



The Virtues of Abandon: An Anti-Individualist History of the French Enlightenment

Charly Coleman

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France in the eighteenth century glittered, but also seethed, with new goods and new ideas. In the halls of Versailles, the streets of Paris, and the soul of the Enlightenment itself, a vitriolic struggle was being waged over the question of ownership—of property, of position, even of personhood. Those who championed man's possession of material, spiritual, and existential goods faced the successive assaults of radical Christian mystics, philosophical materialists, and political revolutionaries. This book traces the aims and activities of these three seemingly disparate groups, and the current of anti-individualism that permeated theology, philosophy, and politics throughout the period.

Fired by the desire to abandon the self, men and women sought new ways to relate to God, nature, and nation. They joined illicit mystic cults that engaged in rituals of physical mortification and sexual license, committed suicides in the throes of materialist fatalism, drank potions to induce consciousness-altering dreams, railed against the degrading effects of unfettered consumption, and ultimately renounced the feudal privileges that had for centuries defined their social existence. The explosive denouement was the French Revolution, during which God and king were toppled from their thrones.

We credit the French Enlightenment with the formal recognition of autonomous individualism, and the Revolution with inscribing the individual's rights into law. This book contends, however, that these rights arose as much out of calls for violent self-sacrifice as for the individual pursuit of happiness. Revealing the religious underpinnings of the Enlightenment even in its materialist, atheistic forms, *The Virtues of Abandon* offers an original, audacious history of eighteenth-century France.

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