
Resources

by Paul Gottfried

The Continuing Revolution

In his critical work about the *bicentenaire* of the French Revolution, *Le Grand Déclassé*, French historian Pierre Chaunu explores the first stages of the unraveling of the glorification of France as a revolutionary nation conceived in 1789. By the time Chaunu's book was published in 1989, however, the official celebrations had been both scaled back and focused on the least divisive aspects of the early Revolution: the establishment of legal equality and the abolition of certain feudal practices. Historian François Furet, like Chaunu, has described as well as contributed to this process of reassessment. According to Furet, what made the French Revolution different from moderate liberal changes then taking place in Anglo-American societies were its least desirable aspects, most particularly mass murder.

As far back as 1790, Edmund Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, showed presciently that what the French revolutionaries were offering was not merely a timely reform of French monarchical institutions but an "armed doctrine," fully reflected in the "Declaration of the Rights of Men and of Citizens," passed by the French Assembly in August 1789. The proponents of this document were legislating not only for their own nation but for the entire human race. Presumably, reasoned Burke, those who spoke for mankind might also feel morally driven to liberate other peoples from their unnatural ways of life. What some French still call contemptuously "*droit de l'homme*" ("human-rights pieties") are not idle speculation but, unlike the originally modest American Constitution, a blueprint for world reform. And this blueprint, which we identify today with both the Jacobins and their American neoconservative caricatures, goes back to the very first month of the French Revolution.

A moderate social democrat (and certainly not a man of the right), Furet has revived the early 20th-century scholarship of the anti-Masonic Catholic Augustin Cochin to stress the role of Masonic networks in driving the Revolution forward. Indeed, much of the research on the intellectual background of the

Revolution came out of the right, just as Furet's treatment of the centralizing tendencies of the Revolution draws consciously on the contextualization of that event by the liberal aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville. In the 1850's, Tocqueville pointed out the connection between the state-building of the Bourbon monarchs and the even more frenetic centralizing efforts of the Jacobins and showed that the Revolution carried out what the monarchy it rejected had begun to do politically. What made the revolutionary government particularly obsessive in its destruction of medieval provincial identities, however, was its devotion to a Masonic transformational project. Its leaders were consciously trying to change human nature as well as the established system of Christian and pre-Christian beliefs. And they proceeded to do so by engaging in, among other practices, mass killing.

Too much is now known about this violence—thanks to such scholars as Reynald Sécher—to allow the French Revolution to remain an object of reverence. In the 80's, Sécher, a student of Chaunu, brought out a series of books detailing the Nazi- or Soviet-like massacres of real or suspected antirevolutionaries in the Vendée and in Brittany. In January 1984, socialist journalist Max Gallo attacked Sécher in *Le Monde* for daring to equate isolated revolutionary excesses with "genocide." But Gallo's attempt to preserve the Revolution as a leftist icon, however, was not notably successful. With massacres in the 1790's reaching well over 100,000 and including the drowning of women

and children, the Revolution looked too much like a 20th-century totalitarian project to allow it to be celebrated as a dawn of democratic freedoms.

Nor did it help matters much that, since the formation of the French Communist Party (following the Russian Revolution), French communists have run around extolling the Jacobins as their spiritual ancestors. Since the 1920's, prominent historians of the Revolution who have adulated the Jacobin dictatorship—Albert Mathiez, Georges Soboul, and Georges Lefebvre—have been either communists or communist fellow travelers and have underscored the inevitability of this choice for those who want to continue the revolutionary tradition. But events have overwhelmed those who enjoy such postures. As Chaunu pointed out in the 1980's, Frenchmen had to make two related decisions: whether to stand with Stalin or with his victims, a choice dramatized by the introduction into France of the works of Solzhenitsyn; and whether to side with the French revolutionary armies or with the peasant families whom the revolutionaries recklessly slaughtered. The French left insisted on throwing into the same *marmite* their Jacobin and Marxist-Leninist loyalties. They turned out to be right: Both loyalties instantiated the relation between radical human reconstruction and wholesale slaughter. And, in the end, it became necessary to affirm or reject both of these bloody experiments aimed at abolishing the past.

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