

# Reformers of the rabble

[History](#), [American History](#)



Relative to his reformatory style of writing, the Parallel systematically dissects the failures of Paris' institutions. Given their wide remit extending to health care, education, and poor relief, he is particularly attentive to the activities of the Church, and thus engages in the anti-clericalism that defined the attention of many an enlightened philosophe. Enlightenment, with its emphasis on reason and liberty, found little to praise in the Church. It was praiseworthy for its potential to promote moral and social order, but the neglectful power and influence that it wielded proved contentious: its monopolizing spirit resembling the stance of a hard power, as opposed to the ideologically appealing role of a soft one. Indeed, curtailing ecclesiastical authority proved the principal dogma of Enlightenment thinkers. The conditions of the hospital, the Hôtel-Dieu (translated as the Hotel of God), best intimate that source of frustration. Situated on the bank of the Île de la Cité and adjacent to the Notre-Dame, it operated under the stewardship of the Archbishop of Paris, with the primary function of evangelizing its patients; the religious groundwork underpinned an institution which prioritized prayer over modern science. Mercier condemned this, citing the neglect of the archbishop who "resisted any change" with the ubiquitous commitment he expected from the role, morbidly claiming he would "kill [himself trying] ... to rectify this." Moreover, Mercier unabashedly censures the priests who "hum Latin words ... to which they themselves pay no attention", hinting that the clergy were diverging from their prerogative, to dispense moral teachings. That is to say the Catholic Church did have a position in Mercier's reformed society, to "impress and edify" and to bring the lower sort to "purify its habits", though such efforts ought to stay within

the confines of ecclesiastical affairs. This intimates that Mercier believed in a degree of freedom, such that Parisians ought not to be coerced into religion by the Church's extensive jurisdiction.

Mercier's reformative, non-abolitionist comments regarding the Church infer his religious inclination. He employs the first person plural pronoun ' We' to describe himself as a member of a congregation, whilst his thorough depiction of churches in France and Britain suggests he was well-acquainted with the sermons. This leads one to suppose Mercier associated with Catholicism. He cites his anger that the afternoon sermon, that which addresses " the soul and [instils] morality, is the part we skip", whilst in London " we are forced to look at them [the Commandments] because they ... remind us of our obligations." Ergo, Mercier's discussion of religion entertains both freedom and order: the former in a scaled-back institution which promotes independent moral teaching, not chanting responses " out of habits" and the latter manifesting itself in the subsequent conduct of said parishioners. Ultimately, it seems that by prescribing more freedom, Mercier would achieve heightened order.

Interestingly, considering his national pride (the Parallel being a " patriotic desire to advise the nation"), his identification with the British vis-à-vis the pronoun ' we' reasserts his French-oriented view of the English capital. Having identified London as a disguised future Paris, Mercier's time there qualifies him as a Parisian from the future. He juxtaposes the perspective of the well-travelled, with the " large numbers of ... half-educated people in Paris who warmly detest the English." That many Parisians are articulating xenophobic sentiments is an analogy for Paris' general reluctance to

progress societally: they are hostile to their own future. The Church is an outdated institution, as it is they who treat the poor “ barbarously ... on the pretext that they ... associate with philosophes.” And although the English themselves display a degree of xenophobia, it derives from a hatred for “ a fatherland which cruelly proscribed them”, insinuating that London – the Paris of the future – detests the oppression of its history for freedom’s sake. Therein lies Mercier’s desire to reduce Church power, such that the poor look towards London with admiration as opposed to hostility. The narrow-mindedness of the Church also harks back to Mercier’s religious inclination: a personal concern that he is not worthy of lying in the consecrated ground that his faith requires. Accordingly, Mercier’s employment of the word ‘ we’ does infer his involvement in Catholicism. His disillusionment is fixed on restoring the Church to a level where it properly encourages morality, not weakens it. In this manner, the Parallel targets greater urban order, dependent on the city’s leaders to inspire the change that their position enables.

Tellingly, the Church was somewhat responsible for immorality. Distinct from the gentlemanly coffeehouses, the guinguettes outside of Paris became arenas for the alcohol-infused misconduct of the lower sorts, where impoliteness reigned supreme. Situated on the city’s periphery, the Parisian guinguettes operated beyond the taxman’s reach, facilitating the sale of cheap alcohol and figuring prominently in Mercier’s much-despised Saint Monday tradition. Saint Monday celebrated absenteeism on a Monday, where the working class would enjoy themselves to excess on Sunday, and take time off work on Monday in recovery. The practice can, unsurprisingly, be

tied to the Catholic Church as it was at their behest that people partied to excess. Such served as a “ prelude for penitence”, insinuating that the Church retained its parishioners by guilt of excessive carouse, and gave reign to “ all sorts of sins only to give herself more power.” However, such is the apparent top-down structure of reform that Mercier asks “ how can these activities be reconciled with one’s duty of worship ...?” He saw order as deriving from extant powers. However, one could question if the Church was fully responsible for Saint Monday celebrations. Mercier glosses over the fact that the guinguettes offered an escape to a starving people from their “ poorly-paid work which occupies them from morning to night without a break, holed up in unpleasant places where they are tormented and abused.” Situated in this light (or lack thereof), it is worth considering that people did not need encouragement from the Church to drink to excess, but that the depressing circumstances of their employment drove them to such despair.

This depiction of a Parisian, deprived of both food and light at his place of work is one that harks back to the shadows of the unenlightened city. The circulation of the city is a constant theme throughout the Parallel, emerging as early as the second chapter where Mercier discusses the “ air of cleanliness, which extends to the houses as well as to their inhabitants” in London, as opposed to the disgusting, “ dirty and ill-kept” Parisian suburbs, and the “ narrow and twisting” layout of the city’s streets. This attention to urban topography owes itself to William Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of blood, published in 1628, which made it fashionable to extend circulation to non-human entities, with the inanimate, yet bustling city offering a

convenient canvas on which to prescribe ideal urban flow. Paris, akin to a body, needed regulating and purging of harmful effects: the muddy and ill-kept faubourgs (suburbs) wherein one can identify the origins of the working man's malaise. Indeed, from the seventeenth century, Paris' faubourgs gained an association with industry, with textile manufacturing featuring prominently in Paris' output. As an example, the Faubourg Saint-Marcel, along the River Bievre, was polluted by workshops and dye vats along its banks, culminating in a hazardous working environment. It is thus that Mercier lists urban reorganization under reforms to be enacted immediately, adopting the imperative stance that one ought to "widen, whatever the cost" the city's boulevards and the road from the "faubourgs Saint-Jacques to the faubourgs Saint-Martin": praiseworthy for, at the very least, improving air circulation.

The immediacy of reform presupposes an extant power, well-positioned to assert themselves and enact the necessary changes. As Mercier champions a much-reduced Church, one looks towards Paris' parlement and monarchy as the purveyors of change, neither of which were reputed for serving the interests of the Third Estate. Indeed, Mercier noted that "nothing in the chamber of the parlement of Paris allows or facilitates debate of the sort which often allows a single wise man to win over all the rest", intimating the suppression of under-represented interests, whilst their hindrance to royal reform – on the rare occasion that it manifested itself – essentially occluded any hope of reformative success. Indeed, historian Alfred Cobban remarked that the Parlements were "the chief obstacles in the path of reform" and, perhaps recognizing this, Mercier would turn his head towards the monarchy.

In L'An 2440, Mercier imagines a philosopher king who regarded his position "with indifference", and thus by his "heroism" effected a revolution. Though Louis XV and Louis XVI had somewhat weaker power than their predecessor Louis XIV, each remained well-positioned to adopt that more effective, absolutist role and deliver the immediacy of reform which Mercier demanded. He certainly viewed the office of King as a greater source of reform than the Church, listing countless religious buildings to be demolished immediately: the "Notre-Dame is enough by itself. I would pull down all the other churches", whilst also reforming the Hôtel-Dieu by building another branch "in the grounds of the abbey of Saint-Victor" and under the supervision of "commissioners." Such improvements reduced the Church's authority, not only reassigning control over the Hôtel-Dieu, but also sacrificing a number of religious buildings for the circulation and general health of the city. It seems that as an Enlightenment project, the Church was not just an ideological infringement on progress, but also a physical one.

In his veneration for the office of King, Mercier also defends him from his previous indolence. He suggests that, "were the king to climb those stairs to see for himself the danger to which those houses are exposed, he would punish the city authorities for having delayed their demolition for so long", thereby presenting the monarch as a figure who is blissfully unaware of the turmoil ensuing around him. In support of this, he imagines the King of France leaving his palace, inducing huge crowds who, unbeknownst to him, are suffocating, crying out. He is blinded by shouts of "Viva le Roi", masking the true consequence of his display of pomp and affluence. King Henry II, too, is presented as an individual operating "in defiance of the most sacred

rights [of the monarchy]” following deplorable acts in parliament: “ members of parlement have been placed under arrest, executed and put on trial, simply for having said what their position authorized them to say loud and clear.” Ergo, Mercier identifies an admiration for the office of sovereign, yet advocates a pressing reform that would impede the abuse of its supplementary powers, perhaps embracing the concept of an enlightened absolutist and the understanding that royal power emanated from a social contract at the behest of the people. This was discernible in the reigns of contemporary European leaders. Frederick the Great, who ruled Prussia from 1740 to 1786, warmly embraced Enlightenment values, famously inviting Voltaire to live in his palace and explaining that, “ My principal occupation is to combat ignorance and prejudice ... to enlighten minds, cultivate morality, and to make people as happy as it suits human nature, and as the means at my disposal permit.” The basis for authority lay not in the timeworn privilege of divine right, but on the premise that the sovereign knew the interests of his or her subjects better than they themselves did, forestalling their political participation in a post-Enlightenment age. Today, historians look unfavourably upon the reality of enlightened absolutism, highlighting the relative incapacity for such rulers, including Frederick, to effect enlightened reform. Indeed, Jackson Spielvogel suggested that Frederick’s retention of Prussia’s “ rigid social structure and serfdom” would point to an otherwise ineffectual leader. It would be a bold claim to suppose that Mercier, too, recognized the impracticalities of enlightened absolutism, although his frustration with top-down authority does lead him to toy with the appeal of bottom-up provocateurs.



Indeed at times, Mercier galvanizes the lower sorts into taking control themselves, thus presenting an unresolved vision for Paris' future. His frustrations at the historical indifference and inaction of the elite lead him to summon Paris' bourgeoisie: " if the government cannot [conduct vital improvement projects], then it's down to individuals." Considering Mercier devotes much of the Parallel to the failures of governance, he is impassioned in his support for the " men of small fortunes" and, reiterating the immediacy of reform, he goes as far as to animate such characters to action, " whatever it costs", and notwithstanding " force." As a manifesto for a free and ordered city, this offers a paradox: did Mercier intend reform to emanate from above, or below?