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978-0-521-28049-5 - Interpreting the French Revolution

Francois Furet

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FRANÇOIS FURET

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Let us set our souls free to revolutionise the Revolution and, above all, let us resolve never to accuse an impartial mind of insulting the Revolution. For the term 'insult to Religion' has been so abused that we shall strike it from our language, since nothing is to be more avoided than the style and cast of mind of a public prosecutor when they are brought into historical and philosophical criticism.

Edgar Quinet,

Critique de la Révolution (Paris, 1867)

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Preface

The two parts of this book were written at two distinct moments, and the order in which they appear reverses the order of their composition.

The first part aims at providing a synthetic solution to a problem that has been a constant concern of mine ever since I started studying the French Revolution: how does one interpret such an event? The second part presents the successive stages of my attempt to answer that question and the sequence of my intellectual encounters so as to chart the itinerary I have followed.

It begins with a brief against the communist historians of the French Revolution, focusing on the inconsistencies of what is today the dominant interpretation of that event. That essay originated in the give-and-take of intellectual life and debate at a particular time; but I did not feel that I should rewrite it, seven years later, in an artificially neutral tone. As it stands, it testifies in its own way to the special importance of the French Revolution as an issue in the French academic community. I can only hope that what it owes to circumstance will not detract from its explanatory character, which is all that matters to me.

That somewhat massive clearing operation is followed by two studies, devoted to the two authors who have been instrumental to the development of my intellectual position: Alexis de Tocqueville and Augustin Cochin. The reader will understand why as these pages unfold: Tocqueville and Cochin were the only historians to propose a rigorous conceptualisation of the French Revolution and to have dealt with the question raised in this book. Their analyses, which seem to me not so much contradictory as complementary, are the basis of my proposed system of interpretation, which will be found in the first part of the book. It is their path that I have taken, and it gives me pleasure to inscribe their names in this preface.

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x Preface

Note to the English edition

I should like to express here all my appreciation to Mrs Elborg Forster for having translated a text that involved not a few difficulties. I am also deeply grateful to Mr Jonathan Mandelbaum, with whom I was able, in Paris, to review the English typescript and update a number of bibliographical references. Thanks to him, the present translation is in many respects fuller than the French original, published in 1978.