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Why the Republic?

The year 1848 in French history stands for a new kind of change in the political regime: that is its salient characteristic. The Republic took the place of the Monarchy, or of a monarchy. An anonymous power, more or less collective or at any rate in the main depersonalised and secularised, now replaced the rule of a single man, a sovereign designated and set above his peers by sole virtue of his birth.

But what did this form of power mean? Was it an expedient to ensure the functioning of the State in the temporary absence of a monarch; was it, in short, a kind of regency? Or was it a system chosen for itself and credited with positive merits of its own? The first concept, that of a temporary republic in the expectation of a restoration of the monarchy, is not one that is foreign to French history. To anticipate a little: we find just such a republic in existence from February 1871 to January 1879. And there can be no doubt that even as early as 1848 a very large number of French politicians would only accept the idea of the Republic seen in that particular light. However, these passive republicans – republicans merely through force of circumstance – known as ‘latter-day republicans’ (*républicains du lendemain*), that is, ‘in the aftermath of the Revolution’, were initially not the strongest. On 25 February 1848, the Republic was proclaimed in Paris by republicans ‘of long-standing’ (*de la veille*), committed and convinced men who desired it for its own sake.

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What were their aspirations? One cannot attach much importance to foreign influences, schoolboy memories of the free cities of Athens and Rome or knowledge of the United States of America.

To be sure, the former still featured large in bourgeois education and the latter too was accessible to the educated public. But Demosthenes, Brutus and Washington provided models of personal behaviour rather than constitutional or political examples. Such examples were now mainly national ones. In 1848 thinking about the Republic meant thinking about

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the French Revolution. As Henri Guillemin¹ put it a few years ago, 1848 was to be, as it were, 'the first resurrection of the Republic' (*la première résurrection de la République*).

The image and memory of the Revolution

What we must discover is what the idea of the first French Republic meant to the young men of 1848 and how they came to love it. It is no simple matter: the spirit of the Age of Enlightenment, political liberty and civil equality, together with modernised institutions and a generalised national pride were all points already gained in 1789 and which could be reconciled to a monarchical regime. Such a regime had existed from 1789 to 1792, from 1804 to 1814 and, again, since 1830, under the symbol of the tricolour flag and the titular leadership of a king (or emperor) 'of the French'. It was possible to be a genuine *philosophe*, a liberal and a patriot, without pressing for more. So to identify, as a republican, with the period 1792–1804 was to want something else. Let us leave aside the years of the Consulate (1800–4), when the Imperial monarchy was already in gestation; and also the Directorial Republic (1795–1800), which was patently a political and social failure. We are left with the key period from 10 August, the period of the Commune and the Convention. Now, it is easy to argue that, without the excess of revolutionary energy deployed during that period, even the gains made by the reasonable wing of the revolution would have been threatened and that '93 was necessary to complete and salvage '89. But although this is nowadays the common view, it was not the one immediately recognised at the time. For many years it continued to be masked by another, more striking, historical fact, namely that the Republic, from 1792 to the Year II, had forced democracy to the point of popular dictatorship and propelled radicalism into the Terror. Being a republican meant being a supporter of the guillotine, of going to the limit of the oppression of individuals and property by the police; it meant, in short, being 'a man of blood'.

Around 1815, this was the grossly simplistic and strongly repellent image of the Republic in the minds of the vast majority of French people. At this date, those who were capable, primarily by example, of testifying to the positive values of the Jacobin revolution (those, at least, who were neither dead nor won over to the opportunism of the constitutional monarchies nor immersed in a somewhat shamefaced scepticism which induced them to condemn their own pasts quite spontaneously) – such men now numbered no more than a handful; and the republican party consisted, essentially, of them and their scattered and un-coordinated families: that is, of old men and their descendants. Before the Republic could attempt a reappearance in 1830 and do so successfully in 1848, it was necessary for this amorphous group to win over new members and

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acquire a measure of coordination. The obscure progress made by the republican idea in the course of the successive reigns of the Restoration and of Orleanism must be counted as the first of the political causes of the 1848 Revolution.

We do not know enough about the later lives and influence of those who had fought for the First Republic. In comparison with the vast body of literature inspired by the Napoleonic legend, the bibliography of the republican legend is very meagre. Everyone remembers the veteran soldier created by Balzac in his *Médecin de campagne*, but Victor Hugo's former member of the Convention in *Les Misérables* (the 'bishop visited by a hitherto unexperienced enlightenment') enjoys no such fame. It is true that Victor Hugo invests his characters with such symbolic significance and distorts their images so boldly that they can hardly be considered as representative social types. All the same, there *were* erstwhile Jacobins who resumed their roles as notaries, artisans or men of private means in their own little towns, just as there were classic veteran soldiers on half-pay from the Imperial army, and they too must have told their tales of an evening, dispensed advice to their neighbours and (after 1831) taken part in municipal politics. Quite apart from their own personal influence and that of their families, we must also bear in mind the impact they may have had within associations such as masonic lodges, secret societies or even plain *cercles*.* The former partisans of the Republic who rubbed shoulders there with other free-thinkers, other supporters of political liberty and other patriots may well have won over to their own ideal more than a few disenchanted Orleanists or even Bonapartists.

The role of historians and of history

However, the overall impact of these individual memories would not have been sufficiently strong had not literature evoked a collective memory. If the Republic was better known during the forties and able to win supporters from beyond the restricted circle of republican survivors and their immediate intimates, this was the achievement of History. The History of the Revolution had come into being many years earlier, under the Restoration, during the period when those who rallied to the white flag were in power. It was against them that liberals such as Thiers and Mignet were obliged to defend the great choice made in 1789; namely the adoption of the tricolour flag and the values of modern and rational policies. In this defence of the Revolution as a whole, constitutional monarchy was exalted and the republican parenthesis excused as the fruit of an inevitable sequence of events, chief of which was the war that had

*The equivalent of the English club, in the most general sense of the term. (In France, 'club' has two specific accepted meanings: (1) a political association at the time of the French revolution; (2) more recently, a sports association.)

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been foisted upon France by outside powers. But once the course of reconstituting and meditating upon the recent national past was embarked upon, there was no checking it and it led inevitably to deeper, more emotional and less politically circumspect historical studies. Thus, within less than two years (1847–8) four separate books appeared almost simultaneously: Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution*, Lamartine's *Histoire des Girondins*, Louis Blanc's *Histoire de la Révolution* and Alphonse Esquiros' *Histoire des montagnards*. Although Louis Blanc generally associated praise of Robespierism with socialist convictions, the others were less exclusive; which is what made them new and important. For in Michelet or in Lamartine we do not find the Republic identified only – or even essentially – with those few months of the tense, dark and sometimes cruel dictatorship of the spring and summer of the Year II. For them, it had at first in 1792 been the party of those men who picked up the torch of 1789 just when the king and most of the constitutionalists were setting it down. In short, the Republic was not a shameful and short-lived parenthesis, but rather, a new revolution, the revolution of 1792, as exalting and noble as that of 1789. And this is what was said by the most renowned poet of the age, Lamartine of the Académie française, as well as by France's most eminent scholar, Michelet, professor at the Collège de France. There was no need for the republican party's writers to declare their explicit support for it. Whether they liked it or not, they were regarded as its moral guarantors.

In every domain, furthermore, History, as mobilised by the July revolution against the out-moded or retrograde spirit of the monarchy of the Restoration, was now opposed to its own former conservatism. In the first years of his reign, Louis-Philippe had erected a column in the place de la Bastille in commemoration of the July struggles; it was a way of paying homage to popular struggles: those of 1830 which were referred to explicitly and those of 1789 which were implied by the choice of the column's location. The tradition of taking up arms was thus officially commemorated right in the centre of working-class Paris. Furthermore, on the other side of the capital, at the top of the Champs-Élysées, the hub of the newly developed part of the city, the regime had at the same date completed the decoration of the Arc de Triomphe at the Étoile. Here Rude had sculpted the *Departure of the volunteers* in glorification of the national fervour of 1792. For obvious reasons there is nothing at all to commemorate the constitutional monarchy in this famous sculpture. In theory, the woman leading the marching column represents the spirit of war. But she could also be seen as an allegory of the Republic. It was no mere chance that the *Departure of the volunteers* was to be more commonly known as the *Marseillaise*, after the title of an anthem still, at this date, regarded as revolutionary. For the worthy Rouget de l'Isle, the 'tyranny' raising its

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Maurice Agulhon

Excerpt

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'bloody standard' was the tyranny of Austria and Prussia, but it was not long before the circumstances of the Revolution made it possible to interpret it equally well in terms of internal politics. Here too, the patriotic struggle had become the republican one. It was certainly extremely difficult to honour the militant Revolution without at the same time exalting the Republic. In its earliest days the July Monarchy had naïvely taken that risk and, by raising these two monuments, had committed two acts of iconographical imprudence within its capital. And, as is well known, in those days the general attitude towards monuments and symbols was far from being blasé.

Of course, the point we are demonstrating by way of these monuments is also only a symbolic one: put simply, that given what the French Revolution represented, namely the birth of modern France, the romantic dynamism of its exaltation was bound to mirror the trajectory of its rise. Just as 1792 had followed 1789, History, which had prepared the way for 1830, was now leading up to 1848 and the July regime was to perish at the hand of History, despite having initially been presented as the historians' own creation and a golden age. So it was that, on the eve of 1848, the Republic, unknown or derided though it had been thirty years earlier, could boast an honourable past, its own partisans and an audience which it could reach through the press, through public opinion and from its own public rostrum; in short, it had won credibility.

The decline of the dynasties

It goes without saying that its chances were increasing along with the discredit that attached to the alternative solutions. France had no less than three dynasties from which to choose. But the first, that of the senior branch of the Bourbons, had become too closely identified with the counter-revolution, the negation of liberalism and the pre-eminence of the Church for it to enjoy the support of the country's most vital forces. It was, furthermore, represented by a prince – the comte de Chambord – who, although in his early youth (he was born in 1820), had left France while still a child and been brought up in a foreign court in an archaic atmosphere. The chances of the second dynasty, that of the Bonapartes, were greater, since the Empire stemmed from the tricolour flag and had extended the life of the Republic. It could thus lay claim to some measure of glory and to the patriotic tradition. Nevertheless, true lovers of liberty could not but feel some misgivings where a Napoleon was concerned. Moreover, here again, the dynasty was not well served by its representative, Prince Louis (born in 1808), a man now in the prime of life but about whom little was known apart from a couple of military scuffles, one or two non-conformist pamphlets, his inglorious escape and impecunious life in London. Far from considering him, the survivors and successors of the

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great military and civil groups representing imperial power had long been in the service of Louis-Philippe. As for the third dynasty, that selfsame house of Orléans, its disadvantages were obvious: the advanced years of the king and the decline of his political aptitude; an heir who was still no more than a child, with the consequent prospect of a regency under a prince neither well known nor popular; the usury and attendant corruption connected with its power; the politics of Guizot, who in the 1846 elections had chosen to draw his strength from the right by wooing a handful of legitimists, rather than from the left by making concessions to the party of reform. In its evolution, the regime was thus turning its back upon its quasi-revolutionary origins and becoming purely conservative. But this was a pragmatic conservatism devoid even of the dignity of any theory, since the philosophy of order was monopolised by legitimism and the Church. We must thus conclude from our political analysis that, as a possible solution, the Republic was in a strong position because it could appeal to an audience of its own; and because the prestige of its rivals was on the wane.

A society in crisis

However, these political considerations do not exhaust the field of possible causes. The 1848 Revolution in France remains very much more than a mere successful repetition of the revolution of 1830. The hopes vested in it were not simply liberal and patriotic, but social too. The aim was to correct the workings not just of the political machine but of human society as a whole.

The problem of the workers

The problem of the working classes came to the fore during the 1840s. It is difficult to give a precise date to the beginnings of such objective processes as the introduction of machinery in French industry, the concentration of the working force in large workshops, the lengthening of the working day and all the new forms of 'pauperism' that resulted from these factors; nor is it easy to trace the first instances of strikes or pre-syndicalist organisations. On the other hand there is no problem in establishing when public opinion became aware of these various factors: it was between 1830 and 1840. They were first drawn to its attention through the efforts of men of the opposition. Republicans such as Doctor Guépin or legitimists such as Villeneuve-Bargemon were naturally inclined to pity by their respective philosophical doctrines – humanitarian in the one case, Christian in the other. Furthermore, standing as they did in opposition to the regime, they were naturally inclined to ascribe all known ills to it, all the more so since they were concerned with the ills of

the working class, while the existing regime claimed to represent the 'middle class'; industry and business. However, it was not at all the case that the only denunciators of social evils came from the opposition. Neither Villermé nor Adolphe Blanqui belonged to it; indeed, they had been encouraged to make a study of pauperism by that very Academy of Moral and Political Sciences that the July Monarchy had hoped to turn into a centre of advanced studies, a veritable laboratory for reflection and advice. We have suggested that history rebounded against the regime of the historians. It could equally be said that the social economy rebounded against the regime of the economists. It is customary to represent Louis-Philippe in the late 1840s as having been the victim of the impetus that his reign had given to national history and to patriotism during the early 1830s. In a similar fashion we now find him to be the victim of another of his initial impulses: the boost that he gave to studies of all kinds, as well as to a positivist administration which observed and made records of everything, from the figures relating to land assessments to those relating to foundlings, or to the number of needy receiving public assistance – in short, to Statistics. One fact emerges quite clearly: around 1830–1, at the time of the first 'Saint-Simonian' missions, the time when Charles Fourier* was growing old in lonely isolation and the young Auguste Blanqui† was just beginning to move away from the Jacobinism of the *quartier latin*, the socialist idea was already accepted by a small minority of eccentrics. Ten years later both the press and literature in general were full of the social question. Five years after that, a general strike mounted by the carpenters of Paris was regarded as a major event, and the opposition's greatest orator, Berryer, once a champion of the duchesse de Berry, defended a number of obscure comrades charged before the courts with unlawfully forming *coalitions*.

The problem of the peasants

The proletariat was certainly too much of a minority and the workers' movement too embryonic to pose a real threat to the established institutions. But the social question was not confined to the *faubourgs* of industrial towns; it existed in the countryside too. At the end of the century a remark made by Jules Ferry, a striking historical aphorism, was much quoted: 'the first Republic gave us the land; the second, suffrage; the third, knowledge'.

*(1772–1837). After Saint-Simon, the foremost French theoretician of utopian socialism. A particular feature of his theories was the idea that all the passions are good and must be put to good use by harmonising them in such a way that they all contribute to the common weal within an ideal social whole, known as a *phalanstère*.

†(1805–81). One of the most tenacious republican and 'communist' secret society militants, the prototype of the activist alternately fighting as an insurgent and imprisoned for his activities.

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But the impression – an incomplete one anyway – that the France of 1900 may have given of a democracy of land-owning peasants was in part a result of the effects of the Revolution (i.e. the total expropriation of the clergy and the partial expropriation of the émigrés) and also, in part, of a whole series of processes that had evolved over the nineteenth century: many of the existing large properties were eroded and the poorest of the peasants left the land. Now, these two decisive evolutions had hardly begun in 1848: there were still many large domains, whether they belonged to former noble families or to new owners, and there were still many proletarians in the villages. Indeed, there had perhaps never been so many, for the beginnings of the migration towards the large industrial centres did not offset the demographic increase which was the continuing result of the surge in the birth rate in the eighteenth century. There is no doubt that the rural departments of France that are most deserted today were then more highly populated than ever before or since.

Nor had the Revolution eliminated all or even the most archaic of conflicts between rich and poor, landowners and those who worked the land, ‘masters’ and day labourers. It may have abolished ‘feudalism’ but it had not yet had time to elaborate a rural code. Thus the problem of common grazing was still unsolved; the mode of exploitation of communal property was an apple of discord; and lastly, perhaps most importantly, the eminently secular problem of users’ rights in the hitherto feudal forests of rural communes continued to give rise to all kinds of conflicts: lawsuits here, a rash of thefts of firewood there, elsewhere bullets whistling past the ears of the forestry guard. There is even reason to wonder whether, in some regions at least, such bitter altercations did not reach their peak during this period. In order to survive, the poor peasants still as much as ever needed the resources offered them by the woods or ‘communal or waste lands’: for pasturage, for gathering various types of produce, for the free use of dead wood or for wood for making tools and the like. Now, the exercise of such rights was becoming even more unacceptable to the large landowners, who were increasingly attracted by ideas of rational agronomy and profit, especially at this time when – before the establishment of any easy and general distribution of coal by means of the railway – anything that could be burnt that could be found locally had a ready market. It was not without good reason that Balzac, in *Les Paysans*, located the class struggle in its pure state in the forests.

The poor peasants coveted State- or communally-owned forests as much as the private ones. Now here, the Revolution, albeit involuntarily, had justified their ancestors by in effect suppressing any form of repression. A new forestry code voted in at the end of the Restoration had re-established a rigorous rural police, and the July regime had been at pains to ensure it was respected. This was one more aspect to the peasant

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question in 1848: while rural pauperism and archaism had diminished scarcely at all, there were many causes for complaint and they were all the more exasperating given that they were directed against those who loomed large in the lives of the peasants: the big landowner, the guard and the tax-collector.

To this list we should add the moneylender, for capitalism, which was still in its early stages and had not yet established any satisfactory network of credit for urban industry and commerce, was – understandably – even more unknown in the rural areas. A man would borrow from his better-off neighbour or from the wholesaler who bought up his harvests, or else he would fall into debt with a mortgage.

But unlike the ills of the urban proletariat which – it should be repeated – were well known or even almost fashionable, rural unrest, which was more diffuse, less immediately felt and above all infinitely diversified, was only to make itself generally known through its consequences. In *Le Peuple* (written in 1845–6), Michelet expresses his feeling of running against the general tide of opinion when he claims – in explicit disagreement with the socialists – that it is not so much the worker but the peasant who is the social pariah.

Romanticism and the education of the people

However, the point was that the general attitude towards ‘the People’, whether workers or peasants, was favourable; and in this climate of opinion the pessimism of a writer such as Balzac struck a discordant note. Within the thinking world the prevailing atmosphere was humanitarian. Indeed, this humanitarianism also represented an aspect to the origins of the Revolution.

Romanticism and populism

Romanticism was everywhere. It is fair to say that by the 1840s the great poets – Hugo, Lamartine, Vigny, Musset – whether still active or not, had shot their bolts or were changing their attitudes and that even the fashionable Parisian world was turning against the author of *Les Burgraves*.* Who, at this juncture, could have predicted that within a few years Vicomte Hugo, member of the upper house, would be discovering a new popular source of inspiration and a new poetical point of departure? But this was the moment when – with the inevitable historical delay – the Romantics’ triumph was penetrating deep into the rest of France. Among the provincial intelligentsia where amateur poets proliferated, the generation of Béranger’s emulators, the *chansonniers* (songwriters) of the *caveaux*

*Romantic drama with a medieval subject by Victor Hugo. It was a total flop in 1843.

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(drinking cellars) – sybarites and admirers of Voltaire – had been superseded by a generation of serious young men who poured out their feelings in Lamartinian tirades in Alexandrine metre. There were even a few young workers among these poets – craftsmen rather than factory workers, admittedly – who seemed to have discovered their vocation through the stirrings of an interest in the social question. But in reality, the working-class poetry of the 1840s stemmed more probably from the upsurge of sociability, the more widespread reading of newspapers in the cafés and even from the first effects of Guizot's law on primary education. It was, in short, a result of this confused ascent towards culture on the part of the masses which represented the major achievement of the age and perhaps, to some extent, of the regime too. At all events, in Paris, the Romantic and socialist writers grouped around Michelet, George Sand and Pierre Leroux were greatly moved by the proletarian muse, hailing it as a sign of the people's accession to adulthood.

Besides, there was every reason why the intellectual elite should present the people as a reservoir of new and healthy energy. In their stand against the courts and aristocracies of cosmopolitan culture, the inspirers and leaders of national movements in central and eastern Europe were readopting themes originally launched at the end of the preceding century by German Romanticism. They sang the praises of the national virtues of folklore, of popular songs and poetry and of the masses with all their primitive wholesomeness. France was not of course in a comparable situation: the problem of nationalism there was considered settled once and for all. But those peoples and nationalities engaged in protest, from Greece to Ireland, from Poland to Italy, were dear to the hearts of French liberals and republicans and so, naturally, the vaguely populist ideology that underlay the European struggles did not fail to leave its mark upon their friends in France.

The discovery of France

Furthermore, whether or not direct political or national conclusions should be drawn, folklore had now been discovered in France as well, and a taste for it was developing. It would seem that folklore in itself reached a kind of peak of popularity during the first half of the nineteenth century; but above all there can be no doubt that it was during this period that the cultivated classes discovered it, along with their own country. Between 1830 and 1840, long journeys through the French provinces ceased to be a rarity, an exceptional kind of expedition, and instead became a form of cultivated leisure. It was a far cry from modern tourism, needless to say, but it nevertheless represented an early stage in the evolution of the latter. This discovery of the land of France by the cream of the intellectual elite was passionately undertaken and of passionate inter-