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INTRODUCTION

Come the Revolution

AS WORKERS FLOWED out of a factory one afternoon in New York City, a communist organizer harangued them from a soapbox on the sidewalk. A crowd gathered to hear him out. “Comrades,” the organizer cried, “are you not tired of laboring for another’s gain? Why don’t your wages reflect the real work you do each day? Don’t you deserve a better deal than this?” A few people cheered in assent. “Then, comrades, join us in our fight for the Revolution! Come the Revolution, the rich will cease to steal from the poor. Come the Revolution, the workers will own the factories. Come the Revolution, everyone will eat strawberries and cream!” Then a small voice piped up in the crowd: “But what if I don’t like strawberries and cream?” The organizer stared coldly at the questioner and responded: “Come the Revolution, everyone will *like* strawberries and cream.”

This joke was told to me by my father, who heard it from his (very conservative) high-school history teacher during the McCarthy era. The joke seems to have originated during the 1930s, when it featured in a vaudeville show.¹ While obviously anti-Communist and counterrevolutionary, it offers a window on the history of revolution. For starters, it draws our attention to an important difference in how revolution has been understood over time. If this joke were transposed to the streets of New York in the 1770s, it would make little sense. No American colonist fighting the British would have imagined that their taste in fruit or dairy could possibly be affected by the outcome of the war. The organizer’s answer to the worker’s question becomes funny only after a certain moment in history, once “revolution” had acquired a different meaning than it had, say, in 1776.

But the joke also sheds light on this more modern understanding of “revolution.” “Come the Revolution, everyone will like strawberries and cream”—if we strip away the frivolity of this punchline, we are left with a

basic claim that reflects what many actually believed. Come the Revolution, everyone *should* come to an agreement: differences in opinion will disappear, especially about subjects less trivial than fruit. The Revolution will not only improve people's lives but should reflect a consensus about what the good life is. Put simply, come the Revolution everyone should agree that strawberries and cream are our just dessert.

Of course, what makes the joke funny is that things do not turn out that way. Come the Revolution, people may agree on some things, but never on all. In most societies, these disagreements are not a problem: we don't expect politicians from different parties to have the same views on issues. Pluralist democracies, by definition, recognize a plurality of opinions. But revolutionary governments do not share this commitment. As Trotsky observed in 1924, "In the last analysis the party is always right. . . . [N]o one can be right against the party."² If the Party decrees that everyone will like strawberries and cream, that is what right-minded people must do. The sinister implication of the organizer's answer is that those who do not like strawberries and cream will be forced to—or face the consequences.

In the slapstick manner of vaudeville comedy, then, this joke connects the modern belief in unhampered progress and the assumption that reasonable people will reach a consensus on all things with the threat that failure to do so will be met with political violence. It does not offer any explanation for how or why these ideas and practices go together. That is the role of history, not humor. But the joke helps to frame some of the great mysteries of the modern age. How and when did revolutions become seen as the solution to social problems? What prevented them from playing such a role in earlier times? And why did political movements rooted in optimism and humanitarianism often lead to oppression, incarceration, and death?



These are some of the questions that I address in this book, which offers a history of the idea of revolution. To be clear, it is not a history of revolutions in general, though many appear in the following chapters. The revolutions that I discuss are primarily here to illustrate how the idea of revolution evolved (or did not) in the midst of political changes. The later chapters also trace how the modern idea of revolution—an idea that emerged, I argue, only in the mid-eighteenth century—shaped the actual course of subsequent revolutions, starting in 1789.

In some respects, this book resembles other intellectual histories, in that it charts the changing meaning of a concept across an extended

period of time. I track “revolution” from Thucydides to Lenin (and a bit beyond), paying close attention to how historians, philosophers, and politicians used language. Most obviously, I focus on the word “revolution” itself, but also on a host of others, across many languages. Where this book differs from comparable endeavors, however, is in the fact that the concept of revolution was primarily fashioned by its critics. Indeed, from the Peloponnesian War to the American Revolution, revolution retained a sulfurous odor. With few exceptions, revolutions were widely condemned as destructive events, to be avoided whenever possible. The primary sources for this period, accordingly, are almost entirely negative.

To modern ears, these accounts of revolution cannot help but sound conservative. In a sense, they are: their authors believed that conserving the state in its existing form was a good in and of itself. But it would be a mistake to call them “conservative” in our contemporary sense. That label derives its meaning from its antithesis, “progressive,” and before the eighteenth century, there were no progressives. That is, the idea that history was gradually but persistently driving humanity toward a more reasonable and just future was not to be found before around 1700. (I suggest below that Christian ideas of providentialism and millenarianism rest on a very different theory of history.) Earlier writers who warned against revolution were conservative not because they opposed progressives but because they did not have a progressive option. Conserving the state was the only reasonable objective of political thought. Even when revolution appeared inevitable, as it did to Whig politicians in the 1680s and to their American descendants in the 1770s, it had to serve the purpose of stabilizing the state.

Once a progressive theory of historical progress became available, by contrast, writers could advance a more favorable view of revolution. And that is precisely what happened: at the very moment when French thinkers began promoting the idea of historical progress, they also turned the meaning of revolution on its head. Where it had previously been seen as a divisive and dangerous phenomenon, these (literal) progressive thinkers portrayed revolution as the gateway to a new and improved future. It is only from this point onward in the historical record that we start to find an abundance of positive accounts of revolution.

This disparity in our primary sources for revolution—overwhelmingly negative from Thucydides to Hobbes, very often positive from Turgot to Khomeini—leads directly to the thesis of my book. How we think about revolution is ultimately conditioned by how we think about history. People who believe that history is progressing toward a better future are more likely to place their trust in a revolution. Those who, conversely, assume that

future societies will face the same problems that they always have in the past will likely view revolutions with skepticism. To understand how the meaning of revolution changed throughout history, we must examine competing accounts of human time.³



If the joke about strawberries and cream would have mystified American revolutionaries, it was because they still accepted the historical vision, with its attending fears, that ancient Greek political thinkers had fashioned. A good example of the staying power of Greek ideas can be found in John Adams. In 1787, as delegates to the Constitutional Convention were preparing to leave for Philadelphia, Adams was in London, representing the United States as the ambassador to Great Britain. While there, he published a work that advocated for the kind of balanced constitution that the delegates ultimately adopted. This text, *A Defence of the Constitutions of the United States*, offers a surprisingly dark take on revolution: “Human nature is as incapable now of going through revolutions with temper and sobriety, with patience and prudence, or without fury and madness, as it was among the Greeks so long ago.”⁴

It might seem ironic that Adams, one of the leading revolutionaries of 1776, should express these reservations about revolution in 1787. To some extent, the circumstances had changed. Now it was the young republic itself that was under threat, notably by internal turmoil such as the veterans’ uprising in Western Massachusetts (known today as Shays’s Rebellion). And Adams was possibly more cautious in his views than other American statesmen. What’s telling is where Adams found support for his fears—“among the Greeks so long ago.” In the Preface to his *Defence*, Adams listed the many revolutions, and their respective body counts, that had dotted a sixty-year interval of Greek history. He singled out one in particular for its savagery: the uprising on the island of Corcyra (present-day Corfu). This episode, famously recounted by Thucydides in his history of the Peloponnesian War, still filled Adams with dread two thousand years after the fact:

Every kind of death, every dreadful act, was perpetrated. Fathers slew their children; some were dragged from altars, some were butchered at them; numbers, immersed in temples, were starved. The contagion spread through the whole extent of Greece: factions raged in every city.⁵

This famous account of revolution loomed large in ancient political thought. Greek and Roman philosophers and historians perpetuated Thucydides’s chilling account of revolution, and their warnings passed on into medieval

and Renaissance texts. From this vantage point, the joke that after the revolution everyone would like strawberries and cream simply would not compute. Revolutions were more likely to bring about death and destruction than universal harmony.

But why was a future filled with delicious treats out of the question? The ancients' negative outlook on revolution rested on a monochrome vision of human history. Empires rose and fell, cities flourished and declined, and strange twists of fate continually surprised us. But the basic stuff of human life and society remained the same. "To examine human life for forty years is the same as to examine it for ten thousand years, for what more will you see?" asked the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius in his *Meditations*.⁶ For all its unexpected turns, history was a hamster wheel, powered by one unchanging constant: our flawed human natures. It was difficult to envisage a fantastic world to come, because the past and present were mirrors of the future. There was no reason to believe that the problems confronting humans today would disappear tomorrow, as the source of our problems lay within us. Or as Adams put it: "Human nature is as incapable now . . . as it was among the Greeks so long ago."



But there was another thread tying Adams and other political writers to their classical predecessors. Ancient Greek thinkers had also drawn political conclusions from their observations—and in some cases direct experiences—of the horrors of revolution. The best way to avoid such catastrophes, they argued, was to design a state in a way that reduced the risk of revolution. Since revolutions typically pitted one social group against another, the best constitutions should rest on some sort of power-sharing agreement. This kind of agreement was not one of opinions: the ancients never imagined that a wealthy landowner and a poor artisan would agree on substantial matters. It was rather a compromise, a distribution of power. Different social groups would fill different roles in the state and exercise different functions. This was the theory of the "mixed" or "balanced" constitution, which Adams recommended in his *Defence*.

The most canonical expression of this constitutional theory came from Polybius, a Greek who spent most of his life in Rome, during the apogee of the Roman Republic. Polybius's theory is sometimes dismissed as derivative, but his reworking of Plato and Aristotle introduced important revisions. Where his predecessors had focused on balancing the interests of rich and poor, Polybius paid equal attention to the distribution of political powers across institutions. In so doing, he established the theory

of a well-balanced constitution. This is the theory of “checks and balances” that the American Founding Fathers so eagerly embraced.⁷

Polybius also proposed a new contender for the title of best constitution: the Roman Republic. By applying categories from Greek political thought to the Roman constitution, he combined the foundations of Western political science with the most storied case study in Western history. This Polybian synthesis shaped how political theorists in Italy, England, France, and the American colonies understood republican government, well into the eighteenth century.

Finally, Polybius described the passage from one form of government to the next as a recurring cycle. Monarchies gave way to tyrannies, before aristocracies replaced them, only to degenerate in turn into oligarchies. These were overthrown by democracies, which lapsed into mob rule, until eventually a single leader emerged, starting the cycle anew. Here was the grueling circle of history: false hopes and false starts, punctuated by bouts of oppression and destruction. The only way out was to adopt a balanced constitution, on the model of the Roman Republic. By merging the best of monarchy (a strong executive), aristocracy (a wise legislative), and democracy (a fair judiciary), states could withstand the inevitable slings and arrows of political fortune.



The Roman Republic eventually collapsed, in one of the most analyzed sequences of events in history. But its failure did not invalidate Polybius’s theory, in the eyes of his followers. Like Plato before him, Polybius had recognized that all states must eventually fall. The republic lasted almost five hundred years—not a bad run, by either ancient or modern standards.

The collapse of the Western Roman Empire, another five hundred years later, posed a greater threat to the longevity of the Polybian synthesis. Polybius, who wrote in Greek, was largely forgotten in the West for the next millennium. Some of his ideas persisted thanks to other writers, most notably Cicero, who adapted them in his treatise *On the Republic*. But even this classic Latin work was largely lost after the fall of Rome, to be recovered only in the nineteenth century. If it was remembered at all before then, it was largely thanks to Augustine, who quoted and attacked Cicero at length in *The City of God*.

In that book, written as the Western empire was teetering on the verge of destruction, Augustine also outlined one of the most influential Christian theologies of history. In one important way, Christianity upended the

classical perception of history as an endless cycle of hubris and humiliation. The awaited Second Coming of Christ gave a direction and purpose to history. Apocalyptic predictions about a thousand-year reign of saints even foreshadowed, in the eyes of some historians, the modern idea of revolution.

But if we look more closely, the impact of Christianity on the classical framework for thinking about history and revolutions was surprisingly minimal. This was in no small part thanks to Augustine himself. Divine history had a clear structure, with a beginning (Genesis), a middle (the Crucifixion), and an end (the Last Judgment). But human history, Augustine argued, was much messier. Indeed, until Christ returned, human affairs would continue to be determined by our sinful nature. There was no divine message to be found in the rise and fall of cities or empires. Fortuna—a pagan goddess who was kept on under new Christian management—continued to rule, capriciously, over the sublunar world.⁸

The classical phobia of revolutions also persisted, thanks to the lingering memory of Roman history in the medieval world. The final hundred years of the Roman Republic, recounted by Sallust, Cicero, Livy, Appian, Plutarch, and many others, reinforced the impression that republics—and, to an even greater extent, democracies—were messy, turbulent regimes, which invariably resulted in death and revolution. This impression became even stronger with the translation of ancient Greek philosophers, Aristotle in particular, who gave popular governments bad press. The recovery of Polybius was a slower affair: only by the end of the fifteenth century could Western Europeans engage with his political ideas. His analysis of the Roman Republic as the best possible constitution was an immediate hit. Machiavelli was so impressed that he included it almost word for word in his *Discourses on Livy*. Translators had to render the unusual Greek word that Polybius had used to describe the cycle of governments—*anacyclōsis*. No doubt recalling the circular motion of Fortune's wheel, a popular medieval motif, they settled on "revolution."

From the sixteenth century onward, then, the idea of revolution was doubly indebted to classical political and historical thought. The word itself was closely connected to Polybius's vision of the "revolution of governments" (*politeiōn anacyclōsis*), as attested by the popularity of equivalent phrases in Italian, French, Latin, and English. Political writers praised constitutions that balanced monarchic, aristocratic, and democratic elements as the greatest safeguard against revolution. English jurists in particular touted their own constitution as a worthy successor to Rome's, since its unusual combination of clergy and aristocracy in a single chamber of parliament (the Lords Spiritual and Temporal) gave it the appearance of combining the

three “pure” forms of government. This entirely coincidental resemblance between the medieval English constitution and Polybius’s ideal type had an outsized influence on the revolutions that rocked England and its colonies between 1642 and 1776 (the subject of part 2 of this book). The lure of the well-balanced constitution proved hard to resist.

This constitutional model was especially attractive to Westerners who had received a classical education. English, French, and Italian political observers were often more familiar with Roman history than with their own. They studied the science of politics in Plato, Aristotle, Polybius, Cicero, and Tacitus. The great modern authors, such as Machiavelli, Bodin, Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, and Rousseau, also drew extensively on classical sources, even when challenging their conclusions. While some Protestant sects espoused millenarian beliefs that exhibited similarities with later revolutionary movements, any attempts to act on these beliefs were short-lived and soon forgotten. Most Europeans continued to view revolutions as dangerous gambles that, if truly unavoidable, should be curtailed as quickly as possible. Defenders of republican government typically argued that the only good that could come from a revolution was the establishment of a well-balanced constitution, as the Romans had done after overthrowing their last king.



How did it become possible to think about revolutions differently? Some historians have pointed the finger at Christian apocalypticism, but it is hard to see how it could have played much of a role. The overwhelming majority of modern writers and politicians who pushed for revolutionary change showed little interest in, or even knowledge of, millenarian currents. Just because there are resemblances between historical phenomena, or because one came before the other, does not mean they are connected.⁹

What’s more, these fringe millenarian beliefs were not the only historical visions that challenged the monochromatic view of history favored by the ancients. As the recovery of classical knowledge peaked in the seventeenth century, some observers began to wonder whether modern accomplishments in the arts and sciences did not rival, or even surpass, those of their ancient forerunners. A quarrel broke out between defenders of the two camps, the Ancients and the Moderns. The stakes of this quarrel can seem petty. Was Racine a greater playwright than Sophocles? Did Homer ever nod off? But other questions led to a heightened awareness of the gradual changes that occurred over millennia. Time itself became a variable in these

debates. Many discoveries—the compass, for example—happened fortuitously, almost as a simple matter of time. Modern societies had a built-in advantage over ancient ones. Time was an agent of cultural change.

It was in the context of such arguments that the modern theory of progress emerged. This theory would be put to many uses, including Western imperialism, though at first modern Europeans mostly measured themselves against their ancient counterparts. The theory of progress also rested on a very different logic than Christian apocalypticism. Its proponents did not posit a moment of rupture (*kairos*) before which all would be the same, and after which all would be transfigured. Instead, they argued that progress was a gradual process that took place over long stretches of time (*kronos*). What drove progress was reason, not revelation. Over time, human knowledge became perfected through trial and error, and the accumulation of discoveries.¹⁰

As the modern theory of progress grew in popularity over the eighteenth century, a new concept of revolution emerged alongside it. In this progressive account, revolutions were the escalators of history, leading human societies to higher levels of development. Enlightenment *philosophes*, Voltaire in chief, were soon describing moments of cultural upheaval as “revolutions:” the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Enlightenment itself. These “cultural revolutions” were mostly wondrous affairs, when the human spirit revealed its potential. The successes of the philosophes’ powerful allies—Frederick II in Prussia, Catherine II in Russia, Gustav III in Sweden, Joseph II in Austria, and Turgot in France—subsequently led them to dream of enlightened rulers launching political revolutions under the banner of reason.

It is here, even before the French Revolution, that we find a radically novel and positive understanding of revolution, one that inverted the negative and destructive model of the Ancients. At the heart of this concept lay a new attitude toward the future. For the Moderns, the future was a terra incognita that could not be charted by means of the experience and knowledge of the past. When a Frenchman awoke after a seven-hundred-year slumber, in Louis-Sébastien Mercier’s best-selling novel *The Year 2440* (published in 1771), the world around him was unrecognizable. A political revolution, inspired by Catherine and led by an enlightened French king, had wholly rationalized Church and state. All the social and political problems of eighteenth-century France had been resolved, to everyone’s satisfaction. Presumably, everyone now liked strawberries and cream.¹¹



The modern idea of revolution rested on the belief that all humans would eventually recognize the rightfulness of rational progress. This view was best summarized by Condorcet, ironically, in a text he wrote while on the run from the revolutionary government in 1793. Since Bacon and Descartes, he observed, scholars had made tremendous progress in almost every field, from physics and politics to epistemology and economics. In the eighteenth century, a new generation of philosophes “propagated” this new knowledge, which in turn began to shape public opinion and influence statecraft. Superstition, prejudice, and error were slowly swept away by this tide of reason, or rather, Condorcet clarified, by this “revolution.” Eventually all people—and in a near future, all peoples—would be freed from their traditional shackles, and could bask in the light of truth, as discovered by the great minds of science or philosophy, and reflected by their propagators.¹² This Enlightenment narrative was not original to Condorcet, but had been expressed in various places throughout the eighteenth century, most notoriously in the *Encyclopédie*. A graphic illustration of its structure even featured on the frontispiece of Voltaire’s 1738 presentation of Newton’s philosophy (see figure 0.1). The divine light of truth passes through Newton’s mind and is reflected in Emilie du Châtelet’s translation of the *Principia*, before illuminating Voltaire’s text.

Along with the other philosophes, Condorcet insisted that the freedom individuals gained from the Enlightenment was the freedom to think for themselves. *Aude sapere*, or “dare to know,” is how Immanuel Kant defined the Enlightenment for his German readers, borrowing a tag from the Latin poet Horace. Don’t believe what a theologian or a book tells you to think, Kant admonished his readers: “Use your own understanding.”¹³ But the philosophes assumed that by thinking on their own, people would end up thinking like the philosophes. Just as Newton had discovered the invariable laws of gravity, reason should similarly lead us to discover the invariable laws of economics, politics, morality, and legislation. There were not two sets of laws of gravity; why should social and political issues have more than one correct solution? The Physiocrats, a group of economists and philosophers with whom Condorcet was associated, took this theory to its logical conclusion, arguing that there was a “natural and essential order of political societies,” applicable to all places, at all times.¹⁴

The enlightened faith in progress thus left little room for dissenting views. On some topics, such as religion and law, the philosophes retained a more modest epistemology.¹⁵ But there was a heady thrill to the thought that Europeans were making strides toward the rational restructuring of

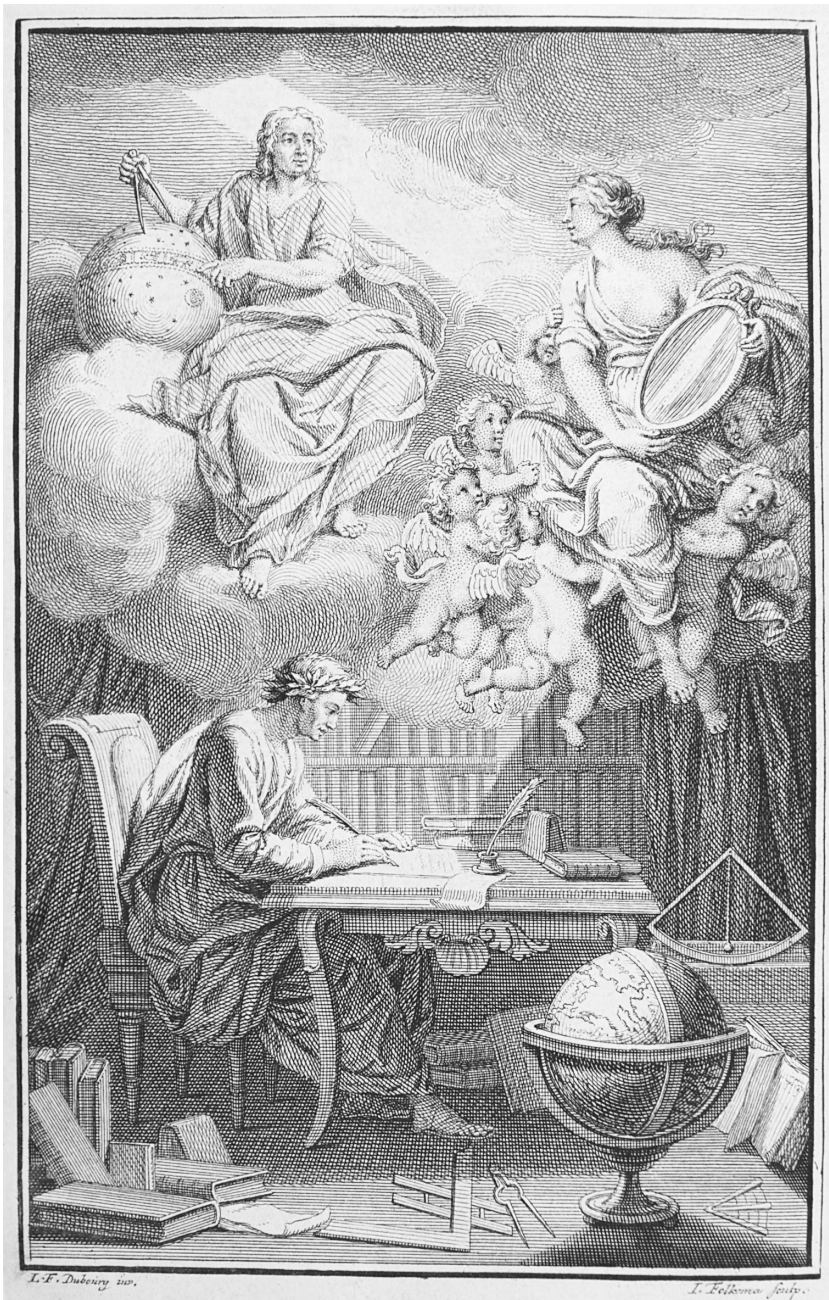


FIGURE 0.1 Voltaire, frontispiece to *Elémens de la philosophie de Newton* (1738). Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

the world. Those who disagreed with the advocates of progress were likely still under the influence of superstition, prejudice, and error.

In this way, the modern theory of progress encouraged, if it did not necessarily impose, an anti-pluralist outlook. Its technocratic undercurrent was already visible during the Enlightenment. “The philosopher is a gentleman (*honnête homme*) who always acts in accordance with reason,” reads a famous definition of the philosophe; “Graft a ruler onto such a philosopher, and you will have the perfect ruler.”¹⁶ Enlightened progressives could be surprisingly intolerant of contradictory views, since they presumed that all right-minded people must eventually come to the same conclusion. When that failed to happen, it was easy to surmise that the dissenters were not right-minded and possibly deranged. “Whoever fails to seek truth ceases to be human, and should be treated by fellow humans like a savage beast; and once truth has been discovered, whoever refuses to follow it is insane or morally evil.” This was the conclusion reached by Denis Diderot, the affable and worldly editor of the *Encyclopédie*.¹⁷

To be fair, Diderot himself later recognized the limitations of this view. In a wickedly self-critical dialogue, his interlocutor asks him, “Are virtue and philosophy for everyone?” before answering his own question: “Imagine a wise and philosophical universe; you must admit that it would be miserable as hell.”¹⁸ To the ancients, this modern outlook would have seemed more mad than sad. The very reason why Greek philosophers had recommended mixing constitutional forms was because they recognized that wealthy and poor rarely agreed on fundamental “questions of equality and justice.”¹⁹ This assumption was shared by later republican thinkers, including the framers of the US Constitution. James Madison defended the bicameral structure of Congress as the best way to manage the inevitable diversity of interests and opinions in the young republic. “As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed,” he insisted. It was ludicrous to attempt to give “every citizen the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.” The ultimate source of discord, for Madison, was the same as for Aristotle: “the various and unequal distribution of property.”²⁰ Only the wealthy liked strawberries and cream.



Of course, the philosophes did not go around executing those who failed to seek the truth or to follow it. They assumed that such failures were fluke occurrences. Their veiled threats of legitimate violence against “enemies

of the human race,” as Diderot castigated his imaginary opponent, were generally little more than rhetorical flourishes, aimed at marginal groups—“savages,” pirates, brigands, and tyrants. Most other humans, being rational, would eventually get with the Enlightenment program.²¹

But this trust that public opinion, when properly guided, would converge on the correct answer faced a serious test in 1789. The early events of May–June followed the Enlightenment script of revolution almost to a T. Unlike their American counterparts, the ringleaders of the newly proclaimed National Assembly eagerly identified their political struggle as a “revolution.” They cast off the classical phobia of revolutionary anarchy. Their revolution was “pure,” even “bloodless.” It marked another step in the general progress of humanity toward a more just future.²²

Not everyone saw the events of that summer in this way, as the early trickle of emigration demonstrated. And the storming of the Bastille sullied the deputies’ self-image of a nonviolent struggle.²³ But the greater threat to the Enlightenment ideal of a progressive revolution came from its supporters. Soon it became clear that the revolutionaries held markedly divergent views about the kind of future the revolution was to deliver. Public opinion did not converge around a single “natural and essential” way forward. Instead, it splintered.

These divisions among revolutionaries were doubly problematic. From an Enlightenment perspective, they were unforeseen. Progress was supposed to bring consensus. The only logical explanation, for each group, was that the others were wrong. Error, superstition, and prejudice clearly had not vanished overnight.

But adding to this surprise and sense of superiority was the fact that these viewpoints found institutional support at different levels of government. In Paris, members of certain districts advanced openly democratic ideas about how the new government should be founded. Representatives at the municipal, departmental, and national levels rejected these views, believing that affairs of state should principally be left to those with greater experience and wealth. Because all these officials exercised different functions (e.g., local policing vs. national legislation), the splits in public opinion translated into fractures of political power. Officials engaged in a series of standoffs: districts against municipal government, municipal government against national representatives, national representatives against departments.²⁴

Divisions among political players were of course nothing new. In eighteenth-century France, royal power was regularly challenged by the *parlements*, or high courts. A century earlier, the English Parliament had fought a war against the English king. In both cases, opposite sides invoked

rival interpretations of sovereignty to justify their claims, and brandished competing accounts of constitutional history. In these cases, however, political arguments were largely about the *past*. What was the correct interpretation of constitutional traditions? After 1789, each side claimed a privileged knowledge of the *future*. Proponents of a mixed or democratic government argued that their side was clearly superior because humanity was progressing in that direction. Since history could not advance in multiple directions at once, anyone who disagreed with your views was not only wrong but (in the new language of 1789) a “counterrevolutionary.”

Another major difference with earlier political conflicts is that, after 1789, opposite sides tended to view each other as illegitimate. The *parlementaires* may have clashed with the king, but they never questioned the legitimacy of royal power. It took the English members of Parliament two civil wars before even contemplating the removal of Charles I. By contrast, French revolutionary rivals routinely decried each other as usurpers. The radical districts questioned the legal standing of municipal and national representatives, who in turn rejected the districts’ actions as groundless and despotic. When they were not *ad hominem*, these attacks typically stemmed from mutually exclusive understandings of how to exercise popular sovereignty. Who should have the vote? What should they vote on? What was the appropriate kind of government for popular sovereignty? Because the revolutionaries could not agree on these fundamental questions, they ended up challenging the legitimacy of their opponents.

At various points during the French Revolution, the political situation resembled that described by Lenin in his famous essay “The Dual Power.” Just as the Paris Commune of 1871 drew on a different theory of government and sovereignty than the French National Government, Lenin argued, so too did the Petrograd Soviet and the Russian Provisional Government.²⁵ In fact, the Paris Commune of 1792 had stood in almost the exact same relation to the French National Assembly in August and September of that year. Each questioned the legitimacy of the other, and did not fully recognize its authority. In place of the happy consensus promised by the modern progressives, the modern revolution delivered discord, and pushed its supporters toward violence.



Some may wonder how modern the French revolutionaries really were. The liberal politician Benjamin Constant would blame the Terror on the

Jacobins' proclivity for ancient republics. If the French Revolution was conducted, as Marx memorably put it, "in Roman costumes and with Roman phrases," was it really modern at all?²⁶

This question should not be dismissed lightly. In some respects, the French were even more obsessed with antiquity than their American counterparts. Not only was their own schooling equally grounded in the classics but they pushed the parallels with Greece and Rome further than the Americans. French revolutionaries bestowed on their children (or themselves) classical names: Anacharsis, Brutus, Gracchus, Minerva, or Mucius were not uncommon. They portrayed their politics with classical allegories: Hercules slaying the (aristocratic) hydra was a popular motif, divine allegories paraded through revolutionary images, and references to classical politicians peppered revolutionary speeches.²⁷ They even turned to antiquity for social and political models: Marat wished to bring back the office of dictator, others sought to model national education on the Spartan example, and Saint-Just looked to Rome for republican institutions.²⁸

But the French brought something else to this store of classical learning. The republic that they dreamed of establishing was not simply an improved version of the Roman precedent, as the English and Americans had sought. They fused classical ideas with the naturalizing politics of the Enlightenment. Indeed, for every allusion to ancient history in a revolutionary speech, there was an appeal to nature and natural law, as well. This naturalizing trend was already visible in many of the political theories of the French Enlightenment, most notably Physiocracy (Greek for "the rule of nature"). It also aligned with the late-Enlightenment emphasis on historical progress, which was assumed to lead in the direction of reason and justice. For Condorcet, it was the discovery of "the true rights of man" that marked an important step on the road toward progress. Accordingly, the revolutionaries could be both classically minded and historically progressive at once. The "natural republic" that they envisaged had never yet materialized in human history. Robespierre, who modeled himself on Cato the Elder, could also gesture toward a remarkable future when the French will have "fulfilled nature's wishes."²⁹

The promise of a natural republic to come led the French to make political decisions that would have been heterodox in America. Perhaps their most shocking one occurred in October 1793, when the Convention suspended the constitution that the French had just ratified and declared a "revolutionary government" instead. The stated reason for this suspension was the ongoing war against both civil and foreign enemies, though

there is evidence that the Jacobins also feared losing their majority. Either way, they opted for dictatorship, at least “until peacetime.”



This proclamation of a “revolutionary government” had lasting ramifications for the modern idea of revolution. For its opponents, it came to stand for the worst excesses of the Terror. When Napoleon Bonaparte seized power in 1799, he deftly and repeatedly used plebiscites to legitimize his rule. While he minimized popular participation in government, he promised to protect individual rights. These promises often fell flat in France, but Bonaparte articulated the basic liberal compromise: limit the exercise of popular sovereignty; prevent the electoral fighting that had plagued the Directory (the regime, based on the 1795 constitution, that Bonaparte had overthrown); and pose as a defender of individual liberty. Historians are right to highlight the authoritarianism of Bonaparte’s regimes, but he also made important contributions to the establishment of liberalism, especially outside of France.³⁰

Indeed, it was under this liberal guise that revolution caught on in other countries. In Haiti, revolution was liberal in a pointed sense, as it sought to prevent the re-enslavement of Black citizens. Unfortunately for them, this emphasis on civil freedom largely came at the expense of political rights. In Spanish America, revolutions doubled as wars of independence, bringing military leaders to political prominence. As Bonaparte before them, they usually promised a stable government with limited political participation in exchange for rights protections. Revolutions in southern Europe sought a greater role for representative government, but struggled to succeed in the era of Restoration politics.

In some respects, liberalism can seem like a return to classical politics. Liberals liked to speak about the separation of powers, and placed high hopes in constitutions. But this resemblance is limited. For many liberals, constitutions were a source of hope because they signaled admission into the modern world. After 1815, many Europeans found Restoration politics outdated, and a liberal constitution marked the way forward. Unlike their classical predecessors, liberals did not regard revolution as a last-ditch measure to be attempted only in the face of the most oppressive tyranny, but as a means of historical progress.

Even their conception of constitutionalism departed from classical ideas. Liberals no longer concentrated on the proper distribution of powers across political bodies. Their primary goal was to secure individual

rights. Securing these rights was viewed as the proper objective of modern politics, and what distinguished “the liberty of the moderns” from that of the ancients (in Constant’s famous distinction). This objective was not incompatible with the concentration of power in a single executive. Many liberals hailed from the military, and many generals rose to the top of republics, where they accumulated power. It was the Napoleonic formula.³¹

Elements of classical political theory certainly remained present among liberal thinkers. But after 1789 one finds few Polybians of Adams’s strain. The French Revolution reconfigured the entire political spectrum, to the point that even conservatives acknowledged that no return to the status quo ante was possible. A writer and aristocrat who emigrated during the Revolution (and later served as minister of foreign affairs), François-René de Chateaubriand compared 1789 to the Rubicon: once crossed, there was no going back. The revolution transformed the very meaning of “conservative.” As Prince Tancredi Falconeri famously remarked in *The Leopard*, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s novel about the Risorgimento in Sicily, “If we want everything to stay the same, everything needs to change.”³²



Precisely because the liberals endorsed the modern doctrine of progress, they found more formidable challengers among more radical progressives. If the revolution really was a portal into a new and improved age, why should the liberals have the final say in human affairs? Surely there were more things in this heavenly future than were dreamt of in liberal philosophy. Progressive writers sketched out remarkably detailed blueprints of a better world to come. While they disagreed on the minutiae, their collective musings imparted to their readers a sense, bordering on certainty, that the perfection of politics and society was within reach. The theorists themselves quarreled incessantly, but consumers of their work, which often assumed literary form, came away with visions of communes dancing in their heads.³³

This mobilization of the imagination had powerful political effects. First, it fueled a growing discontent with liberals. The French Revolution of 1830 led to the fall of the Bourbons, but how different was the reign of Louis-Philippe? The July Monarchy was hardly the glimmering future that progressives craved. Second, the distance between the present state and the desired future continued to expand, as industrialization worsened labor conditions and socialist projections grew more elaborate.³⁴

This yawning gap posed a problem for progressives. All were committed democrats: it was the only form of government fit for a rational and just future. But could democratic governance really navigate the treacherous way between the messy now and the perfected future? Compounding this problem was the current state of the people. How could the poorly educated, economically beholden, and ideologically oppressed masses be trusted to govern their way to the promised land to come?

Faced with this dilemma, progressives looked more favorably on the solution improvised by the Jacobins in 1793. Perhaps some temporary measure like the revolutionary government could bridge the social and political gap between present and future? There was at first some queasiness about endorsing dictatorship. But by 1848, Marx was calling a spade a spade and calling for the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”³⁵

It was an ingenious phrase, combining the progressives’ democratic commitment (were not the proletariat the majority?) with their need for a tactical solution. But what did it really mean? How could a broad swath of the population act as a dictator? The Paris Commune of 1871 offered a tantalizing glimpse of how to square this political circle. Democratically elected, autonomous councils could administer affairs locally, and elect delegates to coordinate with other communes at a federal level. Power would flow from the bottom up, with power mostly concentrated at the lower levels, in the working class. In this way, progressives could have their socialist cake and eat it, democratically, too.



It was this same theory, inspired by the short-lived Paris Commune, that underpinned the rallying cry of the Bolsheviks some forty-five years later: *All power to the soviets!* (*soviet* is the Russian word for “council”). The 1917 February Revolution had led to a tense standoff between the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies, and a Provisional Government. When the Bolsheviks toppled the latter, political power was supposed to return to the soviets throughout Russia. As it turned out, however, the political solution that Marx and Lenin had discovered in the Paris Commune was reversible. Political power could be anchored in local councils, with minimal coordination and control from above, as intended. But it could also end up concentrated at the top, and distributed downward only in crumbs. Structurally, the political organization looked the same. The 1936 constitution of the Soviet Union could formally announce that “the Soviets of Working People’s Deputies . . . constitute the political

foundation of the U.S.S.R.” (art. 2), and that “all power belongs to the working people of town and country as represented by the Soviets of Working People’s Deputies” (art. 3), when in practice power was closely guarded at the top. The “dictatorship of the proletariat” turned out to be a dictatorship *tout court*.

Concentrating power among the upper echelons of the Party, however, did not resolve all political challenges. How was the Party, “the vanguard of the working people” (1936 constitution, art. 126), to determine policy? Again, it rested on a reversible organizational structure. In principle, policy votes were determined democratically, by party members. *Bolshevik* in Russian means “majoritarian,” and originally identified the voting bloc that won an electoral majority at the 1903 Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. But after the Bolsheviks seized power, most important decisions tended to be made by a small group of leaders. After 1928, many were made by a single one.

The rise of revolutionary authoritarianism is one of the most striking features of twentieth-century revolutions, many of which can be metonymically identified with a single name—Stalin, Mao, Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Pol Pot, or Khomeini. The ability of these individuals to wield so much power is often credited to personal qualities (e.g., charisma) or flaws (e.g., megalomania). But the fact that so many different revolutions arrived at the same outcome suggests that something beyond personality must be at play. Ideology is one suspect, but there is minimal ideological continuity between a Stalin, a Pol Pot (who knew little Marx), and a Khomeini (a Shia cleric).

What all these revolutions do have in common, by contrast, is a faith in the role of revolutions in history. All subscribed to the modern viewpoint that revolutions are the vehicles of historical progress. Most of these revolutionaries will have disagreed about what constituted “progress,” but therein lies the key. Even within a single revolution, disagreements about its goals and methods abounded. The existential problem with modern revolutions, as the French discovered in 1789, is that no natural consensus emerges about (in Lenin’s words) “what is to be done.” The splintering of opinion produces factionalism, which in turn leads to power struggles. In the absence of a robust and trusted institutional structure for resolving these differences, revolutions can teeter back and forth, and ultimately collapse.

Entrusting extensive power to a single person, therefore, was a way to fix a structural problem with modern revolutions. In the end, someone has to decide what the revolution stands for and how to achieve it. Just as Hobbes had argued that a single ruler was needed to define laws and

religious doctrines in a kingdom, modern revolutions crave a Red Leviathan to settle disagreements about what “revolution” actually means.

This fix, however, is not without costs. If modern revolutions do not deliver a consensus about the right way forward, this does not mean that modern revolutionaries have given up on the idea that a right way forward exists. “There can be no solution of the social problem but mine,” asserted Shigalov, the ideologue of the secret revolutionary society in Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* (published in 1871–72).³⁶ The revolution cannot stand for one thing and its opposite. Trotsky and Bukharin could not both be right. There can be only one correct path forward.

The Red Leviathan thus serves a double purpose: to determine what is right, and to decide who is wrong. There is a causal relationship—again, structural rather than ideological—between modern revolutions and internecine violence. For classical revolutionaries, disagreement was a feature of society. The reason why they put so much care into balancing the constitution properly was to manage disagreements, not to eliminate them. For modern revolutionaries, by contrast, disagreement was a bug, a symptom of error, prejudice, superstition, or something more nefarious still—counterrevolution. Indeed, strong was the temptation to label one’s political opponents not merely wrong or misguided but counterrevolutionaries. From the French Revolution onward, it was a temptation to which revolutionaries often succumbed.

Anti-pluralist, the modern doctrine of progress could also turn murderous. In modern revolutions, political differences were often settled in blood. What else could one do with counterrevolutionaries, real or imagined? The French called their opponents “enemies of the human race,” so unnatural was it, in their minds, to go against the revolution’s progress. “Enemies of the people,” “saboteurs,” and other slurs accompanied later counterrevolutionaries to their deaths.



Looking back on the revolutionary regimes of the past century, it is hard to imagine anything comparable recurring today, at least in the West. Our commitment to democratic governance is more established; the appeal of radical and violent ideologies has lessened; by many measures, there has been an overall improvement in living conditions; and our culture maintains a vivid memory of past revolutionary tragedies. At the same time, thirty years after the end of the Cold War, “revolution” is no longer a scare word. From socialists to nationalists, “revolution” once again conveys a

certain excitement—no more politics as usual, enough with this corrupt system, and so on. At an ideological level, these “revolutionary” programs have little in common with past ideologies. But the structural challenges with modern revolutions remain. We are stuck in a vicious circle: democracy, as it is currently practiced, fails to deliver the social changes that many desire, both on the Left and on the Right. But a revolution that did away with our constitutional structures could produce an even worse outcome. Whether dissatisfaction with the present regime ultimately leads to revolution in the future is hard to predict. But we can be sure that, come the next revolution, not everyone will like strawberries and cream.



Revolutions are complex events that stretch out over years, if not decades. It is no wonder that historians tend to study them one at a time, often focusing on particular moments or issues in a single revolution. The comparative study of revolutions, by contrast, is a topic that has attracted the attention mostly of social scientists. Their primary concern has been to explain why revolutions occur in the first place, though they also propose various models for how revolutions unfold.³⁷

As an intellectual history of revolution, this book might look like a strange hybrid of these two approaches. I compare many revolutions over a long stretch of time, but do not seek to propose an overarching account of what causes revolutions. I deal with the kind of corpus normally treated by social scientists, but as a historian. For these reasons, much of the social-scientific literature on the topic is not particularly relevant to this study, except perhaps in one important way. Some social scientists might call into question the very premise of this book—namely, that ideas about revolution play any role whatsoever in the outbreak or course of revolutions.

A fundamental premise of much social-scientific research on revolutions is that political thought is mostly irrelevant. As the sociologist Theda Skocpol observed,

Most theorists of revolution tend to regard the political crises that launch revolutions as incidental triggers or as little more than epiphenomenal indicators of more fundamental contradictions or strains located in the social structure of the old regime. . . . An assumption that always lies, if only implicitly, behind such reasoning is that political structures and struggles can somehow be reduced (at least “in the last instance”) to socioeconomic forces and conflicts.³⁸

This materialist conception of society, where all that *really* matter are “socioeconomic conflicts,” has a venerable genealogy. It was Marx himself who called for a “revolt against the rule of thoughts,” and sought to “liberate [people] from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away.” For Marx, the ideological clashes between political rivals were ultimately a red herring. The real reason why revolutions broke out was because tensions between social groups with opposed economic interests had reached a boiling point. These tensions were most likely to explode when there was a major historical shift underway in economic production. Hence, the rise of the bourgeoisie as an economic powerhouse set it on a collision course with the feudal aristocracy. As it rose to power, it also produced an ideology that justified its claims: “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.” We should not let ourselves be fooled, Marx insisted, about the causal relationship at play here. Economic relations generate culture and political ideas, not the other way around.³⁹

Marx’s emphasis on historical materialism, which he opposed to philosophical idealism, has had a long legacy in social-scientific methodology. In a broad sense, his claim that changes in economic relations have major political effects is hardly controversial. Economic trends have a major impact on elections (recall James Carville’s slogan for Bill Clinton’s 1992 presidential campaign: “It’s the economy, stupid”). But Marx’s argument is much stronger: he insisted that *only* material considerations have an impact on political events, and that ideas and culture are merely smoke and mirrors deployed by the ruling class to stay in power.⁴⁰

There are a number of reasons why we might call into question the complete dominance of economic conditions on political events. First, social scientists have yet to agree *which* socioeconomic conflicts are determining. After all, states can be unbalanced in many different ways. Is it the growing economic inequality between capitalists and wage laborers that inevitably produces revolutions, as Marx and others believed? Or is it interstate conflicts that lead to domestic unrest? Maybe demographic shifts are the source of rebellion? Or do ill-timed efforts to modernize the economy bring down the state? All of these accounts are plausible, but they cannot all be correct. And it is hard to argue that “only socioeconomic conflicts determine political outcomes” if the socioeconomic conflicts in question are unspecified, and possibly vary from case to case.⁴¹

Secondly, why is it that massive socioeconomic tensions very often do *not* result in revolutions? History offers many examples of states that survived terrible economic conditions without any major political upheaval: in modern times alone, consider Great Britain in the Victorian age, the United States during the Great Depression, or India since independence. Why do socioeconomic tensions sometimes produce revolutionary upheavals and sometimes not?

A third problem with the materialist approach is that it treats politics as a pale shadow of socioeconomic relations. Political thought, in this model, can never be autonomous: modifications of economic forces produce new political claims, not vice versa.⁴² But is this empirically true? England, for instance, witnessed a massive economic expansion in the eighteenth century.⁴³ As I detail in chapter 6, however, English political and constitutional thought remained remarkably stable between 1689 and 1789. Whigs and Tories alike upheld the vaunted principles of the Glorious Revolution, principles that they proudly traced back to Polybius and Cicero. There is little in Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69) that reflects the new economy of the expanding British Empire. Montesquieu recognized that commercial activity distinguished modern republics from their ancient precedents, but his constitutional theory of the separation of powers barely takes this economic difference into account.

Conversely (and fourthly), there are clear cases where the line of causation runs from political ideas to economic practices. Consider the idea of a free market, one of the pillars of the capitalist economy. This idea first began to circulate in Jansenist circles as a response to a theological question: Can sinful practices still have a positive effect for humanity? These debates took place in the late seventeenth century, long before any government in Europe had actually attempted to liberalize its economy. The various laissez-faire efforts that followed were all driven by intellectual theories, not the other way around.⁴⁴

Finally, there is a certain irony to Marx's insistence that economic conflicts will invariably unleash a political revolution. By the end of the nineteenth century, the promised revolution had failed to materialize. Had socioeconomic tensions diminished? Hardly: the Belle Epoque, or Gilded Age in the United States, was a time of growing social inequality. So why hadn't there been a revolution? Marx's greatest disciple offered a rather unorthodox answer: Lenin argued that party operatives needed to inculcate a "political consciousness" in the proletariat—that is, by spreading *ideas*. The first successful Marxist revolution was brought about by a

political party that ignored Marx's relation between socioeconomic conditions and political thought.⁴⁵

None of the above is meant to imply that economic tensions play no role in the outbreak or course of revolutions. It is highly unlikely that there will be a revolution in Switzerland, at least as things stand. Ideas of revolutionary change will have little purchase in the absence of major hardships. But hardship alone does not seem to be a sufficient condition for revolution. Sometimes it is the "epiphenomena" that push a society across the revolutionary threshold: it took a video of the Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi setting himself on fire to spark a revolution in Tunis. Socioeconomic conditions in Tunisia were terrible, but they had been terrible for decades. The same holds true for Egypt, which experienced a revolution shortly thereafter.⁴⁶

The goal of this book is not to resolve the mysteries of revolutionary causation, even if it seems obvious to me that, at least after 1789, the *idea* of revolution clearly played a part in triggering future revolutions. But my broader methodological claim is that political questions have a degree of autonomy from economic conditions. This autonomy is far from complete. As I explain in the following chapter, the very idea of a balanced constitution emerged as a political solution to the socioeconomic conflicts between wealthy and poor in Greek city-states. But as it was developed by later thinkers, notably Polybius, the theory of balanced government—alongside its loathsome opponent, revolution—acquired a logic of its own. Polybius's idea of checks and balances was not only intended to mitigate class conflict. It also served to prevent ambitious individuals *of any class* from gaining excessive power and subverting the constitution.

What's more, changing economic conditions had little impact on the success or failure of this political framework. In part, this is because it was so capacious: no matter the forms of economic production, the net result has been remarkably stable across history. There have always been a wealthy few and many poor. This is one reason why the American founders, as I detail in chapter 7, still found the Polybian framework so effective. The material conditions of the eighteenth-century American colonies differed greatly from those of republican Rome, but that did not upend how people thought about political structures. Because these ideas also had the imprimatur of antiquity and the hallowed British constitution, they were all the more difficult to displace.

And when this political model was ultimately displaced, it was not because of new economic conditions. It's true that Turgot, one of the most important theorists of modern progress, was also an economist who as

minister championed the liberalization of the grain trade. But the doctrine of progress that he first articulated in 1750, while still a theology student at the Sorbonne, was not influenced by innovations in economic theory or practice. His political masterpiece, the *Memorandum on Municipalities*, is similarly driven by the progressive imperative to rationalize, not by his economic experience. If anything, the economic foundations of the *Memorandum* are backward facing: Turgot recommends that voting power be proportionally allocated based on the size of property holdings (see chapter 8).

This book ultimately makes a fairly moderate and commonsensical plea: We should take ideas seriously, perhaps not as seriously as the German idealists whom Marx pitilessly mocked, but more seriously than some social scientists. And we should recognize that changes in political thought are not only occasioned by external events (socioeconomic or other) but can come about through intellectual debates. The world of ideas is not impermeable to the world outside, but it is not just a play of shadows and light either.

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