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The Birth of Modernity: The Influence of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution

Zeynep Çolak* 

Hanife Yasemin Mumcu** 

Abstract

While the emergence and global spread of modernity is a complex phenomenon, it is known that certain political, economic, and social developments led to its rise and spread. Looking closely at these factors, it is possible to say that the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and capitalism in the Western world are the five main historical developments that shaped modernity. On a historical continuum, these developments are interrelated. Some of them gave modernity its soul. Others made it much more influential and global. In this regard, it is arguable that the first three developments gave modernity its soul, while the last two gave it a much more effective scope. This study examines the first three historical developments using the descriptive research method based on these premises. It considers the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution as the developments that gave birth to modernity and gave it its soul. At the same time, this study argues that these are moments or developments that are intrinsically supportive of each other, seeing these historical moments as moments of rupture and crisis in the Western world. These moments and developments are crucial components of the problems and phenomena we currently discuss today. No literary, aesthetic, philosophical, or political criticism of the 20th century can be analyzed without taking these developments into account. In this respect, this study reconsiders, within a historical continuum, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution, which shaped modernity and its philosophy, modernism.

Keywords: modernity, modernism, Renaissance, enlightenment, French Revolution.

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* Kâtip Çelebi University, Social Sciences Institute, Turkish Language and Literature PhD Program, İzmir, Türkiye. (Corresponding Author).
E-mail: zeyneptext@gmail.com, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9501-0727>

** Prof. Dr., Kâtip Çelebi University, Department of Turkish Language and Literature, İzmir, Türkiye.
E-mail: hanifeyasemin.mumcu@ikcu.edu.tr, ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3612-3611>

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1. Introduction

The developments that prepared modernity are spread over a wide area. However, one should still underline that certain historical turning points determine the degree and intensity of this spread. These are the Renaissance and Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and industrial capitalism. The social changes and cultural interactions in the modern period were essentially shaped within a structure formed by these ruptures, which Raymond Williams (1977, pp. 132–133) called the “structure of feeling.”¹ One of the critics of modernity, Max Weber (Löwy, 2013/2018, p. 11), noted that this widespread and powerful influence of capitalist modernity made it possible to dominate people by confining them to a kind of “iron cage.”²

Undoubtedly, these influential writers’ debates and differences of approach would not have been possible without these developments. It is also possible to read these moments of historical rupture as moments of crisis for the West. Indeed, at these crisis moments, the Western world entered a new historical phase. These moments also constitute the essence of the problems of today’s modern world. In this respect, it is impossible to understand the Western world, modernity, and the processes and effects of its expansion without analyzing these developments in depth. It can be said that at each moment of crisis, Western modernism is reshaped and further increases its degree of influence, determining the severity and sphere of influence of the next moment of rupture. For example, the Renaissance, which ended the Dark Ages, led to the rise of the Enlightenment through a painful process. The rupture that began with the Enlightenment shaped the spirit of the French Revolution. While the West was preparing in the socio-cultural field with these developments, it realized its political economy development with the emergence of the Industrial Revolution in England. The Industrial Revolution took the previous developments to a new stage and carried the social transformation and fluidity that had begun with the Renaissance to a much higher dimension, overlapping modernity with capitalism.

Although the Industrial Revolution and industrial capitalism increased the fluidity of modernity to enormous proportions and made it a global phenomenon, we believe that the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution gave modernity its true spirit. We will, therefore, focus on the first three factors and leave out the last two, bearing in mind the research limitations of an article.

In this context, we will use a descriptive methodology to examine the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and French Revolution, which gave modernity its soul. We want to underline that our methodological approach is based on the premise of historical continuity and that these three factors are the result of intrinsically interdependent developments. This emphasis is neither reductive nor deterministic. We can say that the belief in the scientific approach that specific intrinsic laws guide historical developments and that these laws are connected to historical events that are occurring or have to occur determines the methodology of this

¹ Williams’ term “Structure of feeling” can be expressed as the common ways of thinking and feeling of individuals in a certain period. These stereotyped ways of thinking and feeling, as Eagleton (1978, p. 32) underlines, are closely linked to the hegemony established in the cultural sphere. The reproduction and legitimacy of the dominant culture become possible through these stereotyped structures of feeling and thought.

² The “Iron Cage” term coined by Weber, as Löwy (2013/2018, p. 11) correctly emphasizes, is the modern “capitalist civilization” itself. In his detailed study on how the phrase was transformed, Löwy points out that Talcott Parsons translated Weber’s German word “Stahlhartes Gehäuse,” which means “a strong case like steel,” into English as “iron cage,” and this translation of Parsons was later translated into other world languages in this way. See Löwy (2013/2018, p. 11–12).

research. We will examine under headings the three developments that gave rise to modernity, which are linked to each other by a number of latent historical ties.

2. The Renaissance and the Enlightenment

The first significant development, the first historical break that brought about modernity in Europe, was undoubtedly the Renaissance. However, Europe had to wait more than three centuries to see the results of this first rupture in the context of modernism. With the Renaissance that emerged in Italy in the 14th century, people rediscovered their interest in ancient Greek and Roman culture and made great progress in fields such as art, science, and philosophy.³ It is possible to say that the Renaissance was born in Italy in the 14th century, its meaning became clearer in the 15th century, and the idea of "Renaissance" was accepted and established in Europe in the 16th century (Burke, 1998, p. 18; Faure, 1949/1992, p. 9).

The Renaissance was an art and culture movement that shaped modernity and its philosophy. According to the Swiss historian Jacob Burckhardt (as cited in Burke, 1998, p. 2), who wrote important works on this subject, the Renaissance constitutes the origin of European modern thought. The place where the changes that began with the Renaissance converge is the discovery of the individual, that is, the human. This discovery prepared the rise of anthropocentric thought, a finding that gave spirit to all the following centuries. In this period, people began to discover the meaning of their existence and understand human potential better. In Renaissance thought, the value of the human being, their personality, and their abilities gained importance. People endeavored to discover their potential, relying on the power of their own minds, creativity, and imagination.

In almost all world languages, *Renaissance* refers to a certain period of European history and, as in the word's origin, to both a spiritual and physical renewal (Faure, 1949/1992, p. 10). This is such a renewal, rebirth, and rebirth that it led to the development of innovative ideas in many fields in Europe and people's exploration of a wider range of knowledge and ideas about the world, especially in the fields of art, architecture, science, philosophy, literature, and music. These areas shaped by the Renaissance are also the areas on which the idea of modernism is based. The rediscovery and imitation of classical Greek and Roman art crystallized the Renaissance in art. Famous artists such as Giotto, Petrarch, Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Donatello are the most important names to emerge in Italy. In this period, art evolved towards a different understanding by breaking away from the aesthetic understanding of the Middle Ages (Gombrich, 1951, p. 303). In this process, which completely reshaped the whole of Europe and aesthetic understandings in Europe, radical changes and transformations were observed in areas such as perspective, human anatomy, light, shadow, and color, naturalism, mythology, and classical works (Gombrich, 1951, pp. 269–339).

Perspective is considered a great innovation developed during the Renaissance. Perspective, which puts the human gaze at the center, increases the spatial appearance of objects and carries the sense of depth to advanced dimensions, thus creating a three-dimensional effect in the work. This technique had a great impact on painting and sculpture. As Gombrich (1951, p. 326) states, Renaissance artists attached so much importance to perspective that they prepared

³ The debate about when and where exactly the Renaissance emerged still continues today. Some authors state that the Renaissance emerged in Italian cities such as Florence, Naples, Rome, and Padua, while others point to Avignon in France. However, it should be noted that most of the accounts point to Italy. Most of these approaches (although some point to the painter Giotto a generation earlier) emphasize that the Renaissance first began in the 1330s with the Italian poet-philosopher Francesco Petrarch. See Burke (1998, p. 18).

the perspective and compositions of their works before they started working. Perspective glorified the human gaze and was one of the first harbingers of the sovereignty that man would establish over nature in the near future. Indeed, the first seeds of the Enlightenment's idea of a "subject-centered universe of reason" (as cited in Kumar, 2005, p. 193), emphasized by Immanuel Kant, were being developed with this technique. According to some authors, including Marshal McLuhan (1964) and Ong (1967), this phenomenon made it possible for later scientific inventions like the telescope and the microscope, which put the act of looking at the center, and the visual culture that emerged after the 19th century was based on the Renaissance perspective. In fact, Michel Foucault (1963/2004, 1975/1991), who has left a great mark on postmodern theorists, goes one step further; he argues that modern social controlling-surveillance mechanisms that shape human behavior and psychology began with the discovery of the Renaissance perspective. According to Foucault (1963/2004, 1975/1991), behaviors that could not be controlled in modern society and threatened the established order could be controlled this way.

During the Renaissance period, there were also impressive developments in human anatomy. Artists started to examine human anatomy in great detail. During this period, painters gained more knowledge about the human body's movements, muscles, and organs (Gombrich, 1951, p. 326). In this way, the paintings gained a more realistic appearance. Artists such as Leonardo da Vinci (the "Vitruvian Man" sketch thought to have been made in 1492), Michelangelo (the "David" sculpture of 1504), and Titian (the "Venus of Urbino" of 1538) reflected the human anatomy in its most perfect form, taking into account different perspectives. It can be said that this preference and aesthetic understanding of human anatomy was one of the important developments that prepared the rise of the idea of secularization of life developed in the following periods. One of the reasons why anatomical studies gained importance during the Renaissance is that the artists of the period wanted to use realistic and accurate information to depict the human body (Corbin et al., 2006/2017, p. 269).

For this reason, artists began to take anatomy lessons and study the human body in detail better to understand the structural features of the human body. One of the most important names in anatomical studies is the Italian anatomist Andreas Vesalius. Vesalius, as a result of his studies on the human body, discovered that some of the information contained in the works of Galenus, a medical doctor from Pergamon who lived in the 3rd century, which formed the basis of medicine in Medieval and Renaissance Europe, was incorrect and described the structural features of the human body in great detail in his book *The Structure of the Human Body*, which he wrote in 1543 and which is considered the most important anatomy book of his time (Corbin et al., 2006/2017, p. 259, pp. 268–268). Thanks to Andreas Vesalius' work on human anatomy, the structure of the human body was better understood, and surgical techniques could be developed. During the Renaissance, many publications and discoveries were made in human anatomy and medicine that shed light on modern times. These publications and inventions range from Giovanni Battista Morgagni's "Autopsy Method," which forms the basis of modern autopsy methods, to Hieronymus Fabricius' "Discovery of Venous Valves," to Francesco Redi's microscope, which is the basis of the modern microscope, to the studies in which he examined the anatomy of insects for the first time (Corbin et al., 2006/2017, p. 296).

During the Renaissance, artists made great innovations in the use of light, shadow, and color. Renaissance artists began to add depth and volume to their works through the use of light, shadow, and color (Gombrich, 1951, p. 323). This technique eventually led to a more

realistic and impressive image in painting and sculpture, and it began to be understood that art was a field that allowed for three-dimensional readings (Gomrich, 1951, p. 224). Their innovations in light, shadow, and color brought art closer to nature. Thus, Renaissance artists began to reflect nature more realistically (Gombrich, 1951, p. 294). This naturalistic understanding brought more detail and realism to painting and sculpture. Nature, which in the old tradition had been depicted with divine, religious elements in medieval painting, thus became one of the main components of the new human-centered thought (Corbin et al., 2006/2017, p. 341). In this context, Leonardo Da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man" sketch can be seen as a typical attempt by Renaissance artists to relate nature and man. Da Vinci believed that his buildings should be constructed with the correct mathematical proportions and geometric shapes, and he created his works with this in mind (Corbin et al., 2006/2017, p. 342). In this respect, Da Vinci's work was presented as a reflection of the human body as a reflection of the universe, an image of perfection in nature and the human body. Da Vinci's works reflect the most perfect first examples of the man-centered understanding as opposed to the God-centered understanding of the medieval Church. In this way, one of the greatest steps was taken towards what Martin Heidegger calls the "subiectum" (cited in Foster, 2003, p. 94), incorporating the world into painting and the human into the subject. The positioning of man about nature, nature concerning painting, and, with linear perspective, the positioning of the whole universe concerning the human gaze, as we will see later, gave rise to one of the greatest crises of modernity: it treated man as a kind of "God." As Crary (1992, p. 38) rightly points out, this projection of man is one of the most problematic aspects of the Renaissance subject. It sought to control the world and organize it according to rational criteria. This problematic point will climax with the Enlightenment and will be one of the most important factors in the shaping of modern society and culture from the second half of the 19th century onward.

While the Renaissance brought these transformations to the field of art, how did it affect the areas of literature and language? The Renaissance period brought many innovations in literature and language. Italian literature showed great development during this period, and writers such as Petrarch, Boccaccio, Dante, and Machiavelli became among the greatest names in world literature. As Peter Burke (1998, p. 21) emphasizes, although we associate some of these writers (e.g., Dante) with the Middle Ages, we can say that they are the children of the early Renaissance. These authors used natural language and put human behavior at the center of their works, drawing inspiration from ancient Greek and Roman literature. This led to sonnets in poetry, and five-act plays in tragedy and comedy. During the Renaissance, modern European languages began to develop by publishing works written in local languages instead of Latin. In French literature, writers such as François Rabelais and Michel de Montaigne dealt with human nature and the meaning of life. In English literature, writers like William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and John Milton became some of the greatest names in world literature. In Spanish literature, Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* is considered one of the most important novels in world literature.

During the Renaissance, Johannes Gutenberg created the printing press in Germany in 1440. The invention of it made it possible to reproduce books quickly and easily. In this way, the cost of books decreased, and access to books became more widespread. During the Renaissance, books became popular not only among clergy and educated people but also among a wide range of readers. In this way, knowledge and ideas spread more easily, paving the way for the emergence of different ideas.

In this period, radical changes took place in the West in terms of breaking the power of the Church, which was the driving force of the Middle Ages. These changes complement the

general transformation and rupture we have tried to express above. As a result of these radical transformations, the Enlightenment and the birth of modernity became possible. The Renaissance period initiated a reform movement that opposed the authority of the Catholic Church. An environment was created where people could choose their beliefs according to their conscience and think freely without being pressured by the Church. The wealth of the Church, the corruption of the priests, and the moral corruption of the clergy had caused widespread discontent among the people in certain European countries. This corruption of the Church further supported the idea of an anthropocentric universe.

Modernity, in principle, adopts a view of the world based on reason and rationality. It applies the principles of modern reason and rationality in the social, political, economic, and cultural spheres. At this point, it is important to emphasize how a clear rationality shapes all facets of modernity and how this strict rational understanding fills all gaps. Rationality can be defined as the ability to draw correct and logical conclusions through reason and to make decisions based on information and data. Obviously, a strict understanding of rationality cannot be established without reason or a rational approach. There has always been a connection between reason and man's persistent use of it in a certain direction, if we look at the historical development of the West. In this approach, man is *homo rationalis*, and this understanding can be traced back to Homer' (2019) *Odyssey*. Odysseus, king of Ithaca, stayed away from home during the Trojan War, which lasted ten years. After the war, he wants to return to Ithaca. This new "voyage" of Odysseus lasts another ten years and is a journey back home. In this adventure-filled odyssey, Odysseus overcomes the dangers he encounters (the giant Polyphemus who eats human flesh, the winds trapped in a suit, Circe's spells, the lotus-eaters, the sirens, and sea monsters) with the help of the gods Circe and Calypso, but mainly by using his wits. But after twenty years, the long odyssey to these other, non-human mythical worlds has changed him, too. When Odysseus returns, he is an entirely different human being in the clutches of reification. Odysseus, who once fought with intellect, cunning, and arrogance⁴ against the Cyclopes, human flesh-eating cannibals, and lotus-eaters, returns to his homeland by transforming himself into an evil heir of the monsters he escaped (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947/1995, p. 67). The story of Odysseus, as Horkheimer and Adorno masterfully argue, reflects the archaic history of a subjectivity that begins to emancipate itself from mythical powers beyond its deceitful nature and cunning. Odysseus' struggle here reflects the process of reason's struggle against the mythical world of fate and its creatures and images: "He perceives nature and fate with reason and dominates nature and fate with reason." (Çiğdem, 1997, p. 55).

In the 1600s, the French thinker René Descartes systematized this archaic, notably the first revolt of Odysseus, within the framework of modernity. He takes it, i.e., reason, out of the world of individuals and heroes and asserts that it is a "blessing" given to all human beings and that it is naturally distributed equally to all human beings (Çiğdem, 1997, p. 56). If it is present in all human beings, they can rationally and logically judge and shape the world and history by finding the right path. This idea constitutes the starting point from which modernity understands reason and rationality. With Descartes, rationalism began to rise, and the sciences began to guide philosophy rather than philosophy guiding the sciences, as had happened in

⁴ Odysseus is used in ancient Greek to mean "one who never gets out of trouble, one who brings trouble to others." The dominant character trait of Odysseus was his cunning and deceitfulness. This trait is seen in his adventures on his return: He tricks the gods. He is also the one who devised and carried out the trick of the great wooden horse in the Trojan War. The Trojan War tells two stories of Odysseus' deception (one by Helen, the other by Menelaus). In the first, Odysseus disguises himself and enters the besieged Troy, bringing destruction to the city; in the other, he hides with his friends in a wooden horse and manages to prevent this when Helena forces them to talk and confess. See Calvino (1991/2014, p. 24), Britannica, "Odyssey" (2023) for the information here.

earlier periods. The positive emphasis on reason continued for the next two centuries and peaked in the 18th century. The 18th century is called the century of the Enlightenment. Its emphasis on the concept of reason sets it apart from previous centuries. This concept was the driving force of the century, and it was expressed in its most advanced forms in Kant's philosophy in a way that would greatly influence later periods.

Immanuel Kant argues that reason is foundational by fulfilling a key function leading to the Enlightenment (Çiğdem, 1997, p. 56). In his works, we see that Kant is very confident in reason, has a critical attitude, and tries to discover the types and limits of reason. According to Kant (1781/1998, p. 115), reason can acquire knowledge and arrive at universal truths through *a priori* reasoning, partially independent of experience. Such *a priori* knowledge, as a product of "pure reason," is transcendental, a kind of "transcendental illusion" in which meaning is immanent. (Kant, 1781/1998, pp. 385-86). Those absolutely dependent on experience are, according to Kant (1788/2002, p. 61), a posteriori knowledge, falling within the realm of "practical reason." Kant reflected on the universal character of *a priori* knowledge, and perhaps through these inquiries, he arrived at the founding principle of reason in the Enlightenment.

Kant saw *a priori* transcendental knowledge as a guarantee of "the power of autonomous judgment" (quoted in Çiğdem, 1997, p. 56). This is why he put so much weight on it in his Enlightenment approach: it let people use their reason without being guided by someone else or a group. This made him defend the Enlightenment even more strongly. If reason has universal, *a priori* constitutive ideas, it should even reach a legislative dimension. This fierce defense of reason became the slogan "Sapere Aude!" (Be Courageous!) in his 1784 essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* In this phrase, which has become synonymous with the defense of the Enlightenment, Kant (1784/1992, p. 1) urged the people of the Enlightenment to be courageous in using their own reason and to develop a critical attitude towards dogmatic thinking and authoritarian approaches. The idea of reason that Descartes sketched out is transformed by Kant into a very positive reference to individual reason. With the Enlightenment, the implicit faith in reason and science, the mechanistic conception of the universe, the progressive understanding of history, and the idea of optimism were reinforced in Western civilization, and the developments that took place in the following centuries were shaped within this framework. This idea, this way of seeing the world and life, reached its apogee in the 18th century with Immanuel Kant. The Enlightenment, which developed within this context, impacted the social, cultural, political, and economic spheres.

The Renaissance and the Enlightenment caused a great change in Europe. The development and spread of the Renaissance continued until the 18th century. The radical changes of the 18th century would not have been possible without this rupture. The most significant development of the 18th century was undoubtedly the French Revolution. This revolution carried the break-off that had begun with the Renaissance to further dimensions and considerably expanded the impact and scope of Enlightenment thought. If modern thought is the sum of all these changes, the second biggest factor affecting these consequences is undoubtedly the French Revolution.

3. The French Revolution

The French Revolution, which began with the establishment of the National Assembly (États Généraux de 1789) in France in 1789 and ended with the creation of the French Consul (Le Consulat) in November 1799, is one of the most important developments that shaped modernity (Livesey, 2001; Fehér, 1990). The Revolution resulted in the overthrow of the

monarchy based on the feudal order, which had been effective in France for centuries and determined all social organizations, and the establishment of the republic.

One of the most important results of this radical change was undoubtedly that it enabled the first major steps to ensure that the elements that constitute the essence of modernity, namely principles such as equality, freedom, and justice, were established in society.

The French Revolution also meant that the human-centered thinking that had begun with the Renaissance after a long period of darkness in Europe (the Middle Ages) reached a more advanced stage. Although politically seen as a triumph of the bourgeoisie, which is how Marx reads it, the French Revolution constitutes the starting point of the important problems that will emerge in modern society and the analyses of these problems.

Leaving aside the social (population growth and the massive migration from the countryside to the cities, especially to Paris), political (the effects of the Anglo-French War of 1778–1783), and economic causes (especially the devastating economic consequences of the Anglo-French War of 1778–1783) of the French Revolution, it can be seen how important the intellectual causes are. This is because these latter reasons shaped the spirit of the Revolution and determined a significant part of the debates in the following period. Some names, such as Descartes, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, are particularly prominent here. In addition to these grand names, "La Mettrie," whose full name was Julien Offray de La Mettrie, was another important writer who reflected both Enlightenment thought and the factual and materialistic understanding of the period and shaped the spirit of the age. Prior to the creation of a new era, these authors set out the problems that would arise in the new age and reflected on and evaluated these problems.

René Descartes (1637/2020, p. 32) contributed to the development of critical thinking with his views on the importance of reason by saying "I think, therefore I am" and on the ideas of previous thinkers, especially on creation.⁵ Descartes' rationalist philosophy argued that people can reach thought and knowledge through reason. This idea is parallel to some of the ideas developed and underlined during the Enlightenment period. Enlightenment thinkers also argued that people should fight against unjust governments through reason and rationality. In this context, it can be said that Descartes greatly influenced the intellectual foundations of the revolution and the people who wanted to revolt against despotic monarchies.

In 1748, Montesquieu (1748/2017) wrote a work that would form the basis of the principle of "separation of powers" in state administration: *On the Spirit of the Law*. Montesquieu (1748/2017, p. 57) explained the drawbacks of concentrating all powers on the same person in this work and stated that the name of such a regime would be "despotism" and that power should be distributed to the legislative, executive, and judicial-legal spheres. The principle of separation of powers is considered one of the fundamental principles of modern democratic states and is important to protect the government from despotism or arbitrariness. Montesquieu (1748/2017, p. 68) emphasizes that this distribution of powers within the state will contribute to establishing a democratic order. According to him, "democracy," which is a regime of virtue, should be based on the balanced integrity of the separation of powers, not on the absolute sovereignty of a single mind that holds all powers (at this point, he strongly criticized the rationalist understandings of the period).

Another important point that Montesquieu emphasized in this work is the principle of the rule of law. He argued that laws should be applied equally and fairly for everyone. According

⁵ These criticisms become more pronounced in his work, *The Passions of the Soul*, which can be considered an early modern work as it focuses on the fallibility of emotions and passions. See Descartes (1649/2022).

to him, the principle of the rule of law is important to limit the arbitrary power of the government and to protect the rights of individuals.

The other significant aspect of Montesquieu's work, *On the Spirit of the Laws*, was that he analyzed different forms of government. In this work, he mentions three basic forms of government, such as monarchy, aristocracy, and republic. He defines monarchy as "unlimited government." In this type of government, the powers of the monarch are usually limited and controlled by law. Aristocracy is a form of government in which the government is in the hands of a few elite or noble people. Therefore, he defines aristocracy as a "class government." In aristocracies, the government usually belongs to the richest and most powerful families in society. A republic, on the other hand, according to Montesquieu, is a form of government in which the people have a say in the government, a "people's government." In republics, representatives of the people or elected rulers manage the affairs of the state. Therefore, Montesquieu thinks that a republic is more favorable to human freedom and participation and lists many advantages of this form of government. However, he also draws attention to the fact that republics can dangerously turn into majority despotism.

On the Spirit of the Laws was published in the pre-revolutionary period and had a broad impact. One of the main goals of the French Revolution was to fight against unjust governments and the absolute power of the monarchy. Montesquieu's observational and factual thoughts greatly impacted revolutionary leaders and intellectuals and contributed to the basic ideas of the revolution. His principle of separation of powers became an important reference point for revolutionary leaders to limit the government, balance powers, and ensure the rule of law. It can be said that Montesquieu's ideas shaped and supported the revolutionary atmosphere of the period due to his ideas on reshaping the government within the framework of democratic principles and ensuring freedom and justice. All his works "reflect all the characteristics of the age of Enlightenment: it gives place to observation and experiment alongside reason, to understanding human beings alongside the knowledge of nature."

Voltaire is another name that shaped the intellectual foundations of the French Revolution. He is one of the thinkers who put forward the concepts that form the basis of modern democracies, such as the protection of freedoms, freedom of expression, and human rights, in the strongest way. It can be said that Voltaire's ideas, which shaped and gave a new dimension to the French Revolution and Enlightenment thought, focused on the following points in particular: equality and freedom, tolerance, opposition to religious dogma, emphasis on science and reason, and criticism of despotism.

Voltaire first developed these ideas in the introduction to Montesquieu's most important work, *The Spirit of Law*. In this introduction, Voltaire explains topics such as law, liberty, and government structure, which he would explore in depth in his later works. It would not be an overinterpretation to say that Montesquieu refined and strengthened the ideas that Voltaire developed in this introduction (Cabeen, 1939, p. 439). *Candide: or, All for the Best* (Voltaire, 1759/2006), written as a novella in which he gave a more systematic form to the ideas developed in the introduction, was published in 1759. This humorous novel explores issues of human rights, freedom, and equality through the harsh realities young Candide encounters as he travels the world. Thus, "Candide" is a work in which he sowed the first seeds of the "freedom of thought" that he would emphasize more towards the end of his life. Voltaire's "Treatise on Toleration" (2017), written in 1763, develops the ideas on tolerance, freedom of religion, and freedom of thought that he had set out in his previous work, *Candid*, but this time in a more critical way. Tolerance and the right to a fair trial are particularly emphasized in his legal battle against the unlawful murder of a Protestant, Jean Calas, and his trial. Both issues insisted on

the principles on which the Enlightenment was based in a struggle against the dogmatic order of the Church.⁶ In Chapter Seven, Voltaire questions the sources of intolerance in other civilizations, particularly ancient Greek, and explains how far intolerance can go in Socrates' case. However, he notes that no civilization in the ancient world was able to prevent freedom of thought (Voltaire, 1763/2017, p. 88). In the *Philosophical Dictionary*, published in 1764, Voltaire (1764/1984) formulated concepts such as "freedom," "equality," and "law," which he had discussed from a libertarian perspective in his *Treatise on Toleration*, and explained these concepts together with other concepts that were important to him. Voltaire's character is reflected in the work's critical perspective and approach to concepts.

Voltaire strongly opposed unjust governments, despotism, and religious privileges. His criticisms greatly impacted the French intellectuals and the public, who rebelled against these governments and adopted revolutionary ideas.

Voltaire, with his libertarian and secularist ideas, also argued that religion should be limited and church power should be reduced. It can be said that these ideas emerged as a reaction against the Catholic Church and the political influence of religion during the French Revolution. Enlightenment thought and public discontent influenced the movements of revolutionary leaders and shaped the revolutionary atmosphere. In this context, Voltaire's thoughts and criticisms can be considered one of the elements that inspired the French Revolution's basic ideas and the people's revolt.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of the most important thinkers whose ideas shaped the French Revolution. While Rousseau was among the thinkers of the Enlightenment period, his ideas and works profoundly influenced the thought currents of his time and, as Damrosch (2007, p. XIV) emphasizes, of the following two centuries (Lauritsen & Thorup, 2011, p. 100; Garrard, 2012, p. 37).

One of Rousseau's most important works is *The Social Contract*. This work, which begins with "Man, born free, is everywhere in chains" (Rousseau, 1762/2013, p. 4), goes beyond the era in which it was written and became one of the most severe criticisms of despotic governments in the individual plan. In this work, Rousseau deals with human nature and the formation of society by coming together. According to him, people are born free and equal, but they lose their freedom with the development of society (Rousseau, 1762/2013, p. 4). He argues that a social contract between people should be made to overcome such an unjust and unequal system (Rousseau, 1762/2013, p. 12). Such a contract is an agreement to develop and protect society's order and common interests, which brings freedom to individuals. In this work, Rousseau (1762/2013, p. 26) also deals with the concept of "general will." According to him, the general will be an authority and decision-making process that represents the common interests of all individuals above individual interests. According to Rousseau, people can regain their freedom and ensure social justice by accepting the general will through the social contract.

The "Social Contract" had a significant impact before and after the French Revolution. Revolutionary thinkers, influenced by Rousseau's ideas, began to express their demands for equality, justice, and freedom in society more clearly and distinctly. It should also be emphasized

⁶ One must say that this attitude, formed against the oppressive Christian Church order of his time, led Voltaire to a very prejudiced and critical view of other Abrahamic religions, including Islam. This approach permeates almost all of his important works, from his 1756 work *An Essay on Universal History, Manners and Spirit of Nations* (1756/2018) to his relatively late work *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764/1984), first published in 1764, in which he compares Christianity and Judaism in terms of tolerance.

that this work shaped the historical development of concepts such as democracy, popular sovereignty, and social justice and had a significant impact on contemporary political theory.

Although Rousseau's ideas deeply influenced the process of the French Revolution, the people, and the intellectuals, he was still a thinker, a "marginal" (Baczko, 1978, p. 33), who could look at his own age and society from a certain distance, just like a "foreigner." He wrote *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (Rousseau, 1782/2011) as early as 1776, when capitalist modernity was not yet in question, when the loneliness of man had not yet become inevitable in an alienated social system, and when works such as Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life* and *Paris Spleen* had not yet been written.⁷ He also expressed his own marginality and strict loneliness here: "I seem to have fallen to earth from an alien planet" (Rousseau, 1782/2011, p. 10). This sincerely written work, in which he retreated into seclusion, reviewed what he had written in his *Confessions*, and "examined himself" (Rousseau, 1782/2011, p. 11), was his last work. Eleven years after his death, the French Revolution broke out.

Rousseau proposes a social contract in which people can regain their liberty in an ideal society. Rousseau's ideas inspired the intellectual foundations of the French Revolution and its demands for social change. Rousseau's concepts of natural human nature and justice became part of revolutionary ideas. Revolutionary leaders, influenced by Rousseau's ideas, aimed to eliminate societal inequalities and injustices.

Another important figure who had an intellectual influence on the French Revolution and Enlightenment thought was Denis Diderot, who was also a close friend of Rousseau (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). He was the editor of the *Encyclopédie*. Diderot worked on preparing the *Encyclopédie* to disseminate knowledge, promote scientific thought, and support social change. This work ensured the spread of knowledge during the Enlightenment period and was considered an intellectual revolution. It supported concepts such as freedom, equality, scientific reason, rationality, secularism, and human rights. Diderot took a critical approach to religion and the church (he stated that the church was industrialized under the control of the rich⁸) and opposed religious dogmas. In all his approaches, as Lefebvre underlines, Diderot was critical of religion and the Church (he stated that the Church was industrialized under the control of the rich) and opposed religious dogmas. In all his approaches, as Lefebvre underlines, he adopted a determinist perspective that also shaped modern Enlightenment thought (Lefebvre, 2005, p. 68). His strictly deterministic approach would climax in late 19th-century positivism when Enlightenment thought was transformed into an ideological attitude. He was not only an encyclopedia writer but also a literary author, a "rebellious" thinker who bore the traces of his age on himself. This personality and his works profoundly influenced many writers, artists, and thinkers, from Balzac to Goethe, Zola, and Schopenhauer (Furbank, 1992, p. 446). His close friend Rousseau would write about him in his "Confessions" as follows: "A few centuries later, Diderot will be held in the same esteem as Plato and Aristotle" (Rousseau, 1782/2002, p. 462).

Another writer who shaped Enlightenment thought and the spirit of the French Revolution was Julien Offray de La Mettrie. Reflecting the characteristics of the 18th century, a significant part of La Mettrie's thoughts were among the ideals of the Enlightenment. These ideas ranged

⁷ In the 1859–60s, in the very years of the rise and reshaping of modernity with capitalism, Charles Baudelaire, the founding figure of cultural modernism, formulated the experience that Rousseau had once expressed without naming it. The experiences of Geneva, Paris, and the late "marginal" empire, which Rousseau had written about in the 1770s, echoed in the streets of Paris in the 1860s. Baudelaire, under the influence of Edgar Allan Poe, explained this radical change in terms of "Flaneur," "Dandy," and "Spleen of Paris" with a sense of both fascination and hatred. See: Baudelaire (1857/1998, 1847/1869/2008, 1863/2010).

⁸ In his novel *The Nun*, he describes in detail how the Catholic Church had become corrupt. See Diderot (1796/2019). For Diderot's criticisms of the Catholic Church, see Curran (2019, especially, p. 319, pp. 395–397).

from determinism and freedom to empiricism and empirical knowledge to moral responsibility and theology. La Mettrie (1722) expressed these ideas in his work *Machine Man*, first published in 1747. He influenced the thought of the Enlightenment and contributed, in particular, to the intellectual changes that prepared the ground for the French Revolution. La Mettrie (1747/2022, pp. 30–32) argued that human nature was subject to scientific and mathematical laws. Such materialistic and deterministic ideas gained wider acceptance during the Enlightenment. In his seminal work, La Mettrie (1747/2022, pp. 163, 192), he emphasizes the importance of science and rationality, one of the main pillars of Enlightenment thought. An emphasis on the application of reason and the scientific method guided efforts to find rational solutions to social and political issues during this time. Although La Mettrie's (1747/2022, p. 38) deterministic thoughts explain human behavior in terms of cause and effect, it is important that he emphasizes the freedom to express these thoughts. This illustrates how freedom of thought occupied an important niche among the ideals of the Enlightenment. La Mettrie (1747/2022, pp. 60, 66, 70, 86) is also critical of traditional moral values and religious authority. This led to the questioning and criticism of religion in Enlightenment thought. In La Mettrie's work, we see that he does not stop at this criticism. His critique extends to the ideals of social equality and justice. According to La Mettrie (1747/2022, p. 28), human nature is mechanical, and this phenomenon also affects social equality and justice ideals. La Mettrie's ideas influenced the French Enlightenment of the 18th century and contributed to the intellectual reflections that prepared the ground for the French Revolution.

It is true to say that the Revolution, whose intellectual foundations these authors laid, shaped modernity, particularly in areas such as democratic values, human rights, secularism, nationalism, and social transformation (Lefebvre, 2005, p. 62).

The French Revolution popularized principles and ideals such as equality, freedom, justice, and popular sovereignty, which formed the basis of democratic values and made great contributions to the development of modern democracies. First of all, the Revolution was realized with the people's demand for equality between social classes. During the Revolution, the privileges of the nobility were abolished, feudal structures were destroyed, and progress was made towards the ideal of a society where all citizens had equal rights before the law (Lefebvre, 2005, p. 49).

During the revolution, the 17-article "Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen," proclaimed on August 26, 1789, emphasized equality, freedom, and justice principles. In this basic text, which is understood to have been written against authoritarian and oppressive understandings, the right of people to determine their own destiny and to live freely was underlined (especially Articles 6 and 7). In this respect, the Declaration can be said to be a source of inspiration for the fundamental freedoms and human rights defended in modern democracies.

The bourgeoisie, who gained power during the revolutionary period, especially from the 18th century onwards, demanded the abolition of privileges from aristocrats and nobles and greater equality between social classes (Lefebvre, 2005, p. 44). The limitation of economic privileges was among the demands of the bourgeoisie. The changing order of social and class dynamics also revealed their own truths. The king could no longer ignore their demands because the bourgeoisie had become the most powerful class.⁹ In 1789, Louis XVI demanded

⁹ According to Karl Marx (1969), who had a decisive influence on 19th and 20th century thought and was one of the pinnacles of modern thought, the French Revolution was in fact nothing but the victory of the bourgeoisie. This class, which remained in feudal society for a long time, had to wait for more than three centuries in order to become an antithesis and establish a new synthesis of society, which, according to him, was the most advanced synthesis stage in human history. For Marx's views on the French Revolution and its consequences, see Marx (1969).

a tax on the nobility, a measure not implemented in France since the 1600s (Lefebvre, 2005, p. 44).

In the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, the principle that justice should be accessible to all and the rule of law was also adopted. In the following periods, European democracies developed on this foundation, the foundation of justice.

Another influence of the Revolution was that it gave birth to the concept of the people having a say in the administration. With the establishment of the republic instead of the monarchy, it became possible for society to influence political decisions and have a say in the administration. Public participation and the spread of political awareness gained great importance during the French Revolution. People started influencing political decisions through street demonstrations, rallies, and written propaganda. The French National Assembly, established during the Revolution, aimed to end the monarchy and feudal order. The Assembly consisted of representatives elected by the people and aimed to reflect the will of the people. The Assembly was an important step in ensuring the people had a say in the government. During the French Revolution, the separation of legislative, executive, and judicial powers and the system of checks and balances became an important principle. In this way, the legislative body, which reflected the people's will, had the opportunity to have a say in the administration. Elections were organized during the Revolution, and the people were allowed to determine their representatives. Through elections, it was aimed at encouraging the people to take an active part and have a say in the administration.

During the Revolutionary period, the old order in which the Church and the state were closely linked was replaced by a secular understanding of the state in which the influence of religion on political authority was reduced. The French Revolution abolished the political and economic privileges of the Church. The Church's land ownership and tax privileges were abolished, church property was nationalized, and the Church's political power was reduced. Thus, the social and political influence of the Church was limited, and the foundations of a secular state were laid. The French Revolution took important steps toward freeing education from the control of religious authorities and placing it under the control of the state. A secular education system was established, the privileges of religious institutions in education were abolished, and the state's role in directing education was adopted. This is an example of the application of the principle of secularism in the field of education. The French Revolution aimed to prevent the interference of religion in state affairs and to ensure that the state was in a neutral position. With the reduction of the Church's political influence, the principle of separation of state and religious affairs was adopted. This is a fundamental principle of secular-state understanding. The French Revolution emphasized the freedom of religion and belief for individuals. During the Revolution, it was recognized that everyone had the right to choose, change, and express their religious beliefs freely. This aimed to guarantee the freedom of religion and individuals' beliefs as part of the principle of secularism. The French Revolution has been an important advocate of secularism, with steps such as breaking the Church's political power, the secular education system, and the separation of religion and state. This principle has contributed to developing the modern secular state and guaranteeing freedom of religion and belief.

The French Revolution represents one of the most important social transformations in history. The Revolution profoundly impacted the social, political, economic, and cultural spheres. The French Revolution brought the end of feudalism and radically shook the feudal order. During the Revolution, the privileges of the nobility were abolished, land ownership was

reorganized, and a centralized state structure was established. This led to a major change in the stratification of society and increased social mobility. The French Revolution emphasized the ideals of equality and justice. During the revolution, the people united around the demands for equality, freedom, and justice. Slavery, class privileges, and other forms of social inequality were fought against. These ideals became the fundamental values of modern society. The French Revolution contributed to the development of civic consciousness. During the Revolution, individuals were encouraged to play an active role in political decisions and state administration. Citizenship rights and responsibilities were emphasized, and citizenship consciousness was strengthened. This is a concept that underpins modern democratic societies. The French Revolution contributed to the expansion of the public sphere and increased democratic participation. During the Revolution, the opportunities for the public to participate in political debates and decisions increased. A public sphere was created where social issues were discussed, and ideas were freely expressed. This led to the strengthening of democratic participation and political consciousness. The French Revolution provides an important example of social transformation. It formed one of the cornerstones of modern society with its effects, such as the destruction of the feudal order, ideals of equality and justice, civic consciousness, and the expansion of the public sphere.

While modernity in Europe gradually gained prominence with these developments, a development that started in England at the end of the 18th century put it on very different ground: The Industrial Revolution. This revolution has been the main shaping force of many of the developments we call "modernity" today and has increased socio-cultural and political fluidity to a degree incomparable to any previous period.

4. Conclusion

Beginning in the 14th century, the Renaissance profoundly challenged the authority of the Church, which had been in place for more than a thousand years, and placed the human being at the centre in almost every field, especially in art. It developed a world view based on this perspective. At the heart of this world view was the comprehensive view of the human being, which took nature under its domination. It is possible to say that this discovery of the linear view of the Renaissance spread over the centuries and formed one of the main codes of the aesthetic philosophy of modernity. Without this rapture that began with the Renaissance, modernity would perhaps have been historically impossible.

The Enlightenment was the second major development in Europe that took the great change in Western civilization that began with the Renaissance to a new level. With the Enlightenment, rational approaches to human beings, the world, and the universe took on a new, more ideological form. Concepts such as "preference for the rational," "rationalization," "equality," "freedom," "individualism," and "scientific" became dominant in all fields. It could be seen that man, who had opened up to the universe with the Renaissance, was at this stage almost imprisoned in certain forms and that human beings were placed under burdens that they could not overcome. Since the world and the universe were now knowable in every aspect, science and the rationality that gave it its soul had to lay the foundations of a new civilization. With the Enlightenment, humans took much more systematic steps to eliminate all kinds of metaphysical and political dependencies. The human being can now analyze, explain, and understand the nature and society surrounding him. The light that the Renaissance shed also determined the direction of the Enlightenment. Human-centred thinking moved from

philosophy to science, becoming the soul of all discoveries. This approach led to the development of a dominant methodological approach in the 19th century called positivism. With positivism, the ideals of the Enlightenment turned in on themselves and became self-destructive (the criticism that this overly anthropocentric understanding is one of the most decisive causes of the crisis of modernism is one of the most frequently voiced points in the criticism of modernism). For the Renaissance and Enlightenment to develop further and dominate the economic and political life of the West, several historical developments had to occur. What was lacking at this point were the radical political changes that would undoubtedly lead to profound upheavals. These changes had to bring into the political sphere the great ruptures in the human condition brought about by the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and this period coincides with the late 1700s, some two hundred and fifty years after the Renaissance.

The French Revolution, and the views of the writers and thinkers who gave the spirit to that period, fulfilled this political necessity. The last great development for the formation of the essence of modernity, in which a human being was to become the master of nature, could now be realized. Emphasis on science, scientific progress, and rationality bore fruit in England. The Industrial Revolution had the same profound effect on the political sphere as the French Revolution had on the political sphere. For two hundred and fifty years, it exploded production within the framework demanded by the changing world, and with the emergence of industrial capitalism, it spread that production on a global scale, transforming modernity from a European adventure into a global one. Modernity became a world phenomenon, a world "problem," with the Industrial Revolution. Admittedly, what we mean by "problem" here is not the transformation of the world by more effective means, but the transformation of the world in opposition to human beings and the enslavement of human beings at the end of this process. This is where the postmodern debates begin: The assertion that modernity eliminates human beings while simultaneously fulfilling the ideals it promises, leaving nature under the threat of total extinction, and all this within the framework of great narratives and utopias. Although this anti-modernist perspective, initiated by Lyotard (1979/1984), has its correct aspects, it is far from understanding the problem, that is, the problem of modernity itself, in fact.

An in-depth understanding of the phenomena that give rise to the problem of modernity is necessary. In this respect, going beyond the modern-anti-modern or modern-postmodern debates that we have today, the main purpose of this study is to try to reveal the facts that give rise to these discussions. At this point, it is possible to say that the majority of discussions within the context of modernity are characterized by five historical breakthroughs that complement one another: The Renaissance and Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and industrial capitalism. We have excluded the last two phenomena as complementary historical moments because of the limitations of this study. Studies of modernity tend to focus on its links with capitalism. In these studies, capitalism is presented as the most important factor in structuring modernity. However, including the adventure of capitalism after the nineteenth century, it is, in fact, the first three moments of rupture discussed above that have shaped the spirit of modernity.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

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Hanife Yasemin Mumcu  | Interpretation of data/findings; Supervising; Critical review; Final approval and accountability. Contribution rate: 10%

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