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From 1789 to 1917 & 1989

Looking back at Revolutionary Traditions



IT IS A KIND OF irony of history that I should write about the French Revolution in the very country where it has had the least impact—I mean England, of course. Perhaps it would thus be appropriate to begin by discussing the objectives of the French Revolution of 1789 and the critique of those objectives by the most famous British adversary of 1789, Edmund Burke.

What lent the French Revolution its principal character was its wish to be universal. Independent from the particular conditions of its birth and even from the country in which it broke out, its chosen mission was not to alter existing institutions in keeping with the circumstances of national history or the state of public opinion, but to remake the social contract from top to bottom and to reconstruct society according to the principles of reasoned will. An inextricably political and philosophical event, its particularity came from this complex combination by virtue of which 1789 would be accompanied by a laicised religious annunciation, substituting the promise of the Rights of Man for the promise of God.

As would be the case in the birth of a religion, 1789 thus defined a “Before” and an “After”. This is a rather enigmatic characteristic, if you consider that I speak here not of the messianic appearance of a saviour, but of an event in time, an event which, none the less, was thought to have disrupted the continuous flow of time. The French themselves have come to take that disruption for granted, and have long ceased to see it as at all strange. For 200 years 1789 has represented the origin of their division into Right and Left—into those who liked the *ancien régime*, and so detested

the Revolution and vice versa. But just as the men of 1789 would have wished, that political schizophrenia has spread beyond the history of France. Since their time, it has become the revolutionary political universe, the political patrimony of Europe and even, in our century, of the whole world.

But Burke rejected the late 18th-century French enterprise in its entirety, and after the summer of 1789 he had seen enough to condemn its means and ends.

It is an understatement to say that he rejected the idea of historical discontinuity, for he could hardly conceive of such a thing. The idea of “a people without a past” was both an absurdity and a hopeless endeavour, for it posited a human collectivity deprived of its constituting element: those centuries of accumulation during which successive generations acquired their rules of civility, their customs and mores, their mode of being together, their Constitution. How is it, then, that the French of 1789 so fervently cherished the crazy idea of the *tabula rasa*? Burke described them with more indignation than penetration—although that indignation led him to identify their new principle of social organisation: the Rights of Man, those rights which are imprescriptible because they are “natural”, which belong to each and every man, and which are the only possible foundation for a society composed of free and equal individuals.

Burke understood that this idea contained the constitutive abstraction of modern democracy and the universality of man—the equality of each to each. And to oppose it he brought forward real society, prejudices, passions and interests, thus setting the tone for what would become, since and after him, the central theme of conservative thought and more generally of the critique of democracy, whether originating with the Right or the Left: the differences between concrete individuals as opposed to the pretension to found a society upon their abstract identity. How can a society exist upon an illusion?

In the same way, the natural rights of individuals preclude the conceptualisation let alone the constitution of power. For what can bring unity to a society that defines itself as being composed of what belongs exclusively to each individual? How can men make the *polis* out of “private individuals”? Burke inherited the central question of the 18th century which he treated in the light of 1789. He was thus the first observer of the French events to understand to what extent the problem of political representation is at the heart

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of the French Revolution because the Revolution chose the radical individualism of rights as its ensign.

1789 completely separated the political from the social, the state from civil society: Marx would say this after Burke. But for the Whig parliamentarian, once the image of individuals, both private and equal, had been chosen as the point of departure, there was no longer any space left for the political body except in the abstract exaltation of the state community. This was something both illusory and dangerous. Illusory because political society has nothing to do with real society; and dangerous because the emancipation of individuals from social subordination does not bring about a diminution of the central authority's power over them, but rather a shift and increase in that power which would take the form of the state as the incarnation of the sovereignty of the people. It was his anticipation/prediction of a democratic despotism that lent Burke's analysis its enormous influence. Two years later, that despotism would be realised in the Terror.

In its course, the French Revolution really did manifest the contradiction between its philosophical message and the nature of the régimes it produced. After trying to conserve the *ancien régime* Monarch within a completely Republican system, the revolutionaries founded a dictatorial Republic based on the fear of the guillotine and finally ended up with an administrative and military dictatorship infinitely more despotic than any monarchy had ever been. Thus, in the language of Burke, "pure democracy" turned out to be incompatible with respect for the rights of French citizens; or, to put it into the words of Tocqueville one century later, equality had destroyed liberty.

VIEWED FROM the beginning of the 19th century, the heritage of the French Revolution seemed particularly unruly. Not only did the French events lack the "happy end" of the English 1688, but they furthermore set off a series of contradictions and political conflicts which would become inseparable from modern politics. On the one hand, there was the founding of modern society erected upon the ruins of the aristocratic world—a foundation that came about through the destruction of the traditional ties of dependency between men. Henceforth the building-blocks of society would be free and equal individuals, with each person possessed of imprescriptible rights guaranteed by their voluntary association. But, on the other hand, the political forms of that association, based on a foundation that was completely new in the history of the world, would turn out to be terribly fragile. The autonomy of individuals and the equality inseparable from it gave rise both to a formidable political instability and to régimes which would in fact be incompatible with the liberty they had proclaimed to be their very principle.

This is more easily understood if we position ourselves in the very first years of the 19th century, at the moment when the French, in their search for a resolution of the national political dilemma, had turned to a saviour born of circumstances and his own genius. The Bonapartist dictatorship drew its temporary power from the fact that public opinion—once having restored its own freedom with 9 Ther-

midor and the fall of Robespierre—was unable to decide upon the nature and means of ending the Revolution. Those who wished for that end—like Benjamin Constant or Mme de Staël—could not bring themselves to forget that the arrival of the Republic in France was inseparable from the Terror and lawlessness. They were incapable of defeating, to their Right, those nostalgic for the monarchy, and to their Left, those nostalgic for Jacobinism. The former, in order to guarantee law and order, would have liked to have had a new King but the only candidates available to them were the brothers of the beheaded monarch; and they were irrevocably bound by their misfortune to the Counter-Revolution. The latter, who wished to continue Robespierre's heritage, invented, with the help of Babeuf, a tactic of egalitarian overbidding in the form of a communism of agrarian redistribution. They were the first to initiate the socialist or communist idea viewed not as a creation of the working classes but as a legacy of the French Revolution. The Revolution thus continued to escape from those who wished to end it, for they continually bumped up against either those who wished altogether to erase the Revolution or those who wished to start it up all over again.

ONE THE LESS, BONAPARTE in his own way closed the theatre of the Revolution by creating the modern state. But although he was the sole master of the rational administrative machine which the Kings of France had never managed to complete, he personally remained its only vulnerable element. The old monarchy was weak but hereditary. The new one was strong, but a function of a single life-span. What was incontestable about it aggravated what was ephemeral about it. Like an evil spirit, the Revolution continued to survive in the random character of the reigning family.

The principal if not the only basis of Napoleon's power remained his victories and conquests, as though the unprecedented sovereign was obliged unceasingly to repay the price of his accession to power. Thus, instead of snuffing out the spirit of the Revolution, he prolonged, extended, and transformed it. He enriched the already prodigious repertory of that enormous event by adding Democracy of the Plebiscite as well as the memory of an extraordinary national adventure which, though superfluous, was unforgettable. Through him, the principles of the French Revolution would, in the 19th century, find their most powerful lever: the National Question. Thanks to him, many stateless European peoples would in the 19th century turn to France in quest of the principles for a renaissance or simply a collective existence. Thus the universality of the ideas of 1789 would receive a kind of confirmation in the unexpected form of national identities.

I do not intend now to provide the reader with a narrative—even a brief one—of what has occurred during the 200 years since the French Revolution in order to try to establish whether or not the course of history has turned out to match Burke's pessimistic predictions about French-style revolutionary democracy—or, on the contrary, the optimistic predictions put forth by Tom Paine about the Rights of Man. For

I would rather take the standpoint of this late 20th century, and share with you some reflections on the state of the Western democratic world in relation to the tradition whose bicentennial we recently celebrated.

We are the children of two great historical catastrophes, Fascism and Communism, both of which, in their own way, can be traced back to the same origin. As we know, those two ideologies have had an enormous impact on European democratic public opinion, for reasons easily understood. They have claimed to follow in the line of the legacy of 1789 and the Rights of Man, of which they have offered comparable if not identical critiques. They have brought into question the universalistic abstraction of the French Revolution and have denounced the ideas of 1789 as the founding lie of modern democracy. It is true that beyond this point the two critiques radically part company. Fascism goes on to fight the universality of man in order to destroy it in the name of the Nation and of Race. Communism combats the same idea as a bourgeois illusion, but in order to realise it in the name of the Proletariat.

THE FASCIST CRITIQUE of democracy died first because it was vanquished by military force. Its defeat in 1945 made clear to the horrified eyes of the world the extent to which the Nazi dictatorship had plunged one of the most civilised countries of the European world into political and moral disaster. It probably did much to put an end to the mounting nationalist contest in Europe that characterised the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Since 1945, the German tragedy has ended up teaching Europeans the lesson that the passion for the National State—that product of the history both of monarchy and of democracy—is the most explosive force in modern times. The price of that lesson was incredibly heavy and, moreover, inseparable from the decline of our nations. It has, however, incontestably marked a decisive turning-point in the history of Western Europe. We have all learned how to handle more prudently the store of emotions that constitute membership in a nation. Only posterity will tell us what proportions of reflection and circumstance make up the wisdom we have acquired.

Communism survived the defeat of Nazism and even received from that defeat a great increase in power because the Soviet Union ended up in the winner's camp. But the tyranny practised by the post-revolutionary Bolshevik state in the name of "the emancipation of the proletariat" soon revealed its true totalitarian nature. This occurred just after Stalin's death when in 1956 Khrushchev denounced the crimes of his predecessor and what he termed "the cult of personality". Today we are experiencing the beginning of an irreversible process—the end of an idea that was one of the pillars (perhaps the principal one) of the European Left during the last 100 or 150 years.

As soon as Eastern Europe began calling for the Rights of Man, free elections, and what the Marxists had called "formal democracy", we became witnesses to an extraordinary reworking of the Communist heritage, particularly as it pertains to the relationship of the French to the Russian Revolution. In October 1917, the Bolsheviks hoped and believed they had gone beyond the abstract universalism of

1789 with the "real emancipation" of the working class. In the 20th-century Marxist vulgate, which extended its ideas well beyond the ranks of Communists, the French Revolution, universal in its ideas, was a "bourgeois fact", the Rights of Man were but an affirmation of "formal" principles, and even the energy spent in 1793 to encourage equality led only to "the reign of interests" in the Thermidorian period. 1789 was indeed a Revolution, but a "bourgeois revolution" and thus untrue to its principles, having substituted one form of exploitation for another. 1917 was the *real* revolution, charged with the task of realising the promises of the preceding one.

It is this very vision of the revolution that is toppling before our eyes today. Not only has the notion of the October Revolution as an emancipation foundered but the Communist world is returning to its source, which is more alive than ever: the Revolution it believed it had out-distanced and thus obliterated. The Bolsheviks thought that with 1917 they had buried 1789. Here, at the end of our century, we see that the opposite is happening. It is 1917 that is being buried in the name of 1789. This extraordinary reversal, unpredictable and unforeseen, imbues the famous principles of 1789 with a certain freshness and with renewed universality. As we begin to close the long and tragic digression that was the Communist illusion, we find ourselves more than ever confronted by the great dilemmas of democracy as they appeared at the end of the 18th century, expressed by ideas and by the course of the French Revolution.

Thus the entire European world is in the process of rediscovering its democratic values and principles, from such pre-democratic nations as Spain and Portugal to those nations thought to be post-democratic, such as the Communist dictatorships. The former, moreover, saved from having engaged in a disastrous falsehood, will have a much easier time than the latter in reintegrating their histories, economies, and even their modes of thinking into the mainstream of European democracy. It remains that the universal character of the principles of 1789 seems truer than ever before and holds more power over the imagination of those peoples of whom neither Burke nor Marx could conceive. We are thus also returned, with 200 years more experience, to the great questions posed by French-style democracy.

THOSE 200 YEARS that have elapsed, and particularly the 20th century, have given rise to a sort of critical filtering of the heritage of 1789.

First of all, this is because the more time passes, the further we are from the original event; and second, because the great catastrophes of the 20th century to which I have just referred have furthered (in Western Europe at least) the spirit of moderation and prudence. The most spectacular illustration of this evolution is the way in which post-Franco Spain has developed into a democracy. But to explore this idea further I would prefer to take the example of my own country, because France—the cradle of the 1789 Revolution—seems to me to be the prime example of a country that

has finally learned—if tardily—to master its revolutionary tradition.

Heaven knows that France had a great deal of difficulty and took a long time to dominate that heritage and to anchor it in institutions both stable and free. A first “end” to the Revolution may be ascribed to the moment when Napoleon established his dictatorship and founded the modern centralised state with which we still live today. But if that “end” to the Revolution did indeed bequeath a state to contemporary France, it also consecrated the divorce between democracy and political liberty as well as the unrealistic policy of the French domination of Europe. The French Revolution resumed its course again in 1815, and 19th-century France had the strange character, perhaps unique in history, of being a people repeating for a second time the repertory of the late 18th century—the return of the legitimate monarchy, soon to be overthrown again, followed by a new 1789-like attempt to establish a constitutional monarchy. Then in 1848 came a new revolutionary Republic, and even a second Bonaparte when the first had seemed so exceptional both for his genius and for the circumstances that brought him to power. Finally, a new neo-Jacobin revolution and a last attempt to restore the Bourbons preceded the formation of the Third Republic, the first durable synthesis of the revolutionary democratic tradition.

IF WE LOOK AT our late 20th-century French Republic, the Fifth Republic, we can see to what extent French democratic institutions—the most consensual we have ever had since 1789—have, on the contrary, integrated elements that come from *outside* the revolutionary tradition. The France of today is no longer that republic where the singular and indivisible sovereignty of the public was exclusively in the hands of a Parliament or even of a single Assembly. Now sovereignty is vested in an autonomous judicial power which issues indirectly from the people while being independent and sometimes even above them. The *Conseil constitutionnel* is responsible for overseeing and verifying the constitutionality of laws. Additionally, the sovereign people voted overwhelmingly in favour of an idea passionately rejected by the French revolutionaries: that of a head of state elected by universal suffrage, something the men of 1789 saw as an embodiment of “the ghost” of the monarchy. The men of 1989 no longer viewed this idea as incompatible with French Republicanism, for this is their way of adapting to France something common to almost all modern democracies. It constitutes a rediscovery of a strong executive power.

A sweeping glance at today’s democracies would probably lead us to the conclusion that the ways in which they have resolved the famous 18th century problem of how to

organise the sovereignty of men over themselves are more similar than ever.

For example, democracy founded not only upon the sovereignty of the people, but also upon the division of power is not only a well-known formula for government—well-known since the 18th century—but a feature of all states that have adopted free institutions. And regardless of whether they have Parliamentary or Presidential systems or, as in the French case, a combination of the two, almost all—with the exception of Italy—have strong executive power even when that power is not the direct result of universal suffrage but designated by Parliament. In fact, in democracies of the parliamentary sort, the Prime Minister’s authority comes from the voters who elect the representatives (those representatives having been chosen according to the chief executive they support). In France’s mixed régime, that unique combination of Presidential and Parliamentary régimes, the supreme head of the executive—the President—is elected separately from the representatives. Because of this—as is the case in the United States, the classic model of a presidential democracy—the power of the President may be limited by the choice of representatives (as is indeed the dominant trend in the United States).¹

To the list of common or at least comparable elements of contemporary Western democracies, we must further add the increased role of the Judiciary in the supervision of the constitutionality of laws. After World War II, and as a reaction to totalitarianism, supervision of laws by the judicial courts was established in West Germany, Italy, Greece, Spain, Portugal and, in 1958, in France. Although this is an idea which can be found in the writings of the Abbé Sieyès at the beginning of the Thermidorian period, it is alien to the French revolutionary tradition, which is characterised by what is called “Parliamentary Absolutism”. It has, nevertheless, become a common element of 20th-century constitutionalism on both sides of the Atlantic and finds an unprecedented theatre in Europe in the newly established European Convention on Human Rights, involving all the member nations of the European Community. Not only do all of its members have Constitutional Courts, but those courts are linked by a charter of the Rights of Man which has supreme precedence and by a European Court of those same rights which functions as a supranational court of appeal. The result is the first milestone of the outline of a European state.

AND SO, EVEN WHILE democracy has encountered great disasters in our century, we are currently witnessing the opening up of superior horizons—proof that the ideas of the French Revolution have, in the end, escaped from the malediction that the course of that Revolution seemed to foretell. The democratic revolutionary tradition has indeed fostered incredible catastrophes such as murderous Utopias and the cult of the Nation-State. But on the ruins of those tragedies, at the base of our Western European societies, survive more than ever the principles of 1789—mastered at last, and embodied in free institutions,

¹ Very recently in France, between 1986 and 1988, the French executive power has split itself in two, with the President and the Prime Minister coming from different majorities, thus constituting a new form of the separation of power which would have surprised Montesquieu. Nevertheless, in all these cases, new or old, it would seem that strong executive powers directly issuing from popular suffrage have become the rule in modern democracies, distancing them from the model of 1789.

and thereby closer to the Anglo-Saxon tradition. The guardian angels of the Europe we are trying to construct are neither military glory, nor the grandeur of the state, nor the end of history—but more modest and modern spirits: the liberty and well-being of individuals.

At least this Europe, born of the ruins of its history and re-emerging in prosperity, conserves some of the more significant elements of its exceptional past: the experience of democracy; scientific and technical knowledge; prosperity; and all the pre-conditions for power except for a common will. Once more, it is doing something unprecedented with that heritage. Having once invented the Nation-State—that remarkable instrument of civilisation which almost proved fatal—Europe is now facing the challenge of inventing a new form of community composed of a collection of peoples who have for so long been in conflict. A shared economy will not be enough, and nor will a “*Europe des États*”, nor, con-

versely, a “Nation of Europe” conceived along the lines of the nations which have populated its history.

In truth, Europe of the Twelve can deny neither its origins nor the tendency of its youthful history—that of “a great market”—because they have already provided unity in the at least passive assent of the peoples involved. Having issued from a victory of societies over nations, it would only give ammunition to its enemies were it to go against its natural leanings. But it remains critical that Europe come up with a different kind of popular will, more durable than a military threat which defines but a single circumstance. That will be as strong as the feeling of belonging to a nation, something the European institutions are too young to inspire. In short, Europe needs to be not only a strong and prosperous market, but an idea and an ambition. On that day, Western democracies will be truly united by a common political tradition.

On the Border

(*Rzepin, Poland, August 1989*)

A sunrise pale as concrete
and four women with buckets
still clearing up; yesterday
must have been some party,
empties spill over the bin.

I lean from the window, stare
at the platform, and still it refuses
to move. I sit back
and wait for the soft jolt
and clang of the engine coupling,

it must come soon. Carriage
by carriage the silence
adds on its weight.
Chalk on the goods trucks fades.
All afternoon, those lovers

patrolling like guardsmen embracing
have found the same corner
and keep turning back. The man
with the long-handled hammer
has forgotten which note.

Sometime soon, the sun
like an aspirin will drop into night.
Keep awake.
Perhaps it's the carriage beside us
but I think we have started to move.

Desmond Graham