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A Permanent Revolution

The Historiography of 1789

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There are few things in this world as vast as the historiography of the French Revolution. As much as the Russian and Chinese revolutions have shaped our century and served as ideological touchstones for statesmen and scholars alike, the volume of literature on 1789 surely exceeds the writings on the two more recent revolutions combined. The sheer bulk of the French revolutionary historiography accounts for part of its continuing influence, but substantially more important has been the widespread significance of the ideological and theoretical discussion it has spawned. Lenin and Trotsky were avid students of the French Revolution as, of course, was Marx himself. And historians of the Russian Revolution have long viewed that event through the lens of 1789.¹

Perhaps because the Chinese Revolution seems so clearly to be a phenomenon of the contemporary world, China scholars have not paid as much comparative attention to France. But, as I suggest in this article, a number of developments in the historiography of the French Revolution may be of intellectual and theoretical interest to China scholars searching for new approaches and new paradigms in our current period of ideological uncertainty. These developments include the collapse of the Marxist interpretation in the face of new empirical research; the revival of interest in politics as an independent phenomenon; the shift in emphasis from socioeconomic to cultural explanations of the origins and meaning of revolution; the preoccupation with language and rhetoric, with the idea that power resided in those who controlled the discourse of revolution; and, finally, the use of gender as a category of analysis in the scholarship on 1789.

I make no pretense of providing a genuinely comparative approach myself; I intend only to stimulate discussion and debate through an analysis of significant developments in the French case. It is perhaps particularly important to do so now in the aftermath of a bicentennial commemoration—including the bicentennial of the Terror two years ago—that has added significantly not just to the bulk but to the comparative utility of the French revolutionary historiography.

In a typical year, more is published on the French Revolution than all of early modern French history combined. And these past few years have been far from typical. Beginning in 1984 and escalating ever since, the festivities surrounding the bicentennial of 1789 have produced an unprecedented volume of literature—so much so that even the most diligent scholars are hard-pressed to keep up with it. François Furet, widely considered the leading figure in the field, has himself written or edited more than a dozen books since the early 1980s.² Collections of conference papers threaten to produce even more literature; between 1984 and 1990, French revolutionary scholars traveled to more than 530 colloquia in some 50 different countries. Italy alone held 100 conferences whereas the figure for France topped 225.

To document all this attention, the Sorbonne published a 600-page book providing information about each of these scholarly events. The volume, edited by Michel Vovelle (1991), Furet's rival and chief ideological opponent, includes an amusing but doubtless unintended parody of the *Annales* school's obsession with quantitative methods and historical geography. There are beautifully produced graphics that depict the "density of conferences per million [French] inhabitants," (p. xx) the precise geographic location of each French colloquium, and a two-page map showing the "distribution of conferences throughout Europe and the world." (pp. viii-ix) (China could boast of only a single program.) In addition to the maps, Vovelle's volume features charts showing the distribution of conferences by year, the number held in each city, the percentage taking place in the provinces, the average number of participants per conference, and the distribution of conferences according to the kind of organization sponsoring them. It goes without saying that the volume provides a detailed analysis—and yet more unintended parody—of the meaning and implications of the information represented on the maps and charts.

I have presented these details not only to evoke a sense of the scope of the bicentennial and the scholarly works it produced, but to give myself an alibi for what is of necessity an incomplete account of the historiography of 1789. Rather than undertake a futile attempt to survey the whole of this literature, I focus on the debates over the origins of the French Revolution that may be of interest to historians of the Chinese Revolution. In so doing, I consider—again, in ways I hope are relevant to China scholars—the implications of what has been no less than a shift in paradigm since the mid-1970s.

For most of this century, the mainstream interpretation of the revolution, one shared by French and non-French historians alike, was grounded in Marxist categories of social analysis. The approach is familiar; at the risk of caricature, I give it only a brief summary. In the view of a series of historians beginning with the socialist luminary Jean Jaurès (1901-1908) and proceeding through Albert Mathiez (1927, 1930, 1973), Georges Lefebvre (1924, 1939), and Albert Soboul (1974a, 1974b), the three Sorbonne scholars who dominated the field from the 1920s to the 1970s, 1789 was the world's premier bourgeois revolution. It came as the result of the bourgeoisie's struggle against the nobility for political and institutional power commensurate with the economic preeminence they had gained by the end of the eighteenth century. The development of capitalism in early modern France—so the argument goes—created a rising bourgeoisie increasingly frustrated after 1750 by the nobility's monopoly over political power and social privilege. Adding insult to injury, the nobility undertook a campaign during the second half of the eighteenth century to strengthen its privileges all the more by excluding commoners from the army, from the parliaments, and from service to the king. This supposed aristocratic reaction is said to have moved the bourgeoisie from anger to action: in 1789, its leaders found a political opening in the Crown's financial disarray and used it to elbow the nobility aside and assume power for themselves (Soboul, 1974a).³

This explanation was compelling and logical; it possessed the added virtue of appearing to explain many other potentially difficult phenomena. The Enlightenment could be seen as the ideological arsenal of a rising but frustrated bourgeoisie intent on giving its own particularistic interests the aura of a universal creed. And the fearsome

violence of the revolution itself found its explanation—even justification—in the bourgeoisie’s need to enlist the popular classes in the effort to overthrow the nobility once and for all. The reaction of 9 Thermidor, which followed the execution of Robespierre, represented the bourgeoisie’s desire to rein in a nascent working class that had threatened to go too far, and Napoleon could be seen as the product of the bourgeoisie’s effort to stabilize its institutions and economic position in the wake of a decade of revolutionary upheaval and war.

On paper, all this seemed to make a great deal of sense. The Marxist account, moreover, was the Western civilization instructor’s dearest friend; the ordered and coherent lectures it yielded seemed almost ready-made. The problem was that by the late 1960s, it could no longer withstand the gaze of an Anglo-American empiricism shaped by the anti-Marxism of the cold war. (The assault against Marxist historiography began outside France in large part because the cold war was much less virulent there than it was in England and the United States; many French historians remained within or sympathetic to a still powerful French Communist Party.)

In the narrative of anti-Marxist revisionism, the University of London’s Alfred Cobban stands as the founding father of the new historiography. Cobban’s (1955) *Myth of the French Revolution* dismissed as preposterous the notion that, in 1789, a capitalist bourgeoisie overthrew a feudal aristocracy.⁴ Feudalism, he argued, had long since vanished in France but, more important, the “revolutionary bourgeoisie” did not represent mobile, industrial, and commercial wealth. It was not, in a word, capitalist. Its members, rather, benefited from many of the same rights and dues thought to be exclusive prerogatives of the nobility.

In an analysis of the bourgeois members of the revolutionary National Assembly, Cobban showed that only 13% came from the world of commerce whereas two-thirds belonged to the legal profession. Most did not argue cases in court; instead they served as petty officeholders and minor to middling government servants. Like much of the nobility, these bourgeois officeholders had purchased their positions and held them for life. The trouble, Cobban (1964) maintained in his other important book, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution*, was that these petty bureaucrats felt increasingly frustrated, believing that they did the real work of government service

while their aristocratic betters received all the credit. These feelings, he wrote, were exacerbated by the declining value of venal offices during the 1780s. The revolution, therefore, found its leadership not among a rising capitalist bourgeoisie but among a declining group of middling *officiers*. These men sought not to overthrow “feudalism”—the peasants, Cobban maintained, saw to that—but to open careers to talent. If anything, these bourgeois bureaucrats, many of whom were rentiers as well, retarded the development of capitalism as they endeavored to maintain a bloated state apparatus. Cobban claimed, in addition, that those members of the bourgeoisie who did possess commercial or industrial capital remained largely uninterested in politics. They wanted a stable economy, and a revolution was the last thing they needed.

One problem with Cobban’s argument was that his critique of the Marxist position was far more convincing than his alternative to it. Many of his British and American colleagues were willing to accept that the revolution was not the product of a rising capitalist bourgeoisie, but the idea that it had resulted from the bitterness of a declining middle class of officeholders found only scant empirical support (Hampson, 1963). Indeed, many of these historians began to claim that there was little evidence of any kind for a strictly social interpretation of the origins of 1789. In demonstrating some of the defects of the Marxist social interpretation of the revolution, Cobban had unwittingly convinced more than a few of his colleagues that all essentially socioeconomic accounts were open to question, his own version of the “bourgeois revolution” included. Why, they began to ask, did the France of 1830 look so much like the France of 1780? If, as the social interpretation maintained, vast social changes taking place during the eighteenth century had caused the revolution, then why was an Old Regime-style landed elite still in power forty years later?

For all his hostility to the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution, Cobban never challenged its central tenet, namely that the events of 1789 originated in a conflict between the nobility and the bourgeoisie. This challenge would be undertaken by other Anglo-American historians, soon to be joined by a few colleagues in France. Perhaps because the nobility was a smaller and seemingly more coherent group than the bourgeoisie, these revisionists began their

effort with a detailed empirical treatment of the "privileged orders." It revealed a nobility that looked quite bourgeois.

A number of historians on both sides of the Atlantic found that wealth had become more important than seigniorial or "feudal" privilege in eighteenth-century society and that nobles everywhere managed their properties with an eye to making a profit. Noblemen administered their estates shrewdly and carefully; they also invested heavily in mining, metallurgy, colonial trading companies, land-clearing and speculation enterprises, banking, and tax-collection operations of all kinds. Eighteenth-century nobles sold their timber in an increasingly lucrative market, and they had become adept in marketing grains and wine. As Robert Forster wrote in an influential study published in 1960, the nobility adhered "to the so-called bourgeois virtues of thrift, discipline and strict management of the family fortune" (Forster, 1960, quoted in Doyle, 1980: 177; see also Taylor, 1964, and Sutherland, 1986: 16-9).

It also turned out that, contrary to the widespread beliefs of both Marxist and liberal historians, the nobility did not hold a monopoly over fiscal privilege. The great nonnoble traders of France's mercantile centers enjoyed tax exemptions larger than those of most titled aristocrats (Behrens, 1962-1963). Further complicating the picture was the finding that a substantial portion of the eighteenth-century nobility had only recently bought its way out of the middle class. For the most part, wealthy commoners did so by purchasing one of France's 4,000 offices in the royal bureaucracy that conferred hereditary nobility on the owner or his family. From the middle of the eighteenth century until 1789, Louis XV and XVI granted some 6,500 ennoblements, swelling the aristocratic ranks to the point that, by the late 1780s, between one-quarter and one-third of all noble families had achieved their status within the past fifty years (Sutherland, 1986: 17). Clearly, the nobility of Old Regime France was anything but a closed caste. It constantly received new members recently promoted from the bourgeoisie.

This widespread desire for noble status, of course, says a great deal about the middle class of the eighteenth century, a group whose values and mode of living differed from those of aristocrats much less than historians have traditionally believed. For the Old Regime bourgeoisie, wealth was not an end in itself or a means of creating new and

more abundant resources through productive investment; it was a ticket into the realm of honor and status that titles represented. The enormous cost—and meager returns—of these offices makes it clear that wealthy members of the Old Regime bourgeoisie were willing to sacrifice lucrative business and investment opportunities for noble status alone. The average position required payment of more than 50,000 livres, or enough to feed, house, and clothe 200 rural families for a year (Sutherland, 1986: 17).

A central conclusion of this revisionist research, therefore, is that the bourgeoisie longed to become noble whereas the nobility increasingly behaved like the bourgeoisie. Far from the two distinct and mutually hostile classes of Marxist lore, the nobility and bourgeoisie of the Ancien Régime look more and more as though they were a single social group. It is easy, of course, to exaggerate this convergence; there clearly was an enormous social difference between a nobleman with a million acres of choice land and a middling lawyer with a handful of clients. Still, the elite sections of both groups seemed to grow increasingly alike as the eighteenth century wore on, and their similarity creates insurmountable problems for the historiographical tradition that focused on class struggle.

The problems for the Marxist interpretation grew even greater when historians began to show that very little of the wealth generated by the Old Regime bourgeoisie—or any other social group—involved commercial and industrial capital. Bourgeois riches, like those of the aristocracy, resided mainly in the land (Taylor, 1967). Most eighteenth-century wealth was “proprietary,” not capitalist, and that property belonged nearly as much to nonnobles as it did to nobles. “Even in the well-to-do Third Estate,” wrote George V. Taylor, “proprietary wealth substantially outweighed commercial and industrial capital. . . . There was, between most of the nobility and the proprietary sectors of the middle classes, a continuity of investment forms and socioeconomic values that made them, economically, a single group” (quoted in Doyle, 1980: 18).⁵

Not only were the nobility and bourgeoisie alike in socioeconomic terms, historians increasingly found that they resembled each other culturally and intellectually as well. In some ways, the nobility seem to have been more bourgeois than the bourgeoisie. Based on an extensive reading of the nobility's *cahiers de doléances*, statements

of grievances requested by the king in 1789, the prominent French historian Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret showed that aristocrats had steeped themselves in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, traditionally considered a bourgeois ideology. The cahiers revealed spokesmen for the nobility as deeply hostile to the Bourbon monarchy and eager to establish a representative government in which the talented would be free to rise to the top. Noblemen, of course, saw themselves as comprising that talented group. Still, during the months before the revolution began, they advocated the rudiments of a liberal state, one that protected the individual's natural rights (Chaussinand-Nogaret, 1976). Influenced by the ideas of Locke and Montesquieu, they took these positions in an effort to reduce the monarchy's power to impose taxes and rule without their consent (Richet, 1969).

Meanwhile, the bourgeois cahiers de doléances were, if anything, less "enlightened" than those of the nobility. On the whole, however, there seems to have been a remarkable ideological convergence between the groups during the years before the revolution began. Some of the reasons for this commonality stem from the associations and activities of what Jürgen Habermas has called the expanded "public sphere" of the eighteenth century (Habermas, 1989).⁶

Before absolutism, Habermas wrote, politics took place mainly in the private realms of manor and court; there was no public sphere in the sense in which affairs of state were open to public discussion. Absolutism created a public sphere by centering political activity in a single all-important place and by wielding power in an increasingly depersonalized or bureaucratic way. With monarchical power in some ways independent from the person of the monarch himself, it became easier for members of the "public" or "civil society," as Habermas calls it, to criticize the decisions of state. This critical reflection took shape in a new and growing "private sphere" that emerged first as individual conscience in the crucible of the Reformation. During this era, individuals developed the habit of reasoning for themselves and, when they became the objects of the state's public policy—that is, when the state invaded their own personal realm—they naturally felt entitled to comment publicly on its effects. Absolutism's creation of a public sphere, then, brought private reflection out into the open. The public sphere now included what became known as "public opinion," a set of individual reflections originally formed in private. "Private

people," in Habermas's words, "come together as a public" (quoted in Goodman, 1992: 5).

Institutions soon developed to facilitate the expression of the new public opinion. They began with salons in the relative privacy of the home and eventually moved outward into cafes, academies, lodges, and clubs. These emerging forums of public opinion exhibited a certain egalitarianism by including educated—and generally well-to-do—members of both nobility and bourgeoisie (Roche, 1978; Lougee, 1976; Kors, 1976). In these settings, individuals within the two groups developed political philosophies and ideological perspectives that cannot be distinguished by class. The Enlightenment discourse shared by all the fellows of these associations (whether noble or bourgeois), combined with their common status as owners of propertied wealth, made them into a largely unified elite. Differences of status that continued to divide members of the noble and nonnoble elites paled in comparison to the divisions *within* the nobility between wealthy proprietors and modest squires (Meyer, 1966) and within the bourgeoisie between owners of large landed estates and middling merchants (Berlanstein, 1975).

The overall thrust of the historiographical developments summarized here is compelling and difficult to refute, so much so that one of the few remaining unapologetically Marxist historians of the revolution, George Comninel, accepts virtually all of them (Comninel, 1987). Still, the solidity of the new consensus, not to say orthodoxy, raises the question of why there was a revolution at all. If it is no longer possible to separate the nobility and the bourgeoisie into two antagonistic classes locked in struggle, then what could have caused such an unprecedented upheaval? Surely events of that magnitude do not happen by accident. The efforts of the past dozen years or so to answer this question have shifted the search for the causes of the French Revolution first from the social to the political realm and then from the political to the cultural, ideological, and linguistic one. These developments have produced a rich and complex literature, much of it shaped by the vaunted "linguistic turn" of the past half-dozen years (Toews, 1987).

In 1967, Taylor declared that the French Revolution was "essentially a political revolution with social consequences and not a social revolution with political consequences" (Taylor, 1967: 491). Toc-

queville replaced Marx as the classical theorist of the revolution, and historians turned to politics and state in the quest for revolutionary origins now more than 200 years old. One of the most suggestive early efforts to do so came in 1973 from the English historian Colin Lucas. Still unwilling to dismiss social origins altogether, Lucas wrote that even though nobles and bourgeois both belonged to a single propertied elite, their common status did not mean there were no tensions or divisions within privileged society (Lucas, 1973). Certain declining echelons of each group, especially members of the lesser nobility and bourgeois officeholders, were pinched economically during the 1780s, and they increasingly felt excluded from the elite circles occupied by members of the wealthy nobility and prosperous middle class. The petty nobility and middle bourgeoisie, Lucas maintained, were the two groups opposed most strongly to the government during the political crisis of the later 1780s; what prevented them from joining forces was a crucial political development that virtually guaranteed a radical solution to France's governmental impasse.

In September 1788, the all-noble Parlement of Paris, the kingdom's most prominent judicial institution, ruled that the Estates General should be convened according to its organizational forms of 1614, the last time this medieval representative body had met. Traditionally, the estates had been divided into three separate chambers, one for each of the three orders of the realm: the clergy, nobility, and the Third Estate or commoners. The customary purpose of the estates, which Louis XIV and XV never bothered to call, had been to advise the king; in the dire circumstances of 1788, its role had been elevated to the task of extricating France from the fiscal chaos that the monarchy had done so much to create.

When the Parlement of Paris ordered not only that the old hierarchy of clergy, nobility, and commoners be maintained but that the Third Estate's votes should count no more than each of the other two, members of the bourgeoisie—especially its middling ranks—were outraged. They had hoped for a measure of political power to compensate for their relative social and economic decline. By appearing to reimpose a hierarchy of orders on a social system in which most significant distinctions between nobles and bourgeois had withered away, the *parlement* seemed, Lucas maintained, to be using the political crisis to arbitrarily reassert noble preeminence. For the upper

bourgeoisie, the move was merely irritating; for its economically vulnerable cousins, it was unforgivable. Nothing, however, could have made the lesser nobles happier; from that point on, the nobility and bourgeoisie, until then part of a single social elite, found themselves locked in an increasingly bitter struggle for power. The revolution, still in this view partially social in origin, found its primary impetus in the crisis of state power of the late 1780s.

This highly suggestive argument had the virtue of combining social and political analysis; since then, the historiography has leaned so heavily toward the political and ideological that the social has receded almost to the vanishing point. Much of this shift in emphasis has been enormously creative, enabling historians to consider for the first time many of the long-term political and ideological developments that helped make the revolution possible. But there is, in my view, a troubling lack of attention to the socioeconomic roots of these momentous events. Marxism possesses no monopoly over social and economic inquiry; the demise of the class-based approach should not exclude discussion of other social phenomena providing, of course, that we see them as mediated by language and existing in particular cultural contexts.

Furet has been the guiding intellectual light in this turn to the political and ideological; in his own massive body of work and the volumes he inspired, the questions he has posed now stand at the center of research and debate on the origins and meaning of 1789. In particular, Furet and his followers have been interested in discovering what it was about the political culture of the Old Regime that made the revolution—and especially the Terror—possible. Whereas most republican and Marxist historians of the past century have avoided this two-year period of revolutionary radicalism and violence—or sought to explain it away—Furet has made the Terror a fundamental concern of his work. For him, “the central enigma of the [revolution] was its egalitarian and democratic radicalism” (p. 793). What, Furet (1990) wants to know, were the origins of this unprecedented phenomenon and why did the revolutionary leadership find it so difficult to control?

One key result of Furet’s focus on the Terror has been to diminish the reverence for the revolution that had long been central to its historiography. Scholars now view leaders of the revolution, espe-

cially the most radical among them, far more critically than they have at any time since the mid-nineteenth century. And the violence and suffering associated with these events are no longer swept under the rug. Donald Sutherland has argued that the revolution produced so much hardship that it must be seen as creating as its mirror image a counterrevolution more widespread and more powerful than most students of 1789 have been willing to admit. Revolution and counter-revolution were inextricably linked, each shaping the other with disastrous consequences for liberal and libertarian ideals.⁷

In distancing themselves emotionally from the leaders and ideology of 1789, historians have registered in scholarly form their own disillusionment with revolution itself. The Soviet invasions of 1956 and 1968 along with Khrushchev's critique of Stalinism tarnished for a great many intellectuals much of the Russian Revolution's remaining luster; revelations about the Great Leap Forward and the brutality of Mao's Cultural Revolution did much the same thing for China. It has been a long time, moreover, since many Western intellectuals believed in the promise of Castro's Cuba, and few are unaware of the evils Khomeini has wrought. Furet has made quite explicit the connection between his distaste for Bolshevism and his critique not only of the Marxist interpretation of 1789 but of attempts to explain away the Terror as the revolutionaries' understandable response to war and counterrevolution (Furet, 1981b).

Not surprisingly, scholarly treatments of twentieth-century revolutions have expressed these emotional and ideological developments all the more. In his own contribution to this issue, Joseph W. Esherick questions whether the notion of "liberation" still applies to the Chinese Revolution. The historiography of the Soviet Union, meanwhile, has taken a similar turn, as have many Western accounts of Third World revolutions and movements for national liberation. For France, some historians have gone so far in this effort to demythologize the revolution as to find virtually nothing of merit at all. Simon Schama notoriously suggests that the revolutionaries' terrorist zeal created the political and ideological precedents for the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century and even of the Holocaust itself (Schama, 1989).

Although Furet may have inspired Schama, he is not as resolutely hostile to the revolution as his best-selling colleague in the United

States. Furet's position is far more nuanced: for him, the revolution is both the precursor of Soviet absolutism and the founding stone of France's democratic republic, a regime firmly in place since the 1870s. The point of studying the revolution, Furet insists, is not to endorse or oppose its accomplishments but to understand the mixed legacy of democracy to which it gave birth. Following Tocqueville, Furet sees democracy "not as a type of political regime . . . but the condition of modern man, who must see all of his fellow citizens as his equals" (Furet, 1990: 799). Such equality of condition, he writes, is compatible with either individual liberty or the despotism of the state. In regimes that guarantee the former, there are institutions and practices that vest power in the hands of individuals and shield them from the state. In the latter, all are equal in their powerlessness before central authority. It was Tocqueville's view, and Furet's as well, that the French Revolution created the ingredients for both kinds of regimes, although Furet, like his mentor, devotes far more attention to the democratic despotism revealed so starkly in the Terror.⁸

That event, Furet suggests, following Tocqueville's classic argument, recapitulated in revolutionary form the work of the Old Regime's absolutist monarchy. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Bourbon kings destroyed or rendered politically impotent the intermediary institutions—parliaments, assemblies, the Church—that might have mediated and moderated the increasingly centralized monarchical authority. By the 1780s, only the decrepit shells of these once powerful aristocratic bastions stood between the people and the state. No one possessed any more power than anyone else, and thus no one could stand up to the crown. Absolutism had produced a democratic despotism in which the equality of condition had robbed the nobility—and the people it was their duty to protect—of the institutions that once had given them political liberty.

The revolution, according to Furet, did much the same thing by vesting absolute authority in those who claimed to speak for the people and depriving individuals of the ability to speak for themselves. It too became a democratic despotism built on a radical equality of condition. These absolutist tendencies, Furet writes, were inherent in the revolution right from the beginning: not merely the Bourbon monarchy but the entire political culture of the Old Regime had prepared the way.

The argument for how it did so is enormously complex. In advancing this position, Furet enjoys the company of several talented colleagues: Mona Ozouf and Ran Halévi among others in France, and Keith Baker in the United States.⁹ Its contours extend beyond politics and culture to ideology, discourse, and the rise of public opinion. For Furet, the key political factor is France's undivided sovereignty, its absolutist power lodged wholly in the king. In this undiluted royal prerogative, France differed fundamentally from England where sovereignty was divided between king and parliament and between the two houses of parliament itself. Individual British subjects possessed political power—some far more than others—and public policy emerged from the play of competing interests and from the power of certain individuals and groups to shape the decisions of state.

In France, by contrast, few centers of power existed outside Versailles, and those that did were weak. The prevailing philosophy of government, moreover, held that the king alone represented the whole of the realm and that all power was concentrated in and emanated from him. By the eve of the revolution, the French polity had been steeped for two centuries in this form of sovereignty; its government and people knew nothing else. Although there was one group of revolutionaries who advocated a British-style government, the overwhelming majority of those who set out during the summer and fall of 1789 to devise a new political system could conceive of sovereignty only as "one and indivisible." The revolutionaries were, of course, not about to reinvest that undivided power in the king, so they gave it over to a single assembly in what was to be a unicameral parliament. In so doing, Furet maintains, leaders created a new form of absolute power in the Constituent Assembly, an institution that would not only devise a new constitution but govern without checks and balances.

The Assembly would rule, moreover, according to the absolutist idea that sovereignty necessarily expressed itself in a single voice; it did not emerge from the competition of interests and the clash of individual centers of power. Thus, by clothing the old concept of undivided sovereignty in revolutionary garb, the leaders of 1789, men who saw themselves as breaking radically with the past, nonetheless adopted

a concept of political sovereignty that owed its characteristics to absolutism: now the people took the place of the king, but it was the same place; pure democracy was substituted for absolute monarchy. Just as in the old sovereign power nothing was left to anything that was not the monarch, so nothing was granted in the new one to anything that was not the people, *or supposed to represent the people*. (Furet, 1990: 795; emphasis added)

Furet's concluding phrase is crucial because it suggests how a new form of despotism could arise from a revolutionary system whose architects, despite all their innovative intentions, were creatures of the Old Regime. If all power were vested in a unified people, and if a particular group achieved success in its claim to represent the people, then that group could exercise absolute control. But why did this revolutionary idea of sovereignty assume a unified people? Why, that is, did the revolutionary sovereign, like the absolutist sovereign, necessarily have to express itself in unison? The answer, according to Baker (1990a) and Ozouf (1987), is that, given the absolutist context of Old Regime thought, the radically democratic philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau carried far more weight than did the liberal and corporatist views of Montesquieu.¹⁰

What the revolutionaries learned from Rousseau, Furet and his colleagues maintain, was that in the ideal political system each individual would express not his own particular interests but the general interest; what would emerge from a genuinely democratic consultation was the general will, not a collection of individual desires competing for recognition. Rousseau believed that the English system of representative parliamentary government inhibited the expression of this general will because that system necessarily divided people into factions that could express only particular interests. Representation thus rendered unity impossible; only a system of direct democracy in which all citizens enjoyed perfect equality could allow the general will to emerge.

Rousseau's philosophy, therefore, was egalitarian but not individualist. It emphasized the common good over individual liberty and stressed that sovereignty ought to be united in the service of a single general will. In this interpretation of Rousseau, the parallels with Old Regime sovereignty are obvious; Rousseau is merely the other side of

the absolutist coin. According to Furet, what was dangerous about the popular Rousseauianism he believes to have been prevalent on the eve of 1789 was its illiberal cast. Once in power, the revolutionaries found it all too easy to submerge individual freedom, little valued during the Ancien Régime, beneath the putative claims of the common good. From here, the slope was slippery indeed. Those who exercised political power—and therefore, Furet adds, rhetorical power—would be in a position to define the common good in a way that excluded large numbers of people. Lacking the guarantees of individual rights, the excluded individuals would find themselves vulnerable to arbitrary rule and ultimately to terror itself.

This desire to exclude, Furet maintains, was present in the revolution from its very start:

As early as 1789 a mental framework was in place that fostered political intolerance, the Manichaeian division of the world into the “good” and the “wicked,” patriots and aristocrats. . . . The constitutional framework conceived by the Constituent Assembly laid the foundations for what one might call a “parliamentary absolutism” that was unlikely to allow for divergent opinions or conflicting interests. (Furet, 1990: 795)¹¹

In making this analysis, Furet emphasizes the power of revolutionary language and rhetoric above all else. This part of his work, bordering as it does on a kind of semiotic determinism, is not easy to summarize (Furet, 1981a: esp. 44-61). Central to this discussion is Furet's contention that the elections to the Estates General in winter and spring of 1789 took place in the midst of a vacuum of state power. Financially bankrupt and forced first to capitulate to the nobility and then to the Third Estate, the king presided over a state that had ceased to function. The institutions of absolutist rule had collapsed, and no alternative ones existed to fill the breach; France's centralizing monarchy of the past two centuries had stripped the traditional noble assemblies of their authority and noblemen of the ability to rule. The nature of the Estates General, moreover, was itself uncertain because the Third Estate contested the forms of 1614. Meanwhile, the elections to choose the Third Estate's representatives were extremely democratic, permitting something close to universal manhood suffrage.

The political context of these elections could not, therefore, have been more open or more volatile. They occurred in a situation in which a state without legitimacy or power presided over a highly democratic contest to create a representative body whose basic organizational forms remained unclear. As Furet put it, the vacuum of power "touched off a war among the classes who wanted that power, a war that was fought over the modes of representation in the estates and thus opened up a vast field for the deployment of ideas and social passions" (1981a: 45). In the midst of this war, Rousseauian ideas about the need for a pure democracy and the evils of English-style forms of representation "surged in" (Furet, 1981a: 45). Because no stable institutions existed and there was no consensus about what new ones should take their place, electoral contests and political debate lost their grounding in the reality of parties, programs, and institutions. They floated instead in the heady air of philosophy and ideology. Given the apparent absence of political constraints, anything seemed possible. Society, politics, and even human nature could be transformed completely. Because no one exercised any real power, imaginary power reigned supreme, and that power resided in the word.

Now that the elections and widespread popular protest had thrust the masses into the political realm, the power of language was heightened all the more. The people's allegiance was there to be gained, and the various revolutionary actors fought a battle of words to secure that allegiance for themselves. "The Revolution," Furet (1981a: 46) wrote, "marks the beginning of a theatre in which language freed from all constraints seeks and finds a public characterized by its volatility." Each of those who deployed revolutionary rhetoric sought to achieve the legitimacy of speaking for the people, of expressing that unitary general will that was increasingly taken to be the essence of revolutionary leadership. In this setting, Furet claimed, "The Revolution replaced the conflict of interests for power with a competition of discourses for the appropriation of legitimacy. Its leaders' 'job' was not to act; they were there to interpret action" (p. 49).

What the successful leaders of the revolution told the people was that they were supreme but that their power was one and indivisible. Freedom, Rousseau had taught, was expressed not through the representation of individual interests and desires but through a unanimous

commitment to the public good. Departures from that unanimity threatened popular sovereignty and had to be suppressed. Revolutionary leaders adopted this view of dissent, Furet argues, because they saw it as expressing private, individual interests and wills—phenomena that, by virtue of being private, could easily remain hidden. The role of revolutionary rhetoric was to expose those private, subversive wills and, in so doing, to uncover the counterrevolution that lurked just beneath the surface in the form of an omnipresent conspiracy to deprive the people of its sovereignty. David D. Bien explains Furet's meaning well: "The underside of the undifferentiated and virtuous sovereign that could not legitimize disagreement . . . is that all disagreement would finally look like plot" (Bien, 1990: 779).

Given this hostility to dissent, the suspicion that beneath all verbal opposition lay conspiracy and counterrevolution, Furet maintains that the power and independence of revolutionary language paved the way for terror. Unmoored from political and institutional realities, language became the sole creator of legitimacy and with it the power—and eventually the need—to exclude individuals and groups from the sovereign people. The Terror, then, was embedded in the revolution from the first eruptions of its rhetoric. It follows—and here Furet's ideas are most controversial of all—that the horrors of 1793-94 were not the result of war and counterrevolution. They were inherent in the language and culture of 1789.

Needless to say, not everyone agrees with Furet's linguistic determinism or with his dismissal of the classic "theory of circumstances," the notion that, by 1793, the extraordinary pressures of war on France's borders and counterrevolution at home had forced the Jacobins to violate the liberal and humanitarian ideals of 1789. Nor is there unanimous acceptance of Furet's diagnosis of Old Regime political culture and the extent to which it shaped the revolution. A number of historians, both in France and in the Anglo-American world, believe that eighteenth-century political culture was far more liberal than Furet maintains. According to William Doyle and Dale Van Kley, the parlements of Paris and other major cities gained power during the second half of the eighteenth century and pressed their claims as significant representative bodies. They transformed their traditional arguments for the "liberties" (meaning privileges) of noblemen into what contemporaries widely interpreted as a plea for individual free-

dom and a certain independence from the state (Doyle, 1987; Van Kley, 1987).¹²

Other scholars have challenged Furet's position by suggesting that his understanding of the Old Regime has been shaped too much by his reading of philosophical texts and not enough by the pamphlets and news sheets most people saw. Jeremy Popkin's study of popular journalism and Daniel Roche's work on provincial academies suggest that Rousseauianism may not have had as firm a grasp on public opinion as Furet thinks (Popkin, 1987; Roche, 1987; cf. Censer, 1987). Summarizing much of the opposition to Furet, David D. Bien suggests that there was no single political culture of the Old Regime. Several different ones coexisted, each with its own following. Furet's democratic absolutism was just one of those competing cultures; as such, it provided a possible cultural context in which revolutionaries could operate after 1789, but other—more liberal—alternatives endured as well. Democratic absolutism, Bien (1990) writes, ultimately reigned supreme in 1793 only because the harsh military and economic circumstances of the early 1790s enabled its advocates to gain the upper hand.

Despite these dissenting voices, Furet's views continue to hold sway. Taking up the question of public opinion, his collaborator, Ozouf, has added compellingly to the argument that Old Regime political culture was far from liberal. French men and women of the eighteenth century, she maintains, viewed public opinion not as a set of conflicting voices but as a kind of collective wisdom whose purpose was to achieve singular truths (Ozouf, 1987). Public opinion distilled the variety of opinions into a kind of general intellectual will. It emerged from the public's desire for a set of abstract agreed on truths, not a marketplace of ideas. Like absolutist sovereignty, it expressed itself in a single unitary voice.

Beyond Furet's own intellectual power and the intelligence of his colleagues, his hold over the historiography of the revolution has been maintained by an extraordinary productivity and an unusual level of interest from the French media and publishing industry. (American publishers have contributed as well, bringing out his books in English immediately after they appear in France.) It is perhaps the media attention that is most amazing to American historians, accustomed to being ignored altogether by television and popular journalism. During

the celebrations of 1989, French television coronated Furet the "King of the Bicentennial," and it seemed as though *Le Monde* and the rest of the French press featured articles by or about him almost daily. Even in other European countries, the popular media have portrayed Furet not unlike the way American journalists do movie stars and sports celebrities. Vovelle tells of finding in a leading Spanish paper a lengthy interview with Furet that touched on, among other things, the bicentennial and the historiographical controversies in France. It ran under the headline "I've won!" (Vovelle, 1990).

The publication that has gained Furet the most attention is his *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française* (1988).¹³ This work of more than a thousand pages provides a revealing overview of the Furet position on the origins and meaning of 1789. Unlike the capstone works of Lefebvre and Soboul, the two most important historians of the Marxist school, the *Dictionnaire*, as its title suggests, is not a narrative history. It is, rather, a collaborative work that brings together about 100 entries, each of which is an essay—albeit without footnotes—in its own right. The volume, divided topically into sections on events, actors, creations, ideas, and historians, is as significant for what it ignores as for what it includes.¹⁴ Missing are virtually all the major social groups that contributed to the revolution or felt its effects: the nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie, peasants, artisans, and women. The *Dictionnaire*, moreover, includes no studies of the *longue durée*, no history from the bottom up, no concern with everyday life and popular culture, and nothing about the production of grain, subsistence crisis, or the economy in general, save for some brief entries on taxes, assignats, and nationalized land. It is as if the Annales school had never existed. Even an anthropological history, fashionable in France and elsewhere since the mid-1970s, finds no place in this volume. There is virtually no mention of rituals and symbolic representations or of the meanings expressed by clothing, gestures, and the human body itself. In the effort to break with the Marxist social interpretation, Furet and others have created a history with the society, economy, and popular culture left out.¹⁵

But these omissions are hardly inadvertent; it is not as though Furet and his coauthor, Ozouf, know nothing of the social, economic, and cultural history written during the past fifty years. Indeed, Ozouf has published a brilliant anthropological history of the revolutionary

festivals (Ozouf, 1976). The aim of the *Dictionnaire* seems almost to display the extent to which the historiography of the revolution has been reoriented toward politics, and especially political philosophy, over the past decade. Although Furet's early work followed the *Annales's* quantitative approach, he has long preferred the conceptual and philosophical to the empirical dimension of historical endeavor:

I consider such authors as Hegel and Marx, Constant and Staël, Tocqueville and Quinet much more fundamental for the understanding of the French Revolution than all the academic historians of the twentieth century, because scholarship, though indispensable to the historian's work, is not an end in itself. (Furet, 1990: 792)

True to his word, Furet devotes nearly half of his *Dictionnaire* to ideas in general and to the particular notions of a privileged cadre of historians and commentators. The first section includes concepts such as democracy, enlightenment, equality, fraternity, and liberty, whereas the second focuses mostly on philosophers, a group that, in addition to the figures listed previously, includes Burke, Fichte, Kant, Jaurès, Michelet, and Taine.

With all this attention to philosophy and philosophers, it is no wonder that so much has been left out. One of the most unfortunate omissions is a discussion of the recent—and highly interesting—feminist analyses of the origins and meaning of the French Revolution. In some ways, the new feminist work runs parallel to Furet's in its emphasis on the nullification of individual rights, in particular the rights of women. Joan B. Landes (1988), among others, has shown that aristocratic women of the Old Regime possessed a certain power and standing that the male leaders of the French Revolution took away and then refused to extend to any other women. Before 1789, women who inherited noble estates not only could administer them in their own names but in some regions enjoyed the right to vote in local and regional assemblies that such property conferred. As late as 1661, aristocratic women could still be given titles of nobility in their own right, and they exercised the prerogatives of their rank by sitting as members of the parlements that dispensed justice under the Old Regime. Dozens of noble women retained seats in various provincial parlements until the eve of the French Revolution itself (Landes, 1988: 122; Hause, 1984: 3-4).

Such privileges accrued, it need be said, only to a tiny minority, but a considerably larger group of prominent women enjoyed extensive informal power and influence in what Landes, borrowing from Habermas, calls the "absolutist public sphere" of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Landes, 1988: chap. 1). This sphere consisted largely of urban salons organized and animated by aristocratic women. In these salons intellectual figures, writers, gentlemen, high government officials, and other members of the urban elite came together for conversation and conviviality in a setting distinct from the much more restricted and hierarchical life of the royal court. All conversation revolved around the female *salonnière*, or hostess, who in animating her salon established standards of dress and comportment that her mostly male guests were expected to observe. Thus, in founding these intimate theaters of social and intellectual life, women of the Old Regime not only created an arena of public experience that had never existed before, they made themselves the cultural arbiters of an emerging polite society of cultivation and taste.

Such female prominence, Landes maintains, began to annoy many of the male writers and Enlightenment thinkers who congregated in the woman-centered salons. These men of letters came to associate the *salonnières* with the royal mistresses and confidants, the ladies in waiting and female conspirators, whom "enlightened" men widely believed to exercise undue power at court. In the hands of Rousseau, the prophet of virtue, purity, and modesty for women, this protest against the aristocratic woman's cultural and political power became a critique of the Old Regime itself. French society and politics were corrupt, Rousseau maintained, because they had become effeminate. Such was not the case, the *philosophe* added, in republican Geneva, whose all-male clubs Rousseau depicted as bastions of virility in which "conversation becomes less polished, [but] reasons take on more weight" (Rousseau, "Letter to M. d'Alembert on the theatre," quoted in Landes, 1988: 87-8).

By condemning the absolutist monarchy for empowering women and emasculating men while praising the republic for its grave masculine reason, Rousseau did much, Landes argues, to shape the later discourse and action of the French Revolution (Landes, 1988: chaps. 4-5). After 1789, and especially after 1792 when the republic was

declared, revolutionaries set out to eliminate all remnants of an aristocratic culture they believed to be decadent and corrupt. They resolved to replace an effeminate monarchy of artifice and ornament with a virile republic of virtue and reason. To do so, the revolutionaries undertook to banish women from all public life.

In 1793, the revolution's Jacobin leaders dissolved political organizations composed mainly of women and then banned women from attending any political meetings at all. That same year, Olympe de Gouges, author of the "Declaration of the Rights of Woman," was sent to the guillotine for supposed acts of treason, and another early feminist, Théroigne de Méricourt, was publicly whipped (Moses, 1984: 13; Hause, 1984: 5). In 1795, women were forbidden even to sit in the visitor's gallery of the National Convention and, after a violent demonstration in which women were prominently involved, the convention singled them out for a special kind of punishment, namely confinement to the home:

Be it decreed that all women should retire . . . into their respective homes; those who . . . are found in the streets, gathered in groups of more than five, will be dispersed by armed force and arrested until public calm is restored. (quoted in Moses, 1984: 14)

This was the harshest, most repressive side of the revolution's treatment of women, the most negative consequence of the desire to keep women from the public sphere. But there was another side to this "privatization" of women, one that was much more positive. For even as revolutionary leaders consigned women to the home, they joined with feminists in declaring that women had something of unique importance to do there. The role of women in the new revolutionary order was to produce the virtuous and patriotic citizens who would people it. Women, especially women of the middling classes, were exalted for their status as "republican mothers," for the crucial part they would play in nurturing and educating the republic's newborn citizens.¹⁶

There are no simple conclusions to be drawn from a consideration of 1789 that pays due attention to women and feminist analysis. On the one hand, Landes and others are surely right to say that the revolution—especially when the Napoleonic Code is taken into ac-

count—did little in the immediate to foster women's rights. But, on the other hand, its ideals of liberty and equality as well as the political participation—albeit mostly male—encouraged by the revolution did much to inspire the feminist movements of the nineteenth century and to convince large numbers of women that no democracy was worth its name if it excluded half the human race.

Indeed, no analysis of the revolution, it seems to me, can be wholly convincing if it neglects to explain how, despite the Terror, the counterrevolution, and the deprivation of women's rights, it managed nonetheless to bequeath to future generations and to people around the world not only the desire for political liberty and social equality but the belief that both could be achieved. Nor can any discussion of 1789 that omits its social origins do full justice to the event. One irony of the historiographical debate is that Doyle, one of those who argued most convincingly for a largely political interpretation, has recently urged us to remember that the cultural and political underpinnings of the revolution took shape in a context of social and economic change. The development of salons, clubs, academies, literary societies, and the like required the existence of growing numbers of educated French men and women who possessed the leisure to engage in political and philosophical debate. Only an expanding economy could account for France's widening reading public, and the reasons and implications of this expansion need to be taken into account. We need also to recognize, writes Doyle, that the mounting number of educated people is the result of a rapidly growing middle class (Doyle, 1990: 746-8). Like the libertarian legacy of the French Revolution, the bourgeoisie cannot be completely overlooked. Perhaps we are about to experience the return of the repressed?

NOTES

1. My views on the relationship between the historiography of the French and Russian revolutions has been much influenced by an as yet unpublished paper by Michel Vovelle, "1789-1917," given at a Stanford University conference on the Terror in December 1992. See also Furet (1981b).

2. Among the most important are, *Penser la Révolution Française* (1978), translated as *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1981a); *Terrorisme et démocratie* (1985); *La gauche et la Révolution française au milieu du XIXe siècle: Edgar Quinet et la question du Jacobinisme*

(1865-1870) (1986); *Marx et la Révolution française* (1986), translated as *Marx and the French Revolution* (1988); *La République du centre: La fin de l'exception française* (1988); *La Révolution de Turgot à Jules Ferry, 1770-1880* (1988), translated as *Revolutionary France, 1770-1880* (1992); *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française* (with Mona Ozouf; 1988), translated as *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (1989); *La Gironde et les Girondins* (edited with Mona Ozouf; 1991); *Orateurs de la Révolution française* (with Ran Halévi; 1989); *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* (edited with Mona Ozouf; 1989); *Terminer la Révolution: Mounier et Barnave dans la Révolution française* (edited with Mona Ozouf; 1990).

3. According to Soboul (1974a: 142), the revolution marked "the appearance, the growth, and the final triumph of the bourgeoisie." See also Soboul (1974b); Claude Mazauric (1970).

4. See Doyle (1980) for an excellent discussion of the revisionist critique. I am indebted here to Doyle's lucid analysis.

5. Furet extended and deepened Taylor's analysis in a powerful polemic against what he termed the "revolutionary catechism": "Le catechisme révolutionnaire" (1971), translated in Furet (1981b).

6. The original German edition of Habermas's work was published in 1962; it was translated into French in 1978. For Habermas, the public sphere was necessarily bourgeois; French and American historians of the revolution and its origins have dropped the adjective. See Dena Goodman (1992).

7. The most important statement of the centrality of counterrevolution is Sutherland (1986). See also Solé (1988).

8. Furet (1981a) elaborates this view most fully in *Interpreting the French Revolution*, part I. Tocqueville's long-neglected argument forms the basis of his *Old Regime and the French Revolution* originally published in 1856.

9. See their respective contributions to the two key volumes of conference papers edited by Baker (1987) and Lucas (1988). See also Baker (1990b). For an interesting analysis of the conference that led to the volume of 1987, see Censer (1987).

10. With Rousseau, it seems as though we have come full circle. Partly because a certain conservative historiography once blamed the philosopher for the Revolution, liberal and left-wing interpretations for a long time saw him as irrelevant to it. Now he has returned to the center of debate—not, of course, as the author of revolution but as one whose ideas helped shape the political culture of 1789.

11. These developments were not inevitable, Furet hastens to add. They were facilitated by the nature of the elections to the Estates General in early 1789. Nonetheless, they followed logically from the political culture of the Old Regime.

12. R. R. Palmer (1960) made a similar argument three decades ago in his unjustly neglected, *The Age of Democratic Revolutions*.

13. Harvard University Press published a sumptuous—and very expensive—American edition shortly after it appeared in France. The English title is *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (Furet and Ozouf, 1989).

14. I am indebted here to Claude Langlois's (1990) excellent discussion of the nature and structure of Furet's *Dictionnaire*.

15. Nor is there anything about art and science or the geography of the Revolution. Ignored as well is the notion of an era of democratic revolutions championed by Palmer.

16. On the concept of "republican motherhood," see Landes (1988: 129-38). See also the lucid discussion in Bonnie Smith (1989: 103-16).

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