

*The global  
ramifications of  
the French Revolution*

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and  
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# Introduction

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JOSEPH KLAITS and MICHAEL H. HALTZEL

The Age of Revolution of the late eighteenth century has occasioned an age of anniversary commemoration in recent years, of which the greatest example in magnitude and extent was the French Revolution bicentennial. Around the world there were conferences, exhibits, scholarly and public events in celebration—or at least appreciation—of the worldwide impact of the Revolution. These commemorations, planned years in advance, unfolded in remarkably harmonious coincidence with the momentous events of our current age of revolution. The replacement of Communist domination in Eastern Europe with democratically elected governments and market economies evoked for many the continuity between the eighteenth-century struggles for liberty and present-day analogues.

Such reflections were in the minds of many participants in the conference at which the essays in this book were first presented. The conference was convened by the West European Studies program of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., early in November 1989, just as the Berlin Wall was crumbling. The initial inspiration for this volume was the sense that in all the activities spurred by the French Revolution bicentennial, the Revolution's worldwide impact and continuing significance had been insufficiently elucidated and needed direct examination.

To be sure, it is a textbook cliché that the French Revolution ushered in the “modern world,” with its stirrings of popular sovereignty, patriotic warfare, nationalist impulses and imperialist ambitions, capitalist economics, and egalitarian ideals. All too often, however, the impact of the French Revolution has been cast as limited in focus primarily to France or at most to Western Europe, with any influence farther afield little more than a faint and fleeting echo of the reverberations emanating from Paris. This book proceeds from the premises that the Revolution's influence beyond Western Europe has been greatly underestimated and that its

impact has been truly a phenomenon of the *longue durée*, continuing to the present on a worldwide stage. Hence the chapters that follow examine the impact of the Revolution's ideals and practices in Poland, Russia, Mexico, Haiti, the United States, North and sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and China. The chronological focus of the book ranges from the Age of Revolution itself down to the 1980s.

Such an encompassing approach to the Revolution's impact has been encouraged by recent shifts in the ways historians of the French Revolution have interpreted the origins and significance of the events of 1789 in France. Until the 1980s, as Jack Censer explains in Chapter 1, the leading conceptual model of the Revolution was derived from a Marxian analysis of social change. The Revolution was generally viewed from a perspective first sketched in the late nineteenth century by historians who saw class struggle as the hidden dynamic of the political changes of 1789 and after. The debate—very much alive in France until recent years—between supporters and opponents of republican institutions and egalitarian ideals made the Revolution a continuing issue in French political life. For the largely class-based parties of the Third and Fourth republics, the Revolution variously represented a great treasure to be protected, a disaster to be undone, or an as yet unrealized ideal. But quite suddenly and to the surprise of nearly everyone, this well-worn political mold was broken in the postwar world, so that François Furet could plausibly proclaim in the late 1970s, “The French Revolution is over.”

The fading of the class-struggle model in political action and historical imagination has encouraged the reemergence of an even older tradition of interpreting the Revolution. Instead of emphasizing the clash of social forces, many recent historical writings about the Revolution have stressed the clash of ideas. The vision of the Revolution as an ideological force, first perceived during revolutionary years and greatly clarified by Alexis de Tocqueville and Augustin Cochin in the first half of the nineteenth century, has once again found the spotlight in works by today's historians. Censer analyzes the contributions of several of these historians, all of whose interpretations differ but who share a common framework in a rejection of the social interpretation of the French Revolution and an acceptance of ideological issues—variously defined—as central to the elucidation of the Revolution's meaning.

This recasting of the terms of discussion serves also to bring into focus the wider and more permanent influence of the Revolution. While historians conceived of the Revolution's turmoil in terms of class conflicts, it

was difficult to transfer their model of the French Revolution to the very different social terrains of countries beyond the borders of France or Western Europe. Thus, until recent years—and prominently in many works occasioned by the bicentennial of the American Revolution—the Revolutionary War was typically distinguished from the French Revolution on the grounds that, whereas events in France constituted a true social revolution, in America there was mere rebellion and a relatively superficial change in political forms. This distinction has come under increasing criticism as the social interpretation of the French Revolution has faded (and as that of the American Revolution has received new attention).

In Chapter 2, Lloyd Kramer describes both the affinities that drew Americans of the 1780s and 1790s to the French Revolution and the ideological divisions in American political life that prompted a split in the way the astonishing events across the Atlantic were seen by contemporaries in the new United States. Kramer's thesis is that the French Revolution was central in forming enduring American attitudes toward foreign involvement, democratic culture, and secularism. Stances first developed in the 1790s, he shows, became permanent features of the American scene and are still recognizable in the late twentieth century. Much of the content of American political debate and ideological division seems to have been first articulated in reaction to news of the French Revolution.

The fissures that opened in American public life after 1789 also appeared in Eastern Europe. In Poland and Russia, according to Jerzy Borejsza and Dmitry Shlapentokh in Chapters 3 and 4, authoritarian rule—and in the case of Poland, dismemberment and foreign domination—made the French case, in Borejsza's words, "an example of political and military struggle, . . . a pattern for social revolution and . . . an ideological model." Borejsza shows how the early links between Poland's leaders and the revolutionary governments in France, built primarily around common political interests on the international scene, were replaced after Poland lost its independence by an ideological commitment to the Revolution on the part of nineteenth-century Polish dissidents and nationalist revolutionaries. Shlapentokh's account of the attraction of the French model to Westernizers, who saw it as a beacon for political reform and cultural reorientation, demonstrates that much of the history of Russia in the nineteenth century can be written around the crucial question of how the French Revolution was perceived. The divergent paths of the revolutionary tradition in Eastern Europe made nationalists in Poland

sympathetic to the ideals of 1789, while nationalists in Russia usually rejected the French model as contrary to true Russian values. These chapters show the ongoing influence of the ideals of 1789 in countries where such doctrine was deemed subversive by the rulers.

Equally striking are the instances of rejection of the Revolution's ideals by the French revolutionaries themselves, as in Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in the 1790s, and, more broadly, in the French colonial world throughout the next two centuries. Robert Forster's contribution, Chapter 5, analyzes the French Revolution's debates on slavery and the actions of people of color in the Caribbean during the revolutionary years. Principles of *liberté* and *fraternité*, though deeply felt by some revolutionary leaders, were quickly overridden by the economic and nationalistic considerations of protecting French sugar interests in an immensely rich colony. On the island, the response to the stirring message of liberation was immediate and clear-cut—compatible as it was, Forster shows, with African traditions still vivid in the minds of many slaves. But the ambivalence in France over the question of the applicability of the Revolution's ideals to a colonial setting revealed at the outset the limitations and inherent contradictions of a revolution that espoused both the universalist ideals of brotherhood and equality and the particularisms of nationalistic and imperial domination. As Forster observes, a consequence of this ambivalence was revolutionary France's "forfeiture of its claim to be the Motherland of Liberty for *all* humankind."

Such a clash of values could not easily be resolved, and in practice through most of the last two centuries, the ideals of the Revolution have regularly been harnessed to rationalizations for colonial expansion and cultural hegemony. As Christopher Miller elucidates in Chapter 6, on the French Revolution in sub-Saharan Africa, colonial domination was justified as the "exportation of the ideals of 1789." In the writings of Lamartine and Tocqueville, as well as in the works of more recent African authors writing in French, the conflict between revolutionary ideals and colonial rule is either ignored entirely or resolved by formulating some version of the doctrine that colonial government is somehow liberating. In Miller's view, the contradiction remains fundamental: "What has happened to the values of the Revolution within the discourse of colonialism [is that] the heart has been cut out."

The French Revolution's influence in the Muslim lands of the Middle East and North Africa was also mixed, although the proportions of ingredients differed considerably. Chapters 7 and 8, by Elbaki Hermassi and



Nikki Keddie, describe the political and military impact of French influence in the Napoleonic era and throughout the nineteenth century. Here, the primary stress was on reform in the name of rational, and sometimes also constitutional, government. The statist and militaristic legacies of the Revolution were the first to find an echo among the reforms of leaders in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire. Later, when the Revolution's values of popular sovereignty, secularism, and nationalism began to be felt in the Arab world and Iran, some leaders embraced all these values; fissures emerged separating them from others who to varying degrees invoked traditional ideals indigenous to the Muslim world and, Keddie shows, from spokesmen for a dissident intellectual Islamic revolutionary tradition in Iran that proved receptive to some aspects of Enlightenment thought and the principles of the French Revolution. Though often identified in practice with France's imposition of imperialistic controls, the Revolution's idealistic message of constitutionalism and democracy and its encouragement of nationalistic feeling, Keddie and Hermassi demonstrate, continue to exert an influence on Middle Eastern thought and practice.

The constitutionalism of the French Revolution is the element Charles A. Hale discusses in Chapter 9. He considers three "moments" in the history of nineteenth-century Mexico when the writings of French liberal theorists shaped political discourse. Within the context of attempts—ultimately unsuccessful—to establish a constitutional balance, French liberal thought strongly influenced Mexican political culture. Although other elements of French revolutionary ideology had an impact on the Mexican scene, Hale emphasizes the liberal constitutional legacy of the Revolution, as mediated through such nineteenth-century liberal theorists as Tocqueville, Benjamin Constant, and Edouard Laboulaye.

In contrast, Maurice Meisner's discussion of the Revolution's influence in China (Chapter 10) isolates another side of the revolutionary message. Here the significant mediators were Marx, Engels, and the Paris Commune of 1871. The direct action, class consciousness, and popular sovereignty that Marx and Engels found in the events of the Revolution and that were embodied in the establishment of the Commune eighty years later were the features that attracted Mao and other Communist leaders to the lessons of the French Revolution. Although the Commune—and through it the Revolution—quickly became a ritualistic relic in the sacred pantheon of Chinese socialism, generally devoid of real historical content or influence, Meisner shows that at three junctures from the 1860s to the

early 1980s, the memory of the Revolution's legacy took on vivid and pointed political meaning in the hands of both revolutionaries and democratic reformers.

These concluding chapters demonstrate clearly a lesson implicit in all the others. Whether the Revolution's principles became part of the political culture, as in America, were used to combat authoritarian regimes, as in Eastern Europe, stimulated critiques of indigenous cultures, as in China and the Muslim world, or served as weapons against French colonialism, as in Haiti or Africa, the global ramifications of the French Revolution are pervasive and profound. The Revolution's impact has been strongly conditioned by the diversity of local circumstances, the mediating influences of historians and other commentators, and perhaps most of all by the mixed and often contradictory message of the Revolution itself. Yet the Revolution's power as metaphor and analogue still inspires theorists and political actors throughout the world. While it may be true that in the context of the political life of France, "the French Revolution is over," it would be most surprising if its encompassing legacy as measure, example, and point of contention ceased to be drawn on in coming decades. The dramatic and unexpected events of the late 1980s make it plain that the powerful ideals born two centuries earlier continue to maintain their grip on the modern consciousness. This book helps explain that remarkable fact.