

Untethering Memory: On French Intellectuals Responding to the Classical Theory of Political Cycles from Montesquieu to the Revolution

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The political theory of the cycle of constitutions, famously enunciated in the sixth book of Polybius' *Histories* in the 140 BCE, was significantly reapplied (if with variance and modification) by High and Later Renaissance thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Polybian paradigm placed constitutional beginnings in one-man rule, followed by a zigzag sequence between good and bad polities (monarchy to tyranny, aristocracy to oligarchy, democracy to mob-rule) and then a return to a single figure who started the *anakuklōsis* over again. Such a rotation betokened continual instability, signalling for Polybius that there were repetitive patterns in politics as one important aspect of historical recurrence more generally conceived. Only a well-devised constitution, combining the three worthiest simple polities (kingship, aristocracy, democracy) in a mixture, could forestall such mutations of polity, as Sparta and republican Rome exemplified. Admittedly the whole model was rather too elaborate and artificial to work for the moderns, but, from Machiavelli and into French political thought through Seyssel, Bodin and Le Roy, it was an impressive piece of classical *memoria* beckoning attention and in consequence some interesting tampering. In Machiavelli, we find the “revision” (based on Livy) that constitutions should be brought back to their foundational principles (by a man of political *virtù* like Romulus, who first established Rome’s basic *mixtus*), for the danger was that even a mixed polity could recurrently lapse into tyranny (starting from Tarquinius Superbus). In James Harrington and the English Republicans the issue of “half-mixing,” so producing “mixed kingships,” had to be considered as a means of stabilization; and if a nation was going to live under a monarchy, it had to

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be a constitutional rule and one that secured a correct balance of land among its people.

By the eighteenth century, since monarchies dominated politico-territorial fixtures, the most common picturing of the political cycle was a simplified one: from monarchy to monarchy, through rules of the few and the many. Refinements and caveats were admittedly still possible. The great Neapolitan proponent of historical recurrence Giambattista Vico, for example, keeping up Italian interests in such matters, inscribed a complex process from patriarchal kingships, through heroic aristocracies, popular governments, back to one-man rule in the form of “civic monarchies” (while subtly paralleling post-antique with antique developments and acknowledging the reappearance of Republics). In France and England vernacular translations of Dionysius of Halicarnassus generated relevant interest in the 1720s because his *Archaeologiae* traced Roman constitutional life from monarchy via tyranny, aristocracy, oligarchy and democracy to the republican compromise between patrician and plebeian elements. And everyone knew, even if the extant Dionysian texts (*ca.* 7 BCE) do not say it, a return to one-man rule followed.

While discussion of constitutional sequences was always circulating, though, and the quest for constitutional balance strong, it becomes harder to trace Polybian footprints or calls to some “foundational polity” amid the discordant voices of pessimists, uniformitarians and a growing number of “progressives.” Perhaps the lessened diversity of political forms in the age of absolutism was rendering anacyclic theory irrelevant. Perhaps classical *memoria* was being untied by new “adventures in ideas,” with moderns freer to assert authority over the ancients after their great cultural *querelle*. If this was so, however, the process of untethering remained very slow, with ideas of historical recurrence too powerful to be argued away; and it is this article’s object to consider the somewhat muted application of Graeco-Roman ideas about constitutional *metabolē* and *rota* in French political thought from *ca.* 1740 to 1800 – from Montesquieu, through Rousseau, and on to de Maistre, when the great Revolution had unfolded.¹

What relevant analytical paradigms were spun out in France often related to Britain, as reactions, whether favourable or nervous, to the forging of a “constitutional monarchy” across *La Manche*. Britain had achieved safeguards against absolute royal power, and her liberal theorists waxed eloquent about the achievement. A little before Vico, English “Real Whig” Walter Moyle (1672-1721) had compared the Roman and the British constitutions and found the former wanting. Rome’s original “Monarchy resolv’d into an Aristocracy, and that into a Democracy; and that too relaps’d into a Monarchy,” the implication being that the original was far superior to the eventual Caesardom. The key problem of such mutability for Rome was not a moral one (as Polybius was supposed to believe) but concerned “the Ballance of Land” (a characteristically Harringtonian stress). The “noble [mixed monarchical and in that sense Republican] constitution” first set up by Romulus (thus Livy) was upset during the early kingly period too much in favour of popular power – a rather curious conclusion at the time (at least before Rousseau) – and it was never restored.² Britain, in contrast, possessed arrangements for stability. Whigs and Tories alike joined Moyle in extolling their own nation’s constitutional balance, indicating it as a matter of pride to French visitors. The Whig Edward Spelman (d.

¹ Garry Trompf, *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought* (Berkeley, 1979-2011), vol. 1, 25-59, 252-68; vol. 2, chs. 6-7.

² Walter Moyle, *Essay upon the Roman Government in Works* (London, 1726), 70-73, cf. 4, 54-70, 99, 108, 148; (1747), 371, 385, 411.

1767), as translator of both Polybius Book VI and Dionysius, took the mixed governments of Sparta, Rome and England to be the “happiest to live under;” and if for him the Caesars so upset the balance of the three political orders with an absolute monarchy that made Rome “prey to the barbarian invader,” England could avoid this blunder – to achieve unequivocal perfection.³ The “Freethinking Tory” Lord (Henry St John Viscount) Bolingbroke (1678-1751) looked to “a patriot king” who would influence by moral example “to restore and preserve” Britain under “old laws, and an old constitution,” creating a faction-free equilibrium, with juridical, legislative and executive powers famously separated under a constitutional monarchy.⁴

Insofar as England’s balanced constitution implied some kind of recoverable original, the idea of political recurrence lingered. A mythic panacea was sometimes invoked, as if, like “Romulan foundations,” there were some “ancient (Germanic) constitution” one could perennially recover, when in fact, as Voltaire alleged from France, there were no clear signs of an unenslaved English Commons in a happy political *mélange* until Tudor times.⁵ Whatever the degree of enthusiasm to find some “golden original,” we may justly assert that the myth of Britain’s constitutional balance in the eighteenth century was quietly replacing the comparable “myth of Venice” from the preceding one, certainly in the north.⁶ The most significant admirer of the English system was of course France’s Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755), the greatest legal theorist of his age, who had the precise intention in dealing with it to contrast the “moderate [mixed monarchical] governments” of Europe (which he enjoined for France) with the enslaving despotisms of Asia (the Turks) and the “inquisitorial” infringements of liberty found in the Italian Republics (as in Venice).⁷ Here was someone who knew the English polity firsthand (from 1728), read Bolingbroke and Moyle, and was highly cognizant of ancient and contemporary political arrangements.⁸

The question is whether any relevant and new hermeneutical slants on patterns and/or cycles of constitutional change were developed in Enlightenment France. After all, classical erudition ran high there, and it is worth discovering how the course of the Roman political institutions was interpreted *vis-à-vis* the consolidation of the grand *royaume de France*, which, venerable and *ancien*, deserved saving from degeneracy. We begin naturally with Montesquieu’s *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734)⁹ and give notice that he sees the antique Romans passing successively under the power of kings, aristocracy and a popular state. The succession derives as much from the newly prized Dionysius as from Polybius; but Montesquieu makes nothing of the emperors as a “returning monarchy.”

³ Edward Spelman, *A Fragment of the Sixth Book of Polybius* (London, 1743), 371-85, 411 and *The Roman Antiquities of Dionysius of Halicarnassus* (London, 1758).

⁴ Henry St John Bolingbroke, “The Idea of a Patriot King (1740),” in *Works*, David Mallet, ed. (Philadelphia, 1841), vol. 1, 393-96.

⁵ Voltaire, “Sur le gouvernement,” *Lettre philosophiques* 9 (1734), Raymond Naves, ed. (Paris, 1964), 38-44.

⁶ Haitsma Mulier, *The Myth of Venice and Dutch Republican Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (Assen, 1980).

⁷ Montesquieu, *Défense de l'esprit de lois* (Geneva, 1750), esp. [Bk.] II, 4; XI, 4-6; cf. VIII, 21; XIX and *Lettres persanes* ([Paris] 1721), no. 81.

⁸ Ursula Gonthier, *Montesquieu and England: Enlightenment Exchanges, 1689-1755* (London, 2010), 132-41.

⁹ Using 1758 edn., in *Oeuvres*, repr. André Masson (Paris, 1950), vol. 1.

Admittedly, he equivocates over Rome's arrival at its constitutional apex as “neither a monarchy nor a republic” (*Causes* VI [400]), yet its peculiarities, with the senate and its magistracies as its key internal strengths ([390]; VIII [410]) during the time of expansion as an empire, amounted to an aristocracy “little by little” changing into an *état populaire* ([405]). As is the case with Vico, there is no point in isolating the period of a *mixtus*, and his critical acumen will not allow any ideal mixed constitution at the start (*à la Moyle*), because Romulus was not in a position to make laws, only treaties (I-II, cf. *Esprit des loix* XVI, 16). It always sufficed for Montesquieu to say that Rome was a *république* grounded on “the supreme power of the people” and its polity *excellente*, English Whiggism obviously influencing him in the *Causes* when he credited Roman greatness to the “equal partitioning of lands” (III, cf. *Esprit* I, 2; II, 2). The weight of the analysis of power politics, though, actually falls on Rome's ruthless militarism, and the survival of Rome and her imperial holdings are now seen, in the régime's own terms, as above all depending on military might (*Causes*, I-III; VI), with constitutional analysis left playing second fiddle. Rome grew imperially omnipotent under the Republic, but that was “fatal to Republican government,” because, with the increasing of popular elements, a few ambitious men (first Sulla, and then Crassus, Pompey and Caesar) could take self-generated military control in “a kind of anarchy” that produced civil war (XV [455]; cf. XI [421, 426-7]; XIII [439]). From Sulla on, previously healthy dissensions among the Romans became deadly, and they fast lost their political (even moral) *vertu* (*Esprit* II, 2-3; III, 3). The Caesardom that follows this breakdown is never convincingly upheld as the welcome “civil monarchy” we find in Vico. Indeed, it is “something more than monarchy” for being recurrently susceptible to tyranny (*Esprit* II 3). Even Augustus is a crafty tyrant, “beginning a process whereby the ‘people's power declines’ into servitude (XIII [441]; XIV [447], etc.), for the populace eventually “enjoyed the fruits of the tyranny,” through riches and security, in their own political despoliation (XV [452]).

Montesquieu was not clearly mediating Vichian ideas: Rome's constitutional journey was not from monarchy to monarchy, and the latter (the emperorship) was not held up as a model for modern European rulers' emulation. In France that amounted to a more conservative reading of Roman history, well reflected by the later work of Abbé Le Beau de Bignon, who was bent on propagating the findings of an all-too neglected Vico this way.¹⁰ More akin to Machiavelli on such matters, Montesquieu writes rather of “tyranny to tyranny.” The rule of the Decemvirs (451-49 BCE) was “as cruel a tyranny as that of Tarquin” (not following Dionysius in calling their rule oligarchic), and eventually it will be Caesar who will have “Rome cast again (*remit*) into slavery” (*Esprit* XI, 15, cf. *Causes* I [354, 358], XII [431]; XIV). The consequences of the tyrannies are different, of course. Montesquieu follows Moyle to accentuate the people's role in removing Tarquinius Superbus and thus rooting the expansionist Republican experience in liberty. In contrast, the emperors' polity congeals in its corruption through influences of “the courts of Asia” (V [387]). It becomes absolute – for “no authority is more absolute than that of a prince who succeeds a republic” (XV [454]) and thus akin to an “Asiatic despotism” (IX [415]). Montesquieu's point, then, is to discourage the grand monarchies of Europe from emulating the Roman emperors.

¹⁰ Abbé Le Beau de Bignon, *Considérations sur l'origine et les révolutions du gouvernement des Romains* (Paris, 1778).

The Caesars did not return to the original principles of the balanced, liberty-based constitution they possessed at their height: the contemporary monarchs of England and France, contrastingly, have the capacity to return to those principles (following Moyle and Bolingbroke), whereas the oriental despotisms of Turkey, Persia and even China had to be forever on guard against popular uprisings (*Esprit*, III, 3; V, 18; *Causes*, IX [415]). Over this crucial point Montesquieu creates a discontinuity between the politics of Graeco-Roman antiquity and his own inheritance, “by exiling political despotism from Christian Europe,” as Nadia Urbinati has put it. The classical past is remembered, but in a fresh critical light and more for a political liberalizing than Renaissance-style emulation. And by this strategy Montesquieu “delegitimized all forms of slavery … as a plague,” while at the same taking seriously despotism as a “comprehensive regime,” that “paralyzed action” among its Asiatic subjects (*Esprit* XV, 1; VI, 15).¹¹ Here germinates the discourse of “oriental despotism” and this political form’s constant *internal* recurrence of changing dynasts.

The concessions Montesquieu made to the Republic suited French and other Continental “liberals” who wanted to see kings as “protectors of republics” rather than absolute rulers.¹² But his reconstructions also suggested their own means of correction by conservatives who had an aptitude for spotting more kinds of tyranny than he had within the processes of political rotation. Such was the definite opinion of François Henri (or René) Turpin (1709-99), an impoverished *savant* who, seeking better circumstances, took on “the sublime Montesquieu” in his own terms and with a pro-absolutist (if still “constitutional”) stance. Once again English “Reflection” on political change plays a role, for Turpin heavily plagiarizes the English eccentric Edward Wortley Montagu’s *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of Antient Repubicks* (1759) to instruct on France’s condition, rather than on “the present state of Great Britain,” as Montagu originally intended. Dedicating his *Histoire de gouvernement des anciennes républiques* to Scandinavian royalty (in 1769), Turpin suspects Polybius’ ancient mixed republic was illusory.¹³ The English delude themselves in extolling the constitutional balance of either Sparta or Rome. If the ruin of democratic Athens is a powerful lesson for the English people, who infect themselves with the same dangerous venalities of flattery, insidious eloquence, [and] … jealous rivalry, “one must remember that revolt eventually came to Sparta as well (under Agis [IV] 240s BCE) (*Histoire*, 79-80, 173-5). As for Rome, its military basis (rightly stressed by Montesquieu) only ever produced an unvirtuous *oligarchie tyrannique*, together with sporadic tyrannical dictatorships and then “an oscillation between despotism and anarchy” during the Civil War. The populace, represented by their tribunes, was the root cause of instability, and in turn Caesardom pandered to the problem through public spectacles (340-54, 365-73, 381). For Turpin, unfair to the jurist’s precise position, Montesquieu had been deceived by Polybius, who simply flattered his audience about the mixed balance of Sparta and Rome. The Romans were a much more venal lot than Montesquieu allowed; and the real threat of Polybius’ anacyclic model (*la rotation*) required to be better addressed: the problem

¹¹ Nadia Urbinati, “The Many Heads of the Hydra: J.S. Mill on Despotism,” in *J.S. Mill’s Political Thought: A Bicentennial Reassessment*, Nadia Urbinati and Alex Zakaras, eds. (Cambridge, 2007), 72.

¹² For example, René Louis d’Argenson, *Considérations sur le gouvernement ancien et présent de la France* (Yverden, 1764).

¹³ François Henri Turpin, *Histoire de gouvernement des anciennes républiques* (Paris [pagin. using 1769 edn.]); Edward Wortley Montagu’s *Reflections on the Rise and Fall of Antient Repubicks* (London, 1759), 368, defending Polybius.

of the state falling under “the cruel and ferocious domination [i.e., tyranny] of the people” (80, 412-4, 448-9). Here the strong monarchy of France should set the tone for future stability, not the permission granted to popular and factionalist tendencies in Britain, let alone those dissensions Montesquieu apparently thought healthy for republican Rome. The classics remained a warning for France, not a reason for constitutional adventure.

Turpin, whose work illustrates continuing interest in a cycle of governments, saw the writing on the wall. The momentum for republican *liberté*, even for the “reappearance of ‘unmixed’ democracy” was mounting (314, cf. 173-5, 460). Already by 1762, in his renowned *Social Contract*, stimulating Swiss émigré Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) had re-stated the cycle of constitutions with a guarded radicalism. At first glance, upon studying the provocative tenth chapter, readers might suppose that Rousseau has arbitrarily inverted the Polybian constitutional series, putting democracy and its degenerate form ochlocracy first in order, with aristocracy/oligarchy and “royalty”/tyranny after (*Contrat social* III, 10).¹⁴ In fact, however, the readjustment is made only because he is talking about the “titling” (*inclinaison*) of all governments and their tendency to dissolution, which entails a “natural propensity” to proceed from democracy to aristocracy, and then to monarchy. In an extended footnote [n. 2] we find his definitive exegesis: he not only applies the rule to Rome’s political degeneration, but re-envisioned the whole course of Roman constitutional life so as to place democracy, ever so subtly, at its apex.

Thus Romulus first set up a *gouvernement mixte*; it is primary and at no point reappears in Roman history. This creation collapses into *despotisme* – that of the Tarquins – with a hereditary aristocracy, “the worst of all forms of legitimate administration” under the patricians, until, after a conflict between aristocracy and democracy, the form of government was eventually settled by the creation of the Tribunes (“as Machiavelli has proved”). But far from the result being a *mixta*, as in the Florentine’s estimation, Rousseau has it that “only then was there a true government and a veritable *démocratie*.” The people had become “sovereign, magistrate and judge,” with senate subordinated and the patrician consuls “mere *présidents*.” Thereafter one talks only of decline. There is a slight hint of ochlocracy, with the tribunes “usurping their functions,” although the contemporary alternative of tyranny could serve just as well (see IV, 5). But Rome’s general tendency is back towards aristocracy (apparently now of an “elective” kind) (cf. III, 5), and then, by this polity’s “abuse” (a hint at oligarchy), on to monarchy. The dictator Sulla, earlier on, and then Julius and Augustus as founders of Caesardom, could be deemed “real monarchs”; but Tiberius brings back *despotisme* and thereafter (in Rousseau’s reckless flourish) “the state was dissolved” (*l’état se dissout*). Rousseau clarifies what Montesquieu appeared to have left less precise: tyrants are usurpers of royal authority; despots set themselves up above the law, inevitably making them tyrants as well (III, 10).

In this construal elements of constitutional recurrence are present but muted – with aristocracy and despotism made repeated and with an admission elsewhere, agreeable to a Machiavelli or Turpin, that Rome suffered “revival[s] of all the crimes of tyranny even at its height” (II, 7 [57]). And what of the intriguing concession to democracy? In another chapter he depicts it as “so perfect a government” that men will surely corrupt it, not normally possessing the (civic) *vertu* to sustain or protect it

¹⁴ An ordering repeated by Constantin de Volney, *Les Ruines, ou Méditations sur les révolutions des empires* (Paris, 1791), ch. 9, [n. 3].

from inevitable “intestine agitations” (III, 4). There lies an implication, at least, that Rome at its democratic apex returned to the “original principles” of Romulus’ time, that is, to a government based on common interest, or on “the general will,” by virtue of which members of the State, can be citizens and free (IV, 2; cf. II, 3; IV, 1). Rousseau leaves room for the *wise legislators*, such as Lycurgus and Romulus, and by implication their achievements reflect a primary democratic foundation of all polities. Not that the creation of mixed constitutions can still bear its own intrinsic weight. Some mixed constitutions, such as England’s, are worthy; others, as in Poland’s case, unworkable (III, 7). In modern times, Calvin is made prime example of such a legislator to be “forever blessed:” aside from varying estimates of his theology, “the spirit of patriotism and liberty” endures from “the codification of his wise edicts” (II, 7, [n.1]). The longstanding Italian republics Venice and Genoa, by comparison, seemed stuck in patrician aristocracy in their respective declines (III, 10 [n.2]), and thus the myth of Geneva (and also Berne) replaces that of Venice as his consensual ideal.¹⁵ Classical *memoria* lingers but has been freely reconfigured; it no longer matters whether Geneva is a triadic *mélange*, only that it is a balanced Republic for new times.

Rousseau’s readjustments were daring, and he had no immediate imitators in France. Pure democracy still had to wait a generation to be so welcomed as it was by him; and he looked too “Protestant.” One has to follow the chronological history theory broaching the series and possible cycle of constitutions by crossing the Channel again, to the “Calvinist” Scots Lord Kames and Adam Ferguson and especially the English Unitarian Joseph Priestley, who use Rousseau to expose the recurrent susceptibility of all governments to tyrannize.¹⁶ Indeed, Rousseau’s constitutional revaluations looked subversive, if not revolutionary in an age of absolutism. Revolutions did come, of course, and they were to be much more severe than various turbulences in European countries usually going under the same epithet, like *les révoltes* in Portugal and Sweden, for example, let alone ancient Rome, as described by the Abbé Aubert de Vertot earlier in the century.¹⁷ What, though, of constitutional thought *within* great Revolutions? Here I concentrate on the French one (1789-1815), setting aside America, for as *avant-garde* social theorist Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot had presaged, its protagonists’ enunciations of liberty and equality would be louder than those heard across the Atlantic. Can we expect reflective interpretation of political recurrence in the midst of the convulsions that involved such messy civil strife, witnessed regicide in 1793, and propelled the French government through a series of radical alterations into the following century?

The Revolution’s sequence of political transformations – from the moderate, reformist Convention under the Girondin majority in 1792, through the times of Terror and Directory, to the extraordinary self-coronation of Napoleon Bonaparte as Emperor in 1804 – seemingly defied an expected constitutional pathway. If the Revolution’s extremes could confirm old images of political degeneration, moreover, they also created an aura of quite *unprecedented* radical change. Was all the old *memoria*, all classical modelling of the past, about to be rendered irrelevant by the utterly *moderne*? From as early as 1789 the mass of the French (especially Parisian)

¹⁵ Jean Ferrari, “Genève et Venise dans la pensée politique de Rousseau,” in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, politique et nation*, Robert Thiéry, ed. (Paris, 2001), 259-64.

¹⁶ Joseph Priestley, *An Essay on the First Principles of Government* (London, 1771 edn.), [sect.] II, 18-22.

¹⁷ Vertot, esp. *Histoire des révoltes de Portugal* (London, 1752 edn.); *Histoire des révoltes arrivées dans le gouvernement de la république romaine* (Paris, 1758 edn.).

populace began playing a decisive role (with anti-aristocratic and anti-[high]clerical intent), while to combine revolutionary fervour with the curbing of disorder an oligarchic-looking Directory (involving the Committee for Public Safety) held sway in the Republic between 1793 and 1799. Was one ever going to be in a position to say that a preconceived constitutional cycle was in motion? At least a basic succession from corrupt monarchy, through aristocracy and democracy, and back to one-man rule once again? Not unnaturally, very few living in the heat of these turbulent events were in a position to spot such a broad pattern; it is often only the immediacies of each discrete constitutional alteration, or the simple pull of events one way or another that will occupy interpretative attention. *A propos* the idea of large political cycles, the meaning of the Revolution's genuine complexities and its outcome in the Napoleonic empire would only come with time.

Certainly, there was a common recognition among revolutionaries, sympathizers, or those who saw an anti-Bourbon reaction inevitably arising, that a tyranny had been overthrown with the founding of the first Republic (September 1792). If the liberal marquis d'Argenson had once secretly estimated that royal power over France "had become more despotic than that of Turkey," voices in the groundbreaking National Assembly in 1789 broadly accepted as a general principle that, "since the world began, the *tableau* of revolutions" always had it that "empires were overturned" when "despots and ambitious men" ruled "with violence."¹⁸ With such momentous upsurges in America and France, the classical usage of "tyranny" was going to be resoundingly subverted, often being "applied without distinction to every government" that hindered the great cause and upheld old enslavements.¹⁹ And the word *république* soon became a catch-all for non-monarchical (or just non-despotic) government, as easily derived from such *philosophes* as Montesquieu and Rousseau, or English theorists, as from the Roman Republic.²⁰ French revolutionaries would even flourish *empire* in a loose rhetoric to enhance national grandeur, an empire that "re-established justice and freedom on earth."²¹

Once the old regime was being dismantled, it was predictable that the classical past would be invoked to provide the constitutional replacement. The effects of classical education in Latin being what they were, revolutionary ideologues could hardly miss received tradition that Rome's republic never strictly began until the last of the old kings, the tyrannical Tarquin, had been expelled. This is why the figure of Junius Brutus, who ousted Tarquinius in 509 BCE, keeps popping up in the revolutionary cultural landscape – with the most serious abjurations by *tribunes* (or spokesmen) in the 1792-94 legislative Convention being made *en Brutus*²² – and it soon became obvious how long imbedded in French political discourse, dramatic literature and the other arts was the conceit of high Gallic culture reduplicating Roman *virtus*.²³ It is a curiosity, however, that once the Jacobin protagonists for republicanism won out in the Constituent Assembly (1792) against Girondin

¹⁸ For sources, Paolo Viola, *Il trono vuoto: la transizione della sovranità* (Torino, 1989).

¹⁹ Raymonde Monnier, "Use and Role of the Concepts of Tyranny and Tyrannicide during the French Revolution," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 2:1 (2006): 19-41.

²⁰ For example, William Everdell, "From State to Free-State: The Meaning of the Word Republic from Jean Bodin to John Adams," *Valley Forge Journal* (June 1991): sect. xi.

²¹ Thus Robespierre, see Charles Vellay, ed., *Discours et Rapports de Robespierre* (Paris, 1908), 92.

²² For example, *Moniteurs* No. 42 (Nov. 1793); No. 336 (Aug. 23, 1794); No. 75 (Dec. 5, 1794); No. 134 (Feb. 2, 1795); cf. Robert Herbert, *David, Voltaire, Brutus and the French Revolution* (London, 1971).

²³ Georges Vigne and Florence Viguer, eds., *La Révolution française à l'école de la vertu antique* (Montaubon, 1989).

moderates, *philosophe* theorists, pro-Americans and “Anglomaniacs,” much of the debate about how the French Republic should look turned around Greece, not Rome.

Sparta was the crucial case in point. Received political theory had Sparta a republic; and during the so-called Terror (1793-94), the austerity, even “pitiless severity” of the *Lycurgan* model was sponsored by Robespierre and Saint-Just as the means of strict social control – especially in punishments (against enemies of liberty and defenders of tyranny!), yet also in education and festivals.²⁴ Lycurgus won out against Solonic Athens (preferred for France’s imitation by both a radical, Camille Desmoulins, and a conservative, René de Chateaubriand).²⁵ But whether for one or the other, “cults of political emulation” usually dominated over theories of constitutional change, or were programmes of progress that appropriated a glorious past for legitimacy. Once the flushes of enthusiasm for new political visions had discharged themselves, though, the cultic obsequiousness towards the classics tended to dissipate with it,²⁶ and the rhetorics of “high culture” steadily lost potency in parliamentary decision-making, often giving way to the discourse of progress.

Admittedly in France there was suddenly renewed exertion towards *un retour à l’antique* with the rise of Bonaparte, involving all that talk of dictatorship, consulate, tribunes, emperor and empire that accompanied his rise and victories (1797-1812). One then hears about saving the Republic (Abbé Siéyès, Benjamin Constant), of Napoleon destroying it, or restoring it like (an unassassinated) Caesar, or opening possibilities for an ideal monarchy (Chateaubriand).²⁷ The fitting classical conceit of an emperorship again succeeding a troubled Republic, as of old, was inevitable,²⁸ even if it was soon to lose “classical sense” with the *restoration* of King Louis XVIII. In such obsession with history (even from Napoleon himself), participants could only look for precedents to cover or legitimate each change; events seemed too complex to read as a political cycle. Perhaps the young Breton noble Chateaubriand (1768-1848) nearly did so, in his essaying on *Révolutions* (1797, 1810) over time. Because he preferred paralleling France and its new empire to Athens, he could imply that the Directory was a tyrannical Peisistratid episode rather than any new Sparta, and Napoleon a figure like the tyrant at the end of Plato’s constitutional series of the *Republic* (Bk. VIII), as if it were now possible for a cycle to restart with a new and ingenuous king.²⁹

Not unexpectedly, though, the reversion towards one-man rule, especially considering the beheading of Louis’ brother for treason by the 1792 Convention, led certain interpreters of constitutional change to the British experiences across the Channel, rather than to the ancients. Britain became an ideological hunting-ground for royalists and anti-revolutionaries. By 1790 Anglo-Irish conservative Edmund Burke had contrasted the dangers of “unmixed democracy” in revolutionary France with Britain’s excellent mixed polity, three years before the warnings in Montagu’s *Reflections* about the fall of ancient republics eventually received a fairer French translation than Turpin had allowed him.³⁰ And it is curious how the rather boring,

²⁴ Elizabeth Rawson, *The Spartan Tradition in European Thought* (Oxford, 1969), esp. 269-88.

²⁵ Desmoulins, esp. “La France libre,” in *Opuscules* (Paris, 1789), vol. 1, 90-95, 118-22, 176-80, etc.; Chateaubriand, *Essai historique, politique et moral* (Paris 1797), I, xviii-xxii.

²⁶ For example, Georges Renard, “Notes sur le littérature thermidorienne,” *La Révolution française*, 12 (1887): 769-91.

²⁷ Esp. André Monglong, *La France révolutionnaire et impériale* (Grenoble, 1938), vol. 5, 12-38.

²⁸ Esp. Jean Assali, “Napoléon et l’Antiquité,” in *L’Influence de l’Antiquité sur la pensée politique européennes* (Aix-Marseille, 1982), 423-31.

²⁹ *Essai* (1810), I, ix-xi; II, xx-xxi, lvi-lvii.

³⁰ By André Cantwell (Paris, 1793).

chronicling *History of England* by David Hume came into the picture. The esteemed Scotsman had written rather sympathetically about the royal victim of the English Civil War. Charles I's fate was very familiar to the doomed Louis XVI, and his legal defence was ready to deploy Hume's account as a lesson – only to be met with republican counter-interpretation that both monarchs were parallel in their detestable despotism!³¹

The staunchly conservative yet clever French mind of Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821) grasped this cross-Channel parallelism very well after Louis' execution. He realized French constitutional change was proceeding too rapidly. Awaiting a restoration, he declaimed how extraordinarily "England gave in the last century ... the same spectacle France has given in ours, ... two nations ... two scenes!" and after each regicide, he affirms (guessing the future in his *Considérations sur la France* of 1797), "the return of the king was marked by a cry of joy" (XI [sect.2]).³² The two comparable "cycles" of constitutional change encouraged him into generalities. He had read Vico, Montesquieu and Rousseau and confidently expressed his own version of anacyclic theory. After the recent plethora of shifts, one might have imagined some entirely novel form of government was "no longer impossible just because it had never been seen." But evidently "the die is exact;" we are only ever left dealing with three basic types of power—that of the one, the few, and the many—and "by the theory of probabilities there are no others" coming from "the horn of Fortune," or, speaking more truly, from the ordinances of Providence (IV; cf. II, VI).

De Maistre possibly doubted that the "the successive development" of governments was fixed in an inexorable order. He settled with Montesquieu that "monarchies have always existed, and sometimes republics," accepting that at times the latter will form a democracy, "when the masses exercise sovereignty," and on other occasions an aristocracy, when "privileged families" do. The problems of "oscillation" come at the extreme ends of the constitutional spectrum, with monarchy, when kings with "too much power" are "inclining to tyranny," and with the rule of the many, when "too much authority usurped by the common people" produces "popular confusion" (his equivalent to Polybius' mob-rule). It is the task of government, as Lycurgus well knew, to secure "a wise and lasting liberty" to strike a balance by placing "the senate between the two ... as a salutary counterweight." This had been achieved in Britain and, when it developed out of feudalism into a mature "representative system," also in France, where "there never was so well-tempered a government" (as Montesquieu averred). This mixed-royal system is suitable for France, not a Republic, because over the "four thousand years" in which "so-called Fortune tirelessly" threw up polities one after another, a "large Republic never came up" in the dice's roll (IV). De Maistre presumably took the Montesquieu-inspired view that, unlike self-delimiting Sparta, the Roman Republic became vulnerable to decline once it over-expanded.³³ All possible anthropological conundrums are precluded and the geographic perspective is cramped; his eyes never averted to other revolutionary (often fleeting) constitutional experiments at the time – in Poland, Holland, Italy, or Switzerland. The complexities of the great classical tradition of political changeability are here refined into an arresting simplicity, and mysteriously the classical theory of the cycle of governments still had its chance of stirring the imagination of Western intellectuals.

³¹ Laurence Bongie, *David Hume: Prophet of the Counter-Revolution* (Oxford, 1965).

³² Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France* ([Basel], 1797).

³³ Polybius, *Hist.* VI, iv, 10; x (de Maistre's uncharacteristic concession to Fortune evoking Polubius' *Tuchê*: cf. I,iv,1-5); Montesquieu, *Esprit*, VIII, 16; XI, 8.

In a society without the staggering technological changes we have experienced over the last century, the great achievements of the past hung over the present of eighteenth-century France as a source of both inspiration and potential shame. After *le grand siècle* of Louis XIV – “the most enlightened age the world has ever seen,” as Voltaire applauded it³⁴ – French *savants* were caught between the quest for a surpassing, if not free emulation, of the Ancients and the apprehension of social corruption, bureaucratic stultification and political fragility. Approaches to the received classical paradigm of the cycle of governments reflect these pressures and their ambivalent relationship. In our accounting, we have found deference to tradition, especially since, from Machiavelli onwards, there was a revived interest in the Polybian *anakuklōsis* and related classical principles of sequential constitutional change; yet this was always accompanied by adaptation to altered political conditions, and initiatives of “creative re-utilization” continued in eighteenth-century France out of a Renaissance background. If some applications were freer of ancient models and thus untethered memory more decidedly than others, one detects a consistent assumption nevertheless that justification of right constitutional arrangements must be grounded in ancient exemplars, even while more recent materials were to hand (and special French interest in the English experience conceded).

Modern European thinkers relied overwhelmingly on the Graeco-Roman classics to inspire their political theory, although, since the European tradition also draws on Biblical roots, with many French political commentators being Christian clerics, we should recognize the concurrence of the Bible and the pagan classics over one crucial constitutional issue: the undesirability and fatality of tyranny. French thinkers consistently took their respective, if sometimes quite contrary positions, with this basic dictum – this indelible memory – in view. It was the first and last ingredient in the discourse of political recurrence, and would never dissipate. As for the Revolution, if pessimists claimed its violent extremities were “unparalleled in the annals of History,” and progressives saw it unleashing the “first in a new race of men” who “balked at no innovation” on freedom’s behalf,³⁵ the idea of historical recurrence would always be competing against its alleged exceptionalism.

³⁴ *Siècle de Louis XIV* (using London, 1752 edn.), vol. 1, *Intr.*

³⁵ [Anon.], in *London Times* (July 20, 1790); Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, trans. Hugh Brogan (London, 1955), 178, 188.