

The Perfect Republic

by George W. Carey

Organizing the Revolution: Selections From Augustin Cochin

translated by Nancy Derr Polin
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233 pp., \$19.95



Augustin Cochin (1876-1916), a French historian little known today, sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of the French Revolution with an eye to discovering the reasons for the terror and butchery that arose in its course. The nature and depth of his motivations and concerns can be gleaned from his judgment that the "last three months of Terror" were not only the "most odious" in the history of the French nation but perhaps the "most interesting" in the annals of recorded history. At this time, he observes, "a moral, political, and social experiment was attempted unique in the course of centuries," and, what is more, "the mysterious depths of the human soul, under the action of causes still little known, gave birth to unprecedented acts, sentiments, and types [of men]." Unfortunately, Cochin fell victim to World War I and never completed his task.

This volume, with a fine Preface by Claude Polin, consists of generous translated portions of Cochin's unfinished manuscripts that deal with various aspects of the Revolution and its ideological underpinnings. While some of his observations and conclusions are not fully developed, the broad outlines of his approach and thesis are clear enough. Cochin held that the roots of the French Revolution are to be found in the highly influential and interconnected Philosophical Societies that sprouted up over the course of three decades preceding the Revolution. These Societies, as Cochin takes great pains to point out, were by their very nature a world apart from the larger society; their "single goal" was "bringing en-

lightened thinkers' together, thinking in common for thinking's sake, without any practical goal, seeking speculative truth together for its own sake." This detachment, in turn, had serious consequences: "Whereas in the real world the judge of any notion is its testing, and its goal is what it actually achieves," in the world of the Philosophical Societies, "the judge was other people's opinions, and the goal was their consent." Their purely philosophical world, to put this somewhat otherwise, was conducive to building "cities in the clouds."

With the Revolution, these Societies eventually formed the nucleus of the "Jacobin machine" and the indispensable constituents of "pure" or "direct democracy," the foundational principle of the "Revolutionary government." "Direct sovereignty of the people, pure democracy," Cochin points out, "implies a network of standing Societies." "One does not see how," he continues,

not [only] the reign, but the very existence of the sovereign would be possible without such Societies, how the sovereign could become aware of itself. There is no sovereign people, strictly speaking, except there [in Societies].

Thus, according to Cochin, did Societies come to exercise complete control over elected, judicial, and administrative officers. "From the moment of their creation," he notes,

the popular Societies watched the established authorities and the government itself. And it was this surveillance that constituted freedom: for the people, unable to be always gathered in primary assemblies, spread out into smaller societies in order to keep an eye on the holders of power.

In addition, the inherent character of these "popular Societies" provided an environment highly receptive to Rousseau's teachings, which had an enormous influence on the substance

and scope of their control. Indeed, the impact of Rousseau's thought on the course of events in this era would be hard to overstate because, as Cochin points out, from the time of its publication in 1762, his *Social Contract* also served as a "catechism" for the Philosophical Societies.

A goodly portion of Cochin's analysis is devoted to the organization and operation of the Societies and their impact on the psychology and thinking of their members that produced conformity, inertia, subservience, and the like within their ranks. Certainly one of his more significant findings is that the Societies (the "small" societies) did not reflect the will of the larger society. On the contrary, as he stresses at various points, the Societies actually reflected the opinions of a relatively few members, an inner circle of "wire pullers." Citing the observations of Bryce and Ostrogorski regarding "wire pullers" and American political machines, he concludes that there is a "law of automatic selection" which inevitably operates in egalitarian organizations to place power in the hands of a few. Moreover, he points out, this concentration of power also occurred among the Societies, leading eventually to the emergence of a "Society of Societies" that operated to support, direct, and unify "the action of the inner circles in the entire Society." With the establishment of the Revolutionary government, these developments produced a widening "gap between the sovereign people" (those in the Societies) "and the [real] people" (those of the larger society). These findings led Cochin to one of the major conclusions of his research, a conclusion that contradicts standard explanations for the Reign of Terror, which place the blame on "conspirators and tyrants" ("the great hue and cry of Thermidor") or on the corruption of French society as a whole. Such explanations, he insists, miss the mark. Rather, as he would have it, the terror that gripped the nation was "not the intentional work of a plot or a man, but [rather] the natural and unconscious Work of the Jacobin machine, i.e., of a regime and a frame of mind."

Cochin's account, taken as a whole, reveals how a number of factors conjoined to produce the severity of the tyranny and terror that overtook the Revolution. To begin with, the inner circles of the Societies were made up of Jacobin ideologues under the spell of Rousseau's doctrines and theory, oblivious to the realities of the wider society and, thus, unaware of the enormous social costs involved in their impossible quest for the perfect republic. The direct democracy, in turn, operated in the absence of the rule of law and without any acknowledgment of a distinction between state and society. Under its terms all powers were concentrated in the same hands with an "unlimited right over lives and property." Thus, the full totalitarian potentialities of Rousseau's General Will—i.e., "that each person's life and possessions are . . . at the disposal of the sovereign people"—became a reality, increasingly so as a "humanitarian patriotism" consumed the Jacobins. This patriotism not only eclipsed lesser patriotisms in the cause of national unity but served to justify atrocities as promoting the republic's survival and well-being. "No political faith," Cochin asserts, "had ever had such disregard for human lives." At the same time—thanks in part to the influence of the Encyclopedists—restraints on individual or collective action such as "experience, tradition, and faith"—that which might impose limitations on "free thought"—had been severely weakened.

Cochin's work details the intricate interrelationship between ideology, organization, and action that those familiar with Eric Voegelin's writings would call a gnostic movement. As such, there are abundant parallels between the picture Cochin draws and the gnostic movements of the 20th century in both Germany and Russia. Yet, as this work reveals, understanding the underpinning of the French Revolution is probably more valuable for those concerned about the future of Western democracies. And this, quite aside from the insights it provides into the French Revolution, is one of its chief virtues. Certainly this

is the case with regard to the United States, where Rousseauian notions of democracy have made such headway over the course of the last century that fundamental principles underlying the Philadelphia Constitution have been discarded. Cochin's analysis, for example, clearly suggests that the centralization of political power at the national level coupled with the growth of executive powers must be viewed with trepidation. This development, as the American invasion of Iraq demonstrates, renders the system vulnerable to control by well-financed and well-organized ideological cliques with characteristics—in particular, an incapacity to grasp existential reality—similar to those of the Jacobin Societies. Or, to take another example, his analysis lends considerable weight to the warnings of those cultural conservatives sensitive to Tocqueville's teachings—namely, that the weakening of associations, institutions, and affiliations that stand between the individual and the centralized government produces deracinated and isolated individuals incapable of offering effective resistance to oppressive policies. In view of this, the decline of intermediate institutions, particularly the traditional family, the state's encroachment into the social sphere, and the continuing "reform" efforts to realize "direct" or plebiscitary democracy must all be viewed with great concern. Still another example of the relevance of Cochin's analysis involves the recognition that, as distinctions between society and government fade, restraints in the form of tradition, constitutionalism, or belief in a transcendent order are indispensable for limiting the powers of government. Just an awareness of this fact, for instance, should make one wary of embracing the progressive judicial doctrine of a "living Constitution."

In sum, there is no question that Cochin provides useful insights into the character and dynamics of the French Revolution. Many will find his work worthwhile for this reason alone. But it will also be of great interest to an even wider audience largely because most of his observations and conclu-

sions are so highly relevant in identifying and assessing the dangers that can befall modern democracies.

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Kennedy Catholicism

by W. James Antle III

**The Faithful Departed:
The Collapse of Boston's
Catholic Culture**

by Philip F. Lawler
New York: Encounter Books;
280 pp., \$25.95



The indifference of Catholic elected officials to Church teachings is so common that it rarely attracts attention, but there are occasional exceptions. When at least five fervently pro-abortion politicians took Communion at papal Masses this April, from the hands of the Pope's representative to the United States, even the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* had to take notice.

During Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the United States, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senators Ted Kennedy, John Kerry, and Christopher Dodd received Communion at Nationals Park in Washington, D.C., while former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani did so at St. Patrick's Cathedral. In Giuliani's case, this was especially troublesome, since the unabashed defender of abortion rights only sporadically attends Mass and is married to a third wife even though his second marriage was not annulled by the Church. Edward Cardinal Egan issued a statement saying, "I deeply regret that Mr. Giuliani received the Eucharist during the papal visit here in New York," and indicated that he had admonished Giuliani to stay away from the Communion rail when he became archbishop in 2000.

Yet pro-abortion Catholics are un-