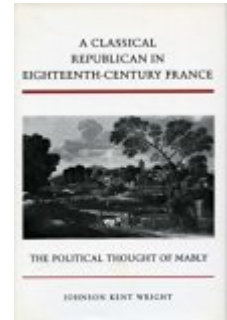


Johnson Kent Wright. *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997. xi + 261 pp. \$49.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8047-2789-1.



Reviewed by Richard A. Lebrun

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Most accounts of French political thought in the eighteenth century scarcely mention Gabriel de Bonnot de Mably. Those that do usually characterize him as some kind of utopian communist, a "precursor" of nineteenth-century socialism. However, in 1819 when Benjamin Constant delivered a famous lecture in Paris on the meaning of the French Revolution, a talk entitled "The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns," he argued that where the French Revolution went wrong was in trying to transform France into a modern Sparta. The "liberty of the ancients," as Constant defined it, involved "active and constant participation in collective power." In contrast, modern liberty, something unknown to the ancients and the specific product of modern civilization, involved the "peaceful enjoyment of private independence." Constant blamed two Enlightenment writers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mably, for encouraging the French in a foolish attempt to restore "ancient liberty." Rousseau and Mably had failed to recognize that the pure democracy of the classical city-state had been lost forever, and that in modern world freedom could be best secured by combining guarantees of individual liberty

with "representative government." Johnson Kent Wright, accepting Constant's assessment of Mably's influence in all seriousness, strives to restore Mably's stature as a central figure in the history of republican thought in the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

Wright accomplishes his purpose by providing an informative and remarkably succinct intellectual biography of Mably, who was born in 1709, and who had an active career as a published writer from 1740 until his death in 1785, just four years before the Revolution. Educated for a career in the Church, like his younger brother, Etienne Bonnot de Condillac (a well-known and influential philosopher and Encyclopedist), Abbe de Mably was never ordained. After a brief period of employment in the monarchy's diplomatic bureaucracy, he devoted himself entirely to studying and writing, eventually publishing some fifteen works in his lifetime. The editions of his works which appeared during the Revolution fill fifteen volumes, and include three pieces previously circulated only in manuscript form. Mably's writings were almost exclusively political in orientation, but

within those limits, included an impressive variety of genres and topics. His works can be assigned to three main categories: works of philosophical history dealing with Greece, Rome, and France (inspired, apparently, by Montesquieu's *Considerations sur les Romains*), philosophical dialogues on a wide range of political and social topics, and a large number of polemical and occasional works. From the evidence of multiple editions and translations as well as contemporary reviews, Wright concludes that nearly all Mably's works achieved a wide readership.

There is, however, one striking anomaly in Mably's "reception." His first book, a philosophical history entitled *Parallele des romains et des francais*, had won warm approval from Voltaire and other *philosophes*. Nevertheless, the work was soon repudiated by the author himself, who abandoned the monarchism of this first essay for the intransigent republicanism of his subsequent writings. Paradoxically, this evolution was accompanied by a growing hostility toward the later Enlightenment. Mably came in time to attack Voltaire, the Encyclopedists, and the physiocrats. Not surprisingly, his estrangement from the central figures of the Enlightenment, like Rousseau's famous quarrel with the same group, has misled some commentators. Some interpreters, Wright reports, have even portrayed Mably as a reactionary Catholic anti-*philosophe*.

During the last decades of his life, Mably endured increasing intellectual isolation, after having possessed a continent-wide reputation at mid-century. Then, during the "pre- Revolution" of 1787-89, his literary executors published two manuscripts which Mably had not dared to print under old regime censorship: the complete text of his *Observations sur l'histoire de France* (dating from 1765), which evoked the original freedom of the French nation before centuries of feudal "anarchy" and monarchical "despotism" and which called for a restoration of the Estates General; and a shorter piece called *Des droits et des devoirs du*

citoyen (written in 1758), which offered a detailed scenario for a transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy. These two works turned out to be the most often cited works in the pamphlet literature of 1788 and 1789. As a consequence, Mably, again like Rousseau, enjoyed an enormous reputation during the revolutionary era. Finally, during the Directory, he was hailed by Gracchus Babeuf and his co-conspirators as a key inspiration for their plans to establish a "community of goods."

As a consequence of his popularity during the Revolution and the connection with Babeuf, Mably's hostility to the Enlightenment was gradually forgotten, and he came to be remembered as the quintessential *philosophe* whose "irresponsible" speculations helped produce the Revolution. In the second half of the nineteenth century, both proponents and adversaries of the growing socialist movement came to count Mably as an early utopian communist, a reputation canonized by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels themselves. Until recently this image of Mably has rarely been challenged. What Wright has done is to make an extremely strong case for restoring "Mably's credentials as perhaps the leading classical republican thinker of his epoch" (p. 20). He accomplishes this objective by providing essential biographical details and a clear, careful review of all Mably's writings, by considering each one in its specific historical context, and by relating the controversies surrounding these writings to the best in contemporary scholarship on the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

In summary, Wright's portrait sees Mably beginning his career as a political royalist whose first book in 1740 "joined the intellectual method of Montesquieu to the political values of Voltaire" (p. 199). Although Mably's commitment to philosophical history never wavered, he soon became a committed republican, idolizing the equalitarian city-states of ancient Sparta and Rome. His mature thought, Wright demonstrates, owed much as

well to the English commonwealth tradition, which he regarded as a modern incarnation of ancient republicanism. The main focus of Mably's thought, however, was always France itself. In the decade or so after 1758, Mably hoped that France might achieve a kind of "managed revolution" (following the models of the Dutch revolt, the seventeenth-century English revolutions, and the restoration of the Estates in contemporary Sweden). Mably's reputed "communism," it turns out, involved no more than a concern to restore "natural equality," recommendations for government regulations "to impede the accumulation of private wealth," and suggestions for ideological measures "to instill egalitarian morals and manners" (pp. 107-108). Following the failure of the *antiparlementaire* Maupeou coup of 1771 and the repeated failure of attempted Enlightened reform from above, Mably became increasingly pessimistic about the ability of mankind to master its fate.

In his concluding chapter Wright very effectively links the trajectories of Mably's lifetime and posthumous careers with that of many of the major intellectual events and movements of the modern world. Wright is particularly successful in relating Mably's thought and concerns to the many strands of republican thought and practice that the Atlantic world has known from the Renaissance to the present, and to the socialist tradition as it has developed since the eighteenth century. There is, however, one significant omission in all this; Wright makes no attempt to trace Mably's image, reputation, or influence among the makers of modern conservative thought. This seems curious, given Mably's hostility to the great figures of the Enlightenment. Graeme Garrard has recently argued for example that Rousseau was an important precursor of what Isaiah Berlin has called the Counter-Enlightenment.[1] Examining the parallels between Rousseau's partial critique of the Enlightenment and Joseph de Maistre's much more comprehensive and systematic indictment, Garrard concluded that "Maistre's works are the consummation of many of the ideas and arguments

first directed against the Enlightenment by Rousseau." [2]

Considering Mably's polemics against some of the major figures of the Enlightenment, one cannot help but wonder how major conservative writers, such as Maistre, Louis de Bonald, and Edmund Burke may have perceived and interpreted him.

Even with this omission, Wright's excellent study makes an important contribution to our understanding of eighteenth-century political thought. A first-rate intellectual biography, it also adds new dimensions to many controversies concerning the Enlightenment, the Revolution, and the history of republican thought in the modern world. Thoroughly researched, well organized, fully documented, and clearly written, this volume can be recommended to anyone interested in any of these topics.

Notes:

[1]. Graeme Garrard, "Rousseau, Maistre, and the Counter-Enlightenment," *History of Political Thought* 15 (1994): pp. 97-120.

[2]. *Ibid.*, pp. 97-8.

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