The Montmor Discourse: Science and the Ideology of Stability in Old Régime France

Historians have long read early modern French history from the perspective of 1789, as if the Revolution were the telos of pre-modern France. Ever since the Marxist paradigm fell out of fashion, the Revolution has come to represent for many historians the rise of modern political culture, founded upon notions of participation, representation, factions, and ideologies.¹ Since the political culture and its concomitant political consciousness depend upon the development of a politically aware and eventually radical opposition to old régime authorities, historians of the French Enlightenment are faced with an important question: If the Revolution unleashed the possibility of a democratic polity, what role, if any, did the philosophes play in the formation of the revolutionary spirit and the egalitarian ethos?

In attempting to answer this question, historians since Alexis de Tocqueville have sought to discover the intellectual and cultural origins of the French Revolution in the moral, philosophical, and political ideas of the philosophes, as well as in their cultural practices.
and spaces of communication. In the 1990s, Jürgen Habermas’ *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962, English translation 1989) provided a compelling new mode of analysis. Habermas proposed a structural explanation for the emergence of a new political consciousness that avoided a simplistic history of ideas in which the philosophes pose as radical theorists and ideologues inspiring revolution. Habermas’ notion of the public sphere enabled historians of the Enlightenment to explain how an educated and urbane literary sphere—the famed Republic of Letters—was transformed into a politicized public sphere that recognized its dialectical opposition to the authority of the monarchy. In Habermas’ words, “state authorities evoked a resonance leading the *publicum*, the abstract counterpart of public authority, into an awareness of itself as the latter’s opponent, that is, as the public of the now emerging *public sphere of civil society.*”

Habermas’s structural method, despite its refreshing focus on a sociological mode of analysis, continues to suggest a proleptic and possibly teleological reading of history, in which contingency and human agency seem delimited by the logics of a historical dialectic. In *Citizens Without Sovereignty* (1994), for example, Daniel Gordon adapts some of Habermas’ themes to assert that the French philosophes sought to preserve their personal sense of dignity and freedom under the rule of an authoritarian regime that rendered its citizens “officially powerless in the public sphere.” Since cultivating openly republican political ideas was “inherently treasonous and utopian,” and since no feasible opportunity arose before 1789 to become rebels or revolutionaries, the philosophes, Gordon argues, sought a solution to the problem of personal freedom and dignity by creating an “ideological space” infused with an egalitarian ethos free from direct state control—the concept of “society,” or the social sphere, institutionalized in the salons and in the Republic of Letters.

Gordon scrupulously avoids a simplistic teleological argument that the Revolution of 1789 formed the logical completion of
a historical dialectic between the authoritarian tendencies of the monarchy and the egalitarian ethos of Enlightenment “society,” but the establishment of a dialectical opposition nevertheless dominates his narrative. One might conclude from Gordon’s argument that, even if Enlightenment sociability did not directly cause the Revolution, it must have established the conditions for its possibility by fostering an egalitarian or “revolutionary spirit” in the emerging political consciousness of the public sphere.

Dena Goodman bases her 1994 history of the Republic of Letters more explicitly on a thesis of dialectical opposition. The Republic of Letters, she argues, emerged in conjunction with absolutism and was in some ways dependent on it, but remained fundamentally a different “polity” with an antithetical “constitution.” The Republic of Letters, Goodman writes, was the “twin”—even the antithesis—of state authority, but it formed the heart of a public sphere that represented an “authentic” realm of political and moral authority because it was based on egalitarian principles. Although the Republic of Letters “betrayed its independence” in the mid-seventeenth century and settled into the royal academies, thus gaining state protection and support in return for service, the arrangement with the state began to break down in the mid-eighteenth century. The fundamentally egalitarian constitution of the Republic of Letters clashed with state power, Goodman argues, and the pursuit of knowledge led to interminable conflicts with Church and State. As the philosophes struggled to free themselves from the monarchy, the Republic of Letters found its new home in Diderot and d’Alembert’s Encyclopédie, where it could engage more freely in a radicalized “project of Enlightenment.”

The desire to find in the philosophes the origins of modern democratic ideals may lead us to read the past from the future—to define eighteenth-century Enlightenment political discourse as necessarily anti-absolutist, as if the philosophes were always already subversives and closet democrats. But democratic, and not to mention egalitarian, ideas emerged slowly and in response to specific
historical events. Reading eighteenth-century political discourse from its past rather than its future reveals its historical continuity with a seventeenth-century political discourse that sought to answer fundamental problems of government in an age of crisis. Viewed in historical context, the Republic of Letters—the intellectual community—did not “betray its independence” by settling into the royal academies in the seventeenth century. Instead, the alliance of the monarchy and the intellectual community was intentional and ideologically conceived—designed to further the goals of a political ideology that sought stability and rationalization after the chaos of the civil wars through the agency of a strong, centralized monarchic, even despotic, state.

The rationalizing ideology begins with the Montmor Discourse. On April 3, 1663, Samuel Sorbière (1610–1670), a scholar and physician, pronounced a discourse on the sciences at a meeting of savants in the Parisian home of Henri-Louis Habert de Montmor. History has largely forgotten his speech, and those who do remember it—historians of early-modern science—consider it primarily of symbolic importance, for it contained one of the first serious proposals in France for a royal academy of the sciences. Samuel Sorbière’s speech was, according to most accounts, merely a blip in the development of modern state-sponsored science, barely worth notice except as a curiosity. Someone had to stand up and make a proposal, and history fated this small honor to an obscure savant who, after his short moment as a world-historic actor, withdrew behind the curtains of time and disappeared. But when viewed in a larger context, Sorbière’s speech proves more than a curiosity. Sorbière voiced a new ideological conception of the relation between the sciences and society, and his speech marks the beginning of an Enlightenment ideology that sought to apply the discourse of the rational sciences to the socio-political realm to make the world conform to the scientific ideals of objectivity, harmony, and stability.

Since the appearance of Charles Gillispie’s Science and Polity in France at the end of the Old Regime (1980), the preponderance
of research has rejected Gillispie’s assertion that the statesmen and politicians of the old régime sought in the sciences only instrumental powers—“weapons, techniques, information, communications, and so on”—and that scientists wanted only to avoid politicization.\textsuperscript{10} The opposite is true: As Keith Michael Baker argues, the sciences became a source, albeit contested, of political authority and legitimation.\textsuperscript{11} Baker, in his “On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution,” identifies the discursive triad that defined the political outlook of French monarchical authority during the old régime: the discourses of justice, will, and reason.\textsuperscript{12} The political discourse of reason, Baker argues, also provided the discourse of modernity, by which Robert-Jacques Turgot and the physiocrats wanted “to transpose the problem of social order into the language of social science”—in short, to transform royal will into the exercise of universal reason, and so to make any opposition to their reforms seem tantamount to denying the dictates of reason. Sorbière’s speech, a century before Turgot, sought to set the “discourse of reason” in motion, not merely to define a new political outlook, but to define the means by which the political world could be transformed.

Revolution could not have been further from Sorbière’s mind, however. Following the chaos of the religious wars in France—not to mention across the Rhine—and the civil disturbances of the Frondes, Sorbière, like many politically aware thinkers of his era, supported a strong, even despotic, monarchy. Agreeing with Thomas Hobbes, with whom he corresponded regularly, he believed a despotic monarchy was the only proof against social and political chaos, and the sciences would support the monarchy in creating a stable, rational polity.

Although we can discern the outlines as far back as the late sixteenth century, a political discourse of reason began to emerge with clarity in the 1660s among the savants of Paris, driven by visionaries or ideologues such as Christiaan Huygens, Charles Perrault, and Sorbière. Sorbière’s notion of a state-sponsored scientific
rationalization for the socio-political order became a central feature of an enlightenment philosophy upheld by later philosophes such as Voltaire. The close association of rationalist political discourse with ideological notions of “enlightened absolutism,” or despotisme légal did not end until the disillusioning final decades of the eighteenth century, particularly after the fall of Turgot in 1776, when it became impossible to reconcile the goal of rationalization and stability with a failing monarchy. Only then did surviving philosophes, especially the younger and more radicalized second generation, begin to abandon the monarchy and promote a stronger, more centralized state formation—a technocratic republic administered by an educated elite that could sweep away the irrational and unjust vestiges of the ancien régime and resolve the disjuncture between the philosophes’ ideals and the world as they perceived it.

A structural explanation for the origins of revolutionary ideas and attitudes that supposes a dialectical relation between the state and the intellectual community seems problematic. Sorbière’s support for despotism was not “backward,” or a false consciousness, or a betrayal of the true interests of the authentic public sphere as it existed in the Republic of Letters. Instead, Sorbière helped to initiate a critical strand of Enlightenment ideology later upheld by the likes of Voltaire and Turgot, and only collapsing with Condorcet and Brissot. The Montmor Discourse provides a focal point that enables historians to read the Enlightenment more from its past than its future, viewing it as a response to the catastrophic events of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

**The Long Enlightenment**

Sorbière, in his spring 1663 speech, sought to prepare the informal Montmor Academy for formal status in the state because he thought the sciences offered the state practical assistance and the authority of reason. Praising Montmor for his support of the sciences during the dark years, Sorbière stated, “there is nothing more to wish for [Montmor’s] glory and for the public utility, if he never engages in
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another enterprise so noble, than that it should become an enterprise of Sovereigns.”¹³ Elitist, pessimistic about human nature, and distrustful of the nobility, Sorbière saw a despoti c regime advised by a ministry of experts and scientific institutions as the best hope for establishing a civilized and orderly society. We can best understand Sorbière’s political views as an evolution of the ideals of the politiques, the religious moderates who, beginning in the late sixteenth century, desired to bring an end to war and anarchy through religious toleration and a strong, preferably absolute, monarchy.¹⁴

The politiques of the sixteenth century found the philosophical expression of their political views in a revival of ancient Greek scepticism and stoicism.¹⁵ By promoting above all the virtues of tranquility, moderation, and wisdom, neo-stoicism offered a moral via media to those disinclined the take a dogmatic stance during the religious wars. The stoic’s apathy toward the external world also complimented the sceptic’s suspension of judgment.¹⁶ If certain knowledge of the external world is impossible, neo-stoics argued, the wise should opt to suspend judgment and cultivate a stoic apathy toward the unknowable and uncontrollable.

To politiques, the political significance of the neo-stoic and sceptical positions lay in their denial of any religious justification for civil or religious strife, which they blamed on the immoderate passions that stemmed from errors of judgment. The Belgian refugee Justus Lipsius, in his hugely popular neo-stoic work, De constantia libri duo (1584), argued that a philosopher achieves la sagesse (wisdom) through reason, and thus learns virtue and tranquility. La sagesse keeps philosophers’ souls free from immoderate passions by allowing them to distinguish accurately truth from falsity.¹⁷ The wise, Lipsius suggests, obey the laws of the state scrupulously and do not get mired in conflicts that disrupt social or political order and thus prevent contemplative tranquility.¹⁸

The politiques found a more politically active neo-stoic philosophy in the works of Guillaume du Vair than in Lipsius, however. As Bishop of Lisieux and later Keeper of the Seals under Louis XIII, du
Vair lived a public life and adapted neo-stoic themes to his own civic humanism. Like Lipsius, du Vair advised a purging of the violent passions that lead to error.\(^\text{19}\) When the state is well ordered, a stoic philosopher’s sphere of action is his or her own soul, just as Lipsius observed. In times of trouble, however, du Vair argued that the wise must act vigorously in the world to remedy the situation.\(^\text{20}\) According to du Vair, the duty and responsibility of the virtuous and talented is to help lead society toward tranquility, because no one can find happiness in solitude if one’s fellows are in misery.\(^\text{21}\)

Lipsius, du Vair, and other sceptics and neo-stoics, including Michel de Montaigne, provided philosophical authority to the politique position, but their intellectual influence paled next to the most widely read neo-stoic author of the era, Pierre Charron. Charron’s *De la Sagesse* appeared in thirty-nine editions between its first publication in 1601 and 1672. Praised as well as criticized, the work was placed on the Index in 1606, and yet called by Gabriel Naudé, the librarian of Richelieu and Mazarin, the greatest book ever written after the Bible.\(^\text{22}\) Although derivative of other neo-stoic works, including those of du Vair and Montaigne, Charron’s work was seminal to the intellectual identity of thinkers such as Sorbierè.

Like du Vair, and even his friend Montaigne, Charron was a politique. His turn to neo-stoicism, like that of other neo-stoic thinkers, marked an overriding desire for political stability and peace. An avocat of the Parlement of Paris at the end of the sixteenth century, Charron moved in the circle of the politique leader Michel de l’Hôpital. In anger and indignation, after the assassination of the Duc de Guise in 1589, Charron briefly sided with the Catholic League. After the assassination of Henry III, however, Charron returned to the cause of the politiques and remained faithful ever afterward to Henry IV, to whom he dedicated his first published work, *Les Trois Vérités* (1593). Charron later explained his temporary defection as the result of violent emotions that clouded his reason.\(^\text{23}\) *De la Sagesse* resulted in part from Charron’s intense inner scrutiny to seek the causes of his actions. He concluded that uncontrolled
passion had been the culprit—false judgment, the result of prejudice and opinion, had led to his passionate response. The goal of the wise, Charron argued, should therefore be the supreme virtue of self-control, which regulates the passions by reason and will and is achieved through contemplation and knowledge. The suspension of judgment, as the sceptics advise, is wise because it preserves the mind from prejudice. Virtue and morality come not from adherence to dogmatic and unexamined religious doctrine but from wisdom, or *la sagesse*—one likely reason *De la Sagesse* was put on the Index.

The primary duty of the wise, according to Charron, is to control their conduct in the world, which implies both a duty to the internal self—the maintenance of self-control—and a civic duty similar to what du Vair suggests. “To flee and hide oneself while having the means to profit others and aid the public,” Charron wrote, “is to be a deserter, to bury one’s talent, to hide one’s light.” Like du Vair, Charron asserted that the virtuous cannot maintain their tranquility and liberty alone while the rest of the world is in chaos. The internal cannot be radically separated from the external.

Charron did not believe that those who can achieve virtue through the ethic of self-control are like most people, however. They are *esprits supérieurs*. The majority are either *les esprits faibles* or *les esprits médiocres*. The weak-minded can be ignored; they are born only to obey. Mediocre minds are active and dogmatic, both ruling and troubling the world. Superior minds prefer to stand aloof from the relentless bang and clatter *les esprits médiocres* cause, but they willingly engage when the state is in need. They observe the laws and customs of the land not from habit but from reason, and even with a hint of cynicism. If order, tranquility, and stability are to be maintained, a powerful central authority must enforce the obedience of the masses. The philosopher easily sees through the king’s assumptions of divine right and absolute power, but supports them, because they are the best hope for establishing the authority of the monarchy and thus ending civil strife.
The generation most influenced by Charron, of whom many earned the epithet *libertin* or *libertin érudit*, formed the nascent scientific community in Paris, and from them a rationalist moral-political discourse emerged. Sorbière belonged to the second generation of learned freethinkers who took their ideals as a matter of course and for whom self-conscious religious and epistemological scepticism formed a way of life. The first generation, writing mostly in the early seventeenth century, included Gabriel Naudé (1600–1653), François le Mothe le Vayer (1585–1672), Pierre Gassendi (1592–1655), and such disparate personalities as Father Marin Mersenne (1588–1648) and the poet Théophile de Viau (1590–1626). As disciples of Charron, the learned freethinkers thought of themselves as *esprits forts*, echoing Charron’s *esprits supérieurs*—intellectual elites surrounded by weak and mediocre minds. They were sceptical of theological and epistemological dogmatism and privately cynical of authority, but publicly they evinced orthodoxy and loyalty. They had no desire to disrupt a tenuous social and political stability by inciting in the masses anything other than Catholic orthodoxy and unquestioning loyalty to the monarchy. Most held offices of some sort from Richelieu or Mazarin and believed it was the job of the state, according to its enlightened self-interest, to ensure peace, harmony, and tolerance. The *libertins érudits* were, at least in spirit, *politiques*. From the ranks of the *libertins érudits* in the early seventeenth century emerged a moral discourse that upheld what we might term a Baconian moral ideal of the sciences as pragmatic, rational, polite, and civilizing. Some of the learned freethinkers, such as La Mothe le Vayer, adopted a nihilistic Pyrrhonism in response to the loss of religious certainty; but others, such as Gassendi, found their attitude unnecessarily pessimistic in light of recent scientific achievements such as those of Galileo. In the first two books of *Exercitationes paradoxicae adversus Aristoteleos* (1624), Gassendi upheld sceptical arguments and insisted that a science of necessary causes that reveals certain truths about some supposed real world existing independent
of our sense perceptions cannot exist. Certainty is impossible and must be abandoned in favor of probability, because the ultimate nature of things cannot be perceived, although “it can be stated also that there are many things that can be known... only by an experimental science or one following appearances.” In short, a science must avoid metaphysics, and so also avoid the dogmatism that results from false certainties. Gassendi continued to promote his epistemological via media in the Syntagma Philosophicum, still uncompleted at his death in 1655.

This moral discourse of the sciences emerged from political and social concerns. Gassendi’s close friend, Mersenne, for example, supported the sciences as a source of stability in a chaotic world. In La Vérité des Sciences contre les Sceptiques ou Pyrrhoniens (1625), and in other works, Mersenne argued that a basic scepticism must be accepted, but he agreed with Gassendi that useful, positive, and reliable knowledge of the experiential world could be attained. Mersenne also appears to have believed that pragmatic, non-systematic, and non-dogmatic natural philosophy could best foster unity and stability among the intellectual elites of Europe, thus providing a model of civil society for the political elites to follow. Savants should work together to discover useful knowledge and not fight over inflexible beliefs or the doctrines of ancient authorities. Through such collaboration, the intellectual community could take up the social and political duty du Vair and Charron prescribed. Mersenne himself took this duty seriously: He conducted a vast correspondence with scholars throughout Europe, sponsoring cooperation and pragmatism. He and other correspondents, such as Peiresc and Oldenburg, virtually created the Republic of Letters in the early seventeenth century.

Mersenne, from the 1630s until his death in 1648, also organized a circle of savants who met to discuss matters of natural philosophy. The group, which at times numbered over sixty, including Descartes, Gassendi, Roberval, Huygens, Carcavi, and the Pascals, was cosmopolitan, transcending religious, social, and political differences.
After Mersenne’s death, the survivors of the group eventually made their way, virtually *en masse*, to the house of Montmor.\textsuperscript{38}

**Sorbière’s Discourse**

And so, by a circuitous route, we return to Sorbière’s discourse. Since about 1657, Montmor, a wealthy office-holder and founding member of the Académie Française, had scheduled weekly meetings for scholars to discuss scientific matters.\textsuperscript{39} Soon after the 1648 death of Mersenne, savants such as Boulliau, Pascal, Roberval, Desargues, Carcavi, and Sorbière had begun congregating at the Montmor residence for discussions and dinners. By the early 1650s, Montmor, an avowed Cartesian, had become the leading supporter of the scientific community in Paris. He even provided lodging for Cartesianism’s aging philosophical opponent, Pierre Gassendi, which made the Montmor house especially attractive to savants. After Gassendi’s death in 1655, he was buried in the Chapelle de Montmor, and Montmor himself led the organization and publication of Gassendi’s *Oeuvres* in collaboration with other savants, including Sorbière.\textsuperscript{40} By placing the interests of what was already called the Republic of Letters above petty internecine disputes, Montmor won the respect of savants, who longed for a society where stability and reasonableness replaced anarchy and dogmatic inflexibility.

By 1663, however, disputes over philosophical systems, selfish concerns with personal glory at the expense of scholarly exchange, and personal animosities threatened to destroy the Montmor Academy despite Montmor’s best efforts to organize it by posing, in effect, as a petty enlightened despot in a tiny realm of savants. He rapidly grew bored with the whole affair. In April 1663, several savants, led by Sorbière, made a last-ditch effort to renew the academy’s spirit of cooperation.\textsuperscript{41}

Sorbière, in his speech on 3 April, expressed his annoyance at the dissonances of the Montmor Academy, which he took personally—in 1657, upon Montmor’s request, Sorbière and his colleague, du
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Prat, had drawn up the academy regulations. Some members thought themselves above etiquette and openly flaunted the rules, Sorbière complained, and ruined the academy assemblies for the rest by willfully disrupting meetings. Others, whom Sorbière termed “qui non scire cupiunt ut sciant, sed ut sciantur”—whom we might call “windbags”—wasted everyone’s time with useless, frivolous discourses. Such speechifying broke the first article of the Montmor Academy regulations, upon which the pragmatic, anti-Aristotelian spirit of the academy, depended: “That the purpose of the Conferences will not at all be the vain exercise of the mind on useless subtleties, but will always focus on the clearest knowledge of the works of God, and the improvement of the conveniences of life in the Arts and Sciences which serve better to establish them.” These windbags, Sorbière complained, associating them with the Aristotelians of the universities, “have come here only to kill time and to acquire esteem,” and they contributed nothing to the advancement of knowledge.

Sorbière’s attack on the speechmakers did not imply that he supported the elimination of all learned discourses, as some exasperated experimentalists had advocated. He preferred the experimentalist method, but an elimination of all discourses would, he argued, break “our primary resolutions, which are to carry out a learned and judicious mix of experiments and reasoned discourses.” Moreover, an orderly and harmonious society, best suited to foster progress and peace, would exclude “no method, provided that it does not contravene order.” A determined and self-conscious scepticism, and not dogmatism, Sorbière believed, remained critical to the maintenance of order.

Besides the windbags, Sorbière also complained about those savants who willfully behaved with incivility. Noting that certain savants, treated with “too much indulgence,” had disrupted the academy soon after its establishment, Sorbière insisted on the necessity of depriving the academy of their enlightenment, rather than allowing them to silence others. He was likely referring to the brilliant
but apparently vain mathematician, Gilles Personne de Roberval, who, in 1658, had argued rudely with Montmor and was subsequently not invited to any further assemblies.45

For Sorbière, order was required to maintain sociability and politeness, but not for their own sake—the unfettered communication of practical knowledge depended upon the control of irrational and disorderly passions. How many times, complained Sorbière, had the Montmor Academy witnessed “two men who are with us no longer, two minds as penetrating and judicious as there ever were to my knowledge, two disciples of Mr. Hobbes and two copies of Bacon, the wise M. du Prat, and the agreeable M. du Bosc, leave without having said a single word because two others had amused fruitlessly this company for three solid hours, as if they were the only ones with something good to say?”46

The academy was a microcosm of French society, and required authority and regulations to function properly. Effective and practical regulation ensured stability, enabled communication, and facilitated progress. Unlike society, however, the academy, as a community of esprits forts, should be able to regulate itself—but it was failing. Historians who see in the early scientific associations only the playful emptiness of aristocratic politesse or new sites for games of patronage and power diminish the political awareness of these savants. The aristocrats had disgraced themselves in the recent Frondes, and some savants held them to blame for the turmoil of the past century and a half. Sorbière sought to advance the dream of Mersenne and create in the scientific community a new social paradigm that favored tolerant scepticism over dogmatism, and rational, intellectual association over self-interested designs for glory and honor. His frustration steadily grew as the dream teetered toward collapse.

Sorbière had a vision of the role the sciences, and savants, should play in the state. He hoped to make the academy more attractive to the monarchy and to convince sceptical savants that they needed the formal recognition of the state. The Montmor Academy, Sorbière insisted, showed that private scientific associations had gone as
far as possible in promoting a study of the sciences. To complete their work, natural philosophers needed funding, facilities, laboratories, machines, and manpower, which even wealthy patrons such as Montmor could not provide. “In truth, Messieurs,” said Sorbière, “Only Kings, and rich Sovereigns, or some wise and wealthy Rep- publics could undertake to outfit a Science Academy engaged in continuous experimentation,” and until they did, “our Mechanics will remain imperfect as they are, our Medicine will be blind, and our Sciences will teach us with certainty only that there is an infinity of things that we know nothing about.”

David Sturdy, in his study of the Académie des Sciences, discusses the extent to which the monarchy after the Frondes sought to bring intellectual activity in France under its control. An absolute monarchy required not only the centralization of military and political power in France, but the control of intellectual and religious forces as well. The establishment of royal academies in various fields of expertise, including the sciences, to channel intellectual and artistic production to the service of the absolutist state soon followed.

Centralization was not necessarily oppressive or authoritarian. From 1648–1653, during the turmoil of the Frondes, many savants turned to the monarchy, as their forebears had during the religious wars. Sorbière, who, from his home in Leiden, followed with horror news of the depredations of the Frondes, became an enthusiastic and vocal proponent of an absolute monarchy—sentiments which, as a devoted follower of Thomas Hobbes’ philosophy of centralized state power, he had expressed earlier in the 1640s, in the last glory-days of Richelieu and Louis XIII. In 1649, with the Frondes underway, Sorbière translated into French Hobbes’ *Elementa philosophica de Cive*, followed in 1653 by *Corpus Politicum*. In the 1650s, Sorbière’s outrage inspired him to compose tirades promoting despotism. In 1656, he wrote two essays: The first, *Discours Sceptique à Philotime, pour montrer que Paris et les Français ne sont pas tout à fait exempts de barbarie*, ranted about the terrible state of affairs in Paris and France; and the second, *Discours sceptique en...*
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faveur des bêtes et du gouvernement despotique, insisted that men live more happily under a despotic government than under one less absolute. Far from seeing despotic regimes as repressive, Sorbière argued that they protect the people, who “are all immediately under the protection of their Sovereign,” from mistreatment at the hands of an autonomous nobility. An insufficiently despotic government, Sorbière wrote, would allow a governor of a region or province to disobey “sometimes with impunity the orders of the sovereign,” while “the least folly of the people is severely punished, as if there is not more to fear from the disobedience of the great than from the little people.”

By the mid 1650s, if not earlier, Sorbière had come to believe in the necessity of a rational but despotic government if France were ever to achieve political stability and justice. Moreover, he was convinced that the arts and sciences, by promoting civilization and reason, supported and required a strong state, and he strove to direct the energies of Montmor Academy toward his desired ends. His idealism is evident in a February 1658 letter to Thomas Hobbes, who, intrigued by reports of a new science academy with formalized rules of etiquette, the first in France, had requested a copy of the regulations Sorbière and du Prat had only recently devised. Eager to obtain Hobbes’ approval, Sorbière sent a transcription of the nine articles and waxed poetic about a future in which the arts and sciences would promote peace and harmony on Earth: “The age of iron will not last forever. Peace will return in its time to the Earth, the Muses will not be eternally exiled, the Arts will be reborn, the Sciences will once again take their place, and a more gentle influence of the Stars than that which today produces only soldiers and Captains, will produce once again the Gilberts, Bacons, Harveys, Fra Paolos, Galileos, Mersennes, Descartes, and Gassendis.”

Institutions such as the Montmor Academy, Sorbière believed, would prove “the glory of our age,” enabling “these Illustrious persons” to teach that, “despite the barbarism in which we have lived, there is found a great number of honest men who have not
lacked love of Philosophical studies.” Sorbière hoped he would be able to shape the Montmor Academy to realize his utopian vision: “God grant that I be a Prophet with my desire that we imitate the Modesty of Monsieur Gassendi, that his sweet and tranquil spirit rein in our Assembly and that this new Academy fail not the hopes of these regulations that I send to you.”

**An Ideology of Stability**

By the end of the 1650s, Sorbière had begun to articulate and act upon a rationalist political discourse, an ideology, which sought to make the world conform to an ideal: a stable, centralized polity organized according to the dictates of scientific reason. Sorbière’s ideology, although consistent with Sorbière’s, and his colleagues’, education, experience and ideals, was not democratic, egalitarian, or revolutionary, and in 1658 it seemed stillborn. Sorbière was not yet the prophet he hoped to be in his letter to Hobbes, and problems of organization, regulation, and philosophy continued to plague the Montmor Academy. Sorbière doggedly continued his efforts to keep the academy focused. In a June 1658 speech, he admonished the savants to embody the practical and visionary spirit of Gassendi: “I do not want us to dispute eternally on what fire is. Rather I wish that we would report on new inventions, or on the practices of diverse lands, for warming oneself better.”

An easier and more convenient life, and hence a happier one, Sorbière argued, contributed to peace and tranquility, and since these were the goals of the state, the sciences should soon attract the attention of the monarch and his ministers. “We have seen in this Assembly the first men of the Robe, the Cordons Bleus, Dukes and Peers, and Grand Prelates,” said Sorbière. “Our scientific researches find themselves honored by their presence. Their example could well advance our discoveries and favor the commodities of life if Sovereigns also stood one day before the land, and claimed afterwards that they had extended and assured the felicity of their People—to which, without doubt, the natural sciences, and the Arts
that depend on them, could contribute much—certainly if we could by their means make our health better, life longer, and happiness more universal. Such would be a rather magnificent plan.”

Sorbière was not content merely to harangue the savants of the Montmor Academy. He also cultivated friendship and patronage in high places, in particular with the Cardinal Mazarin. Since converting to Catholicism in 1654, Sorbière had maintained an irregular correspondence with Mazarin, and from 1657 he sought to focus Mazarin’s mind on the utility of the sciences to the state. In 1659, Sorbière collected his various discourses and letters on philosophy and the sciences, many to Mazarin, and published them in two volumes dedicated to him. The dedication, which strongly echoed Sorbière’s optimistic 1658 letter to Hobbes concerning the imminent conclusion of the “age of iron,” contained in the flattery a not-so-subtle injunction for Mazarin to support the sciences, which would then support him and his glory: “All the Sciences and Arts rejoice to see you return to your first inclinations: And I have no doubt that, after the great discoveries that the Galileos, Gilberts, Bacons, Harveys, Gassendis, Hobbes, Descartes, and several other excellent men have made, that if you favor them, and if you undertake to push them vigorously much will be accomplished before the end of the century. This would not make, in my opinion, a small mark in posterity for the glory of Your Eminence.”

Sorbière’s ideas about the utility of the sciences to the state were growing more complex than a cursory reading of his dedication to Mazarin might reveal. In Sorbière’s view, the sciences could provide rational authority to state power. When Sorbière suggests that Mazarin’s interests “are confounded” with the sciences, he implies that politics can be made scientifically rational, and that such rationality supports central authority.

Mazarin knew exactly what Sorbière meant. In an earlier letter to Mazarin, Sorbière had explicitly argued that politics could be studied scientifically, using similar a priori proofs one finds in sciences
such as geometry. Sorbière thus contradicted the common belief that politics, a creation of the human mind, could never be explained or predicted by definitive scientific proofs, which were based upon universal principles. On the contrary, Sorbière argued, politics rests upon the underlying science of ethics—the science of what is just and unjust—the proofs of which are known *a priori*. One cannot deduce ethical propositions from the behavior of men in a state of nature, because for such men justice and injustice have no meaning, and their social activity differs little from that of any social animal. Justice and injustice, rather, are deduced from their causes, which are the laws and pacts man has made in accordance with his reason. One cannot know justice by observing the behavior of men, but by consulting one’s reason and deducing the manner in which men *ought* to behave, and then making laws to regulate behavior. Like Hobbes, Sorbière argued that justice, law, and right do not emerge naturally from society; a rational authority must impose them from above. Mazarin was bound to favor such an argument linking scientific rationalization with Royal Authority.59

Sorbière’s obsequiousness served him little, however. Mazarin died in March of 1661, and Sorbière lost his privileged connection in the government. Failure continued to dog his efforts. He was less familiar with Mazarin’s protégé, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, who founded the Académie Royale des Sciences in 1666. Several of Sorbière’s colleagues—including Christiaan Huygens, who was by then one of the most respected savants in Europe—also advocated royal patronage of a science academy and were closer to Colbert. They soon stole the limelight, especially after the appearance of the *Project [sic] de la Compagnie des Sciences et des Arts*, a proposal for a broadly conceived academy of human knowledge. Although usually associated with Huygens, the *Project* appeared only a few days after Sorbière’s 1663 speech to the Montmor Academy, and there is no reason to assume Sorbière was ignorant of it.60 Certainly the *Project* reached Colbert, probably through Huygens, and became the basis for later formal proposals for a royal academy of the sciences.61
In the early 1660s, the clamor for an official science academy was reaching a crescendo, and Sorbière was only one of its more vocal and ideologically driven proponents.

Sorbière, a few weeks after his 3 April speech to the Montmor Academy, sent a copy with a cover letter to Colbert. Sorbière noted that he desired nothing for himself but to pass the rest of his life in “the business of the Sciences,” and he sought to impress upon Colbert, as he had Mazarin, the importance of supporting scientific endeavors, “as you will see from my harangue of 3 April, which could lead to something important for the public if it is considered by those who work for the ornamentation of France.” Linking the utility of the sciences with the health of the state, Sorbière asserted that Colbert could not heal the state of its maladies, nor bring it to its full stature, unless he helped the arts and sciences to flourish.

Conclusion

In the *Sorberiana* (1694), the collected sayings of Sorbière, his admirers sought to remind the public of his role in fostering the goût des sciences that swept France at the end of the seventeenth century. Since the foundation of the Académie Royale des Sciences twenty-eight years earlier, a craze for things scientific had taken hold of polite culture, and scientific experiments and writings were all the rage in the salons of Paris. The sciences did not merely entertain the wealthy, however. As the rising voice of the scientific community, Fontenelle had implied eight years earlier in his popular *Entretiens sur la pluralité des mondes* (1686) that the sciences could fundamentally alter human consciousness. In suggesting that the earth was only a small part of a vast universe filled with many inhabited planets, Fontenelle implicitly argued for a rational worldview that would tolerate differences and abhor religious arrogance and dogmatism.

The sciences offered human society new ways to construct its morality and politics, which the compilers of the *Sorberiana* believed had been Sorbière’s message as well—as esprits forts, the
duty of savants, per the neo-stoic tradition, was to promote stability and peace, which meant supporting a strong central authority, the monarchy of Louis XIV. Such support, while practical and pragmatic, was also ideological. In the Sorberiana Sorbière begins to sound like the fiercely rationalist philosophes of the late eighteenth century: “The Mathematical Sciences are the true Metaphysics and Moral Science is the true Theology. They both arise from the Physical Sciences, and civil society is their invention because our Arts and our Customs come from them, and they draw out of us all those things that distinguish us from other animals... I avow to you that Moral Science and Mathematics come together, and that Physics is an Ocean to which all our knowledge will return.”

Sorbière’s work and passion suggest a new vision of the rational sciences as the basis for an uncompromisingly monarchical social, political, and moral order. The philosophes’ eventual role in the development of a revolutionary consciousness must be understood in an ideological rather than a social-structural context—one, moreover, that reads historical change historically, not proleptically. Sorbière’s Montmor Discourse was a response to the post-Fronde anxieties of French intellectual culture, and he sought to resolve the disjuncture between the chaos of the socio-political world and the supposed tranquility of the scientific world by reforming the monarchical state to conform to the dictates of scientific reason. By the mid-1770s, the failure of the project sparked revolutionary sentiments, but that is another story, although, even in the 1660s, the ideology of stability was on the verge of collapse. Sorbière himself was dogged by failure, and seems even in his own estimation to have achieved little or nothing, despite constant effort.

In 1663, soon after his letter to Colbert, Sorbière departed for a summer voyage to England, where he visited Hobbes and attended meetings at the Royal Society. Upon his return to France, he wrote an account of his travels, which appeared in 1664 under the title Relation d’un voyage en angleterre. Predictably, the account focused
upon the Royal Society in a pointed comparison to what Sorbière considered the failings of the Montmor Academy. Of Royal Society fellows, Sorbière wrote approvingly, “They report in as few words as they find appropriate to explain the experiments that the Secretary has proposed. No one hastens to speak, nor takes it upon himself to be longwinded and say everything he knows. They never interrupt whoever is speaking.” The Royal Society’s motto, *Nullius in verba*, expressed perfectly Sorbière’s scepticism of philosophical systems. Despite arguments over theories, hypotheses, and principles, Sorbière insisted, all members of the Society behaved toward each other with such moderation that their work was never impeded. The Society fellows “know well that they are coming together for the same end, even if by different routes, since they all work to explain the same phenomena.”

Sorbière foresaw the result of collaborative, government-supported scientific work as “an infinity of useful inventions” for everyone, leading to general peace and prosperity as life improved. A monarch who supported such work, Sorbière added, would receive glory far beyond those who sought it in “ill-considered wars,” and would be remembered forever. By aiding the call for a royal academy of the sciences, Sorbière proved instrumental in the final push to found one. By 1664, Perrault and Huygens had Colbert’s ear regarding a general learned academy. After the spectacular comet of 1664, astronomers such as Adrien Auzout were able to make a compelling case for the creation of a royal observatory. Clearly in a mood to listen, Colbert lent his Parisian residence for observations of the eclipse of 1666, and by that summer he was selecting the first members of the official Académie Royale des Sciences.

Sorbière, however, enjoyed no part in these grand events. In June 1664, despite his efforts, the Montmor Academy collapsed. Although Huygens hoped that a royal academy would soon rise from its ashes, the end of the Montmor Academy marginalized Sorbière in the scientific community. The English received Sorbière’s *Relation* poorly, and his dream of savants working together for the common
good took yet another blow. An apparently indiscreet remark about the Lord Chancellor brought an open complaint from the English government, and in an effort to retain good relations across the channel, the French government issued an arrêt de Conseil d’Etat ordering the Relation suppressed and its author banished from the capital.71 Although granted royal clemency in October, Sorbière found he had earned the nationalist rancor of his colleagues in the Royal Society. In 1665, Thomas Sprat, historian of the Society, issued a violent, rambling, and incoherent reply to Sorbière’s Relation entitled Observations on Monsieur de Sorbier’s Voyage into England, and he sought to have Sorbière’s name stricken from the Society rolls in 1666.72

Discouraged and ill, Sorbière committed suicide on 9 April 1670 by overdosing on Laudanum.

NOTES

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1. One of the seminal texts in this discourse is Lynn Hunt, Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

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15. See Gerhard Oestreich, *Neo-Stoicism and the Early Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Also, R.H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). As Popkin argues, the crisis of the Reformation was not only religious and political, but also intellectual. Once the Reformation had challenged the traditional criterion of religious knowledge—and ultimately all knowledge—certainty had to be given up. The revival of scepticism and stoicism was part of the rational response to this intellectual crisis.
18. Lipsius also outlines a neo-stoic political philosophy in the *Politicorum, sive civilis doctrinae libri sex* (1588), echoing the *politique* argument that *raison d’état* should
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19. See du Vair, *La Sainte Philosophie* (1584), and *La Philosophie morale des stoïques* (1585).


29. For example, Sorbière applied the term “sceptique” to various discourses more to indicate his philosophical position than to talk specifically about scepticism. See the two mentioned below, as well as the *Discours sceptique sur le passage du chyle, & le mouvement du coeur . . .* (Leiden: De J. Maire, 1648). He also prepared a *Lettre sur le Pyrrhonisme* in 1660 and began but never finished a translation of the ancient sceptic, Sextus Empiricus, in 1656.

30. Seventeenth-century French libertinage encompassed a range of moral and intellectual ideas and thus cannot be described as a single movement, although they shared enough characteristics that those of less critical orthodoxy sometimes feared they were engaged in a conspiracy to undermine traditional faith. See René Pintard, *Le Libertinage Erudit dans la Première Moitié du XVIIe Siècle*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1943); and Popkin, *The History of Scepticism*, chap. 5.

31. Keohane discusses at length the “two-moralities” of philosophers, public and private, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in *Philosophy and the State*, especially chapter four.

32. For example, Gabriel Naudé was librarian to Richelieu and Mazarin and secretary to Cardinal Bagni; Gui Patin was Rector of the medical school of the Sorbonne; Leonard Marandé was secretary of Richelieu; La Mothe le Vayer was tutor to the royal family; Gassendi was a Professor of Mathematics at the Collège Royal. Sorbière later held pensions from Mazarin. Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 87.


37. On this theme, see Sturdy, *Science and Social Status*, 14–16.


41. Montmor experienced various difficulties in the 1660s, which ended disastrously in 1669 when he was forced to sell his charge of Maître des requêtes to pay the debts of his eldest living son. Delorme, “Un Cartesian Ami de Gassendi,” 68.


45. The incident is famous mostly because the gregarious astronomer Ismaël Boulliau described the clash in a letter to Christiaan Huygens. *Oeuvres de Huygens*, n. 553, 2:286–87: “As for M. de Roberval, he has done a very stupid thing in the house of M. de Montmor who is as you know a man of honor and position; he was so uncivil as to say to him in his own house, having taken offence at an opinion of M. des Cartes which M. de Montmor approved, that he had more wit than he, and that he was less only in worldly goods and the office of Maître des Requêtes, and that if he were Maître des Requêtes he would be worth a hundred times more. Monsieur de Montmor, who is very circumspect, said to him that he could and should behave more civilly than to quarrel with him and treat him with contempt in his own house. The whole company found the boorishness and pedantry of M. de Roberval very strange.” Translation from Brown, *Scientific Organizations*, 87.


50. Sorbière was not alone in his admiration for Hobbes. On 25 April 1646, Mersenne suggested in a letter that Sorbière examine Hobbes’ *De Cive*. Gassendi also noted that *De Cive* was “truly uncommon, and worthy of being handled by all who are sensible of higher things.” The letters are printed, in Latin, in the preface to Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive* (Amsterdam, 1647); English translation in the critical edition of *De Cive* by Howard Warrender (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).


58. *Lettres et Discours*, dedication.

59. Sorbière to Mazarin, 8 May 1659, *Lettres et Discours*, letter LXXXXXI.

60. In fact, Sorbière and Montmor visited Huygens on 5 April to discuss the reorganization of the Montmor Academy. The *Project* is appended in Huygens’ *Oeuvres Complètes* to a letter written the next day to his brother describing Sorbière’s visit. See Huygens to Lodewijck, 6 April 1663, *Oeuvres Complètes*, n. 1104, 4:323–24, and n. 1105, 4:325–29.


Huygens to Moray, 12 June 1664, *Oeuvres de Huygens*, n. 1234, 4:69–70: “l’Académie chez Monsieur de Montmor a pris fin pour jamais, mail il semble que du debris de celle cy il en pourroit ranaistre quelque autre, car j’ay laissé quelques une de ces Messieurs avec de tres bonnes intentions.”

Sorbière’s only remarks about the Chancellor (i.e., Clarendon) appear on page 97 of the *Relation*.