Rachel Hammersley discusses how events in the 1640s and 1680s in England established a tradition that inspired French thinkers on the path to revolution a century later.

Lessons from the land of Liberty

Since riots and looting spread across England in August, commentators have been quick to point out that this country has a long tradition of often violent urban protest, dating back to the 18th-century Gordon Riots and before. Revolutions, too, are in the news at the moment, from the Arab Spring to student sit-ins against tuition fees and anti-cuts demonstrations in the UK. This type of demonstration can be seen to present a problem for the British, since the prevailing view is that, unlike our French neighbours, we are not a revolutionary nation. As Andreas Whittam Smith commented in the Independent in 2002:

We... have no revolutionary tradition to live up to or to inspire us. The British rarely descend on to the streets to advocate political change. Every generation or so, the French do exactly that – in 1789, 1830, 1848, 1870, 1936 and 1968.

Yet this has not always been the case. In the 18th century it was the English who were viewed as the revolutionary nation and, when they moved towards revolution at the end of the century, the French looked to English history and the ideas of 17th-century English ‘revolutionaries’ to guide them.

England’s revolutionary reputation was built on the fact that it had experienced not one, but two revolutionary upheavals: the Civil Wars and Interregnum of 1640-60 and the Glorious Revolution of 1688-89. The events of 1640-60 foreshadowed in several crucial respects those that would unfold in France in the 1790s: popular disturbances; calls for recognition of natural rights and popular sovereignty; civil unrest; regicide; republican government; the drawing up of written constitutions; attempts at restoring order through military rule; and, eventually, the restoration of monarchy. Moreover, the French recognised these events as antecedents of their own by using the term ‘revolution’ to describe the Civil Wars and Interregnum it was quickly adopted as a label for the events of 1688-89. While what resulted in the ‘abdication’ of James II and the succession of William III and Mary II does not on the surface appear to have involved either the kind of radical change or the level of violence conventionally associated with revolutions, the settlement that resulted directly challenged the principle of hereditary and divine right monarchy and introduced a new form of monarchical government. Moreover, participants justified their actions with reference to natural rights and popular sovereignty. At the same time, although there was little violence in 1688-89, that moment was preceded by at least a decade of popular uprisings, assassination attempts, persecution and public executions. Indeed, the term ‘mob’ was coined during the 1680s.

Eighteenth-century French views of England were by no means uniform. Nevertheless, the sense of England as a free nation in which the people engaged in politics and demonstrated openly against ill-favoured government measures was popularised by leading Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu and Voltaire, both of whom spent time in England. Montesquieu depicted ‘political liberty’ as the spring that animated the English political system, while in his Letters Concerning the English Nation, published in the 1730s, Voltaire observed:

If ever I smell of a Resurrection, or come a second time on Earth, I will pray God to make me born in England, the Land of Liberty.

Montesquieu was particularly impressed by the English constitution, which he described in detail in his great work The Spirit of the Laws (1748). His account of it owed much to the writings of the British Real Whigs and other Country Party opponents of Robert Walpole’s administration (1721-42), who adapted the ideas of mid-17th-century English republicans in support of a limited constitutional monarchy.

Montesquieu’s ideas proved immediately influential. The Genevan Jean-Louis De Lohne developed Montesquieu’s positive vision of the English constitution in his account of 1771. Other French writers shared Montesquieu’s interest in Country Party ideas, drawing on the French translations of their works and those of
A propaganda print of the Glorious Revolution, *The Flight of the Popedom out of England* by Romeyn de Hooghe, 1688, shows Catholic fugitives fleeing the country. James II and the royal family are led by Louis XIV on a bear while Catholic chapels are destroyed by the 'mob'.

their 17th-century predecessors by French Protestant exiles. Works by the regicide Edmund Ludlow (1616-1792), the martyr to liberty Algernon Sidney (1623-83), the Real Whig Thomas Gordon (d. 1750) and the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) were all translated by Huguenots in the first half of the 18th century. Many works by the leading Country Party figure, Viscount Bolingbroke (1678-1751), were also translated around this time. The French philosopher the Abbé Mably (1709-85) made his debt to these ideas explicit by including a fictional Real Whig, Milord Stanhope, as the main character in his dialogue *The Rights and Duties of the Citizen*. Mably’s Stanhope not only expressed admiration for the British constitution, tempered by concern that the revolution of 1688-89 had not gone far enough, but he also advocated the application of those ideas to France.

Though written in the 1750s, Mably’s text was first published in 1789. The outbreak of the French Revolution prompted fresh interest in these English ideas and a number of French revolutionaries began to look to England for guidance. A large proportion of Real Whig and republican translations were reissued around this time, alongside new translations of works by English thinkers, such as John Milton (1608-74), the republican James Harrington (1611-77) and others.

The British constitution was recognised by some as a potential model to be imitated. The so-called *Monarchiens* drew on the works of Montesquieu and De Lolme to support the introduction of a bicameral legislative system and an absolute royal veto. As members of the National Assembly’s constitutional committee during the summer of 1789 they were in a position to promote their vision, but it was eclipsed in the autumn by the unicameral system favoured by the influential political theorist, the Abbé Sieyès (1748-1836). An even more strident advocate of the British model was the Comte de Mirabeau (1749-91). He sought advice from English friends on laws and institutions and organised the translation and publication of an account of the mode of operation of the House of Commons and of several other English works. These included two pamphlets by Milton, one supporting a free press and the other defending the regicide, and Catharine Macaulay’s Real Whig *History of England* (published 1763-83). The translator’s preface to Macaulay’s interpretation of 17th-century England emphasised Mirabeau’s perception of its relevance:

Given our circumstances, this is no ordinary work … There exist so many points of contact and connection between these events, these people, and us, that in limiting ourselves to drawing attention to them in footnotes, we will find that we have written the history of two revolutions.

Mirabeau’s aim appears to have been to find a shortcut from 1642 to 1689, a means of providing the French with a British-style constitutional monarchy without entailing the anarchy and bloodshed that had been suffered by the English. That the outbreak of the French Revolution coincided with the centenary of England’s Glorious Revolution also encouraged the
drawing of parallels between these two events. In the autumn of 1789 the Society for Commemorating the Revolution of Great Britain sent a congratulatory address to the French National Assembly. Several of the French responses acknowledged the parallel. A member of the Patriotic Society of Dijon asserted:

*Why should we be ashamed, Gentlemen, to acknowledge that the Revolution which is now establishing itself in our country is owing to the example given by England a century ago?*

Interestingly this comparison was invoked 200 years later at an event commemorating the bicentenary of the French Revolution by none other than Margaret Thatcher. In response President Mitterrand pointed out that the regicide of 1649 constituted a more obvious parallel. This was also a common view among the French revolutionaries themselves. As the translator of Harrington’s works remarked in 1795:

*The troubles of the French Revolution resemble so closely those of the English Revolution [by which he meant 1640-60], that those who like to reason from effects to causes [should] not hesitate to study the one so as to better determine the effects of the other.*

In particular (somewhat ironically) there was a desire to learn from the English example how the French might avoid ending up with either a Cromwell or a Charles II. Mailhe insisted that the English had erred in allowing the Commons – rather than the nation as a whole – to take the decision on the king's fate. Others referred to the English case to advocate exile rather than execution.

On the issue of constitution-building the French were keen to emphasise their originality. However, several leading revolutionaries drew inspiration from the constitutional model provided by James Harrington. Harrington’s plan for a large, modern republic was embedded within his work *The Commonwealth of Oceana* of 1656. Though written during the Interregnum and under the rule of Cromwell, it was critical of the various republican models that had been adopted in England and offered a distinctive alternative.

The relevance of Harrington’s work was first brought to the attention of the French in the 1780s, when Jean-Jacques Rutledge, a minor French Enlightenment figure, offered an account of Harrington’s ideas and emphasised the extent to which they had influenced leading French thinkers. By the early 1790s Rutledge was a leading member of the radical Cordeliers Club and directly involved in practical political action, but he had not forgotten his commitment to Harrington. He included several lengthy but
unacknowledged extracts from Harrington’s *A System of Politics* in his periodical *Le Creuset* and applied some of those ideas directly to contemporary circumstances. Following the declaration of the first French Republic he even responded to the National Assembly’s call for constitutional ideas by sending them several Harringtonian works, including a draft constitution modelled on *Oceana*.

Rutledge’s draft probably had little impact on the constitution-builders of the National Assembly, but some of Harrington’s ideas were embodied in French law via other routes. The members of the committee that drew up the Constitution of 1795 incorporated Harrington’s idea of having one legislative body to propose laws and another to accept or reject them. They appear to have derived this mechanism from the extracts from Harrington’s works that appeared in *A Defence of the Constitutions of the United States of America* by the American revolutionary John Adams (1735-1826), which was translated into French in 1792. The Abbé Sieyès was another important conduit. He made notes on Harrington’s works and incorporated several of his ideas into his own constitutional proposals. His plan to divide the territory and population of France, his system for rotation of office, and his insistence on the need to separate the proposal of laws from their approval, all owed something to Harrington. The National Assembly adopted the first of these proposals in 1790, while the other two found their way into the constitutions of 1795 and 1799.

These borrowings were not lost on British observers. In an article in the *Morning Chronicle* of September 22nd, 1797, it was noted:

*The mode at present adopted by the French Constitution for annually renewing in part their Legislative Assemblies seems to have been borrowed from a similar idea formerly started by our Rota Club* [established by Harrington in 1659].

Nor did French interest in English models and ideas die out after 1799, as the works of Guizot make clear. An article in the French newspaper *Le Globe* in August 1830 took the parallel between the English and French Revolutions to a new level, offering corresponding lists of the leading figures and institutions of 1640-89 and 1789-1830 and even invoking the term *Glorious Revolution* to describe France’s most recent revolutionary moment.

While it is true that Britain remained distanced from the revolutionary upheavals that affected much of Continental Europe in the 19th century it is wrong to conclude that the English have no revolutionary tradition. In fact, in the 17th century the English had been pioneers of revolutionary change and served as a source of inspiration and guidance for the French when they came to embark on their own revolution at the end of the 18th century.

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