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The European Republic from the Enlightenment to the Counter-Revolution

Matthijs Lok

Between 1787 and 1792, the Mainz historian Niklas Vogt (1756–1836) published his multivolume work *Über die Europäische Republik* (On the European Republic). In five volumes, Vogt analyzed the “European republic” from different perspectives: as a political system of independent states with moderate constitutions, as a mixed political economy, as the product of legal, moral, and religious pluralism, and finally as a balanced set of military counterweights (*Gleichgewicht*).¹ Within this wider “European republic,” cities, provinces, states, empires, as well as religious communities, could develop in their own unique way. According to Vogt, this supposedly exceptional European pluralism had evolved over several centuries, determined by Europe’s climate and steered by providence and destiny.² The original founders of the European republic had been the ancient Germans in the sixth and seventh centuries. However, it was only during the sixteenth century that the European political system became fully developed. Vogt believed that the unique spirit of freedom of this republic was threatened in his own lifetime, by power-hungry and self-interested great powers with their pernicious ambition to build new universal empires, as well as by the radicalism of atheist *philosophes* and the spiritual oppression of the intolerant Jesuit order.

The only historical precedent for the European republic could be found in Ancient Greece. Vogt compared the unity in diversity of the Greek world with medieval and modern Europe, contrasting both worlds with the stifling uniformity of the Roman Empire. Like Greece, Europe for Vogt did not consist of one culture but was the result of the intermingling of different cultures and

1 Niklas Vogt, *Über die Europäische Republik*, 5 vols. (Frankfurt a.M.: Varrentrapp, 1787–92). On Vogt: Ursula Berg, *Niklas Vogt (1756–1836). Weltsicht und politische Ordnungsvorstellungen zwischen Aufklärung und Romantik* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1992); Heinz Duchhardt, “Niklas Vogt (1756–1803),” in *Europa-Historiker. Ein biographisches Handbuch*, vol. III, ed. by Heinz Duchhardt et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007), 43–62; Steven Stargardter, *Niklas Vogt, 1756–1836: A personality of the late German enlightenment and early romantic movement* (New York: Garland, 1991).

2 Vogt, *Republik*, I, Vorrede.

peoples.³ In the eighteenth-century *Querelle des anciens et des modernes* Vogt characteristically took a middle position. Instead of claiming the superiority of either the ancient Greeks or the modern Europeans, he wrote that they were on equal footing in terms of cultural and scientific development. The comparison with ancient Greece also contained a warning. Classical Greece had over time become corrupted and decadent as a result of moral degeneration and the wrong kind of philosophy. Eventually the Greek world was submerged by first the Hellenist, and finally by the hegemonic Roman universal Empire.⁴ Vogt did not claim any originality for his ideas. He declared himself to be at the end of a tradition of a wide variety of authors from different European countries, including Mirabeau, Montesquieu, Necker, and Adam Smith.⁵ He also professed to be inspired by classical historians, in particular Tacitus and the Hellenistic Greek Polybius, who witnessed the rise of the Roman Empire and the demise of the independent Greek states in his lifetime.

In this essay, I will examine the conceptualization of the “European republic” from the middle of the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century. This period in European and world history was characterized by the dramatic events of the revolutionary and Napoleonic decades. Ideas of European order, crafted by Enlightenment *philosophes*, were suddenly reformulated and given different meaning. I will focus attention on the parallels drawn by authors between the “modern” European republic and the classical world, in particular ancient Greece. I will discuss authors from the Francophone, Anglophone, and Germanophone traditions, which during this period functioned as models for authors writing in other languages and came to constitute a canon of experts on Europe and European history.⁶

Studying the conceptual history of the “European republic” in this period gives us insight into at least three important scholarly debates in the field of eighteenth-century political thought. To begin with, the eighteenth century has often been credited (or blamed) for the invention of the idea of “modern Europe,” based on ideas of progress and urban and commercial civilization.⁷ As we shall see, the modern state system was conceptualized through

3 Ibid., III, 62.

4 Ibid., 81–84.

5 Ibid., II, preface.

6 M.M. Lok, “A Revolutionary Narrative of European History: Bonneville’s ‘History of Modern Europe’ (1789–1792),” *History* 103, no. 3 (2018): 434–50.

7 Olaf Asbach, ed., *Europa und die Moderne im Langen 18. Jahrhundert* (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2014); Matthijs Lok, “La Construction de l’Europe moderne, entre esprit des Lumières et des Contre-Lumières,” in *Histoire de la conscience européenne*, ed. by Antoine Arjakovsky (Paris: Salvator, 2016), 179–92.

the prism of the ancient world, but increasingly also by distancing “new” from “old” Europeans.⁸ Studying the conceptual history of the “European republic” between ancients and moderns will teach us more about the transition, or its absence, from cyclical to linear historical thinking.⁹

Moreover, conceptual histories of the “European republic” are often missing from studies on the history of republicanism.¹⁰ Pre-revolutionary historical republicanism is usually studied from the perspective of the state, not from the prism of the state system and the international order.¹¹ As we could observe from the synopsis of Vogt’s multivolume work, his concept of a European republic differed fundamentally from the interpretation of the “republic” in the tradition of classical republicanism as most prominently defined by John Pocock and Quentin Skinner. Vogt shared with classical republicans the Polybian pre-occupation with political freedom and the threat of losing this liberty through moral corruption and self-interest, resulting in a decline and fall of the political community.¹² For Vogt and other counter-revolution-

8 See for this similar mechanism of drawing upon as well as distancing from past models: Matthijs Lok, “A much superior situation’: The ambivalent memory of the Dutch Revolt and the construction of the Dutch Restoration regime,” in *A History of the European Restoration*, vol. 11, *Culture, Society and Religion*, ed. by Michael Broers, Ambrogio Caiani, and Stephen Bann (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 28–37.

9 Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979); idem, “Einleitung,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, vol. 1, ed. by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1979), 13–27. Cf. Erika Kuijpers and Judith Pollmann, “Introduction: On the Early Modernity of Modern Memory,” in *Memory before Modernity: Practices of Memory in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Erika Kuijpers et al. (Leiden: Brill 2013), 1–24.

10 A chapter on the “European republic” is for instance absent from the standard work on European republicanism: Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen, eds., *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, 11 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

11 For cosmopolitan republicanism: Pauline Kleingeld, *Kant and Cosmopolitanism: The Philosophical Ideal of World Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Kant’s federal republicanism, however, is very different from the concept of the “European Republic” examined in this essay. Cf. Frank Ejby Poulsen, “A Cosmopolitan Republican in the French Revolution: The Political Thought of Anacharsis Cloots” (PhD thesis, European University Institute, 2018).

12 In this sense, this kind of republicanism has similarities with the neo-Roman idea of freedom: Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); see more extensively: Matthijs Lok, “A Just and True Liberty’: The Idea of (Neo-Roman) Freedom in Francophone Counter-Revolutionary Thought (ca. 1780–1800),” in *Rethinking Liberty Before Liberalism*, ed. by Annelien de Dijn and Hannah Dawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). On Polybius and classical republicanism: John Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic republican tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 77–85.

aries, however, “freedom” was not in the first instance guaranteed by the political participation of virtuous citizens or by the precise form of the sovereign. Instead he believed liberty was best guaranteed by institutional pluralism, in the sense of the absence of a centralized political, economic, religious, or cultural power, combined with ideas of moderation, balance, the rule of law, and cultural diversity.¹³ By looking at this particular strand of “republicanism” beyond the state, if we can indeed call it by that name, we are able to broaden the definition of republicanism and study the concept of “republic” in entirely different political and ideological contexts.¹⁴ We can also start examining the (dis)continuities between the eighteenth-century Enlightenment idea of the European republic and liberal and conservative internationalism and Europeanism in the nineteenth century.¹⁵

To a certain extent the notion of the European Republic drew on the humanist idea of the “Republic of Letters,” as well as the even older concept of the *respublica christiana*.¹⁶ Its eighteenth-century Enlightenment formulation differed, however, from these older concepts in the sense that it referred not in first instance to an intellectual continent-wide network of learned individuals or a religious community, but primarily to a set of institutions that had developed over time. The defining characteristic of these institutions was their pluralist and fragmented nature with a common cultural, legal, and moral framework, resulting from a long historical evolution.¹⁷

I will argue that the European republic evolved from a moderate Enlightenment notion into a key concept of the counterrevolutionary and conservative

13 Matthijs Lok, “‘The Extremes Set the Tone’: Counter-Revolutionary Moderation in Continental Conservatism (ca. 1795–1835),” in *The Politics of Moderation in Modern European History*, ed. by Ido de Haan and Matthijs Lok (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 67–88.

14 Cf. Rachel Hammersley, *The English Republican Tradition and Eighteenth-Century France: Between the Ancients and the Moderns* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 203.

15 For instance: the eighteenth-century roots of J.S. Mill’s “principle of systematic antagonism”; cf. Georgios Varouxakis, “Guizot’s Historical Works and J.S. Mill’s Reception of Tocqueville,” *History of Political Thought* 20, no. 2 (1999): 292–312.

16 On the concept of the “Republic of Letters”: Anthony Grafton, “A Sketch Map of a Lost Continent: The Republic of Letters,” <https://arcade.stanford.edu/rofl/sketch-map-lost-continent-republic-letters>. Cf. Floris Solleveld, “Afterlives of the Republic of Letters: Learned Journals and Scholarly Community in the Early Nineteenth Century,” in *Erudition and the republic of letters* 5 (2020): 82–116.

17 On the “Enlightenment narrative,” see Karen O’ Brien, *Narratives of the Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); John Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 11, *Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); on the Dutch variation of the “Enlightenment narrative,” see Eleá de la Porte, “Verlichte verhalen. De omgang met het verleden in de Nederlandse verlichting” (PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam, 2019).

ideological war against the French revolutionaries.¹⁸ As has been pointed out by Wyger Velema on many occasions, Enlightenment and conservatism do not pose a contradiction or dichotomy, but merged in several ways in the revolutionary era.¹⁹ Focusing on the pluralist European republic as counterrevolutionary concept provides us also with a fresh approach towards early conservatism. This view counters the cliché of early conservatism as the defense of the local, the regional, or the national against revolutionary cosmopolitanism and universalism.²⁰ The idea of the European republic or commonwealth became one of the ideological foundations of the post-Vienna monarchical order.

1 Matrices of Enlightenment Europe

In *Über die Europäische Republik*, Vogt used a wide variety of authorities from different countries.²¹ One of his most important sources was Charles Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu. This is perhaps not surprising, as according to Celine Spector and Antoine Lilti, Montesquieu's oeuvre formed the "matrix of the enlightened reflection on Europe."²² Like Vogt, Montesquieu had explicitly linked what he regarded as Europe's unique freedom to its pluralist, that

18 Counter-revolutionaries are defined here as the self-declared opponents of the French Revolution and its legacy. The concept of Counter-revolution, however, was used by contemporaries in various ways and carried different meanings. See: Friedemann Pestel, "On Counter-revolution: Semantic Investigations of a Counterconcept during the French Revolution," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 12 (2017): 50–75; F. Pestel, "Contre-révolution," in: *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680–1820*, ed. by J. Leonhard, H.-J. Lüsebrink, and Rolf Reichhardt (forthcoming).

19 Wyger Velema, "Enlightenment against Revolution: The Intellectual Origins of Dutch Conservatism," in *Cosmopolitan Conservatism: Countering Revolution in Transnational Networks, Ideas and Movements (c. 1700–1930)*, ed. by Matthijs Lok, Friedemann Pestel, and Juliette Reboul (Leiden: Brill, 2021); idem, *Enlightenment and Conservatism in the Dutch Republic: The Political Thought of Elie Luzac (1721–1796)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993). For the concept of 'conservatism', see the introduction by Lok, Pestel and Reboul, *Cosmopolitan conservatism*, 1–40.

20 See for instance the still influential work of Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

21 Vogt also referred to Germanophone authors such as Leibniz, Pufendorf or Von Justi.

22 Antoine Lilti and Céline Spector, "Introduction: l'Europe des Lumières, généalogie d'un concept," in *Penser l'Europe au XVIIIe siècle. Commerce, Civilisation, Empire*, ed. by Antoine Lilti and Céline Spector (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2014), 1–9; Jean Goldzink, 'Montesquieu et l'Europe', in *L'idée de l'Europe au fil de deux millénaires*, ed. by Jacques Perrin (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994), 141–59; Alberto Postigliola and Maria Bottaro, eds., *L'Europe de Montesquieu: actes du Colloque de Gênes, 26–29 mai 1993* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1995).

is politically and institutionally fragmented, character.²³ Already in his earlier work, *Réflexions sur la monarchie universelle en Europe* (Reflections on the Universal Monarchy in Europe), written around 1734, Montesquieu had argued that universal empires based on military hegemony were no longer compatible with modern civilization in Europe, nor with contemporary warfare. Centralized empires could exist only in “archaic” societies such as still existed in Asia.²⁴ Imperial states ruled by a despot as a rule strove for uniformity, whereas in moderately sized states powers counterbalanced each other. Due to climate and geography among other factors, Europe was characterized by small republics and medium-sized commercial monarchies, and this made freedom in this part of the world possible.²⁵ Montesquieu continued this argument in his magnum opus *De l'esprit des lois* (The Spirit of the Laws, 1748), stating, in the tradition of classical republicanism, that freedom is best guaranteed in small and medium-sized states, such as existed in Western and Central Europe. Montesquieu equated Europe with freedom and “moderation,” and Asia with an unrestrained exercise of power.²⁶

Montesquieu was critical towards the Roman legacy: in his view the Roman Empire had lost its freedom as a result of its imperial conquests, causing its decline and fall.²⁷ The Germanic tribes, no doubt less developed than the Romans, had, by contrast, retained their freedom and independence by experimenting with an early form of representative institutions. Although Europe's history was according to Montesquieu characterized by the absence of a unitary authoritative structure, this did not mean that pluralism was always self-evident, and that Europe was immune from despotism.²⁸ In his *Réflex-*

23 On Montesquieu's aristocratic idea of freedom: Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought from Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); idem, *Freedom: An Unruly History* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2020).

24 Montesquieu, *Réflexions sur la monarchie universelle en Europe* (1734), ed. by Michel Porret (Genève: Droz, 2000).

25 Montesquieu, *Réflexions*, 94; Céline Spector, *Montesquieu. Liberté, droit et histoire* (Paris: Michalon, 2010).

26 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 283.

27 Montesquieu, *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, ed. by Catherine Volpillac-Augier (Paris: Gallimard, 2008). In this earlier work (published in Amsterdam in 1734) Montesquieu explained the decline and fall of the Roman Empire as the result of the establishment of a Roman universal monarchy that destroyed Roman freedom, the foundation of Rome's rise. Catherine Volpillac-Augier, “Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence,” *A Montesquieu Dictionary*, <http://dictionnaire-montesquieu.ens-lyon.fr/en/article/1376399421/fr/>.

28 Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 136. Cf. chapter II.

tions sur la monarchie universelle, Montesquieu referred to Europe as a “nation composed of several nations,” but the concept of Europe itself as a “republic” did not seem to figure prominently in his works.²⁹ He did, of course, advance the “federal republic” as an ideal solution for republics that were too small in scale to survive in a political world dominated by monarchies, based on the model of the federations of the ancient Greek republics. This federal republic constituted an “agreement by which many political bodies consent to become citizens of the larger state that they want to form. It is a society of societies that make a new one, which can be enlarged by new associates that unite with it.”³⁰ But Montesquieu was primarily thinking here of the Republic of the United Provinces, the German empire, and the Swiss federation as modern federal republics, rather than conceiving of Europe as a whole as such.

Voltaire, by contrast, whose *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations* (Essay on the Customs and the Spirit of the Nations, 1756) became the most influential articulation of the “Enlightenment narrative” of European history, did define Europe as a great “republic.” In *Le siècle de Louis XIV* (The Age of Louis XIV, 1751), Voltaire, like Montesquieu, characterized the “European republic” as, on the one hand, politically fragmented and comprising a diversity of regimes, but, on the other, as sharing a common culture, religion, and morals:

For a long time, Christian Europe (with the exception of Russia) could have been viewed as a large republic split into several states, some of which were monarchies, other mixed; some aristocratic, other popular; but all corresponding with each other; all having a same basis of religion, though they were divided in several sects; all having the same principles of public law and politics, unknown in other parts of the world.³¹

British authors also influenced Vogt’s pluralist idea of the European republic in important ways. David Hume, to begin with, published an important interpretation of European pluralism in his *Historical Essays*, comparing modern

29 “L’Europe n’est plus qu’une nation composée des plusieurs.” Montesquieu, *Réflexions*, 105.

30 Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, 131. Lee Ward, “Montesquieu on Federalism and Anglo-Gothic Constitutionalism,” *Publius: The Journal of Federalism* 37, no. 4 (2007): 551–577. Ward discusses Montesquieu’s federalism only on a national level. On Europe as a “federation”: Lilti and Spector, “Introduction,” 6.

31 Voltaire, “The Century of Louis XIV (1751),” quoted in *The Idea of Europe: Enlightenment Perspectives*, ed. by Catriona Seth and Rotraud von Kulessa (Open book publishers, <https://books.openedition.org/obp/4281>). Antoine Lilti, “La civilisation est-elle européenne? Ecrire l’histoire de l’Europe au XVIIIe siècle,” in *Penser*, ed. by Lilti and Spector, 139–66.

Europe with the ancient Greeks.³² In his essay “Of the rise and progress of the arts and sciences” (1742), Hume tried to find general explanations for the development of the arts and sciences. Cultural achievements could not be ascribed only to the exceptional talents of a few men, he argued. Instead he tried to uncover “general causes and principles,” which could be found in peoples as a whole.³³ Hume’s first observation was that the arts could flourish only among people who enjoyed a free government: “these refinements require curiosity, security and law not to be found in despotic governments.”³⁴ More freedom could be found in a system of smaller and medium-sized states than in large empires that tended towards despotism. For Hume, however, it was not the republic but a moderate, medium-sized mixed monarchy, such as Great Britain, that was most conducive to freedom.³⁵

In Hume’s view, a system of smaller states was also more beneficial to the arts because it created an atmosphere of cultural competition necessary for intellectual and artistic creativity.³⁶ Ancient Greece was a good example: “Greece was a cluster of principalities, which soon became republics; and being united by their near neighbourhood, and by the ties of the same language and interest, they entered in the closed intercourse of commerce and learning [...] Their contention and debates sharpened the wits of men.”³⁷ According to Hume, the relation between the states in ancient Greece was based on the principle of the “balance of power,” although it was a cruder and more violent version of the modern European one.³⁸ The rise of the Roman Empire and the coming of Christianity ended this Greek cultural pluralism by imposing political and religious uniformity. The Catholic Church could be regarded as “one large state” or empire. The end of political fragmentation in Greece was for Hume the main reason for the decline of the arts and sciences, as well as freedom in the ancient Greek world.

Modern Europe was described by Hume as a restored Greece on a much larger scale: “mankind having at length thrown off this yoke (of the church) affairs are now returned nearly to the same station as before, and Europe is at

32 James Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

33 David Hume, “Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences,” in: idem, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Carmel, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1985), 114.

34 Ibid., 119.

35 Hume, “Of the Liberty of the Press,” in idem, *Essays*, 10. According to Hume, sciences generally flourished most in republics, the arts in monarchical states: Hume, “Rise,” 124.

36 Ibid., 119.

37 Ibid., 120.

38 Hume, “Of the balance of power,” 338.

present a copy at large, of what Greece was formerly a pattern in miniature.”³⁹ The competition and lack of a central authority in Europe resulted in increased freedom and the flourishing of the arts and sciences. No philosophical system could attain a hegemonic position. Hume contrasted modern Europe with China, where the imperial administration had imposed Confucianism as the dominant philosophy, resulting in the slow development of sciences in that state.⁴⁰ The fact that Europe had seen more ruptures and crises than China had been advantageous to the cultural and philosophical development of Europe, as religious and political authorities had been challenged more fundamentally, “dethroning the tyrannical usurpers over human reason.”⁴¹ Although Vogt disagreed with Hume on the role of Christianity, they both considered ancient Greece as well as modern Europe pluralist and free political worlds.

Hume’s countryman, the moderate Protestant historian and minister William Robertson (1721–1793), was the representative of the Scottish Enlightenment most cited by Vogt.⁴² In particular his three-volume *History of the Reign of Charles V* (1769) had an enormous influence on the writing of European history on the continent.⁴³ Building on the work of Montesquieu and Voltaire as well as on that of Hume, Robertson wrote a history of the European state system. In the extensive prologue, Robertson described the long prehistory of the state system. Like Montesquieu, Robertson argued that Europe’s unique development started with the destruction of the hegemonic and repressive Roman Empire by the crude but freedom-loving Germanic tribes. Over the course of the Middle Ages, the European institutions slowly developed. Despite its reputation for intolerance and fanaticism, the era of the Crusades gave an impetus to the development of trade and the rediscovery of ancient knowledge due to contacts with the Arab world. Robertson had a nuanced view of the role of the Catholic Church: on the one hand, he described intolerant popes’ attempts to hinder progress and suppress knowledge, while, on the other hand, he acknowledged the role of the Church in civilizing Europe.⁴⁴

39 Hume, “Rise,” 121.

40 *Ibid.*, 122.

41 *Ibid.*, 123.

42 For instance: Vogt, *Republik*, I, 62.

43 William Robertson, *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V with a View of the Progress of Society in Europe, from the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century*, III vols. (London: W. Strahan, 1769); Jeffrey Smitten, “William Robertson: The Minister as Historian,” and David Allen, “Identity and Innovation: Historiography in the Scottish Enlightenment,” in *A Companion to Enlightenment Historiography*, ed. by Sophie Bourgault and Robert Sparling (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 101–32 and 307–42.

44 Robertson, *The History*, I, 10–81.

Robertson particularly underscored the importance of the growth of cities on the development of states as well as on the rise of commerce and freedom. These cities enabled, for instance, the European kings to become relatively independent from nobility. The increasing centralization of medieval states stimulated progress and development. Representative institutions developed all over Europe and legal systems became more uniform and rational. The growth of commerce “polished the manners of the European nations.”⁴⁵ At the end of the fifteenth century, the different European kingdoms increasingly became integrated, “the affairs of the different kingdoms becoming more frequently, as well as more intimately connected, they were gradually accustomed to act in concert and in confederacy.”⁴⁶ This development culminated in the rise of a continental, European balance of power in the sixteenth century as a result of the rivalry between the Habsburg emperor Charles V and Francis I of France: “it was only during the reign of Charles V that ideas on which this system is founded became first to be fully understood.”⁴⁷ Robertson’s narrative of European history, as an unfolding of freedom and progress in relation to the development of a balanced state system, found its way into many other histories of Europe written by British and continental historians.⁴⁸

2 A Balanced System

We return to Vogt in Mainz now to see what happened to his typically Enlightenment idea of the pluralist “European republic” in the turmoil of the revolutionary decades. Like many of his fellow Germans, Vogt had, as an Enlightenment reformer, initially welcomed the outbreak of the French revolution as an opportunity for the renewal of society. However, when his works were used as propaganda by the Mainz revolutionaries in 1792, he turned against the revolution. After a period of indecision, he eventually fled Mainz and went into exile. As a result of the invasion of French revolutionary armies, he emigrated for good in 1797, becoming an advisor to Karl Theodor von Dalberg, the last elector of Mainz and chancellor of the Holy Roman Empire. Vogt followed his

45 Ibid., 81.

46 Ibid., 90.

47 Ibid., 90.

48 For instance: [William Russell], *The History of Modern Europe, with an Account of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire and a View of the Progress of Society from the Fifth to the Eighteenth Century*, v vols. (London: Robinson, 1779–84); on the adaption of Russell’s history by the French revolutionary historian Nicolas de Bonneville: Lok, “Revolutionary Narrative,” 438–39.

patron in supporting Napoleonic rule in the German lands: in 1804 he even attended the coronation of Napoleon in Notre Dame. After the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire, Vogt became a senator in the city of Frankfurt. He was buried on the estate of his old student from his days as history professor of the University of Mainz, the architect of the post-Vienna Restoration order, Clemens von Metternich.⁴⁹

In his widely sold *System des Gleichgewichts und der Gerechtigkeit* (System of Balance and Justice, 1802), the work he himself later regarded as his magnum opus, Vogt was decidedly more pessimistic and cynical about the possibility of a state system based on the principles of law rather than power play. Whereas in his book on the European Republic, he had been critical of the role of the clergy as an obstacle to progress, he now saw the Catholic Church primarily as a bulwark of social and political order. Abstract French philosophy was generally blamed for the revolutionary chaos. The European “republic” was in this work called a “commonwealth” (*Gemeinwesen*), rather than a “republic,” as the word “republic” had been discredited as a result of the French radical republic of 1792–94.⁵⁰ He still defended a pluralist idea of European order, warning against excessive patriotism as well as cosmopolitanism. He also advocated active public involvement by adult middle-class males, harnessing classical republic ideals for the counterrevolutionary course.⁵¹

From 1804 onwards, he would place his European pluralist ideals in service of a new cause: the Napoleonic Empire.⁵² Rather than the product of the French revolution, Vogt regarded Napoleon as a new Charlemagne, a restorer of Christian traditions and order. Napoleon’s empire would safeguard the institutional diversity and plurality of Europe, and Germany in particular, against the boundless materialism of the British and the aggressive militarism of the Russians, and to a lesser extent the Prussians. Ultimately, Napoleon was for Vogt not only a military conqueror or an empire-builder, but the regenerator

49 Berg, *Vogt*.

50 Edmund Burke also referred to Europe as a “commonwealth”: Edmund Burke, *Revolutionary Writings*, ed. by Ian Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Richard Bourke, *Empire & Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

51 [Niklas Vogt], *System des Gleichgewichts und der Gerechtigkeit*, II vols. (Frankfurt a.M.: Andreäischen Buchhandlung, 1802). Cf. Niklas Vogt, *Historische Testament*, vol. II (Mainz: Florian Kupferberg, 1815), vii.

52 Vogt could be termed a “political weathervane,” or political survivor, a familiar persona of this era. Cf.: Pierre Serna, *La République des girouettes. Une anomalie politique: la France de l’extrême centre (1789–1815... et au-delà)* (Seysse: PUR, 2005); Matthijs Lok, *Windvanen. Napoleontische bestuurders in de Nederlandse en de Franse Restauratie, 1813–1820* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2009).

of a civilization.⁵³ Napoleon would renew and reinvigorate the corrupted and decadent European civilization, ushering in an era of true Christian Enlightenment.⁵⁴ The revolutionaries had tried to destroy the pluralism and diversity of European states and thus also almost destroyed European culture itself. By protecting Europe's unique political pluralism, Napoleon would herald a new European cultural Renaissance.⁵⁵ After the collapse of the Empire, Vogt would project his pluralist Europeanism onto the new order created at Vienna, which in his view should be modelled on the ancient Germanic and Christian constitution. Eventually Vogt was disappointed with what he regarded as the failure of Vienna to build a regenerated European moral and religious civilization and order.

Vogt was not the only Germanophone historian who would use an Enlightenment pluralist narrative to advance a counterrevolutionary agenda. In his *Über den Ursprung und Charakter des Krieges gegen die Französische Revolution* (On the Origin and Nature of the War against the French Revolution, 1801), the influential counterrevolutionary and anti-Napoleonic publicist Friedrich von Gentz (1764–1832), a former student of Kant, described the European state system as a “European Republic” or a “political federation.”⁵⁶ This European republic consisted of a great variety of individual states with their unique characteristics and political trajectory, which nonetheless all formed a community (*Gemeinschaft*) as a result of numerous connections (*Verbindungen*), and a uniformity (*Gleichförmigkeit*) of customs, laws, way of life, and culture.⁵⁷ The foundation of this European Republic was for Gentz a careful balance (*Gleichgewicht*) of different states and nations within a common institutional, legal, and cultural framework. This fragile balance was being threatened by the fanaticism of the French revolutionaries and their armies. In his later works,

53 Cf. Vogt, *Historische Testament*, vol. 1, 5; [N. Vogt], ed., *Europäische Staats-Relationen*, XIV vols. (Frankfurt a.M.: Andreäischen Buchhandlung, 1804–1809), vol. XI, 128.

54 This argument was also implicitly made by Archchancellor Karl Theodor von Dalberg in his essay on Charlemagne. Vogt wrote the preface to the German translation. Karl von Dalberg, *Betrachtungen über den Charakter Karl des Grossen*. Translated from the French, with a preface by Niklas Vogt (Frankfurt: Der Andreäischen Buchhandlung, 1806).

55 [Vogt], *Staats-Relationen*, vol. III, 13.

56 Friederich Gentz, *Über den Ursprung und Charakter des Krieges gegen die Französische Revolution* (Berlin: Heinrich Fröhlich, 1801), 19. On Gentz as an Enlightenment cosmopolitan: Raphaël Cahen, *Friedrich Gentz 1764–1832. Penseur post-Lumières et acteur du nouvel ordre européen* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2017). On Kant and Gentz: Jonathan Green, “Fiat Justitia, Pereat Mundus: Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Gentz and the Possibility of Prudential Enlightenment,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14, no. 1 (2015): 35–65.

57 Gentz, *Ursprung*, 19.

Gentz framed Napoleonic aggression and despotism as the main threats to the existence of the European Republic.

A comparable argument can be found in the works of the Göttingen historian Arnold Hermann Ludwig Heeren (1760–1842), whose roots lay in the city republic of Bremen. Since the mid-eighteenth century, the newly founded University of Göttingen in the electorate of Hanover had become the most important academic center of knowledge about “Europe” and its (political) history, and the model for other German universities. Vogt and Heeren both had a positive but not uncritical regard for the Holy Roman Empire, which they considered the cornerstone of a pluralist European order. Coming from smaller states, they were critical of both Prussia and Vienna’s desire to dominate the German empire and foreign powers’ attempts to dominate the European state system.

Like many other German historians of modern Europe, Heeren was trained as a classical philologist and also inspired by the works of Polybius.⁵⁸ When he was hired by the university, he was first appointed an extra-ordinary professor of philosophy, mainly teaching and publishing on ancient history and comparative literature.⁵⁹ At the end of the 1790s, his interests started to turn from ancient to modern European history. He first wrote about the impact of the Crusades and the Reformation on the development of European history in a vein similar to other Enlightenment historians such as Robertson. In 1809 he published the first edition of his *Handbuch der Geschichte des Europäischen Staatensystems und Seiner Kolonien* (Handbook of the History of the European State System and its Colonies).⁶⁰ In this work he described the development of the European “state system” in three distinct stages: its rise in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, its consolidation in the era of Louis XIV and the

58 Suzanne Marchand, “Ancient History in the Age of Archival Research,” in *Science in the Archives: Pasts, Presents and Futures*, ed. by Lorraine Daston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 137–58.

59 Arnold Heeren, “Ideen über die Politik, der Verkehr und den Handel der vornehmste Völker der alten Welt,” in *Historische Werken*, vols. x–xv, ed. by Arnold Heeren (Göttingen: J.F. Röwer, 1824–26). On Heeren: Christoph Becker-Schaum, *Arnold Ludwig Heeren. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Geschichtswissenschaft zwischen Aufklärung und Historismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 1993).

60 Arnold Heeren, *Handbuch der Geschichte des Europäischen Staatensystems und Seiner Kolonien, von der Entdeckung beider Indien bis zur Errichtung des französischen Kayser Throns* (Göttingen: Röwer, 1809). I have used the version in the collected works: Arnold Heeren, *Historische Werken*, vols. VIII–XIX (Göttingen: J.F. Röwer, 1821–22).

early eighteenth century, and finally its decline, fall, and (in the later version) restoration.

Although Heeren used the word “state system,” as well as “association” (*Verein*) or “society of states” (*Gesellschaft*), rather than “European republic,” his analysis was similar to Vogt’s and Gentz’s, in the sense that he regarded the state system as the result of the interaction of political, cultural, religious, moral, military, and economic factors, rather than prioritizing only one aspect. The key concept underlying the European international system was also for Heeren the *politische Gleichgewicht* or equilibrium. He considered the European state system unique in world history due to its freedom and the independence of the states that jointly formed the political balance within a common cultural and moral framework. This assemblage of states formed a historical and concrete entity. In his study, Heeren explicitly aimed also to examine the development of “Europe” within the wider global and, in particular, the colonial context.

When Heeren published his Handbook in 1809, he somewhat melancholically described a world that in his view no longer existed. The state system described in his book had been destroyed as a result of the rise of the Napoleonic Empire. Although he did not explicitly mention Napoleon in the foreword, it was clear that he, unlike Vogt, regarded the emperor as a despotic ruler and his empire as a “universal monarchy.”⁶¹ The foreword of the third edition of 1819 was written in an entirely different tone. The seemingly invincible empire had collapsed in 1814–1815. Heeren’s advice to the crowned heads and their secretaries, assembled at Vienna, had been that the new order should not be built from scratch, as the revolutionaries had mistakenly done, but it should instead respect centuries-old lineages. The main lesson from his Handbook was that the peace-makers should not strive for uniformity but for pluralism, as diversity (*Mannichfaltigkeit*) had been the cornerstone of this free system.⁶² Heeren also drew explicit parallels between the Greek pluralist world and the politically fragmented European state system, both in the classical period and in the Hellenistic phase.⁶³ At the same time he emphasized the unique nature of the European state system, which surpassed the ancient world in its historical importance and scale, but also in the degree of freedom and independence of its member states.⁶⁴

61 Heeren, *Handbuch*, “Vorrede,” x.

62 Heeren, *Handbuch*, “Nachschrift,” xiv.

63 Heeren, *Handbuch*, 13.

64 Heeren, *Handbuch*, v–vi.

Historians have credited – or blamed – Heeren for inventing the modern concept of the international system as part of a counterrevolutionary agenda.⁶⁵ However, it would in my view be incorrect to characterize Heeren as a mere “reactionary” inventor of the modern state system. In spite of his opposition to the French revolution, Heeren made clear that he was not opposed to written constitutions or reforms per se, but to the radical nature of revolutionary state-building and the revolutionaries’ use of abstract and universalizing concepts. Throughout his work, Heeren championed the idea of a plural and free state system consisting of independent and individual nations who together formed a commercial network as well as a cultural and political community based on historical institutions. European monarchies were ideally characterized by moderation, but even absolutist European monarchies, which guaranteed their subjects private liberties whilst refusing them political rights, were in his view not despotic: it was the revolution that led to despotism, radicalism, extreme violence, and universal monarchy in the name of abstract ideals.

3 Conclusion

In this essay I have traced a part of the history and some uses of the concept of the “European republic” and its related ideas such as the European “commonwealth,” “association,” and “state system” from the late Enlightenment to the counterrevolution. I have been able to examine only a few examples to hint at the transnational nature of this language. I have not looked at the uses of the concept of the European republic by revolutionaries, but it seems that it was above all counterrevolutionaries who adapted the idea of (historical) Europe for their own purposes.⁶⁶ “Europe” in the revolutionary discourse existed, beyond the purely geographical, mainly as a theater and laboratory for humanity as a whole and a promise for future peace. Revolutionaries envisaged their

65 Edward Keene, *Beyond the Anarchical Society: Grotius, Colonialism and Order in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14–26; David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 40–41.

66 On the (Francophone) counterrevolutionary idea of a European order: Marc Belissa, *Repenser l'ordre Européen (1795–1802). De Société des Rois aux Droits des Nations* (Paris: Kimé, 2006), 48–64; Gérard Gengembre, “La Contre-Révolution: Europe française ou Europe?” in *L'idée de l'Europe au fil de deux millénaires*, ed. by Michel Perrin (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994), 161–74; Matthijs Lok, “The Congress of Vienna as a Missed Opportunity: Conservative Visions of a New European Order after Napoleon,” in *Securing Europe after Napoleon. 1815 and the New European Security Culture*, ed. by Beatrice de Graaf, Ido de Haan, and Brian Vick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 56–72.

idea of international order primarily as a universal federation or as a system of “sister-republics” under French imperial dominance, although plans for a federal republic of the United States of Europe or a European confederation were certainly proposed.⁶⁷

Counterrevolutionaries in the 1790s and 1800s, by contrast, reinvented the idea of a “historical Europe” as part of their ideological war against what they perceived as a radical, universalist, and despotic revolutionary republic that had abruptly and violently severed all ties with the historical institutions that constituted the moderate and pluralist “European republic.” We may call this strand of thought “pluralist republicanism,” as it shared the pre-occupation with (the loss of) political freedom and corruption, in the vein of Polybius, but also differed fundamentally from the much-studied “classical republicanism.” This pluralist type of republicanism was not confined to the boundaries of one state, and it was defined by moderation, the rule of law, and freedom from foreign dominion as well as internal arbitrary power. In Vogt’s writing, pluralist republicanism was combined with an emphasis on the duty of middle-class males to actively participate in the affairs of the state. As we have seen, it morphed easily into a monarchical and even imperial ideology.

Also, we have observed that the characteristics of the European republic, system, or commonwealth were often described through the prism of the ancients. In particular the world of the ancient Greeks, politically fragmented but united by a common culture and commerce, was regarded as a Europe “in miniature.” As the same time, the “modern” European balance was increasingly seen as superior to its Greek predecessor due to its scale, development, and worldwide effects, as well as, after 1815, the supposedly relative lack of violence and warfare. The stifling hegemony of the Roman Empire was generally decried and, for instance by Heeren and Gentz, compared to the contemporary Napoleonic Empire. Finally, following the lead of Wyger Velema, I have questioned the persisting opposition between “Enlightenment” and “Counter-revolution” by examining a transnational strand of Enlightenment conservative Europeanism. The concept of the pluralist European republic, system, or commonwealth, forged by *philosophes* in the eighteenth century, became a key counterrevolutionary concept in the polarized decades after 1790.

67 Pierre Serna, “Introduction. L’Europe une idée nouvelle à la fin du XVIIIe siècle,” *La Révolution française 4: Dire et faire l’Europe à la fin du XVIIIe siècle* (2011): 2–16; Sophie Wahnich, “L’Europe dans le discours révolutionnaire,” *Tumultes* 7 (1996): 11–28; Belissa, *Repenser*; Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); on the “sister republics”: Joris Oddens, Mart Rutjes, and Erik Jacobs, eds., *The Political Culture of the Sister Republics, 1794–1806: France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Italy* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015).