Chapter 5
What it started

The Revolution began as an assertion of national sovereignty. Nations – not kings, not hereditary elites, not churches – were the supreme source of authority in human affairs. It was this conviction which led the National Assembly in 1790 to declare that France would never make war except in self-defence, and impelled the Convention, two years later as the new Republic appeared to have survived the hostile onslaughts of the leagued despots of Germany, to offer fraternity and help to all peoples seeking to recover their liberty. It only took a few months for the Convention to recognize the impossibility of such an open-ended pledge; and the forces unleashed by the Revolution would be defeated, a generation later, by an alliance of kings supported by intransigent nobles and vengeful priests who spurned any thought that nations could be sovereign. Nevertheless a new principle of political legitimacy had been irrevocably launched, and within a hundred years of the apparent triumph of reaction in 1815, the sovereignty of nations had achieved acceptance throughout Europe and the Americas. In the twentieth century it would be invoked in its turn to expel Europeans from all their overseas colonies.
Totalitarian democracy

What constitutes a nation has remained problematic. Sieyès’ definition of 1789, used to lambast the privileges of the nobility, was ‘A body of associates living under common laws and represented by the same legislative assembly’. It proved a beginning, but no more – too loose for those who considered language, traditions, and territory at least as important. But nations, once self-defined, have seldom been content over the last two centuries to be governed by authorities not of their own choosing. The revolutionaries of 1789 assumed that national sovereignty could only be exercised representatively, but within ten years Napoleon had begun to show how it could be appropriated to legitimize dictatorship and even monarchy. Each of the steps he took between 1799 and 1804 towards making himself a hereditary emperor was endorsed by a plebiscite responding to a carefully phrased question. The results were never in doubt and all were almost certainly rigged to make them even more emphatic. His nephew Napoleon III would use the same device to give national legitimacy to his own seizure of power in 1851 and 1852; and as recently as 1958 the Fifth Republic was launched by a referendum giving vast powers to General de Gaulle. The world beyond France had to wait mostly until the twentieth century for the techniques of plebiscitary or totalitarian democracy to become widespread; but they were as firmly rooted in the great legitimizing principle of 1789 as any of the more liberal ideals also proclaimed then.

Liberalism

The term ‘liberalism’ was not invented until Napoleon’s power was in decline. It was first used to describe the aspirations of the Cortes of Cadiz between 1810 and 1813 to establish representative government in post-Napoleonic Spain. But what the Spanish liberals dreamed of was based on the political model first established in France by the Constituent Assembly: representative government underpinned by a
written constitution guaranteeing a basic range of human rights. These would constitute the minimum demands of political reformers throughout the nineteenth century and down to the overthrow of the last absolute monarchy in Russia in 1917. The essence of liberal beliefs was to be found in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen. That meant freedom to vote; freedom of thought, belief, and expression; and freedom from arbitrary imposition or imprisonment. Liberals believed in the equality embodied in the Declaration, which meant equality before the law, equality of rights, and equality of opportunity. They did not, however, believe in equality of property, and one of the main functions of the rule of law which they consistently invoked was to secure property owners in their absolute rights.

Beyond that there was scope for wide disagreement. Not until the twentieth century did more than a small minority accept that women should enjoy the same liberty and equality as men; and during the Revolution the few bold spirits of either sex who made liberal claims on behalf of women were ridiculed or silenced. One reason why French women had to wait so long for the political rights they finally achieved in 1944 was that the politicians of the Third Republic feared that female voters would be dominated by their priests: ever since 1793 women had proved the mainstay of Catholic resistance to revolutionary secularism. Racial equality left liberals ambivalent too. The first stirrings of anti-slavery sentiment in France coincided with the onset of the Revolution, but slaves were property, and their labours underpinned a vast network of wealth and commerce. The dangers of loosening their bonds seemed vividly demonstrated by the great slave uprising in Saint-Domingue in 1791. In an attempt to regain control there, the Convention’s representatives proclaimed the abolition of slavery, and in February 1794 their action was confirmed in Paris. The deputies congratulated themselves on being the first rulers ever to abolish slavery – which they were, but only through recognizing a fait accompli. Napoleon in any case restored it less than ten years later in islands remaining under French control, and regimes ostensibly more liberal
than his maintained it until the revolutionaries of 1848 made it part of their first business to honour the legacy of 1794.

The new Constituent Assembly that made this gesture had been elected by universal manhood suffrage – a further belated homage to a principle used to elect the Convention in 1792 but never since. Even then it had excluded servants and the unemployed. The men of 1789 had been much more restrictive. They believed that only property owners had the right to political representation: if all were now citizens, only those with a minimum level of wealth could be active citizens. The distinction reflected a mistrust of popular participation in public life as old as history, but which the events of the Revolution did nothing to dispel. Revolution was born amid riot, intimidation, and bloodshed in the crisis of 1789, and popular violence or the threat of it had flickered throughout the early years before bursting out with appalling carnage in the September Massacres of 1792. Everybody recognized how much the vengeful demands of the sansculottes had done to precipitate terror a year later, so that when, after it ended, the Convention produced the constitution of 1795 it deliberately set out to exclude even more people from public life than in 1791. Thereby a pattern was set for half a century, under which representative regimes would represent only the very rich, people with something to lose; and even unrepresentative regimes, like Napoleon’s, would study their interests and seek to rule with their cooperation.

The People

The problematic paradox was that a revolution which ushered in the principles of liberalism could not have come about without popular support. The people of Paris had saved the National Assembly on 14 July, and perhaps in October 1789 as well. What only counter-revolutionaries still dared to call mobs were now manifestations of the people aroused and in action, and voices could always be found to justify their excesses. The ferocious Marat, in his newspaper The People’s
9. Marat assassinated: Jacques-Louis David’s revolutionary pietà
Friend, built a journalistic career on doing so, and after his assassination in 1793, was revered (and commemorated in David’s most memorable painting) as a martyr to the popular cause. By 1792 popular activists were glorying in being ‘sansculottes’, and after the overthrow of the monarchy populist style and rhetoric dominated public life for about three years, polite forms of dress and address were abandoned, and political rights were equalized (at least among men). An egalitarian constitution was proclaimed or at any rate promised, vouchsafing free education and ‘the social guarantee’ of welfare support for the indigent, the sick, and the disabled. Meanwhile the rich were mulcted in a forced loan, there was talk of redistributing the property of émigrés and traitors to poor patriots, and prices of basic commodities were kept low by the maximum. All these policies were abandoned after the fall of Robespierre; but almost at once they began to be regarded by many as the lost promise of true social equality. Babeuf and his co-conspirators of 1796 proposed to base their seizure of power on the never-implemented constitution of 1793. Later, Socialists would look back to the Year II of the revolutionary calendar to find the earliest ‘anticipations’ of their ideals at the moment when the People entered politics for the first time in pursuit of their own interests, rather than as the tools of more powerful manipulators.

Terror

But here too there was a problematic paradox. The Year II was also the time of the terror, whose last phase at least looked very like social revenge in action. Were popular power and terror inseparable? Drawing on theoretical justifications framed at the time by orators such as Robespierre or Saint-Just, some later Socialist or Communist revolutionaries did not shrink from accepting that only extermination would defeat the enemies of the people. There could be no true revolution without terror. And although the nineteenth century shuddered at the memory of the revolutionary tribunal and the show trials it conducted, the twentieth would see them echoed under many
regimes claiming legitimacy from revolutions. Many later sympathizers with the Revolution’s broad aspirations were understandably reluctant to believe that society could only be made more equal through bloodshed. They, along with liberals who were as concerned by the threats to property heard in the Year II as the threats to life, saw the terror as at best a cruel necessity, forced upon the First Republic not by the inexorable logic of the Revolution but by the force of ‘circumstances’. In a country divided by rashly imposed religious choices and the feckless behaviour of Louis XVI and his queen, the fortunes of war dictated extreme measures of national defence as the distinction between opposition and treason became blurred. But the Revolution was a warning of what might happen rather than a prescription of what must.

Left and right

All such perceptions were grounded in the conviction that, however mixed its character, there was more good in the Revolution than bad. This was the view from the left, itself a way of describing politics which originated in the Revolution, when proponents of further change tended in successive assemblies to sit on the left of the president’s chair, while conservatives congregated on his right. The right, in fact modern political conservatism, was as much a creation of the French Revolution as all the things it opposed. The instinctive inertia of the ancien régime had gone forever: those who sought to preserve governments, power structures, and social institutions from revolution in the new sense were obliged to formulate unprecedented rationales and strategies for doing so.

Conspirators and revolutionaries

The collapse of the old order, and the headlong changes that followed, took everyone by surprise. In the confusion of the next five years, with ever more horrific news of destruction, outrage, and massacre,
10. The enduring legend: Eugène Delacroix’s *Liberty Leading the People* (1830)
bewildered onlookers cast about for explanations for such a boundless upheaval. Hostile observers thought it could only be a conspiracy. As a network of political clubs, the Jacobins, emerged as the vectors of the revolutionary radicalism, it began to be suspected that these were none other than the mysterious freemasons who had proliferated so spectacularly over the eighteenth century. Deistic but tolerant (and condemned twice for that by the Catholic Church) and glorying in secrecy while invoking values such as liberty, equality, and benevolence, masonic aims and ideas seemed in retrospect to be corrosive of all established values – even though the old elites had flocked to join lodges. No credible causal link has ever been established between freemasonry and the French Revolution or indeed the Jacobin clubs, but in 1797 a book purporting to demonstrate their connection in a plot to subvert religion, monarchy, and the social hierarchy was a Europe-wide bestseller. Barruel’s *Memoirs to Serve for the History of Jacobinism* remained in print into the twentieth century, reflecting an undying suspicion of a movement that before 1789 had alarmed nobody except a few paranoid priests. So indelibly, indeed, did freemasonry now come to be associated in certain continental countries with republicanism and anti-clericalism, that to join a lodge became a gesture of radical political conviction – which it had never been before the Revolution. Conservative regimes, right down to the Nazis and their Vichy puppets, would accordingly continue to view freemasonry with the deepest suspicion, and would periodically close its networks down.

Nor were such suspicions entirely groundless, in the sense that throughout the nineteenth century many political radicals had come to believe that the way to bring about revolution actually was through secret conspiracies. Before 1789 there was no such thing as a revolutionary. Nobody believed that an established order could be so comprehensively overthrown. But once it was shown to be possible, the history of France in the 1790s became the classic episode of modern history, whether as inspiration or warning, a model for all sides of what to do or what to avoid. Not even sympathizers could afford to accept
that conspiracy was not a way to achieve revolution, because otherwise it would be the work of a blind fate beyond the influence of conscious human agency. And so the 1790s themselves saw secret groups plotting revolution in many countries of Europe. In Poland and Ireland they played a significant part in bringing about vast and bloody uprisings. Their defeated leaders who had turned to France for help, men like Tadeusz Kosciuszko and Wolfe Tone, have been revered ever since as prophets or martyrs of national independence. And when the Revolution in France itself began to disappoint its adherents, a genuine Jacobin plot was hatched – but against the new regime rather than the old. The first attempt in history at communist revolution, Babeuf’s ‘conspiracy of equals’ of 1796 failed miserably; but his co-conspirator Buonarroti spent the rest of a long life setting up conspiratorial revolutionary networks, and perpetuated the memory of the first one in a book of 1828 (Conspiracy for Equality) which inspired three generations of subversives and became a sacred text of successful Communism after the Russian Revolution of 1917. Throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century, in fact, when Russia experienced two revolutions, French precedents became an obsession among Russian intellectuals, and in 1917 even the leading players brooded constantly on who were the Jacobins, who the Girondins, and whether a Napoleon was lurking among them.

Patterns and paradigms

In France itself, meanwhile, recourse to further revolution had been a standard, and for many people entirely reputable, political option for much of the nineteenth century. When in 1830 Charles X seemed poised to abandon even the attenuated parts of the revolutionary legacy accepted by his brother Louis XVIII as the price for succeeding Napoleon, he was overthrown by three days of insurgency on the streets of Paris. His cousin and successor Louis-Philippe ostentatiously flew the tricolour, and hoped to reconcile the bitterly divided traditions originating in 1789. He failed, and was driven out in his turn by more
popular defiance in the revolution of 1848. Another Bonaparte closed this one off, but his defeat in the Franco-Prussian War led to the bloodiest episode since the terror – the Paris Commune of 1871 in which perhaps 25,000 people died. The very name commune evoked 1792, and many communards saw themselves as sansculottes reincarnate, fighting the same enemies as the First Republic – Royalists, Catholics, duplicitous generals, and the greedy rich. Only the last category derived much benefit from their defeat, however, and the Third Republic which emerged from the traumas of the early 1870s would glory in revolutionary imagery and modestly pursue democratic and anti-clerical aspirations first articulated in the 1790s. For half a century after 1917, many French intellectuals regarded the Russian Revolution as the belated fulfilment of the promise of their own, and the historiography of the revolutionary decade was dominated by members of or sympathizers with the French Communist party. But their grip on the Revolution began to be challenged from the mid-1950s, and, as the Soviet empire crumbled in 1989, the hegemonic interpretation of the bicentennial year was that of the neo-conservative, ex-Communist François Furet.

Although he saw terror as inherent in the Revolution from its very beginning, Furet nevertheless saw the revolutionary experience as the foundation of modern political culture. Americans have the best grounds for disputing this, with a founding revolution that preceded the French one by more than a decade. Having helped to make American independence possible, many French contemporaries certainly found the transatlantic example inspiring, but nobody thought it could be transplanted to Europe. By the time that most enduring monument to eighteenth-century political creativity, the United States constitution, was finalized, the French were engaged in their own constitution-making and claiming, with some justice, that their revolution was like no other in history, and owed little except fraternal good feeling to previous upheavals elsewhere. The Americans themselves were soon enough bitterly divided about whether the new France was in any sense
the same country which had helped them to independence, and
uncertain about how much of its new regime they could admire.
Remote from the older continent, ambivalent about contacts with
it, and speaking what was still a peripheral language, America
was marginalized by the French Revolution until the twentieth
century – even if it owed its westward expansion to the sale by
Napoleon of Louisiana in 1803.

Conservatism, reaction, and religion

Convinced, meanwhile, that what had allowed an old regime of
stability, deference, and order to be overthrown was a lack of vigilance,
European conservatism struck out at the sources of subversion. Before
the 1790s were out, all governments were rapidly expanding their
repressive resources, with a proliferation of spies and informers and
experiments with regular public police forces. Lists of suspects would be
routinely kept and their movements tracked. Strict censorship would be
imposed on all forms of publishing, and the press, blamed for
disseminating insubordination and free thought both before and during
the Revolution, subjected to the closest supervision. Among the most
efficient of these repressive regimes would be that of Napoleon himself,
who, although a product of the Revolution, sought to ground his appeal
in reassuring property owners that the social threat of Jacobinism had
been stifled. Napoleon also recognized that the original, and still the
deepest, wound inflicted on France by the Revolution had been the
quarrel with the Roman Catholic Church; and nothing did more to bring
the Revolution to an end than his concordat with Pius VII. He was
convinced, like all conservative regimes after him throughout the
nineteenth century, that the firmest support for order and authority lay
in a secure and recognized role for organized religion, in which he saw
nothing more or less than ‘the mystery of the social order’.

Traumatized by the experience of the 1790s, which included the first
attempt in history in 1793 to stamp out religious practice entirely, and
then the renunciation by the Convention the next year of all religious affiliation (the first overt creation in the history of Europe of a secular state), the Church for its part was only too eager to renew its age-old alliance with secular powers. The experience proved less than satisfactory. Within eight years of concluding the concordat, Pius VII found himself, like his predecessor, a French prisoner, deprived of his central Italian dominions, and about to undergo four years of relentless bullying by Napoleon. From imprisonment on St Helena, the former emperor claimed that he had planned to abolish the papacy outright. The Bourbons who succeeded him were much friendlier towards the Church, but they had long given up any idea of returning it to its position of before 1789. An attempt to renegotiate the concordat foundered, and the new regime confirmed the loss of Church lands which Napoleon had insisted the pope accept as a precondition of the original negotiation. From now on the fortunes of the Church echoed every vicissitude in the French state throughout a turbulent century; and when eventually that state became a republic vaunting its descent from the one which had severed all links between Church and state in 1794, the course was set for a separation which eventually occurred in 1905. Beyond France meanwhile, although the pope received his Italian territories back in 1814, ecclesiastical rule was not restored anywhere else in Europe, and Italian nationalists increasingly regarded the papal states as the main obstacle to unifying the peninsula. Until the downfall of Napoleon III in 1870, monarchical France was the papacy’s main supporter; but, increasingly embattled, Pius IX fell back upon powers that were not of this world. The end of French support, and with it the absorption of former papal territories into the new kingdom of Italy, coincided with the promulgation by the Vatican Council of the doctrine of papal infallibility – never before unambiguously claimed for fear of the reactions of secular rulers. And what the experience of Church–state relations had demonstrated since 1790 was that faith was at least as likely to flourish without the backing of the state as with it. The lesson was reinforced when the new German empire launched the Kulturkampf against the Catholic Church in the 1870s. Rome would continue to
anathematize the French Revolution as the origin of modern impiety and anti-clericalism, a change happily accepted by all those who glorièd in these attitudes. But the traumas of the 1790s also began a process of slow recognition within the Church that it might be better off independent of secular authority, free to make its own decisions and demanding only toleration for its practices and activities. When power was offered it, as in mid-twentieth-century Spain, or in Ireland, the clergy still found it hard to resist; but in a world (again traceable to the French Revolution) where regular political change was normal and to be expected, the unwisdom of identifying too closely with any regime, however sympathetic, has become more and more obvious to thoughtful churchmen.

The Church continued, after all, to pay the penalty of clinging too closely to reactionary and repressive regimes throughout the nineteenth century. As late as the 1920s, the later stages of the Mexican revolution brought conscious echoes of the dechristianization of 1793, and the Cristero revolt of devout Indians in support of the embattled church recalled the Vendée revolt of that same year. The last great triumph of extreme anti-clericalism, however, struck not so much at the Catholic Church (or at least not until it reached Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary after 1945) as the Russian Orthodox. By 1922, Lenin had ‘reached the firm conclusion that we must now instigate a decisive and merciless battle against the clergy, we must suppress their opposition with so much cruelty that they will not forget it for several decades. The more . . . we succeed in shooting for this reason, the better’. Like several of the more zealous dechristianizers of 1793, Stalin had trained before the Revolution as a priest, and the Soviet Union under his rule was officially committed to atheism and the eradication of ‘superstition’. Most churches were closed, many demolished, and devotion was largely kept alive (as in France in the 1790s) by peasant women. These policies were maintained, although less ruthlessly, after his death; and yet the Church re-emerged as the Soviet Union collapsed. Its East European satellite regimes, meanwhile, knew better
than to confront the Catholic Church too fiercely. The emergence of a pope from Poland in 1978 might be seen, in retrospect, as a sign of the Church’s recovering confidence at the moment when an ideology of extreme secularism first formulated almost two centuries earlier was beginning to crumble.

Rationalization

The revolutionary critique of religion, even before it became an all-out attack, was part of the wider commitment of the men of 1789 to promoting rationality in human affairs. The collapse of the old regime, they thought, presented them with an opportunity to take control of their circumstances and remould them according to a conscious plan or set of principles. Nobody before had ever had such an extraordinary chance. When their armies and Napoleon’s in turn overthrew other old regimes, they gave their subjects – forced upon them, indeed – the same chance. The keynote of all the new arrangements and institutions which now appeared was rationality and uniformity. Administrative maps and boundaries were redrawn, divisions equalized, anomalies of all sorts eliminated. The departments into which France was then divided remained unmodified until the twentieth century. Uniformity of means of exchange and communication was also introduced – currency, weights and measures, and language; underpinned by a centralized and carefully regulated system of education, and a simple, concise code of laws. Some of these things were only sketched out or barely begun in the 1790s; but the drive and singleness of purpose of Napoleon fixed most of them firmly in place and established them all as goals to be pursued by successive regimes. This was how modern states organized themselves. It is true that, under the inexorable pressure of interstate competition, moves in this direction had already been underway in a number of countries before 1789: but they were bitterly contentious, and it was contention over just such moves that brought down the French old regime. The Revolution swept the institutions and forces of resistance aside, both in France and wherever else French power
reached. In so doing, it offered an object lesson to all regimes of how easy modernization could be, given determination.

Or so it seemed. In reality, the victories of the French Revolution had been far from easy. They had only been secured through paranoid savagery at home and military ruthlessness abroad. To the 16,000 official victims of the terror should be added perhaps 150,000 more who perished in the fighting and reprisals of 1793–4. The devastated Vendée, in fact, has been identified by some of its most recent historians as the first modern attempt at genocide. The wars against old regime Europe between 1792 and 1815 cost the lives of well over 5 million Europeans (1.4 million of them French) – a slaughter as great, although over a longer period, as that of the war of 1914–18. Such costs were overlooked, or brushed aside, by later observers inspired by the ambitions and achievements of the revolutionaries. The corollary was that when such enthusiasts triumphed, as in twentieth-century Russia or China, the carnage was repeated. Nor have the victories achieved at such cost endured.

A limited legacy

The legacy of the French Revolution to the nineteenth century, we have seen in this chapter, was momentous, but always partial and often paradoxical. The regimes of revolutionary Communism established in the twentieth century have not outlasted it in Europe, and those still surviving beyond are transforming themselves in ways which would have outraged their founding fathers. What has defeated the revolutionary impulse in the long term is the persistence of cultural diversity. Rationalizing ideologies imposed by state power, and the intellectuals and administrators who have placed such faith in them since 1789, have never succeeded in effacing the importance of less rational sources of identity in habits, traditions, religious beliefs, regional and local loyalties, or distinct languages. Perhaps the most ambitious of all the Revolution’s rationalizations was the attempt to
restart time itself from the founding of the republic in September 1792. The very months were rescheduled and renamed, and seven-day weeks replaced by ten-day ‘decades’. It never caught on, and the revolutionary calendar was officially abandoned by Napoleon at the end of the year XIV (1806). It was a portent of many other failures of reason in the face of human resistance or indifference. And with the collapse since the mid-1980s of most of the world’s regimes of Communist universalism, these forces have re-emerged with renewed vigour. Even in countries where Communism never triumphed in the twentieth century, including France, decentralization and devolution, acknowledgement of linguistic diversity, and abandonment by the state of obligations too readily assumed or acquired, marked the last two decades of the twentieth century. As the bicentenary of 1989 recedes, what was intended as a celebration of the enduring values launched by the Revolution begins to seem more like their funeral.
'The whole business now seems over', wrote the English observer Arthur Young in Paris on 27 June 1789, ‘and the revolution complete.’ People would repeatedly make the same observation, usually more in hope than conviction, over the next ten years until Napoleon officially proclaimed the end of the Revolution in December 1799. Even then all he meant was the end of a series of spectacular events in France; he was to continue to export them for another sixteen years. Besides, the Revolution was not simply a meaningless sequence of upheavals. These conflicts were about principles and ideas which continued to clash throughout the nineteenth century, and would be reinvigorated by the triumphs of Marxist Communism in the twentieth. Thus it still seemed outrageous to many French intellectuals when, in 1978, the historian François Furet proclaimed, at the start of a celebrated essay, that ‘The French Revolution is finished’ (terminée).

A historical challenge

What he meant was that the Revolution was now, or ought to be, a subject for historical enquiry as detached and dispassionate as that of medievalists studying (his example) the Merovingian kings. Whereas the history of the Revolution as it has been written in France for much of the twentieth century had been more a matter of commemoration than scholarly analysis, its legitimacy monopolized by a succession of
Communists or fellow-travellers entrenched in the university hierarchy. Furet’s attack was suffused with personal history. Though a Sorbonne graduate, he had always despised the university world, and had built a career in the rival *École pratique des Hautes Études* (later EHESS). A Communist in youth, like so many others he was disillusioned by the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, and renounced the party. And when he and a fellow apostate, Denis Richet, wrote a new history of the Revolution in 1965, they were unanimously denounced by leading specialists in the subject as intruders, not qualified in the subject, who, in offering an interpretation suggesting that it had ‘skidded off course’, had traduced the Revolution’s essential unity of purpose and direction. By 1978 Furet had abandoned this view, but not the enmities it had aroused. For the rest of his life (he died in 1997), he pressed home his attack, particularly during the debates of the bicentenary. As that year came to an end, he cheerfully proclaimed that he had won.

**The classic interpretation**

What had he defeated? He called it the ‘Jacobino-Marxist Vulgate’. His opponents called it the ‘classic’ interpretation of the Revolution. Its basis was (and is, since despite Furet’s triumphalism it retains many adherents) the conviction that the Revolution was a force for progress. The fruit and vindication of the Enlightenment, it set out to emancipate not just the French, but humanity as a whole, from the grip of superstition, prejudice, routine, and unjustifiable social inequities by resolute and democratic political action. This was the ‘Jacobin’ bedrock, differing little from the professions of countless clubbists in the 1790s. As a historical interpretation, it built on the work of nineteenth-century custodians of revolutionary traditions, most famously perhaps Jules Michelet, that apocalyptic idolizer of ‘The People’. Confident and complacent, the Jacobin perspective was disturbed only by the terror, which it did not seek to defend except as a cruel necessity and a reflex of national defence.
Around the turn of the twentieth century, this historiographical Jacobinism began to acquire a new political overlay. From 1898 the great left-wing politician Jean Jaurès began to produce a *Socialist History of the French Revolution* which emphasized its economic and social dimensions and introduced an element of Marxist analysis. Marx himself had written little directly on the Revolution, but it was easy enough to fit a movement which had begun with an attack on nobles and feudalism into a theory of history that emphasized class struggle and the conflict between capitalism and feudalism. The French Revolution from this viewpoint was the key moment in modern history, when the capitalist bourgeoisie overthrew the old feudal nobility. The fundamental questions about it were therefore economic and social. At the very moment when Jaurès was writing, a fierce young professional historian, Albert Mathiez, was beginning a lifelong campaign to rehabilitate Robespierre, under whose terroristic rule clear ‘anticipations’ of later socialist ideals had appeared. Mathiez set out to stamp his own viewpoint on the entire historiography of the Revolution, and his native vigour was redoubled from 1917 by the example and inspiration of the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, which seemed to revive the lost promise of 1794. Robespierre’s Republic of Virtue would live again in Lenin’s Soviet Union. Mathiez only belonged briefly to the Communist Party, but he established a parallel historical party of his own in the form of a ‘Society of Robespierrist Studies’. Its journal, the *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française*, is still the main French-language periodical devoted to the Revolution. Apart from the years of Vichy, when it was silenced, from the death of Mathiez in 1932 until the advent of Furet this society and its members dominated teaching and writing about the Revolution in France, and its successive leading figures occupied the chair of the History of the Revolution at the Sorbonne. When Furet launched his polemics, the incumbent of this apostolic succession was the lifelong Communist Albert Soboul (d.1982), against whose convictions the waters of what he naturally called ‘revisionism’ broke in vain.
Revisionism

But revisionism had not begun with Furet. It originated in the English-speaking world in the 1950s – in England with Alfred Cobban, in the USA with George V. Taylor. Although many of the great minds of nineteenth-century anglophone culture had been fascinated by the French Revolution and Napoleon, interest lapsed during the first half of the twentieth century. The handful of historians still attracted to the subject worked little in France and achieved almost no recognition there. After the Second World War, however, as Western democracy appeared threatened by Marxists both domestic and foreign, it seemed urgent to rescue the great episodes of modern history from tendentious distortions. Both Cobban and Taylor chose to confront what they called the French ‘orthodoxies’ head-on. It was a myth, Cobban claimed, that the revolutionaries of 1789 were the spokesmen of capitalism; the deputies who destroyed the ancien régime were office-holders and landowners. In any case, Taylor argued, most pre-revolutionary wealth was non-capitalist, and such capitalism as there was had no interest in the destruction of the old order. That destruction, indeed, so far from sweeping away the obstacles holding back a thrusting capitalist bourgeoisie, proved an economic disaster and drove everyone with money to invest in the security of land. Taking their cue from the vast range of questions raised by these critiques, throughout the 1960s and 1970s a new generation of scholars from English-speaking countries invaded the French archives to test the new hypotheses. By the 1980s they had largely demolished the empirical basis and the intellectual coherence of the ‘classic’ interpretation of the Revolution’s origins.

Initially the French maintained their traditional disdain for the ‘Anglo-Saxons’, dismissing Taylor and Cobban as cold warriors who had read too much Burke and wished only to disparage the Revolution as a continuing threat to the hegemony of the Western bourgeoisie. But when Furet and Richet challenged the classic interpretation from within the introverted world of French culture, the Robespierristes were forced
onto the defensive. Furet, who had no problems with the English language, had by the early 1970s begun to incorporate the findings and arguments of the foreigners into his own interpretations; as well as those of a compatriot long neglected in France but always taken seriously by English speakers, Alexis de Tocqueville (d. 1859). Tocqueville saw the Revolution as the advent of democracy and equality but not of liberty. Napoleon and his nephew, whom this aristocrat of old stock hated, had shown how dictatorship could be established with democratic support, since the Revolution had swept away all the institutions which, in impeding the relentless growth of state power, had kept the spirit of liberty alive. These insights persuaded Furet that the Revolution had not after all skidded off course into terror. The potential for terror had been inherent right from the start, from the moment when national sovereignty was proclaimed and no recognition given to the legitimacy of conflicting interests within the national community. For all its libertarian rhetoric, the Revolution had no more been disposed to tolerate opposition than the old monarchy, and the origins of modern totalitarianism would be found in the years between 1789 and 1794.

Post-revisionism

This was more than revisionism. The approach of Cobban, Taylor, and those who came after them has largely been empirical, undermining the sweeping social and economic claims of the classic interpretation with new evidence, but seldom seeking to establish new grand overviews. The most they claimed was that the Revolution could be more convincingly explained in terms of politics, contingency, and perhaps even accident. This is largely the approach adopted in earlier chapters of this book. Such suggestions did not satisfy bolder minds. As Furet began to depict a Revolution in the grip of attitudes and convictions which propelled it inevitably towards terror, others, mostly in America, sought wider explanations for revolutionary behaviour in cultural terms. They saw a number of ‘discourses’ emerging from the political conflict
between 1770 and 1789, which laid the foundation for much of the uncompromising language and arguments of the revolutionaries. Borrowing from the speculations of the German left-wing philosopher Jürgen Habermas, they argued that in the generation before the Revolution public opinion escaped from the king’s control, and that in the process respect and reverence for the monarchy ebbed away. Furet found these interpretative trends even more congenial than those of early revisionism, and spent increasing amounts of time in America and at conferences abroad, where yet another generation of young scholars committed to the cultural approach treated the triumphs of revisionism as yesterday’s battles. By 1987, these trends were crystallizing into a new orthodoxy, and were being labelled as post-revisionism.

The bicentenary

Whatever might be said against the classic interpretation, it was at least coherent and comprehensible. By contrast, the ‘linguistic turn’ of post-revisionism, increasingly influenced by philosophers and literary theorists, produced much abstruse material that could barely be understood outside specialist circles. When, therefore, the Socialist president of France decreed, some years in advance, that the revolutionary bicentenary of 1989 must be celebrated, he entrusted the academic side of the festivities to the still well-entrenched defenders of what Soboul had called, just before he died, ‘our good old orthodoxy’. Soboul’s successor at the Sorbonne, Michel Vovelle, was given a worldwide mission of coordinating academic commemoration. He worked so hard at it that eventually doctors instructed him to stop. But the learned bicentenary proved just as unmanageable as the more public one. While both Vovelle and Furet toured colloquia in every continent, they never appeared together on the same platform, and Furet and his cohorts boycotted the biggest conference of the year organized by Vovelle in Paris. This was scarcely the attitude of scholarly detachment for which Furet had seemed to be calling in 1978. As a
11. Scholarly overload: The reaction of reviewers to the bicentenary
(Daily Telegraph, 3 June 1989)
subject arousing sectarian passions, the Revolution was clearly far from finished, even for those claiming it was.

The bicentenary, in fact, released a torrent of vituperative publishing, most of it denouncing one aspect or another of the Revolution and its legacy. Particularly vocal in France were defenders of the Vendée rebels, the most persistent contemporary French enemies of the Revolution, and in consequence victims of the most savage repression. The heroism of devout peasant guerillas, long derided as superstitious fanatics, was now lovingly chronicled. Catholic clergy reminded their flocks of when modern impiety had begun. In the English-speaking world, meanwhile, while hundreds of learned gatherings picked over the debris of a generation of scholarly clashes, and publishers and the media felt obliged to mark the bicentenary in one way or another, the sensation of the year was the publication of Simon Schama’s *Citizens*, a vast ‘chronicle’ of the Revolution which ignored the historical debate almost entirely in the interests of telling a colourful and lurid story. The overall message was the folly of undertaking revolutions (one fortunately lost on the East Europeans who were at that moment defying Soviet satellite regimes). Yet there was an intellectual stance behind Schama’s Dickensian narrative, and it was basically the same as Furet’s. The terror, declared the most famous sentence in the book, was merely 1789 with a higher body count; and ‘violence . . . was not just an unfortunate side effect . . . it was the Revolution’s source of collective energy. It was what made the Revolution revolutionary’. Significantly, Schama’s tale ended abruptly in 1794 with the fall of Robespierre and the end of the terror.

One of the favourite mantras of the Revolution’s classic interpreters was taken from Georges Clemenceau, the statesman of the Third Republic who gloried in the achievements of the First. The Revolution, he declared, was a *bloc*. It had to be accepted in its totality, terror and all. It could not be disaggregated. Revisionism, with its emphasis on the contingent, the accidental, and the reality of choices facing those involved, suggested otherwise – as had the young Furet when he and
Richet spoke of the Revolution skidding off course. Only by approaching events as contemporaries had to, without an awareness of horrors to come, could regicide, dechristianization, and the guillotine be prevented from throwing their shadows over what preceded them, as they did over everything that followed. Post-revisionists, however, turned against this approach. In emphasizing the cultural constraints that determined what history’s actors could or could not think or do, they opened the way to a determinism not unlike that of the economic and social factors emphasized by the classic historians in their Marxist-inspired heyday. And in insisting that terror was inherent in the Revolution from the start, Furet made it the central issue by which to judge the movement’s entire significance. For post-revisionists of all stamps, in fact, the Revolution was as much a bloc as it was for those they claimed to have vanquished.

It was, of course, a different sort of bloc. And while the post-revisionist emphasis on the centrality of terror encouraged blanket denunciations not only of the Revolution but also of the very attempt to commemorate it, there were also plenty of celebrations throughout France, as Mitterrand intended, of two hundred years of human rights. Vovelle, for his part, while reiterating his commitment to left-wing values traceable back to Jacobinism, refused to accept that there had been any sort of contest with Furet, observing meekly that scholarly enquiry was open to all viewpoints. But, apart from a few hard-line Communists, the adherents of the once-hegemonic classic tradition emerged from the bicentenary chastened. In the 1990s, the Annales Historiques de la Révolution began gingerly to open its pages to non-members of the Robespierre studies circle, and to review their books for purposes other than denunciation. The chair of Mathiez, Soboul, and Vovelle is now occupied by a historian of the Vendée. And although since the death of Furet new sympathetic analyses of Jacobinism have begun to appear, they have been anxious to deny that terror was part of its mainstream. The heaviest blows, however, were not delivered by scholarly revisionists or post-revisionists. They came from the
spectacular collapse of Soviet Communism, and the repressive attempts of its Chinese variant, just a few weeks before 14 July 1989, to shore up its authority against students calling for liberty and singing the Marseillaise.

The end of a dream?

Awareness of the full repressive record of Soviet Communism had been growing at least since Krushchev had begun to denounce Stalin in 1956. But so long as the Soviet Union continued apparently flourishing and powerful, it could be argued that its Marxist ideology worked and that its bloody past had been a worthwhile price to pay to secure popular democracy. Similar arguments had been used to justify terror in 1793–4, and by later pro-Jacobin historians. When the rule of Gorbachev revealed the whole Soviet edifice to be unviable, and incapable of sustaining its sister-republics in Eastern Europe, this delusion collapsed. A regime invested for seventy years with all the hopes and dreams repeatedly frustrated since the fall of Robespierre had proved scarcely more successful, and at far heavier human cost, than the prototype which it and its friends held in reverence. The Chinese, whose historical loyalties were similar, had no answer to their own domestic critics other than to shoot or imprison them. If such regimes were the true heirs of the French Revolution, then Tocqueville and Furet were right in their perception that its significance lay not in the enhancement of liberty but in the promotion of state power. Faith in the benevolent potential of a rationalizing state was the first, and perhaps the last, illusion of the Enlightenment; and in this sense the French Revolution, and all the others that followed over two hundred years, were its authentic heirs. The illusion died whilst historians in the West squabbled about how, or even whether, to mark the Revolution’s second centenary.

But of course totalitarian peoples’ democracy was not the only legacy of ways of thinking that first triumphed in the 1790s. François Mitterrand’s decision to celebrate the rights of man at the bicentenary was more
than a doomed attempt to dissociate the memory of the Revolution from the terror. It was also a recognition that the ideology of human rights was, if anything, more important than it had ever been. Regimes of tyranny and massacre have no monopoly in the heritage of the Revolution. Citizens of modern constitutional democracies whose civil and political rights are guaranteed, and whose life chances are equal before the law, can find much in it to celebrate. The ambition of the French Revolution was so comprehensive that almost anyone living since can find something there to admire as well as to deplore. Nor are all the battles it launched yet over. If the collapse of Communism can be seen as defeat for Jacobins, the European Union looks very like a Girondin project to bring the liberal benefits of 1789 to Europe as a whole. In turn, this aspiration meets most resistance from national reflexes first fully aroused by the challenges emanating from revolutionary France. ‘The barest enumeration of some of the principal consequences of 1789’, wrote an eminent literary critic in 1987, even before the full symbolic significance of the bicentennial year had emerged,

enforce the realisation that the world as we know it today . . . is the composite of reflexes, political assumptions and structures, rhetorical postulates, bred by the French Revolution. More than arguably, for it entails subsequent, so often mimetic revolutionary movements and struggles across the rest of the planet, the French Revolution is the pivotal historical-social date after that of the foundation of Christianity . . . Time itself, the cycle of lived history, was deemed to have begun a second time . . . 1789 continues to be now.

The Permanent Revolution

The last word, however, should perhaps be left to the author with whom this book began. ‘That, my dear Algy’, says Ernest Worthing, ‘is the whole truth pure and simple.’ ‘The truth’, his friend replies, ‘is rarely pure and never simple.’
Timeline: Important dates of the French Revolution

BEFORE
1756–1763  Seven Years War
1770   Future Louis XVI marries Marie-Antoinette
1771–4   Maupeou remolds parlements
1774   Accession of Louis XVI. Dismissal of Maupeou
1776   American Declaration of Independence. Necker joins government
1778   France enters American War of Independence. Death of Voltaire and Rousseau
1781   Necker resigns
1783   Peace of Paris; Calonne becomes finance minister
1787   Assembly of Notables
1788   8 Aug. Estates-General convoked for 1789
       16 Aug. Payments suspended from Treasury
       Oct.–Dec. Second Assembly of Notables
       27 Dec. Doubling of third estate

DURING
1789   Feb.–June. Elections to Estates-General
       Feb. Sieyès, What is the Third Estate?
       5 May. Estates-General convene
       17 May. National Assembly proclaims national sovereignty
       20 May. Tennis Court Oath
27 May. Orders finally unite
14 July. Bastille falls
July. 'Great Fear' in countryside
4 Aug. Abolition of feudalism, privileges, and venality
26 Aug. Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen
5–6 October. 'October Days': women march to Versailles, king and Assembly move to Paris
2 Nov. Church property nationalized
12 Dec. Assignats introduced.

1790
13 Feb. Monastic vows forbidden
22 May. Foreign conquests renounced
19 June. Nobility abolished
12 July. Civil Constitution of the Clergy
16 Aug. Parlements abolished
27 Nov. Oath of the clergy
Nov. Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France

1791
Mar. Paine, Rights of Man
2 Mar. Guilds dissolved
13 Apr. Pope condemns Civil Constitution
14 May. Le Chapelier law bans trade unions
20–21 June. Flight to Varennes
16 July. Louis XVI reinstated
17 July. Champ de Mars massacre
14 Aug. Slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue
27 Aug. Declaration of Pillnitz
14 Sept. Louis XVI accepts constitution
30 Sept. Constituent Assembly dissolved
1 Oct. Legislative Assembly convenes
19 Dec. Louis XVI vetoes decrees against émigrés and unsworn priests

1792
20 April. War declared on Austria
25 April. First use of guillotine
13 June. Prussia declares war on France
20 June. Sansculottes invade royal palace
30 June. Fédérés enter Paris singing the Marseillaise
10 August. Overthrow of monarchy
2–6 Sept. September massacres
20 Sept. First victory of French forces at Valmy
21 Sept. Convention meets
22 Sept. Republic proclaimed
19 Nov. Fraternity and help offered to all peoples ‘seeking to
recover their liberty’
3 and 26 Dec. Trial of Louis XVI

1793
16 Jan. Louis XVI condemned to death
21 Jan. King executed
1 Feb. War against British and Dutch
11 Mar. Vendée rebellion begins
19 Mar. Defeat in Belgium at Neerwinden
6 April. Committee of Public Safety created
31 May–2 June. Purge of Girondins

June. Spread of ‘Federalist Revolt’
13 July. Marat assassinated
27 July. Robespierre joins Committee of Public Safety
23 Aug. Levée en masse decree
27 Aug. Toulon surrenders to the British
5 Sept. Sansculottes force Convention to declare terror the
order of the day
29 Sept. General maximum on prices
Oct.–Dec. Dechristianization campaign
5 Oct. Revolutionary calendar introduced
9 Oct. Fall of Lyon to Convention’s forces
16 Oct. Marie-Antoinette executed
31 Oct. Girondins executed
19 Dec. Fall of Toulon
23 Dec. Vendéans defeated at Savenay

1794
4 Feb. Abolition of slavery
24 Mar. Execution of Hébertists
5 Apr. Execution of Dantonists
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 June</td>
<td>Festival of the Supreme Being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 June</td>
<td>Law of 22 prairial inaugurates ‘Great Terror’ in Paris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27–8 July</td>
<td>(9–10 thermidor). Fall of Robespierre; end of terror</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aug.–Dec.</td>
<td>‘Thermidorean Reaction’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Sept</td>
<td>Republic renouces all religious affiliations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Nov.</td>
<td>Jacobin club closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Dec.</td>
<td>Invasion of Dutch Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>1–2 Apr. Germinal uprising of sansculottes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>20–23 May. Prairial uprising of sansculottes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>8 June. Death of Louis XVII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>24 June. Declaration of Verona by Louis XVIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>27 June–21 July. Emigré landing at Quiberon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>22 Aug. Constitution of Year III and Two Thirds Law approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>1 Oct. Belgium annexed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>2 Nov. Directory inaugurated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1796</td>
<td>19 Feb. Abolition of assignats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1796</td>
<td>11 April. Bonaparte invades Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1796</td>
<td>10 May. Arrest of Babeuf and conspirators for equality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1797</td>
<td>18 April. Bonaparte forces peace preliminaries of Leoben on the Austrians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1797</td>
<td>29 June. Cisalpine Republic created</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1797</td>
<td>4 September. Councils and Directory purged in coup of fructidor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1797</td>
<td>30 Sept. Bankruptcy of Two Thirds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1798</td>
<td>18 Oct. Peace of Campo Formio ends war on the continent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1798</td>
<td>15 Feb. Roman Republic proclaimed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1798</td>
<td>11 May. Electoral results annulled in coup of floréal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1798</td>
<td>19 May. Bonaparte sails for Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1798</td>
<td>21 May. Irish rebellion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1799</td>
<td>1 Aug. Battle of the Nile. Bonaparte marooned in Egypt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1799</td>
<td>5 Sept. Jourdan law universalizes conscription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1799</td>
<td>26 Jan. Parthenopean Republic proclaimed in Naples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1799</td>
<td>12 Mar. Austria declares war. War of the Second Coalition</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10 Apr. Pope Pius VI brought to France
18 June. Directory purged in coup of prairial
22 Aug. Bonaparte leaves Egypt
29 Aug. Death of Pius VI
9 Oct. Bonaparte lands in France
9–10 Nov. Bonaparte takes power in coup of 18–19 brumaire
25 Dec. Consular constitution promulgated
1800 14 June. First Consul defeats Austrians at Marengo.
       Negotiations with new pope, Pius VII, follow
       3 Dec. Final defeat of Austrians at Hohenlinden
1801 16 July. Concordat signed
1802 27 Mar. British make peace at Amiens. End of French
       revolutionary wars
       18 Apr. Concordat promulgated

AFTER
1804 Promulgation of the Civil Code
1804 Coronation of the Emperor Napoleon; end of the First
       Republic
1806 Dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire
1808 Deposition of Spanish Bourbons
1812 Napoleon invades Russia; retreat from Moscow
1814-15 First Bourbon restoration
1815 20 March–22 June. The ‘Hundred Days’
       18 June. Final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo
1815–30 Restoration monarchy
1821 Death of Napoleon on St. Helena
1830 June: Revolution of 1830
1830–48 July Monarchy: reign of Louis-Philippe
1835 Büchner, Danton’s Death
1836 Carlyle, The French Revolution. A History
1840 Return of Napoleon’s remains to France
1848 February. Revolution of 1848
       December. Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte elected president

113
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event/Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1848–52</td>
<td>Second Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1852–70</td>
<td>Second Empire: reign of Napoleon III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>Tocqueville, <em>The Ancien Regime and the French Revolution</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>Dickens, <em>A Tale of Two Cities</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>Franco-Prussian War; abdication of Napoleon III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>Paris Commune</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1873–1940</td>
<td>Third Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>Separation of church and state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>Russian Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940–4</td>
<td>Vichy State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1944–58</td>
<td>Fourth Republic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Fifth Republic established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>Bicentenary of the French Revolution</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>