Part I

The French Revolution is over

I

Historians engaged in the study of the Merovingian Kings or the Hundred Years War are not asked at every turn to present their research permits. So long as they can give proof of having learned the techniques of the trade, society and the profession assume that they possess the virtues of patience and objectivity. The discussion of their findings is a matter for scholars and scholarship only.

The historian of the French Revolution, on the other hand, must produce more than proof of competence. He must show his colours. He must state from the outset where he comes from, what he thinks and what he is looking for; what he writes about the French Revolution is assigned a meaning and label even before he starts working: the writing is taken as his opinion, a form of judgment that is not required when dealing with the Merovingians but indispensable when it comes to treating 1789 or 1793. As soon as the historian states that opinion, the matter is settled; he is labelled a royalist, a liberal or a Jacobin. Once he has given the password his history has a specific meaning, a determined place and a claim to legitimacy.

What is surprising here is not that the history of the Revolution, like all histories, involves intellectual presuppositions. There is no such thing as 'innocent' historical interpretation, and written history is itself located in history, indeed is history, the product of an inherently unstable relationship between the present and the past, a merging of the particular mind with the vast field of its potential topics of study in the past. But if all history implies a choice, a preference within the range of what might be studied, it does not follow that such a choice always involves a preconceived opinion about the subject chosen. For that to happen, or to be assumed, the subject must arouse in the historian and his public a capacity for identifying with political or religious passions that have survived the passing of time.
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The passing of time may weaken that sense of identification, or on the contrary preserve and even strengthen it, depending on whether the subject treated by the historian does or does not continue to express the issues of his own times, his values and his choices. The theme of Clovis and the Frankish invasions was of burning interest in the eighteenth century because the historians of that era saw it as the key to the social structure of their own time. They thought that the Frankish invasions were the origin of the division between nobility and commoners, the conquerors being the progenitors of the nobility and the conquered those of the commoners. Today the Frankish invasions have lost all relevance, since we live in a society where nobility has ceased to act as a social principle. No longer serving as the mirror of an existing world, the Frankish invasions have lost the eminent place in historiography that that world once assigned to them, and have moved from the realm of social polemic to that of learned debate.

The fact is that beginning in 1789 the obsession with origins, the underlying thread of all national history, came to be centred precisely on the Revolutionary break. Just as the great invasions were the myth of a society dominated by the nobility, the saga of its origins, so 1789 became the birth date, the year zero of a new world founded on equality. The substitution of one birth date for another, in other words, the definition in time of a new national identity, is perhaps one of the abbé Sieyès’s greatest strokes of genius, especially if one remembers that he anticipated the founding event by several months¹ and yet gave it its full meaning in advance:

The Third Estate has nothing to fear from going back into the past. It will refer back to the year preceding the conquest; and since it is today strong enough not to be conquered, its resistance will no doubt be more effective. Why should it not send back to the forests of Franconia all those families who cling to the mad claim that they are descended from the race of conquerors and have inherited their rights? Thus purified, the nation will easily console itself, I believe, for no longer imagining itself composed only of the descendants of Gauls and Romans.²

These few lines tell us not only that the nobles’ proprietary claims over the nation are fictitious, but also that, even if those claims were well founded, the Third Estate would have only to restore the social contract in force before the conquest or, rather, to found it by obliterating centuries of violent usurpation. In either instance it is a matter of

¹ *Qu’est-ce que le Tiers Etat?* was written at the end of 1788 and published in January 1789.
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constituting a 'true' origin for the nation by giving a legitimate date of birth to equality: that is what 1789 is all about.

But Revolutionary historiography has had the function of keeping alive that account of society's origins. Consider, for example, the manner in which studies are divided for the teaching of history in France. 'Modern' history ends in 1789 with what the Revolution christened the 'Ancien Régime', a period which, if it lacks a clearly marked birth-certificate, is thus given a duly signed death-certificate. Thereafter, the Revolution and the Empire form separate and autonomous fields of study, each with its own professorships, students, learned societies and journals, and the quarter-century separating the storming of the Bastille from the Battle of Waterloo is assigned a special place: it is both the end of the 'modern' era and the indispensable introduction to the 'contemporary' period, which begins in 1815; it is the period of transition that gives meaning to both, the watershed from which the history of France either flows back to its past or rushes toward its future. By remaining faithful to the conscious experience of the actors of the Revolution, despite all the intellectual absurdities implicit in such a chronological framework, our academic institutions have invested the French Revolution and the historian of that period with the mysteries of our national history. The year 1789 is the key to what lies both upstream and downstream. It separates those periods, and thereby defines and 'explains' them.

But it is not enough to say that the Revolution explains what lies downstream – the period beginning in 1815 that the Revolution is supposed to have created, made possible, inaugurated. The Revolution does not simply 'explain' our contemporary history; it is our contemporary history. And that is worth pondering over.

For the same reasons that the Ancien Régime is thought to have an end but no beginning, the Revolution has a birth but no end. For the one, seen negatively and lacking chronological definition, only its death is a certainty; the other contains a promise of such magnitude that it becomes boundlessly elastic. Even in the short term, it is not easy to 'date': depending on the significance the historian attributes to the main events, he may encapsulate the Revolution within the year 1789, seeing in it the year in which the essential features of the Revolution's final outcome were fixed, when the final page of the Ancien Régime was turned – or he may go up to 1794 and the execution of Robespierre, stressing the dictatorship of the Revolutionary committees and of the sections, the Jacobin saga and the egalitarian crusade of the Year II. Or he may use 18 Brumaire 1799
The Revolution is over as the terminus, if he wants to acknowledge the extent to which Thermidorians had remained Jacobins, and include the government of the regicides and the war against the European monarchies. He may even integrate the Napoleonic adventure into the Revolution, perhaps to the end of the Consular period, or to Napoleon’s Habsburg marriage, or even to the Hundred Days: a case can be made for any of these time frames.

One could also envisage a much longer history of the French Revolution, extending even farther downstream, and ending not before the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. For the entire history of nineteenth-century France can be seen as a struggle between Revolution and Restoration, passing through various episodes in 1815, 1830, 1848, 1851, 1870, the Commune and 16 May 1877. Only the victory of the republicans over the monarchists at the beginning of the Third Republic marked the definitive victory of the Revolution in the French countryside. The lay schoolteacher of Jules Ferry was a missionary for the values of 1789, and was more than an instrument; he was the embodiment of victory in that long battle. Integration of France’s villages and peasant culture into the republican nation on the basis of the principles of 1789 was to take at least a century, and no doubt considerably longer in such regions as Brittany or the Southwest, which lagged in more than one respect. That recent history of the French countryside is still, for the most part, unwritten; yet it too constitutes a history of the Revolution. Republican Jacobinism, dictated for so long from Paris, won its victory only after it could count on the majority vote of rural France at the end of the nineteenth century.

But its electoral ‘victory’ did not mean that it was honoured or assimilated as a value, something so unanimously accepted as to be no longer debated. The celebration of the principles of 1789, the object of so much pedagogical solicitude, or the condemnation of the crimes of 1793, which usually serves as a screen for the rejection of those principles, has remained at the core of the set of notions that shaped French political life until the middle of the twentieth century. Fascism, by its explicit rejection of the values of the French Revolution, gave an international dimension to that conflict of ideas. But, interestingly enough, the Vichy régime, set up after the German victory, was less specifically fascist than traditionalist, and was obsessed with 1789. France in the 1940s was still a country

3. The expression ‘lagging’ has only a descriptive value. The analysis of this ‘lag’ and of integration into the Republic through the school system and politics is the central topic of Maurice Agulhon’s work (especially in La République au village [Paris: Pion, 1970]). That process is also analysed in Eugen Weber’s recent book Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernization of rural France (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1976).
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whose citizens had to sort out their history, date the birth of their nation, choose between the Ancien Régime and the Revolution.

In that form, the reference to 1789 disappeared from French politics with the defeat of fascism. Today the discourse of both Right and Left celebrates liberty and equality, and the debate about the values of 1789 no longer involves any real political stakes or even strong psychological commitment. But if such unanimity exists, it is because the political debate has simply been transferred from one Revolution to the other, from the Revolution of the past to the one that is to come. By shifting the conflict to the future, it is possible to create an apparent consensus about the legacy of the past. But in fact that legacy, which is one of conflict, lives on by dominating the representations of the future, just as an old geological substratum, covered with later sedimentation, still moulds the features of the earth and the landscape. For the French Revolution is not only the Republic. It is also an unlimited promise of equality and a special form of change. One only has to see in it not a national institution but a matrix of universal history, in order to recapture its dynamic force and its fascinating appeal. The nineteenth century believed in the Republic. The twentieth century believes in the Revolution. The same founding event is present in both images.

And indeed, the socialists of the late nineteenth century conceived of their action as both coordinated with and distinct from that of the republicans. Coordinated, because they felt that the Republic was the prerequisite of socialism. Distinct, because they saw political democracy as a historical stage of social organisation that was destined to be superseded, and because they perceived 1789 not as the foundation of a stable State but as a movement whose logic required it to go beyond that first stage. The struggle for democracy and the struggle for socialism were the two successive forms assumed by a dynamic of equality originating in the French Revolution. Thus was formed a vision, a linear history of human emancipation whose first stage had been the maturing and the dissemination of the values of 1789, while the second stage was to fulfil the promise of 1789 by a new, and this time socialist, revolution. This two-pronged mechanism is implicit in Jaurès’s socialist history of the Revolution, for example, but the great socialist authors were at first unable to give an account of the second stage; understandably so, since it was still in the future.

All that changed in 1917. Now that the socialist revolution had a face, the French Revolution ceased to be the model for a future that was possible, desirable, hoped for, but as yet devoid of content. Instead, it
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became the mother of a real, dated, and duly registered event: October 1917. As I suggest in one of the essays below, the Russian Bolsheviks never – before, during or after the Russian Revolution – lost sight of that filiation. But by the same token the historians of the French Revolution projected into the past their feelings or their judgments about 1917, and tended to highlight those features of the first revolution that seemed to presage or indeed anticipate those of the second. At the very moment when Russia – for better or worse – took the place of France as the nation in the vanguard of history, because it had inherited from France and from nineteenth-century thought the idea that a nation is chosen for revolution, the historiographical discourses about the two revolutions became fused and infected each other. The Bolsheviks were given Jacobin ancestors, and the Jacobins were made to anticipate the communists.

Thus, for almost two hundred years now, the history of the French Revolution has been a story of beginnings and so a discourse about identity. In the nineteenth century that history was virtually indistinguishable from the event it purported to retrace, for the drama begun in 1789 was played over and over, generation after generation, for the same stakes and around the same symbols, an unbroken memory that became an object of worship or of horror. Not only did the Revolution found the political culture that makes ‘contemporary’ France intelligible, but it also bequeathed to France conflicts between legitimacies and a virtually inexhaustible stock of political debates: 1830 was 1789 all over; 1848 re-enacted the First Republic; and the Commune echoed the Jacobin dream. It was not until the end of the century, with the spread of a republican consensus, first in the Parliament, then in the nation at large, and with the founding of the Third Republic, that the Revolution – at last, after a century – began to acquire academic respectability. Under pressure from the Société d’histoire de la Révolution française, founded in 1881 by a group of republican intellectuals, the Sorbonne offered in 1886 a ‘course’ in the history of the Revolution, taught by Alphonse Aulard. In 1891, that course became a ‘chair’.

Did the Revolution, once it was officially taught, become national property, like the Republic? As in the case of the Republic, the answer is: yes and no. Yes, because in a sense, with the founding of the Republic on the vote of the people, and no longer on the Parisian insurrection, the French Revolution was finally ‘over’; it had become a national institution, sanctioned by the legal and democratic consent of citizens. Yet, on the other hand, the republican consensus built on the political culture born in
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1789 was conservative and obtained by default from the ruling classes, who could not agree on a king, and from the peasants and minor notables, who wanted a guarantee of security: indeed, it was the repression of the Commune that made the Republic acceptable in the provinces. However, a victorious French Revolution, finally accepted as a closed chapter of history, as a patrimony and a national institution, contradicted the image of change it implied, for that image involved a far more radical promise than lay schools and the separation of Church and State. Once the Revolution had succeeded in imposing the Republic, it became clear that it was much more than the Republic. It was a pledge that no event could fully redeem.

That is why, in the very last years of the nineteenth century, when the historiographical debate between royalists and republicans was still over what had been the political stakes of 1789, socialist thinking seized upon the notion of the Revolution as prefiguration. Aulard had criticised Taine for reconstructing the ‘Origins of Contemporary France’. Jaurès saw the French Revolution as the beginning of a beginning, as a world that would give birth again: “The least of its greatness is the present ... Its prolongations are unlimited.” The Russian Revolution of October 1917 seemed made to order to fulfil that expectation of a renewed beginning. Henceforth – as Mathiez made quite explicit – the inventory of the Jacobin legacy was overlaid with an implicit discourse for or against Bolshevism, a development that hardly made for intellectual flexibility. In fact, the overlap of those two political debates extended the nineteenth into the twentieth century, and transferred onto communism and anticommunism the passions previously aroused by the king of France and by the Republic, displacing but not weakening them. Quite the contrary, for those passions were re-implanted in the present and given new political stakes to be culled, like so many still indistinct promises, from the events of 1789 or rather 1793. But in becoming the positive or negative prefiguration of an authentically communist revolution, in which the famous ‘bourgeoisie’ would not come to confiscate the victory of the people, the French Revolution did not gain in meaning or in conceptual clarity. It simply renewed its myth, which became the poorer for it.

I should like to avoid a misunderstanding here: that contamination of the past by the present, that endless capacity for assimilation, which by definition characterises a Revolution conceived as a starting point, does

5. Cf. below, p. 85.
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not preclude partial progress in certain areas of scholarship. After all, the Revolution has been an academic ‘field’ since the end of the nineteenth century, and since then each generation of historians has had to do its share of archival work. In that respect, the emphasis on the popular classes and their action in the French Revolution has brought advances in our knowledge of the rôle played by the peasants and the urban masses that it would be absurd to ignore or underestimate. But those advances have not appreciably modified the analysis of what we usually refer to as the ‘French Revolution’ taken as a whole.

Take the problem of the peasantry, which has been studied and re-evaluated in many works since the beginning of the century, from Louchiski to Paul Bois, an area in which, it seems to me, Georges Lefebvre made his main contribution to the historiography of the French Revolution. From his analysis of the question and of peasant behaviour, Georges Lefebvre came to two ideas: first, that, from the social point of view, there were several revolutions within what is called the French Revolution; second, that the peasant revolution was not only largely autonomous and distinct from the other revolutions (those of the aristocrats, the bourgeois, and the sans-culottes, for example), but also anti-capitalist, that is, in his opinion, traditionalist and backward-looking. Right off, those two ideas are difficult to reconcile with a vision of the French Revolution as a homogeneous social and political phenomenon opening the way to a capitalist or bourgeois future that the ‘Ancien Régime’ had blocked.

But there is more. Georges Lefebvre also noted that, in the rural history of the Ancien Régime, capitalism was increasingly present, and that its ‘spirit’ had deeply penetrated the landed aristocracy. Consequently, as Paul Bois showed later, the same peasantry could successively come into conflict with the seigneurs in 1789 and with the Republic in 1793 without the ‘Revolution’ having changed anything in the nature of the social pressures exerted by the peasantry or the struggle in which it was engaged. As early as 1932, Georges Lefebvre could write: ‘The Ancien Régime started the agrarian history of France on the road to capitalism; the Revolution abruptly completed the task that the Ancien Régime had begun.’ But this conclusion, which sounds almost like Tocqueville, does not lead the historian of Jacobin tradition, like his legitimist ancestor, to a critique of the very concept of revolution. He does not try to understand how

one might reconcile the idea of radical change with that of an actual continuity. He simply juxtaposes, without attempting to make them compatible, an analysis of the peasant problem at the end of the eighteenth century and a contradictory tradition that consists in seeing the Revolution, through the eyes of its participants, as a break, an advent, a time both qualitatively new and different, as homogeneous as a brand-new fabric. It would not be difficult to show that the twentieth century's greatest university scholar of the French Revolution, the man who had a richer knowledge and a surer grasp of the period than anyone, based his synthetic vision of the immense event to which he devoted his life on nothing more than the convictions of a militant adherent of the Cartel des Gauches and the Popular Front.9

The fact is that scholarship, although it may be stimulated by preoccupations stemming from the present, is never sufficient in itself to modify the conceptisation of a problem or an event. In the case of the French Revolution, scholarship could, under the influence of Jaurès, 1917 and Marxism, take a turn toward social history and conquer new territories in the twentieth century. Yet it remains attached – indeed more closely than ever – to the old recital of origins, which was both renewed and made more rigid by deposits of socialist thinking. For the takeover of the history of the Revolution by social history, if it has opened new fields of research in specific areas, has only shifted elsewhere the question of origins: the advent of the bourgeoisie has been substituted for the advent of liberty, but it remains no less an advent. The durability of that notion is the more extraordinary since the idea of a radical rending of the social fabric of a nation is even more difficult to conceive of than the political break; in that sense, the historiographical shift from a political to a social emphasis shows the lasting power of the notion that the Revolution was an advent, precisely because such a shift is even more incompatible with ‘revolution’. That intellectual contradiction is masked by the celebration of the beginnings. For in the twentieth century, more than ever before, the historian of the French Revolution commemorates the event he narrates or studies. The new materials he brings to bear are no more than supplementary ornaments offered up to his tradition. Lineages are perpetuated along with the debates: just as Aulard and Taine debated the Republic when writing about the French Revolution, so Mathiez and Gaxotte discussed the origins of communism. This infinite capacity for commemoration, always an expression of

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	national pride, explains why in France the Revolution has become a special field in historical studies. It was dignified as an academic specialty not because it contains demonstrably special problems, but because it allows the historian to identify with his heroes and 'his' event. The French Revolution therefore has its royalist, liberal, Jacobin, anarchist, or libertarian histories, and this list is neither exclusive – for those tendencies do not necessarily always contradict each other – nor above all restrictive. Mother of the political culture into which all of us are born, the Revolution allows everyone to look for filiations. But all those histories, which have bitterly fought each other for the last two hundred years in the name of the origins of their opposition, in fact share a common ground: they are all histories in quest of identity. No Frenchman living in the second half of the twentieth century can perceive the French Revolution from the outside. One cannot practise ethnology in so familiar a landscape. The event is so fundamentally, so tyrannically rooted in contemporary French political consciousness that any attempt to consider it from an intellectual 'distance' is immediately seen as hostility – as if identification, be it a claim to descent or rejection, were inevitable.

Yet we must try to break the vicious circle of that commemorative historiography. It has long been fashionable among people of my generation, who were brought up under the double influence of existentialism and Marxism, to stress that the historian is rooted in his own times, his own choices and his own constraints. By now the continued harping on those truisms – however useful they may have been for combating the positivist illusion that 'objectivity' is possible – is liable to perpetuate professions of faith and polemics that have had their day. Today the historiography of the Revolution is hampered, even more than by political ideology, by mental laziness and pious rehearsing. Surely, it is time to strip it of the elementary significations it has bequeathed to its heirs, and to restore to it another primum movens of the historian, namely, intellectual curiosity and the free search for knowledge about the past. Moreover, a time will come when the political beliefs that have sustained the disputes within our societies over the last two centuries will seem as surprising to men as the inexhaustible variety and violence of the religious conflicts in Europe between the fifteenth and the seventeenth century seem to us. The very fact that the study of the French Revolution could become a political arena will probably be seen as an explanatory factor and as a psychological commitment of a bygone age.

But that 'cooling off' of the object 'French Revolution', to speak in Levi-Straussian terms, is not to be expected from the mere passing of time.