EDITED BY JAN HANSEN, JOCHEN HUNG, JAROSLAV IRA,
JUDIT KLEMENT, SYLVAIN LESAGE, JUAN LUIS SIMAL, AND
ANDREW TOMPKINS

THE EUROPEAN
EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

https://www.openbookpublishers.com

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at https://archive.org/web

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323#resources

Cover image: Wilhelm Gunkel, *Fly Angel Fly* (2019). Cover design by Katy Saunders

6.2.1 Ideologies in Early Modern History (ca. 1500–1800)

Marie-Laure Legay

Introduction

The European thinkers of the early modern era are essential for understanding the development of political thought in general. Their contributions brought about paradigm shifts in the way politics was thought of and experienced. Although their writings were known only to a few, many channels helped to spread their ideas. In order to understand the foundations of modern political thought and its evolution during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we must identify the cultures in which the great intellectuals lived and worked, some of them (like Machiavelli and Bossuet) siding with the rulers, others distancing themselves from the elite, while remaining aware of the theological, ecclesiastical, legal, or political stakes of the disputes of their time. Let us note from the outset that 'dissident' thought, which would be that of a perspective on the role of the prince, does not necessarily emerge from observers who do not hold power, and that it is not possible to dissociate 'conformist' intellectuals from 'dissident' intellectuals in modern political thought: Thomas Hobbes legitimised the strong power of the sovereign, considering it a good companion of the natural rights of peoples (1651); François Fénelon remained close to Louis XIV for a long time, but expressed his reservations in *The Adventures of Telemachus* (1699); not to mention the ambiguity with which the philosophers of the Enlightenment praised despots. In this chapter, therefore, political ideas are presented in terms of the questions they reflected as well as in terms of the political criticism they conveyed. The central issue in these debates is the implementation of good government, the strict definition of which varies according to the period. In order to understand these debates, we must appreciate the hold of the state and religion on people's minds at the time, understand the notion of freedom in its context, and observe the dialogue between society and the powers that be.

Humanists and Republicanism

The sixteenth century in Europe was marked by humanism and the Renaissance, which gave rise to a republicanism that drew its models from classical antiquity, but also from a new evangelical ideal. Erasmus (1466–1536) exhorted in *The Education of a Christian Prince* (1516): "You cannot conciliate God by any other service than by showing yourself to be a prince devoted to the salvation of his people". Machiavelli (1469–1527), whose great model was the Roman Republic, helped to anchor the ideal of the prince entirely devoted to virtue, capable of freeing himself from the whims of fortune, in order to act in the world. However, by insisting on the aim of the prince's actions "to maintain his state", Machiavelli emphasised political qualities that had not been seen as important until then. According to Machiavelli, the sovereign must ensure "security and power" for himself while guaranteeing "stability and safety" for his subjects; therefore, wisdom, intelligence, temperance (moderation, honesty, etc.), valour, as well as justice can be put at the service of an economy of violence considered useful to the state.

Fig. 1: François Dubois, *St. Bartholomew's Day massacre* (ca. 1572–ca. 1584), Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:La_masacre_de_San_Bartolom%C3%A9,_por_Fran%C3%A7ois_Dubois.jpg.

The leaders of the Reformation also promoted the idea of a strong prince, not through political reason but through divine omnipotence. The assertion that the whole world is governed by providence leads, both in Luther and Calvin, to the idea of an authoritarian republic which is difficult to disobey without offending God. However, the inference from such a statement had a

resounding theoretical echo: what happens if the prince fails in his Christian duties? In the context of the Wars of Religion (1562–1598), conflicts in France between Protestants and Roman Catholics, this question arose repeatedly, especially among Calvin's followers in the aftermath of the St Bartholomew's Day massacres in 1572. The Monarchomachs then affirmed more categorically the duty of disobedient subjects caught in the clutches of a tyrannical power.

At the end of the sixteenth century, political thought therefore shifted significantly towards constitutional thinking. Princely virtue was no longer sufficient to guarantee a happy republic; it had to adopt clearer legal contours defining the power of the sovereign in his political relationship with the confessional society. The ideal of a regime by assemblies defended by the Monarchomachs gained momentum. The Catholic nobility also made it their credo, supported by neo-Thomists such as Pedro de Ribadeneyra (1527–1611; *Treatise on the Religion and Virtues That a Christian Prince Should Have,* 1595) or Juan de Mariana (1536–1624; *De rege et regis institutione,* 1599). This political ideal was, however, opposed by jurists such as Jean Bodin (1530–1596), who, in *The Six Books of the Republic* (1576), provides a universal definition of sovereignty as a monopoly of the law:

> Now, those who are sovereign must not be subject to the commands of others and must be able to give law to their subjects and to break or destroy useless laws in order to make others. This cannot be done by those who are subject to the laws or to those who have authority over them. That is why the law says that the prince is absolved from the power of the laws.

New Conceptions of Freedom

In the seventeenth century, the political effects of the confessionalisation of society during the previous century became clear. A neo-Roman conception of civil liberty was forged at this time, which influenced the first English Revolution (1640–1660). One of the most important intellectuals of the first English Revolution was John Milton (1608–1674). An expert on the works of antiquity, Milton took up the arguments of his predecessors in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (1649), according to which the right of resistance is a duty when the king goes against the interests of the governed. Beyond that, he gives an original interpretation of freedom, based on the biblical idea that truth is gradually revealed to men, and that consequently tyrants remain in error.

If John Milton was still inspired by the Gospels, many European intellectuals of this period freed the field of political activities from the idea of divine intervention. In 1612, the Spanish philosopher Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) argued in his *Tractatus de legibus ac de Deo legislatore*: "No king, no monarch has or has had the political principate immediately from God or by the act of a divine institution, but by means of human will or institution".

The school of natural law further deepened this autonomy and definitively changed the way of thinking about politics in Europe, through the promotion of law. The German jurist Samuel von Pufendorf (1632–1694) sought to make this discipline a universal science, based on a law of sociability that obliges everyone to respect each other's commitments. According to Pufendorf, the rules of natural law were first and foremost those of the conservation of life. Therefore, the political contract must aim at the safety of free individuals. The Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) adopted the same approach, convinced of the existence of a law common to all peoples. He laid the foundations of the law of war in *On the Law of War and Peace*, published in 1625.

The works of English philosophers Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and John Locke (1632–1704) stem from this same individualism, this same concern for peace and security. Moreover, the doctrine of natural law allowed any power to be justified as long as it appeared reasonable and useful to society. Thus, as absolutism lost ground, theories of natural law took on a different political content from that of Grotius or Pufendorf. For Thomas Hobbes, the individual's right to self-preservation justified absolutism. As a rationalist, Hobbes observes the laws of nature which dictate that men defend their property and hence surrender their rights to the prince. The state, both ecclesiastical and civil, is thus the result of an irreversible contract and has the task of defending everyone and guaranteeing peace. The influence of his magnum opus *Leviathan*, published in 1651, was far-reaching. On the one hand, it sparked the disgust of Catholics, Anglican bishops, and libertarians, but on the other hand it laid the foundations for a mechanistic political thinking that is still influential today.

John Locke's understanding of the nature of politics as a purely human activity was particularly influential. He returned to the purpose of power from the reflections of Hobbes, arguing that the great end for which men enter into society is to enjoy their goods in peace and security. But unlike Hobbes, Locke believed that the state of nature was a peaceful state of freedom and equality, and that private property existed in this original state, prior to civil society. From then on, "all that the power in question must be used for is to make laws". Locke is therefore a theorist of the superiority of legislative power. As a result, he considered in his work *Two Treatises of Civil Government*, published in 1690, that in all states the first and fundamental positive law is that which establishes the legislative power. His political theories are opposed to the ideas of the English theorist Robert Filmer (1588–1653) or the French bishop and author Bossuet (1627–1704), both of whom defended the divine right of kings. For Bossuet, royal authority is, as with Locke, paternal and reasonable, but princes are seen as God's lieutenants on earth; their authority is therefore sacred.

With Locke, Europe witnessed the ideological triumph of liberalism, which, according to historian Quentin Skinner, not only discredited the neo-Roman

theory of civil liberty, but also the Protestant foundations of political authority. Liberalism requires a type of voluntary subjection and self-control, but in stark contrast to Puritanism, its political vision is based on an unshakeable sense of human reason and the relative ease with which order can be achieved. This confidence of liberalism removes the need for repression and the permanent struggle against sin. This ideology undermined the traditional foundations of political authority, provoking, according to historian Paul Hazard, "a crisis of conscience" by demystifying power.

The entire eighteenth century in Europe was marked by the denunciation of credulity and false beliefs. The French author Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), who inspired the Enlightenment with his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697), as early as 1681 denounced the superstitious interpretation of the passage of the Great Comet in December 1680 and cut the Gordian knot that had been intertwining politics and religion for centuries. Bayle not only heralded the Enlightenment: he established the figure of the 'critical intellectual', who had to face the challenges of his time. The French archbishop and writer François Salignac de La Mothe Fénelon (1651–1715) also illustrates this archetype of late modernity: "Princes that have been accustomed to consider their will only as law, and to give the reins to their passions, may do any thing; but their power of doing any thing is necessarily subverted by its own excess", he wrote in 1699 in *The Adventures of Telemachus*.

Liberalism and Constitutionalism

Eighteenth-century liberal thought can be divided into many strands. Economic liberalism is one that questions the formation of state power from the productive capacity of people. In France, the economist and physician François Quesnay, author of *Tableau économique* (1758) and a treatise on the natural rights of men (1765), the Marquis de Mirabeau, author of *La philosophie rurale* (1763), as well as authors like Mercier de la Rivière, Dupont de Nemours and the Abbé Baudeau, all belonged to the physiocratic school of thought, which called for the formation of assemblies of owners. The economist and statesman Turgot (1727–1781) was close to this school. A supporter of free trade in corn, the abolition of the *corvée* and of trade communities, but also of municipal assemblies, he was opposed by financiers, parliamentarians, the clergy, and the court. In Scotland, the philosopher Adam Smith (1723–1790) was also a representative of the liberal school. After frequenting the Parisian salons and making the pilgrimage to Ferney, Smith wrote *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). For him, since *homo economicus* is driven by the pursuit of individual profit, only free competition allows for the best possible orientation of capital, which determines production, and the best distribution of the products of labour. This *laissez-faire* approach leads to

a harmony between needs and resources that bears witness to the "invisible hand" of providence: the alchemy of particular interests produces the general interest. In this sense, The French writer Montesquieu (1689–1755) is influenced by Smith when he states: "each individual advances the public good, while he only thinks of promoting his own interest".

However, Montesquieu is best known for his political theories. His liberalism was developed when he discovered the functioning of the Lower House of Parliament in London:

> England is now the freest country in the world, I do not exclude any Republic. I call it free because the Prince has no power to do any conceivable wrong to anyone, for the reason that his power is checked and limited by an act. But if the Lower House were to become the master, its power would be unlimited and dangerous because it would also have executive power. (Montesquieu, 'Notes sur l'Angleterre', Œuvres complètes, 1818)

A scheme of thought of universal scope, inspired by Lockean constitutionalism, then takes shape: the balance of powers guarantees the law that guarantees freedom. Montesquieu's method of analysis involves taking into account the diversity of regimes, relativism (the spirit of the laws consists in the various relationships they may have with different things: the terrain, the climate, morals, religion, trade, etc.) and rationalism. Montesquieu researched political laws and came up with two major theories: the theory of governments, whose principles vary according to the regime; and the theory of checks and balances—"power must stop power". According to him, freedom is the right to do whatever the laws allow. From this point of view, democracy and aristocracy are not free states by nature. Political liberty is found only in moderate governments. In the same vein, the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) expounded his empirical relativism and his vow of moderation, but unlike Locke or Montesquieu, he thought that abstract liberty was a fiction, feared the dictatorship of parliament more than the abuse of royal prerogative, and conceived of the general interest as a set of particular interests limited to each other.

A reader of Locke and Montesquieu, the French philosopher Voltaire (1694–1778) was much less involved in political theory. His admiration for English thought can be seen in his *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1734) and his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), but in practice he defended the enlightened despotism of Frederick II of Prussia to extend his protections in order to escape the wrath of censorship and prison. Denis Diderot (1713–1784), for his part, placed himself under the protection of Catherine II of Russia. A writer (of works such as *Rameau's Nephew* and *Jacques the Fatalist*, both published posthumously, in 1805 and 1785, respectively) and philosopher, indefatigable and curious about everything, Diderot believed in movement and was opposed to any idea of innatism, fixism or fatalism. His *Letter on the Blind* (1749) convinced

the censors that its author, who had been under surveillance for some time, was a dangerous individual. The work was condemned and Diderot was arrested at his home and taken to the Château de Vincennes, where he was imprisoned for three months. During his imprisonment, Diderot was visited by his friend Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) who, on the way, had the famous epiphany that led him to write his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750). His painful imprisonment traumatised Diderot and prompted him to be very careful in his publications. At the time when the first volume of the *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, appeared (1751), the political affairs of France went through a very tumultuous phase and the various bodies of the monarchy, without being 'contentious', were bitterly debating the foundations of Versailles' decisions, in particular the creation of the Twentieth Tax (1749). In this context, the article on "political authority" returns to the foundations of royal authority. Diderot discusses the origin of authority based on the ideas of John Locke, which are clearly identifiable. He also evokes the historical foundations (the conquest), then discusses submission to God and to the prince, and the forms that this submission takes by considering the limits of the prince's power, since his legitimacy draws its source from "the body of the nation".

Fig. 2: Maurice Quentin de La Tour, Portrait of Voltaire (ca. 1736), Public Domain, Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:D%27apr%C3%A8s_Maurice_Quentin_de_La_Tour,_ Portrait_de_Voltaire_(ch%C3%A2teau_de_Ferney)_-001.jpg.

A perfect representative of the French Enlightenment, Diderot did not, however, advocate the introduction of a constitution. In the twilight of the *ancien régime*, the French constitutionalist movement was poorly represented because it required specific prolegomena on freedom, but also a more detailed reflection on inequality between men. From this point of view, Rousseau considers two kinds of inequality: physical and political, the latter consisting of "the different privileges, which some men enjoy to the prejudice of others" (*Discourse on the Origin of Inequality among Men*, 1755). The French politician and philosopher Gabriel Bonnot de Mably (1709–1785) later translated this into less abstract terms: "the distinction between nobles and commoners can only be the result of several events and revolutions from which the vanity of some citizens took advantage to attribute particular prerogatives to themselves and to form a separate class". Hence the idea of a legitimate convention based on an equitable, useful and solid *Social Contract* (1762), itself based on a supreme general will. Rousseau established the principle of popular sovereignty, while the French priest and statesman Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (1748–1836) completed the reflection by defining the 'nation', which is certainly by natural right, but which needs a political and administrative organisation—a public process, in the words of the author of *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état?* (1789). The era of revolutions committed the constitutionalist intellectuals of the time to thinking about representation in politics. The intellectual Thomas Paine (1737–1809), who later became a French citizen and a member of the National Convention, published a pamphlet with the very characteristic title of *Common Sense* a few months before the American Declaration of Independence in 1776. This republican-inspired work contains a sharp criticism of the English Constitution. He presents royalty as a "political papism" and insists on the distinction between society and government: "society is produced by our needs, government by our vices; the former procures our happiness in a positive manner; by uniting our affections; the latter in a negative manner by restraining our vices". Paine advocated a redesign of political systems through universal suffrage.

Conclusion

Political thinkers of the early modern era were faced with remarkable intellectual challenges. The ideal of good government established during the Middle Ages was challenged by the promotion of Christian individualism and the resulting demand for freedom. Defining princely virtues, and supporting them with faith or reason, was only a fraction of the process. The *res publica* required not only a contract defining the terms of the use of authority, but also a legal and social art that founded the nation. These ideas would influence

the political and intellectual landscape of Europe and the rest of the world for centuries to come.

Discussion questions

1. What was the role of religion in early modern political thought?

2. The thinkers cited in this chapter were all men. Do you think this influenced their ideas? If so, how?

3. How do the ideas of early modern thinkers still influence our society and politics today?

Suggested reading

Burns, J. H. and Mark Goldie, eds, *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

Dunn, John, *The Political Thought of John Locke: An Historical Account of the Argument of the 'Two Treatises of Government'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Hirschman, Albert O., *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

Skinner, Quentin, *The Foundations of Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

van Gelderen, Martin, *The Political Thought of the Dutch Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).