The philosophe may have laid the egg, but was the bird hatched of a different breed? Maurice Cranston discusses the intellectual origins and development of the French Revolution.

EDMUND BURKE was one of the first to suggest that the philosophers of the French Enlightenment were somehow responsible for the French Revolution, and his argument was taken up, and elaborated on, by many historians, including Tocqueville and Lord Acton. The philosophes undoubtedly provided the ideas. It may well be that the collapse of the old regime was the consequence of other factors – economic problems, social unrest, conflicting ambitions of groups and individuals – but in the unfolding of the Revolution, what was thought, what was said, and what was advocated, was expressed in terms and categories that came from political theorists of the Enlightenment.

Those theorists were far from sharing the same ideas; but, then, the French Revolution itself was not animated by a single revolutionary programme. Unlike the English and American Revolutions, the French Revolution went through a series of phases, each of which almost amounted to a revolution in itself, and as the Revolutionists repudiated one policy to adopt another, more or less its antithesis, they were able to turn from one philosopher of the Enlightenment, to an alternative, competing or rival theorist from the same stable.

The first phase of the French Revolution was the one in which the dominant ideas were those of Montesquieu, notably those expounded in his masterpiece, L’Esprit des lois first published in 1753. Montesquieu claimed that a liberal constitutional monarchy was the best system of government for a people who prized freedom, on the grounds that by dividing the sovereignty of the nation between several centres of power, it provided a permanent check on any one of them becoming despotic. Montesquieu suggested that the English had achieved this by sharing sovereignty between the Crown, Parliament and the law courts. The French, he suggested, would need, if they were to adopt the same idea, to make use of the estates with which they were themselves already familiar: the Crown, the aristocratic courts, the Church, the landed nobility and the chartered cities.

Montesquieu’s project gives a conspicuous share of the sovereignty to the aristocracy – the class to which he himself belonged – both the noblesse de robe in the courts and the noblesse de race on the land. Some of the people most active in the earliest stages of the Revolution were aristocrats, who undoubtedly identified the cause of national freedom with the interests of their own estate. When the French Revolution began, Louis XVI took it to be an enterprise on the part of some of his privileged subjects to do what the Whig nobles of England had done in 1688, and replace an absolute monarch with a constitutional monarch. It was in order to avoid being another James II of England that Louis XVI tried to play the part of another William III.

The comte de Mirabeau, the leading orator among the revolutionists of this early phase, was very much the disciple of Montesquieu in his demand for a constitutional mon-
archy. On the more abstract level Mirabeau believed that the only way to ensure freedom was to institute a divided sovereignty, but he did not agree with Montesquieu as to whom estates in France should have a share in that divided sovereignty. Despite being a nobleman himself, Mirabeau was out of sympathy with most of his peers. Indeed one big difference between the French liberal noblemen who were prominent in the early stages of the French Revolution — Lafayette, Condorcet, Liaucourt, Talleyrand, as well as Mirabeau — and the English Whig aristocrats of 1688 is that they did not represent the views of a large section of their own class.

Even before Mirabeau’s death in April 1791, Montesquieu’s dream of devolving a large share of national sovereignty on to the peers and the Church had been rendered unrealisable by the attitude of the First, the ecclesiastical, and the Second, or the noble Estates when the Estates-General first met in May 1789. The privileged orders proved more eager revolutionists had done so in 1776. Lafayette, having taken part in person in the American war of independence, and Condorcet, who had been made an honorary citizen of New Haven, were among those most active in having the French Revolution justify itself to the world and the people, by proclaiming the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen as early as August, 1789. However, as later critics pointed out, a ‘declaration’ has no force in law, and the proclamation made no material difference to the institutions and procedures by which the constitutional monarchy was governed. The division of sovereignty between the Crown and the legislature was still thought of as the central achievement of the Revolution of 1789.

What put an end to all this was the king’s flight to Varennes, which made it fairly obvious that he did not want to share his sovereignty with the legislature; and the failure thereafter of liberal monarchists to patch up the constitution gave a signal to those who had no desire for the

Charles de Montesquieu, leading philosophe proponent of a ‘limited’ monarchy.

Rousseau defined freedom as ruling oneself, living only under a law which one has oneself enacted. On Rousseau’s philosophy of freedom, there was no question of the people dividing and diminishing sovereignty, because the people were to keep sovereignty in their own hands. In Rousseau’s conception of a constitution, the nation became sovereign over itself.

The second phase of the French Revolution can be dated as it is in the revolutionary calendar from September 1792, or Vendémiaire of Year One, to Napoleon’s coup d’état in November 1799, or 19 Brumaire of Year Eight. This is the republican phase, for which Rousseau not only furnished the terminology of revolutionary discourse, but was generally acknowledged to have done so. Unlike Montesquieu, whose name had been cited with the same passionless respect as that of Aristotle or Locke, Rousseau was idolised and venerated. His body was disinterred from its grave in Ermonville, taken in a solemn procession to Paris and placed in the Panthéon.

It is said that not many people had actually read the book called The Social Contract where Rousseau expounded his republican theories, but Rousseau had made his ideas well known in more popular writings and his personality became familiar through his Confessions.

He had contrived to make himself known as the man of the people, one who had not only proclaimed his love of virtue and freedom, but had demonstrated that love in an exemplary life and a constant struggle against oppression. He was the
found assent in France; and no French king was ever to be secure on his throne after that belief took root in the French national consciousness.

When the First French Republic was brought to an end by Napoleon, his coup d'état did not mark the end of the French Revolution, but only its passage to the third, or imperial, phase. Again he had to look no further for his ideas than to those provided by the French Enlightenment. This time it was the turn of Voltaire, and his doctrine of enlightened absolutism. This theory, like that of Rousseau, kept the sovereignty of the state undivided, but in Voltaire's case it was not transmitted to the people but kept, without question, in the hands of the monarch.

Voltaire proclaimed himself to be, like Montesquieu, a disciple of the English philosophers, and having visited England at much the same time, he described the English kingdom, in much the same terms, as the homeland of liberty. Again, like Montesquieu, Voltaire named Locke as the prince of English philosophers, and there can be no doubt that he owed much to Locke's inspiration. Voltaire's own Traité sur la

The ideas of Rousseau (inset left in an allegorical revolutionary tableau) became increasingly influential as the Revolution progressed; his remains were honoured by their translation to the Pantheon (below) in 1794.

plebeian among philosophers, Jean-Jacques the martyr and champion of the poor; but he also provided arguments which served the purposes of the Terror. For while he said a people could only be free if it ruled itself, Rousseau also said that a man could be forced to be free; he suggested the cult of a civil religion being established in place of Christianity; he authorised the head of the republic to overrule the dictates of private consciences together with the use of state powers to suppress immorality as well as crime.

It would be unfair to Rousseau to say that Robespierre put the theory of The Social Contract into practice, but he used Rousseau's language, and exploited — while distorting — several of Rousseau's ideas in the course of his reign of terror. At all events, the discrediting of Robespierre did not result in the discrediting of Rousseauism. Whereas the departure of Cromwell from the scene had left the

English with a lasting hatred of republican government, the execution of Robespierre did not mean that the French had ceased to be republicans. The idea that the nation might be sovereign over itself has never ceased to command a widespread and pro-
tolerance, for example, adds little to the arguments of Locke's Letter for Toleration. But Voltaire did not join Montesquieu in subscribing to the theory of divided sovereignty and constitutional government as set forth in Locke's Two Treatises of Gov-
government. Voltaire was far more attracted to the political ideas of another Englishman, Francis Bacon, the philosopher of progress. Although Bacon had died in 1626, Voltaire considered him the most up-to-date of thinkers: one whose message had a kind of actuality and relevance for eighteenth-century France that exceeded even that of Locke, whose message was mainly a message to the English, who already had experience of parliamentary government which the French had not.

Voltaire admired Bacon first as a man of science. It was not that Bacon had made any scientific discoveries of his own; he simply proclaimed the doctrine that science can save us. What was distinctive about his approach was his stress on utility. Science, he suggested, was not just an intellectual exercise to give us knowledge, but a practical enterprise to give us mastery over our world. Once men knew how nature worked, they could exploit nature to their advantage, overcome scarcity by scientific innovations in agriculture, overcome disease by scientific research in medicine, and generally improve the life of man by all sorts of developments in technology and industry.

Voltaire thrilled to this vision of progress, and he was no less excited by the programme Bacon sketched out as a means of achieving it. First, frankly in favour of an enlarged royal prerogative at the expense of the rights of the Church, Parliament and the courts. Voltaire approved. Bacon had, in his time, the scheme of fostering the desire of James I to become an absolute monarch so that he himself might enact the role of philosopher at the elbow of a mighty king; Bacon failed, but Voltaire was more than sympathetic to his effort.

Besides, the Baconian plan seemed to him to have a better chance of success in France, because France had had, in Voltaire's opinion, an altogether happier experience of absolute monarchy under the Bourbon kings of the seventeenth century. One can readily understand

(Left) Rousseau's concept of a new civil religion was fleshed out as Robespierre's Festival of the Supreme Being.

(Below) Voltaire's message of scientific progress, drawing heavily on the arguments of English thinkers such as Locke and Bacon, was one that was also congenial to the early years of the Revolution, as this engraving of the triumphal entry for the new 'Monuments des Sciences et Arts En France' shows. His more genial outlook of tolerance, captured in the 18th-century bust (bottom left), was not however one emulated by the revolutionaries.

the abolition of traditional metaphysics and of idle theological disputes on which scholarship was wasted. Second, the repudiation of old-fashioned legal and political impediments to the efficient organisation of a progressive state. Bacon was Voltaire's admiration for Henri IV; it is less easy to understand his veneration for Louis XIV, the persecutor of Protestants, the oppressor of dissent and the protector of the pious. It has been suggested that Louis XIV appealed to the aesthetic side of
Voltaire's imagination, which saw the king as an artist imposing unity on the chaos of society. In any case, Voltaire saw no necessary threat to freedom in the centralisation of royal government. On the contrary, he considered that in French experience the great enemies of liberty were the Church and the institutions controlled by the nobility, including the parlements. By suppressing or emasculating such institutions, a strong central government could enlarge the citizen's liberty; it had done so in the past in France and could do so in the future. He would not accept Montesquieu's doctrine of power checking power to produce freedom through equilibrium. For Voltaire, one single power that can be trusted is needed not to counter-balance, but rather to subdue those other powers which menace freedom.

The idea of 'philosopher-king', of course, dates back at least as far as Plato. In the eighteenth century, several European monarchs were persuaded by Enlightenment philosophy to try to enact the role, among them, the Empress Catherine of Russia, the Emperor Joseph of Austria, as well as several lesser princes. Frederick of Prussia was the one who approached Voltaire in person, and invited him to join his Court at Potsdam. It was a doomed enterprise. Voltaire found himself unable to control the mind of a king who considered himself a philosopher already, and who wanted no advice, but only praise.

The French kings took no interest whatever in Voltaire's ideas: but Napoleon did. And once Napoleon had seized power, he made the Baconian, or Voltairean, project his own. Napoleon could fairly claim to be something other than a military dictator. He introduced what he thought of as scientific government. He gave his patronage to those intellectuals who saw themselves as the heirs of the Enlightenment: to Destutt de Tracy, Volney, Cabannas and Daunou, exponents of what they called the 'science of ideas.' He furthermore the creation of such essentially Baconian institutions as the Polytechnique, the lycées, and the several écoles normales. He made education a central feature of imperial policy, and he made that education state education.

Assuredly, Napoleon modified the Voltairean theory of enlightened absolutism in directions that Voltaire would not have approved. Napoleon introduced something approaching a democratic element by making his despotism plebiscitary, something which the earlier phases of the French Revolution had made almost inevitable. Voltaire had never cared much for democracy, because he considered the majority of people to be hopelessly unenlightened, but once the people had been brought into the French political arena, Napoleon saw that there was no way of pushing them out. They had only to be persuaded to let themselves be led, and Napoleon, of course, proved something of a genius in doing this. Voltaire, had he lived, might have admired him for this, but he would not have admired, or approved either of Napoleon's re-establishment of the Catholic Church or his military adventures. It was Frederick's wars which did most to alienate Voltaire; and Napoleon's wars would have pleased him no more; especially as Napoleon's conquests seemed to diminish rather than increase his attachment to the ideals of science and of freedom.

Nevertheless, one cannot deny that the fifteen years of Napoleon's consulate and empire, while rejecting the institutions of the republic, did much to consolidate and perpetuate the institutions which the earlier phases of the Revolution had introduced into France, and which the ideas of the Enlightenment had inspired. Napoleon was not a counter-revolutionary in any sense. Even his restoration of the Church was the introduction of a cult over which he kept control rather than to which he submitted. The only French royal and noble titles that he recognised were those of his own creation. He kept the republican character of his empire, much as the Romans had done in the ancient world.

Indeed the very fact that the Romans had transformed their republic into an empire made it all the easier for Napoleon to do so in France. Once the French revolutionists had rid themselves of their king, they began increasingly to think of themselves as the Romans of the modern world. Their art and architecture, the military organisation of their new army, even the names of civil ranks such as 'consul' and 'senator' were conscious copies of the Roman model. In doing this they did not depart very far from the more modern and democratic ideas of Rousseau; for although Rousseau preferred Sparta to Rome, and believed that freedom could only be realised in a small city state, he, too, was all in favour of reviving Roman ideals in place of Christian ideals, and looked forward to the emergence of a new man in the shape of the citizen-soldier of antiquity reborn.

Rousseau even made the singular prediction that the island of Corsica would one day produce a leader who would astonish the world. That leader owed much of his success, while that success lasted, to adopting the policies of Voltairean enlightened despotism while dressing them all up in republican language and trappings that were inspired by Rousseau; it was not a genuine synthesis, because it took the substance from one and the appearances from the other, but at least it enabled Napoleon to achieve all the popularity he needed in France, so that his regime could only be overthrown by a coalition of foreign governments and armies.

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