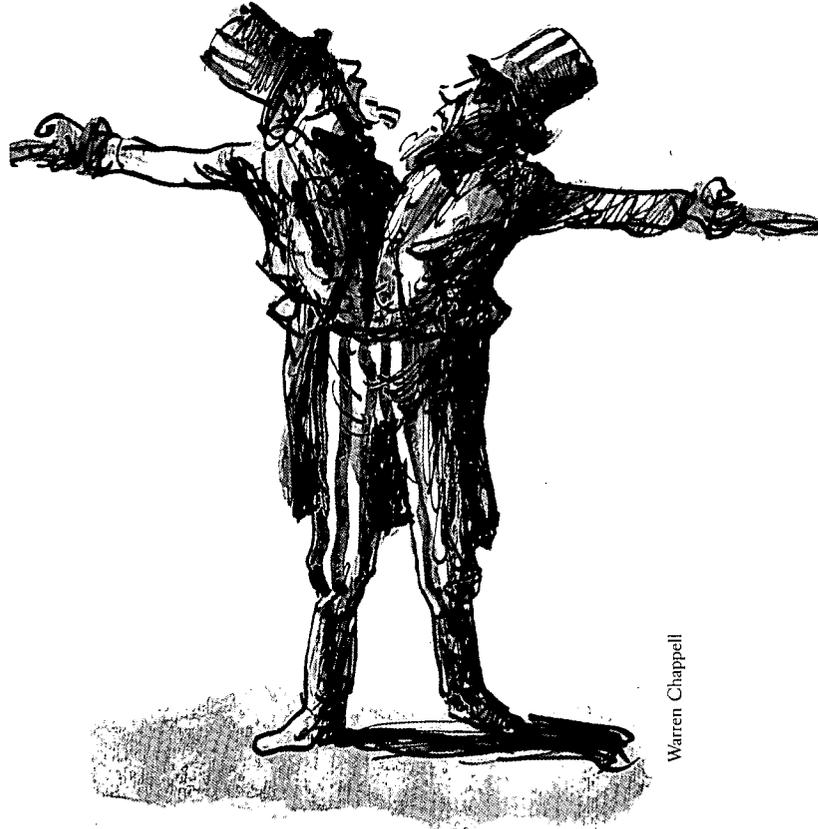


Revolution and the American Mind

by Robert L. Paquette

"The world has never had a good definition of liberty."

—Abraham Lincoln



Revolutions: Reflections on American Equality and Foreign Liberations

by David Brion Davis
Cambridge: Harvard University Press;
130 pp., \$19.95



Food lines lengthen in Moscow; show trials continue in Beijing; bicycles replace motor vehicles in Havana. As the Warsaw Pact and Berlin Wall crumble, so does the standing of Mao and Ché, even on college campuses. The closing of this millennium may not bring the kingdom of heaven,

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but it has brought searching reconsideration of the meaning of revolution.

In three essays composed for the Massey lectures at Harvard University, David Brion Davis, one of this country's preeminent intellectual historians and author of two prize-winning volumes in a proposed trilogy on the history of slavery, reflects on how the meaning of revolution shaped the birth and maturation of the United States. For many scholars the outbreak of the American Revolution marked the beginning of an Age of Democratic Revolution, which extended to the middle of the 19th century. It was a remarkable period of economic growth and social upheaval to be sure, arguably the most important period in the making of the modern world. On both sides of the

Atlantic, in country after country, disaffected social groups emerged and coalesced into mass insurgencies. Taken as a whole, they threw down the gauntlet to hierarchy, challenged arbitrary and despotic power, and championed citizenship, civil liberty, and natural rights. Alexis de Tocqueville captured the central tendency of this age when he concluded in 1840 that democratic revolution is "an irresistible fact. Gradually the distinctions of rank are done away with; the barriers that once severed mankind are falling; property is divided, power is shared by many, the light of intelligence spreads and the capacities of all classes tend toward equality."

By this time revolution had acquired a whole new meaning, thanks in large part to Tocqueville's countrymen. Long

before the French Revolution, the word had no political definition. Revolution denoted circularity and was frequently applied to the movement of celestial bodies. In the 17th century revolution acquired a political meaning but retained the element of circularity. Hence Samuel Johnson in his celebrated dictionary defined revolution in one sense as "a change in the state of government," for the example he clearly had in mind was the Glorious Revolution and the return of legitimate government in England under William of Orange. France's revolution, as Edmund Burke saw to his horror early on, was a "complete revolution" or "innovation," qualitatively different in its conscious use of collective violence to remake society, root and branch, and he contrasted it unfavorably not only with the Glorious Revolution but the American Revolution as well. From the time of Burke's reflections to that of Davis's many keen observers, and not exclusively conservatives, have found the contrasts so striking that they have questioned whether the American Revolution was a revolution at all. Indeed, some have gone so far as to argue that what began in 1776 was essentially a conservative movement.

Davis quickly raises the question and eventually relates it to various ways specific individuals and social groups in the United States have had their values confirmed or denied by foreign revolutions, especially the great French Revolution. The Founding Fathers, as Davis acknowledges, lacked Burke's perspicacity. Even after regicide and the Red terror, most of them continued to look with affinity on what was happening in France. Not until the fierce debates in 1795 over Jay's Treaty had passed did conspicuous defections from the prevailing view begin to mount.

Why this overlong embrace? In parts one and two Davis argues that religious millennialism and the language of equality conspired to cloud public judgment. Religious millennialism fostered what Davis calls the "illusion of an inevitable and predictable sequence of events," the naive hope that despite its bloody excesses and betrayed promises, the French Revolution would eventually conform to the American trajectory. With its inherent ability to relocate quickly sources of evil, millennialism provided justification for the extremes

of destruction and carnage. To make his point Davis retells John Adams' story—a wonderful allegory for our own times—about the famed chemist and French hotspur Joseph Priestley. When after the execution of Louis XVI, Adams challenged him point by point to provide the empirical evidence that the French Revolution was fighting for the cause of all mankind, Priestley could not readily do so. To save himself from further strikes, he fell back on revelation and prophecy. Similarly, Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to Madame d'Enville, reassured her that despite the "horrors" that were attending the onset of the French Revolution, the new government "would approximate us more to one another. . . . But the way to heaven, you know, has always been said to be strewn with thorns." Belatedly, in 1816, Jefferson would concede to Adams that Adams' "prophecies" about the French Revolution had been truer than his own.

At the end of the 18th century equality, while a staple part of a shared, trans-Atlantic revolutionary vocabulary, possessed multiple and ambiguous meanings. Davis convincingly argues that while some overlap in meaning

existed, enough to delude revolutionaries on both sides and to present future slaveholders with intractable problems, general usage of equality in revolutionary America and France grew apart because each revolution germinated in quite different soils. The overthrow of France's feudal system necessarily equated liberty and equality for some time. In a strongly seigniorial society, freedom would entail an immediate leveling of status between the lower and upper ranks of society. America's revolutionaries, without this ponderous feudal baggage, wanted to preserve from arbitrary power what French commoners had yet to attain. In this sense the American Revolution was conservative. From the start Americans generally proved far better positioned in their society to "intuit" natural equality and then move quickly beyond to claim other meanings, such as equality of opportunity. Consequently, the excesses of the French Revolution might be explained by the effort required to breach a still formidable, if decaying, social order to which Americans were largely unaccustomed. As one acute French observer told Thomas Jefferson in 1790, "the characteristic difference

REVOLUTION DERAILED



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between your revolution and ours is that having nothing to destroy, you had nothing to injure, and labouring for a people, few in number, incorrupted, and extended over a large tract of country, you have avoided all the inconvenience of a situation contrary in every respect."

Davis suggests how conflicting emotions conditioned members of America's revolutionary generation to identify with the French Revolution. On one hand, it acted to reinforce a broad feeling that human beings could indeed make their own future, what Davis, borrowing from Robert Darn-ton, calls the sense of "possibilism." On the other hand, a generation that was testing "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice" had to be insecure about the survivability of the great experiment. Anxious about internal and external enemies, leaders of the fledgling republic might be forgiven for embracing kindred spirits where they were not. Enthusiasm for the French Revolution,

Davis points out, could obscure domestic divisions. Elites that proclaimed French principles could pretend they were not elites. Such enthusiasm could even become "the litmus test that would reveal either ideological purity or a betrayal of the principles of America's War of Independence and the sacred mission it bequeathed."

Age, undoubtedly, also played a role. Revolutionary America was young America. How many early supporters, like the brilliant John Randolph of Roanoke, could justifiably write off their early identification with the French Revolution as youthful exuberance and naïveté? In addition, some French radicals, at least in the beginning, looked to members of America's revolutionary generation for ideas. Courted and flattered, they could have easily deceived themselves into thinking that they and the French were fighting the same battle.

Perhaps more remarkably, enthusiasm for French principles among whites in the United States continued to wax strong for years after those principles had helped to ignite a slave

revolution in France's Caribbean colony of Saint Dominique. A few white notables, boldly moving from religious and secular meanings of equality to a broad critique of the arbitrary rule of one man by another, defended the slave revolution and justified the blood-letting. The majority, however, particularly white Southerners, turned away to confront the rising spectre of servile warfare on their own lands incited by black Jacobins. By 1800 a series of slave conspiracies and revolts throughout the Americas with clear connections to the great revolutions in France and Saint Dominique confirmed their worst fears. Little wonder then that in 1801 President Thomas Jefferson, instead of using Saint Dominique's former slaves to thwart Napoleon and advance United States interests in the Mississippi Valley, actually encouraged Napoleon to reoccupy Saint Dominique, for in Jefferson's estimation, the greater threat was race war. But in the long run, Jefferson could not escape what antebellum white Southerners would read into his famous words on equality, and many, like Edmund Ruffin, would come to repudiate him as an abolitionist.

In truth the older Jefferson approximated Adams in his indictment of the French Revolution. Davis's commentary on their correspondence suggests that he, too, has qualified his early thinking on revolution. Like Adams, he has sickened of the enormities committed in its name. Like Burke, he recognizes that the traditions and values of one society cannot easily be exported by revolution to another that is ill-prepared to accept them. Yet, in the end, he appears to find consolation in the reforms that revolution or the threat of revolution has precipitated, albeit indirectly: "I can only shudder when I think what our world would be like today if industrialization had advanced without political revolutions and the fear of revolutionaries, who, for all their mistakes and self-delusions, perpetuated dreams of equality and social justice."

He has a point. Strategic reform has not always come easy to conservatives. If the modern world has suffered too much for its extravagant faith in human progress and its shameful disregard of continuity, it has also suffered too much from repeated failures to recognize legitimate cries for social justice. ◊

LIBERAL ARTS



EMIGRATION

My opinion, with respect to emigration, is, that, except of useful Mechanics and some particular descriptions of men or professions, there is no need of encouragement: while the policy or advantage of its taking place in a body (I mean the settling of them in a body) may be much questioned; for, by so doing, they retain the Language, habits and principles (good or bad) which they bring with them.

—George Washington, in a letter to John Adams, November 15, 1794

L'affaire De Man

by Milton J. Rosenberg

"Colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the workyard made."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

**Signs of the Times:
Deconstruction and
the Fall of Paul de Man**

by David Lehman
New York: Poseidon Press;
318 pp., \$21.95

There is mention in the English annals of the 14th century of syphilis as "the malady of France." Inevitably, blame was bilaterally distributed and the French of the same period called the disease "*la maladie d'Angleterre*."

A new malady of France, in the form of a disease of culture, reached across the Channel some twenty years ago but could not take hold in England. Instead it found a breeding ground in the humanities departments of American universities. Deconstruction has, since then, become epidemic in the intellectual world of the United States, and it persists long after it has been put aside in France by still fresher forms of conceptual derangement.

Rather like the theory of relativity, deconstruction has both a "special" and a "general" form. The special theory of deconstruction was intended as a method for the interpretive reading of "texts." Jacques Derrida, the founding provocateur of deconstruction, has taught a generation of academic acolytes to consider texts to mean everything from Sophocles and Flaubert to rock lyrics and cereal box inscriptions. All, according to Derrida, have no intrinsic meaning and they differ neither in artistic merit nor in moral worth. These qualities reside merely in the eye and mind of the reader, and finally the proper function of criticism is not to elucidate, evaluate, or appreciate, but to deconstruct—that is, to destroy. Thereby one destroys not only the authority of the



work in question but also the delusional sense that we command our language (in fact it "speaks us") or that such mistaken standards as reason, truth, or beauty have any possible claim upon us.

In its general form deconstruction, when placed in intellectual history, comes to look very much like a *reconstruction* of nihilism, that older philosophy which regards the concept of meaning as meaningless and the idea of truth as an utter lie. Thus the broader deconstructionists—who now fill and often dominate the humanities departments of our universities—raid far beyond mere literature as they flail away at the graphic arts, at science, at law, and at philosophy itself. And in these forays, as they pull apart yet other "texts," they continue to proclaim that objectivity, reason, and meaningful moral purpose are all and always vain

illusions. Well—almost all and almost always: for in their voraciousness the leading deconstructionists have, in recent years, attempted to gobble up Marxism and feminism. The purpose has not been to deconstruct *their* texts but rather to demonstrate a great new insight: that the significant literary and intellectual works of Western civilization, whether in literature, law, or philosophy and ranging from classical antiquity to the middle of this century, are all in fact merely doing the work of repressive capitalism by keeping women, workers, homosexuals, and non-Westerners entrapped in a sense of unworthiness.

As they have frolicked in their newly opened neo-Marxist playground, American deconstructionists have enjoyed the added delights of attacking the traditions of the institutions that house and pay them. Assaulting the "canon" of significant authors, shifting the work of English departments away from Shakespeare, Dickens, or James and toward Spillane, Madonna, and 2 Live Crew, burdening half-literate undergraduates with the opacities of Derrida, De Man, and their American imitators, they have, in the humanities departments of our universities, made a desolation and called it "victory."

While scholarly argument about deconstruction has, in recent years, begun to emerge in the academic journals and intellectual reviews, it has hardly been reported to the broad public. David Lehman's new book is a welcome contribution. In vivid reportage it brings to the general reader the bad news from Harvard, Yale, Johns Hopkins, Duke, Berkeley, and kindred scholarly enclaves. Lehman, who has apparently spent his time as an indentured academic in the English department at Ithaca College, has been a close observer of this scene. His stance is amusement at the follies of his peers, but just behind his puckish persona one senses deeper reserves of disgust and rage.

Milton J. Rosenberg is a professor of social psychology at the University of Chicago.