A REVOLUTION OF THE MIND

Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy

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CHAPTER VII
Conclusion

By the mid-1770s the split in the French, German, Dutch, American, Italian, and British enlightenment had become open, clear, and irreparable. It was impossible to bridge the gap between Moderate and Radical Enlightenment in philosophy, science, moral thought, or politics, and many could see that this was the case. It was a vast conflict—political, social, and intellectual—that had to be fought out and one that in the 1770s, 1780s, and 1790s, looked dangerously unresolved. What is more, despite Voltaire’s last great throw and Turgot’s adamant stance against materialism, it was clear, even to the former, that he had lost the fight in the philosophical arena, at least for the time being, and that it was the radical thinkers who had gained the upper hand.

By the 1770s the radical philosophes were diffusing an entirely new form of revolutionary consciousness that in their minds applied not to France alone, or any particular country or Europe specifically, but to the whole world.
All the world suffered under the sway of tyranny, oppression, and misery, buttressed by ignorance and credulity, and all humanity required a revolution—intellectual to begin with, practical later—through which to emancipate itself. The last and most radical version of the Histoire philosophique, that of 1780, generalized the radical analysis of what was wrong with Europe, taking in the colonial empires spanning the world, announcing with unprecedented force the need for a general revolution, in India and Africa no less than in Europe and the Americas.

Different racial writers began applying the same basic formula introduced by Diderot and d'Holbach to all the world's regions and civilizations. Thus, the young Volney who later, in 1789, was to be one of the leaders of the democratic movement in the revolutionary French National Assembly, a thinker highly critical of Montesquieu, applied it with considerable cogency to the Middle East, where he spent three years learning Arabic in the mid-1780s. Apart from a few nomadic groups such as the Bedouin, Druze, and Mesopotamian Turkmens, practically all the societies of the region, and especially the sedentary population of the main cities and agricultural tracts, according to Volney, had for many centuries languished under a relentlessly oppressive alliance of religious and political despotism firmly grounded in "superstition." Only a "grande révolution" or general "révolution" could rescue the inhabitants of Syria and Egypt from the oppression, destitution, and misery in which most of them—the nomadic peoples excepted—dwelt. In Western Asia, he thought, this "grande révolution" would begin via an armed revolt among the fiercely independent nomadic tribes of the Arabian desert.1

But however it began, the first step had to be the spreading of awareness of the havoc wrought upon human life by despotism, religious authority, ignorance, and superstition. Radical Enlightenment, unlike Voltaire's enlightenment, could not hope to advance by winning over influential court advocates. It had no other recourse but to turn philosophy into effective ideology and inundate the reading public with its new revolutionary awareness via a torrent of clandestine publications, and to do so to such an extent as to set in motion a general process rendering society more "enlightened." Ultimately, their aim was to transform the political and social framework of modern life. Only by eradicating the reading public's former attitudes could Radical Enlightenment hope in the end to raise the general level of education, undermine privilege and special interests, and, at some future point, redirect the levers of government toward reforming the law and institutions and making society more secure and protective, and more equal for all.

Consequently, the rise, growth, and diffusion of Radical Enlightenment from the 1660s down to the 1780s is not merely relevant to the advent of the French Revolution, and indeed the entire revolutionary wave of the late eighteenth century, but arguably much the most im-
important factor in any proper understanding of how and why the Revolution developed as it did—that is, how and why it became a conscious and systematic effort to erase completely the institutions and consciousness of the past and replace these across the board with the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Over many decades a majority of historians have been famously loath to concede that ideas played a formatively crucial part in the Revolution. But if one looks at the great public intellectual controversies of the 1770s and 1780s it becomes obvious that there is no place for such an attitude. The prevailing view about the French Revolution not being caused by books and ideas in the first place may be very widely influential but it is also, on the basis of the detailed evidence, totally indefensible. Indeed, without referring to Radical Enlightenment nothing about the French Revolution makes the slightest sense or can even begin to be provisionally explained.

Since, however, the Radical Enlightenment in the later eighteenth century has only recently come to be studied as an international intellectual, cultural, and social phenomenon, today’s student, inevitably, is presented with a highly perplexing problem of historiography. For although historians have now for some years been more aware of a huge and striking gap persisting in the historiography of the French Revolution, becoming conscious of the astounding failure dragging on over the decades to look seriously at the intellectual background to the Revolution, efforts to fill the gap remain rather sparse. Keith Michael Baker, in his *Inventing the French Revolution* (1990), stresses that “there has been relatively little explicit or systematic attention in recent years to the question of the ideological origins of the French Revolution.”

So incomplete and sketchy is current historiography’s understanding of the intellectual origins of the French Revolution, and such the continuing tendency to focus excessively on the great constitutional conflicts of the mid- and later eighteenth century in France prior to 1789 (which for the most part have little to do with the intellectual origins of the Revolution), that Baker’s complaint can perhaps usefully be reiterated in much stronger terms. For the fact that a massive torrent of democratic, egalitarian, radical literature and journalism welled up before 1789, infused with Radical Enlightenment ideas propagated by works like *Le Système de la nature*, the *Système Social*, and the *Histoire philosophique*, had a profoundly unsettling effect on the best minds—as the reactions of Voltaire, d’Alembert, Deschamps, Bergier, Richard, and many others show—is both undeniable and massively important. The evidence of book-history demonstrates that these books achieved a far greater penetration in the 1770s and 1780s than did Rousseau’s political and social theoretical works, or indeed any other political and social ideology. This has been known for some time.
Yet thus far these crucial developments have failed almost entirely to penetrate the consciousness of historians of the revolutionary era, a strange state of affairs indeed.

The result is a vast corpus of literature on the Revolution, and the revolutionary era more generally, extending right down to the last few years that is absurdly inadequate in its account of the relationship between Enlightenment and Revolution. Thus, in François Furet’s widely read and admired *Revolutionary France, 1770–1880*, for example, a 600-page synthesis that appeared in 1988, Diderot and d’Holbach are not even mentioned in the index; no mention is made of Brissot’s, Mirabeau’s, Volney’s, Maréchal’s, or Cloots’s pre-1789 philosophical writings; there is no reference to Cerisier, Paape, or any of the Dutch radical democrats who worked in France before 1789; the radical character of Condorcet’s pre-1789 thought is not developed, even briefly; no reference is made to Tom Paine, Weishaupt, or Georg Forster; and nothing is said about Volney’s pre-1789 publicity campaign in Rennes to turn the local population against the Breton nobility and local noblesse de robe. In a few lines, on one page, Furet acknowledges that the Enlightenment in France was a factor in the Revolution owing to “the scale and the forcefulness of the condemnation it brought to bear on contemporary life—including the Church and religion,” conceding that the Enlightenment provided over a “tremendous reshaping of ideas and values.” But he says the Enlightenment did this “unwittingly,” which is perfectly absurd and, in any case, makes no attempt to build on these insights in developing his analysis.

Even Keith Michael Baker, who expressly set out to reframe this highly distorting imbalance, arguably does not really do so. An important contribution in many respects, his study very usefully distinguishes the discourse of institutional and parliamentary constitutionalism in the French Revolution from what he calls the discourse of Enlightenment reason, on the one hand, and the Rousseauist discourse of will, on the other. Identifying these three intellectual impulses as core elements, each fundamentally different and in many ways incompatible with the other, is a valuable advance. Yet when it comes to the intellectual roots of the French Revolution’s ideology as such, again we find practically nothing. Diderot is almost entirely missing (except for one highly relevant quote); d’Holbach goes virtually unmentioned; Volney, Cloots, Maréchal, Cerisier, Priestley, Price, Paape, Barlow, Weishaupt, Forster, and except for one brief mention, Tom Paine, are all missing from the index. Not a word is said about the *anti-philosophes* and their analysis of the “revolution of the mind,” one of the most important factors in diffusing radical ideas, especially outside France, since their literature was very widely disseminated in Italian, German, and Spanish, as well as in French. The *Histoire philosophique*—the culminating literary blow to the ancien régime, the single most devastating intellectual assault on existing structures of authority and conventional
thinking of the eighteenth century, a work furiously debated throughout the 1770s and 1780s, appearing in nearly fifty editions in French by the early 1790s, with more than twenty in English and several also in German, Dutch, and Danish—rates only one brief reference.

What intellectual history based on the "controversialist" method (studying public controversies) identifies as much the most important factor in the making of the French Revolution before Robespierre and the Terror—the "revolution of the mind" before the revolution of fact, engineered by the spread of the "modern philosophy"—is largely omitted from the picture, even in Baker, never mind the rest. This is dismaying to anyone who researches the intellectual content of the debates of the Revolution. It is a state of affairs bound seriously to mislead every student reader as to what was really happening in French culture and society in the 1770s and 1780s. Generations of historiography, consciously or unconsciously, give students and the general reader the totally false impression that in the months before the calling of the Estates General in 1789, everyone was busily discussing the national political crisis in terms of traditional and conventional ideas—in terms of precedent, existing institutions, and what the populace was used to, just as in other major early modern events—when in reality this was absolutely not the case.

On the contrary, in France, Germany, Britain, Holland, and elsewhere there was by 1788 already an acute and widespread consciousness in influential circles of the need to abolish privilege and rank because "philosophy" had for two decades been teaching men that this is what a rational society needed to do. One cannot begin to grasp the revolutionary position in 1789 rightly without acknowledging that philosophisme was seen to have engineered a vast "revolution of the mind." And this phenomenon is in turn inexplicable without looking at the long, and in part self-conscious, build-up to its climax in the 1770s and 1780s of a radical tradition reaching all the way back to the 1660s. "They are sapping the foundations of society," protested Father Jamin, by representing loyal "subordination" as a set of barbaric ancient rights, obedience as mere weakness, and authority as tyranny. All belief in supernatural beings and spirits, and therefore all supernatural authority, is eliminated by these philosophes modernes. "Tout est matière," they affirm, "avec Spinoza." The principal agent of this (to the anti-philosophes obvious) coming revolution was, beyond any question, la nouvelle philosophie, and here Jamin, Deschamps, Bergier, Marin, Maleville, and the rest were assuredly right.

It was a claim clearly echoed in 1789 in the cafiers, or collective reports, submitted by all the localities and different orders of society, in each locality throughout France, to the meetings of the Estates General convened in that year. These were the meetings that triggered the French Revolution, and the reports provide detailed in-
formation as to what different social groups thought was wrong with French society at the time. Many cahiers of the clergy testify to this sense of a "revolution of the mind" being already far advanced. The Angoulême clergy, for instance, reporting in March 1789, cited the fatal effects of incredulity, the whole of France, they complained, being inundated in less than a century with impious and scandalous books that, to the prejudice of religion, had become the only "code d'instruction d'une jeunesse insensée." Among their main points the clergy of Armagnac urged forceful measures to halt the withering of all religious, moral, and civil principles caused by this scandalous multitude of books "nù règne l'esprit de libertinage, d'incrédulité et d'indépendance," books subverting with impunity and great temerity faith, sexual modesty, throne, and altar. The Revolution came and went. It proclaimed liberty, equality, and fraternity but failed to establish a viable democratic republic. Robespierre, and the Terror of 1793–1794, wholly or partially discredited the Revolution in the minds of contemporaries in France and abroad just as they have in the minds of modern readers and students ever since. "Moderate" philosophes in France during the Revolution, such as the Abbé Morelet, who quarreled definitively with the circle of Madame Helvétius and the Radical Enlightenment in 1789–1790, blamed the catastrophe on what he saw as the perversion of la philosophie by radical ideas, and the Terror and the atrocities to which this perversion gave rise, on the parti démocratique and the democratic tendency itself. Morelet, citing Volney as one of those most responsible, argues that the radical intellectual tendency in the Revolution was unjust and criminal from the outset in not wanting to respect property rights, including the property and special right to representation of the nobility and clergy. But if radical ideas dominated the opening stages of the Revolution down to early 1793, and then the post-1794 phase, it is arguable that the darker side of the French Revolution, the Revolution of 1793–1794, was chiefly inspired by the Rousseauist tendency. The crass demagoguery and murderous violence directed by Robespierre and the Jacobins did not hesitate publicly to condemn all the philosophes and the whole Enlightenment.

Historians generally have given nowhere near sufficient emphasis either to the distinction between Radical Enlightenment and Rousseauism or to the intensity of the clash over democratic Enlightenment ideas within the Revolution. Assemblée nationale deputies and their supporters—such as Condorcet (who, along with Pinot, had called for a republic as early as 1791, months before Robespierre had dared to), Cloots, Cabanis, Garat, and Volney—were horrified when Robespierre and other Montagnards initiated a program of systematic denunciation and harassment of the Enlightenment heritage and the key principles that it had introduced, and that the early and post-1794 phases of the revolution fully embraced.