Revolutionary change

The French Revolution had a profound effect on the nation's science.

Science and Polity in France: The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Years

by Charles Coulston Gillispie
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Bruno Belhoste and
Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent

At the end of the eighteenth century, while England was experiencing the Industrial Revolution, France was going through two simultaneous revolutions. The political revolution changed a rigid order into chaos, and later into tyranny, with a rapid turn-over of regimes taking it from a kingdom to a republic and empire. The scientific revolution, quietly conducted by a host of mathematicians, astronomers, chemists and physiologists, brought about new theories in mathematical physics, chemistry and biology, as well as a new regime of knowledge production with the creation of higher-education institutions.

This period of French scientific life is an ideal case for those who want to study the subtle interplays of science and politics. The US historian Charles Coulston Gillispie, who founded the history and philosophy of science programme at Princeton University in the 1960s, has devoted most of his scholarship to the study of French science around 1800. This book continues the broad sweep of work he initiated in *Science and Polity in France: the End of the Old Regime* (Princeton University Press, 1980). The first book presented a 'golden age' when France was at the centre of European scientific life, and analysed the cultural, political and technical factors that prompted this leadership. This sequel doesn't just describe the many changes and innovations that occurred in various scientific fields at the turn of the nineteenth century, but disentangles the intricate threads that linked scientists and politicians during the revolutionary and Napoleonic years.

The French Revolution brought scientists into power. The mathematicians Lazare Carnot and Gaspard Monge, and the chemist Louis-Bernard Guyton de Morveau, used their analytical skills to organize the military defence of the country. The Marquis de Condorcet, a mathematician and secretary of the Academy of Sciences, was in charge of reforming the educational system as a member of the Legislative Assembly and the Convention.

The crossover between science and politics went both ways. During his emergence as a political and military leader, Napoleon

Bonaparte flirted with science, solving a geometrical problem to divide a circle into four equal parts using just compasses. Even at the height of his career he enjoyed the company of scientists, and his expedition to Egypt was conceived as both a military conquest and a scientific expedition, involving astronomy, zoology and chemistry.

As in his previous book, Gillispie argues here that the close alliance between knowledge and power was profitable for both sides. Savants were able to secure the financial and institutional support necessary for the advancement of knowledge. In turn they provided politicians with instruments for increasing their military power, and experts helped them to secure social control.

More fundamentally, the French Revolution brought science and civil society closer. In the old regime, individual roles were defined by social status, under a system of estates and orders. The new republic of science introduced a meritocratic value system that was strikingly different. Similarly, in the modern society that emerged from the political revolutionary upheavals, social roles were redefined according to function, and the notion of merit became the main regulator for access to positions in the state, much as in academic life.

Gillispie suggests an interesting parallel between this societal change and a simultaneous shift in science. The eighteenth-century encyclopaedic culture of natural philosophy was overthrown by a disciplinary reorganization of science with the creation

of new educational institutions. The traditional quest for truth, with its emphasis on taxonomy, was discredited by the positivist call for scientific enquiry to be confined to describing phenomena and establishing the natural laws that rule them. "In both politics and science the premium is on effectiveness, on doing something rather than being someone," writes Gillispie. He is content to point out the analogy between epistemological and political choices without venturing any interpretation. He recognizes in Auguste Comte's *Cours de Philosophie Positive* an image of the new epistemic regime that emerged, but does not follow Comte's views of the links between science and politics.

Such a cautionary attitude exemplifies Gillispie's historiographic style. His method is based on sound empirical data and he is wary of grand philosophical claims. He thinks that most historians who study this period place too much emphasis on theoretical and ideological debates. In his view, the deep and lasting changes concerned the daily practice and conduct of science, rather than world views.

Gillispie is a fair philosopher of science but a great master of erudition and historical narratives. This volume can be read as either a saga of science or a series of short, loosely interconnected stories. The author is at his best when he is reporting colourful episodes, portraying a character, disentangling a plot or dissecting an institution. Although this book is intended for a scholarly audience of science historians, it will also appeal to

Voyage of discovery: Napoleon's journey to Egypt was a scientific trip as well as a military conquest.

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scientists who are fond of history. They will particularly enjoy the chapter on the creation of the metric system, the narrative on Condorcet's death, the subtle analysis of the Monge connection, and, above all, Napoleon's fascinating and exotic expedition to Egypt. ■

Bruno Belhoste and Bernadette Bensaude-Vincent are professors of the history of science, Université Paris X, 200 Avenue de la république, 92001 Nanterre, France.

A brain in the hand

On Intelligence: How A New Understanding of The Brain Will Lead to the Creation of Truly Intelligent Machines

Jeff Hawkins, with Sandra Blakeslee
Times Books: 2004. 272 pp. \$25

Igor Aleksander

With so many books published recently on minds, machines and intelligence, it is becoming progressively more difficult to find their distinguishing features. Happily, Jeff Hawkins has a unique perspective, as one of the pioneers of hand-held electronic organizers and founder of the Palm Computing and Handspring companies, whose products adorn the pockets of executives and technical boffins alike. His hard-nosed grasp of complex digital-system design and his passion for neuroscience are the authoritative bases for this book.

On Intelligence may not herald a future of super-intelligent hand-held computers, but it does analyse how this objective could be approached from an understanding of some particular and complex computational features of the brain. It is written as a personal history, with step one for Hawkins being the realization in the mid-1980s that computers and research into artificial intelligence had not produced the kind of intelligence that each and every one of us possesses. He has always felt that artificial intelligence, being based on achieving smart outward behaviour through the speed and power of a computer, tells us nothing about what intelligence is, and why brains are better at it than computers. He argues that the brain can be understood only if its intricate architecture can be analysed and turned into computing theories. His ideas were rejected by both industry and the academic world at a time when the stranglehold of the 'power and speed' approaches of the 'artificial intelligentsia' did not recognize the power of brain models, caricaturing the brain as 'slow and squishy'. Well into his career as a successful computer engineer, Hawkins studied biology and neurology at night and then gave up his day job to become a graduate student in biophysics at the University of California, Berkeley.

Smart thinking: understanding the cerebral cortex can aid the development of intelligent computers.

Hawkins made the move just as neural networks, or connectionism, became the favoured alternative to classical artificial intelligence. But this too proved to be a disappointment. Neural networks were only distantly inspired by the brain and this remoteness was fatal. Connectionism became obsessed with the mathematics of learning and revealed little about the nature of real intelligence. The brain, as the most complex machine on the planet, remained unexplored in the computational sense.

Depressed by these failures and the seeming flood of uncoordinated data that neuroscience produces, Hawkins started looking for organizing principles. He turned to the work of Vernon Mountcastle of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, who advocates looking for common mechanisms in different modalities. Although vision and hearing are different, for example, the ways in which signals are processed in the two cases bear an engineering similarity that points to general principles underlying both.

Much of *On Intelligence* could be summed up as 'how computer scientists got it wrong'. Memory in the brain is an active affair that stems from the interaction of cells. It has stable states that provide the 'Aha!' sensation when an input trigger causes part of the brain to fall into such a state. This is a long way from the filing-cabinet type of memory in conventional computers. The brain is constantly trying to predict its input, whereas a computer merely waits for the input and reacts to it. These differences lead to clear expositions by Hawkins of the way the cortex may be organized to achieve this active engagement with the world, which is true intelligence. The working of the cortex

leads Hawkins to comment on the fallacy of treating consciousness "like a sauce" that turns meat into a conscious being; instead he makes a series of testable predictions about the power of his memory-prediction model.

Anyone looking for a blueprint for the ultimate conscious, palm-held computer will be disappointed. This is not a book on how to compute, it's more about how not to compute. The book is clear and punchy, and is fine for general reading, thanks in some measure to Hawkins' co-author, Sandra Blakeslee, a columnist at *The New York Times* who has helped several authors improve their books about mind and psychology. As with other computational experts who have written about the mind, Hawkins could be criticized for not having noticed that many computer scientists share his views. The time has come for people who share these ideas to stop deprecating previous efforts and look at each other's work. Other authors have suggested architectures like those proposed by Mountcastle (without mentioning him), for example, and analyses of dynamic memories and prediction have been appearing in the literature since the mid-1990s.

Nevertheless, Hawkins makes an appealing case for the sort of computational analysis that is likely both to clarify how the brain works and to give artificial-intelligence systems a new grounding. Such work requires more collaboration among those who agree with Hawkins. The fact that two years ago he created the Redwood Neuroscience Institute should help. ■

Igor Aleksander is emeritus professor of neural systems engineering at Imperial College London, Exhibition Road, London SW7 2BT, UK. His book *The World In My Mind* will be published in 2005.