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New Man, New Nation, New World

The French Revolution in Myth and Reality

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Regeneration

Enlightenment philosophers on revolutionary regeneration

The year was 1758. France was embroiled in the murderous Seven Years War and was experiencing a short but severe political crisis. Criticism of the despotic rule of Louis XV was growing louder. In this very year the aristocrat and former diplomat, Gabriel Mably, wrote a treatise entitled *Concerning the Rights & Duties of the Citizen*, which, for the time being, would remain in his desk drawer. It is a report based on confidential conversations between a Frenchman and an English Lord, who argues that the French need not live in fear of revolution (alternatively, the term *civil war* is used). At first the Frenchman resists the Englishman's arguments, but eventually he is convinced.

Revolution – Mably wrote – shakes the soul of man, but it also builds courage. "The People are never stronger, never happier, never more serious than they are after the shock of civil war. The Corsicans seem to have risen up as a new nation since their love of liberty dictated that they take up arms." As a result of such revolutionary shocks, "the horizon expands, talents multiply, and dignity and pride grow in the souls of man." Mably continued: "Absolute authority emboldens scoundrels and morons; it is so easy to achieve success by not thinking or doing anything good. If only the scene would change, then we could easily become a people of great spirit and integrity, or at least our efforts to achieve those traits, rather than being a burden, would become pleasant." There appear in Mably's discourses two classic aspects to the theory of revolutionary regeneration: The new nation and the entirely new individual. Published on the eve of revolution, in 1789, Mably's text would have a significant influence on French thinking.

Now let us take a short trip back in time to the early 1760s. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, regeneration – if such a thing was possible at all – was tied to a vision of the great and wise Legislator. To regenerate the individual and society meant to proclaim laws that restore meaning to elemental values, lost in human history, which is the history of ever-growing decadence. This idea – regeneration through legislation – would seduce the French in the unforgettable year of 1789.

But can revolution, in Rousseau's view, open the gates to the heaven of regeneration? "The crisis is approaching, and we are on the edge of a revolution," Rousseau wrote in *Emile* (1762). "In my opinion it is impossible that the great kingdoms of Europe should last much longer." This prophecy, contained in a book suggesting that people may escape to a natural state of innocence, could be read as a harbinger of the great and ultimate catastrophe awaiting corrupt societies. But now let us open Rousseau's *The Social Contract* to chapter eight of the second book and we find that revolution can – though not necessarily must –

be an instrument of regeneration. “Just as some diseases unhinge men’s minds and deprive them of all remembrance of the past, so we sometimes find, during the existence of States, epochs of violence, in which revolutions produce an influence upon nations such as certain crises produce upon individuals, in which horror of the past supplies the place of forgetfulness, and in which the State, inflamed by civil wars, springs forth so to speak from its ashes, and regains the vigor of youth in issuing from the arms of death.” Such words suggest the myth of *l’éternelle jeunesse*, the eternal youth of a post-revolutionary society, an idea that would hypnotize so many in the year 1789. And it is precisely here – in the words of Antoine de Baecque – where the New Man finally appears who “sees the entire future as the realm of excellence.”[1]

Now we jump forward twenty years on our trip through time and make a stop at the beginning of the 1780s. The British colonies in America were experiencing a real revolution, albeit a relatively mild one. The aging Denis Diderot was watching these events carefully in the hope that the American Revolution “will defer for at least a few centuries the sentence passed upon all things of this world - the sentence that condemns them to the fact that they are born, reach maturity, fall into a state of decrepitude, and finally meet their own end.” What Diderot was arguing here, in his *Aux insurgents d'Amérique* (1782), was actually nothing new for the great philosopher, who had long believed that “a Nation can regenerate itself only with a bloodbath, just as it was with Jason, whom Medea made young again by quartering him and boiling him in a cauldron.”

The American Revolution convinced Diderot that such revolutionary regeneration was highly possible, that the decay of the eighteenth century was a reversible phenomenon: A bloodbath could rejuvenate a people and a country. But for others, this was not at all so obvious. In 1788 Honoré Comte de Mirabeau wrote that “recourse to violent revolution would be a barbaric retreat from the principles of our age. The invention of the printing process alone is enough to create all the change we need.... Only in this way will nations not lose that which is good about them.” For Mirabeau, a bloodbath was simply out of the question.

The idea of revolution was nothing strange to French readers. Since the end of the seventeenth century they had a wealth of material to choose from, much of it well written, dealing with revolutions in England, Sweden, Spain, Persia,

1 Antoine de Baecque, “L’Homme nouveau est arrivé,” *Dix-Huitième Siècle*, XX, 1988, 196. On the wider issue of the “new man”, compare Mona Ozouf, “La Révolution française et l’idée de l’homme nouveau”, in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. II: *The Political Culture of the French Revolution*, edited by Colin Lucas (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1988), 213ff.

Turkey and Russia; a classic example was the scholarship of a now forgotten priest, René Aubert de Vertot. Recently, the French scholar Jean-Marie Goulemot has conducted research on this literature[2] showing that its overall tone, interestingly, was often anti-revolutionary: French absolutism was fully able – authors of these works argued – to defend stability and order against chaos and the barren convulsions of revolution. For the majority of political writers in eighteenth-century France, revolutions were a fact, not an act; they were a sort of divine retribution, like an earthquake or volcanic eruption, rather than the result of human actions or choice. Revolutions were not "done," they "happened." Naturally, it was therefore difficult to examine their internal dynamics, to write about the logic of revolutionary actions. In the great French dictionaries of the time, the word *révolution* appears, but not *révolutionnaire* and *révolutionner*, which is understandable, since revolution was not something done, but rather something survived, passively.[3] Significantly, among these works there were few that dealt with revolution in France. The implication was that, without a doubt, Bourbon absolutism could successfully defend its subjects against any unproductive disruptions, and would guarantee blessed stability.

It is not difficult to understand why the English Lord in Mably's conversations had to work so hard to convince the Frenchman of the benefits of revolution. "The slightest sign of unrest, even the slightest murmur," the Englishman says, "gives you the impression that France is on the brink of civil war." But one must remember that "civil war is sometimes something very good … it is good if a society, sick like a patient with gangrene who refuses an operation, would otherwise be destroyed." Of course, France's gangrene was despotism, which was legitimized only by a hysterical fear of revolutionary upheaval and social chaos. "You must choose," the Englishman finally pleads, "between revolution and slavery, there is nothing in between."

But what were the chances that the French would make the right decision in the face of such a disturbing alternative? Mably wrote his treatise in 1758, and - as we have already noted - opposition to despotism and its obvious failures was growing. And it is significant that, for Mably, revolution was not an event independent from men, but rather the result of their will; it was an act, not a fact. In 1758 Mably expressed optimism: "I think revolutions are still possible, and the good citizen should not lose hope." The task of this good citizen was to ask himself if revolution would be useful, and along with his fellow citizens, he had to

2 Jean-Marie Goulemot, *Discourse, révolution et histoire* (Paris: Union générale d'édition, 1975).

3 Keith Michael Baker, "Revolution," in *The Political Culture of the French Revolution*, vol. II, 41ff.

"steer" the revolution (*une révolution ménagée* - Mably's ideal of a well-devised revolution). "Let God grant that revolutions be not so rare and so difficult."

But God did not show the French His mercy: Opposition to despotism – so alive in the 1750s – eventually died down, and Mably lost his revolutionary optimism. In the second part of his *Observations sur l'histoire de France*, published after his death, in 1788, Mably concluded that the French had missed their chance at revolution. "The current political system is well suited to the French character … We no longer have in us any idea of revolution." According to Mably, there were two conditions necessary to carry out *une révolution ménagée*, namely that a nation be both enlightened and determined, but the French fulfilled only the first condition. They were enlightened, but they lacked the necessary courage and will. Mably concluded: "Enlightenment arrives too late in a society where morals are so depraved."

Whereas Diderot was an optimist on the issue of revolutionary regeneration and Mably was – in the end - a pessimist, Rousseau oscillated between the two. Of course, we read in the *Social Contract* that revolution can raise society from the ashes, but such cases are rare, indeed exceptional. What's more, after a given nation is once offered the chance to regain its freedom, it usually does not get a second chance. The ignorance of the people, corruption among the elites, the collision of hostile interests, terrible flaws within political institutions, the fatal defects of modern civilization – all of this threatens the human race with catastrophe. And yet a glimmer of hope remains, regeneration is not impossible. Rousseau allowed history a fragile chance that it could somehow return to genuine values.

Such swings between optimism and pessimism were common among writers and thinkers of the age (not only among the great Philosophes), though their works did not always share the same lofty rhetoric and pathos that characterized the work of Rousseau. Take, for example, the writing of Louis-Sébastien Mercier. In the two decades before the storming of the Bastille his work was widely read. Especially successful was his futuristic utopian novel *L'An 2440* (1771), but no less so were his realistic observations of life in the capital city in *Le Tableau de Paris* (1781–1788). As the year 1789 drew closer, Mercier's work was filled with penetrating analysis of social contrasts and conflicts that would lead to revolution. And what we find, behind the façade of optimism and rationalism, is a rising tide of mistrust toward the Enlightenment. In the introduction to the 1786 reprint of *L'An 2440*, he compares the detached life of the French academic to the ancient astronomer gazing at the stars from the depths of his isolated laboratory. "The abyss is right at our feet," Mercier wrote.

In Mercier we see a mixture of Rousseau's sense of cataclysm and Mably's faith in revolutionary regeneration. "There are situations when a [revolutionary]

era becomes necessary, times which are terrible and bloody but which also signal the coming Liberty…. It is then that great people emerge…. Civil war reveals deeply hidden talents, widens the field of opportunity for extraordinary people…. This is a frightening remedy, but when the state is paralyzed and souls are numbed, it becomes necessary." Wonderful words, but that is a peculiar way for Mercier to be playing with the idea of revolution. Describing with true sympathy terrible examples of social injustice inflicted upon people, he was amazed by their incredible patience, though he warned against stretching that patience too far. He predicted revolution, but at the same time he did not believe in it. He ascribed to revolution the power of regeneration, but he preferred to encourage the King to institute reforms in order to relieve social tensions. He accepted the submissiveness of the aggrieved, but it bothered him. Such was the oscillation between despair and hope, between pessimism and faith that perhaps things would turn out well.

And such were the ambivalent views at the threshold of revolution in 1789, all of which would greatly influence later visions of revolutionary regeneration.

So far we have pointed out only that the myth of regeneration – this idea of a new man, a new society, a new view of the world – was to become, as of 1789, one of the most important elements of revolutionary rhetoric, indeed a new way of thinking. But it is no surprise that the great enemies of revolution began to quickly and violently attack this idea.

The most prominent of them was Edmund Burke, author of the famous *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Burke was well aware of the uniqueness of the French Revolution which, by the simple fact that it was so distinct from the traditional course of European civilization, had - so to speak – a sort of negative greatness ("the most important of all revolutions… a revolution in sentiments, manners, and moral opinions"). Burke mocked the idea of revolutionary regeneration, pointing instead to the degeneration of the French, a return to stupid, chattering senility or to primitive, blabbering infantilism. "These gentlemen deal in regeneration; but at any price I should hardly yield my rigid fibers to be regenerated by them, nor begin, in my grand climacteric, to squall in their new accents or to stammer, in my second cradle, the elemental sounds of their barbarous metaphysics." Under noisy protestations of regained youth were hidden the grotesque realities of infantile babble or senility.

Joseph de Maistre tore down the myth of regeneration in a very similar way. "Bloodbaths" - to use Diderot's term - have no power of regeneration, but rather represent God's punishment for the sins of the French, a "great purge" preparing the ground for future regeneration. True regeneration, according to Maistre, would be an act of restoration, of a "new" monarchy.

The "disappearance" of the *ancien régime*

The complex myth of regeneration developed by men of the revolutionary era exerted a huge influence on how they defined the relationship between the new society and that which preceded it, between the revolution and the old "gothic system" (only later would use of the term *ancien régime* become common).

The events of the summer of 1789 were widely received as a magnificent and unexpected gift either from God or history. No one had expected the rapid, deep and relatively painless change that came with the capitulation of despotism after the storming of the Bastille and the elimination of clerical and noble rights and privileges on 4 and 5 August; one could have easily concluded that the gothic monster had destroyed itself. And it began to appear as if writers of some of the great literature of the pre-revolutionary era had predicted the coming upheaval. It turned out that Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787), or *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782) by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, could be interpreted metaphorically, taking on prophetic meanings. Don Giovanni, a man – as Jean Starobinski has written – who is "devoted to extravagance and excess, to living for the moment, and to conquests with no future," invites the Commendatore to his last supper by his own free will, and thereby brings destruction upon himself; in a confrontation with raw virtue, symbolized by the Commendatore, *uomo di sasso*, the aristocratic libertine has no chance. Similarly, the demise of Valmont in Laclos's novel is a matter of self-destruction. The fate of these two aristocratic reprobates, taken metaphorically, seemed to presage what would happen in 1789 – the self-destruction of the *ancien régime*.[4]

Much of the revolutionary rhetoric during the first, euphoric months of victory was marked by solar themes: The forces of darkness had been exhausted, the night of despotism and superstition had receded; the Sun of Liberty shone down on all the French people, equal and generous. And such rhetoric was accompanied by a certain way of thinking about events the French had just lived through: If the daylight of Liberty had suddenly replaced the night of despotism, one could suppose that the new socio-political system would have nothing to do with the system it had replaced, which had passed like a bad dream. The ease of victory suggested that the "gothic system" had not been destroyed so much as it had simply scattered like a fog blinding the people from simple social and political truths. The revolution was not the midwife of history; the new system was not born in pain from the womb of the old system; there had been no caesarean section. "The new system," Mona Ozouf has written, "took the place of the old one just like one spectacle is replaced by the next one … the dramaturgy for this

4 Jean Starobinski, *1789, Les emblèmes de la Raison* (Paris: Flammarion, 1973), 25, 30.

cycle of appearance and disappearance reveals both the immediacy of change and the impossibility of a return to what was."[5] Could one ever imagine that someone or something would be able to snuff out the sun, or that rights granted to the people in the full light of day could suddenly be taken away? A deputy to the Constituent Assembly, Bertrand Barère, undoubtedly showed great intuition when, at the beginning of the revolution, he entitled his newspaper *Le Point de Jour*, by which he meant "dawn."

The widespread belief that the darkness of slavery and superstition would never return was best confirmed by the breathtaking speed of actual events on the ground. In July 1789 Dominique Joseph Garat declared in the Constituent Assembly: "Our progress has been so rapid, we have marched to the limits of Liberty at such a tempo, that one could say, since the moment we set out, whole centuries have passed." Most Frenchmen welcomed the pace at which revolutionary events were unfolding, in part because, as each day passed, the gap between the present and the past grew ever wider, and the dangerous influence of what had passed on what had just begun was being neutralized.[6]

None of this means, however, that people suddenly lost interest in pre-revolutionary history. Until the year 1792 the French were bombarded with historical works dealing with the *ancien régime*. Most popular were novels on such topics as the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, on the secrets of the Bastille, and on Queen Marie Antoinette's so-called Affair of the Diamond Necklace.

Two authors, Jacques Nicolas Billaud-Varenne (*Despotism of the Ministers France*) and Louis-Charles de Lavicomterie (*The Crimes of Kings*), exposed in thick volumes the iniquities of the old regime and later, not coincidently, were able to make for themselves fine government careers. These and other, more solid works, whose authors benefited from the end of censorship, helped paint for the public a real picture of old France. They tried to make sense of this long history and sometimes drew the conclusion that the worst period in French history had been the cruel, anarchic era of the "seignorial despots" and that the absolute monarchy since the times of Cardinal Richelieu had been, in fact, the lesser of two evils. They found "good kings" such as Louis XII and Henry IV, and even included on that list Louis XVI, the Restorer of Liberty. Even the furiously radical - and later Hébertist - Charles-Philippe Ronsin wrote a lengthy tragedy on the life of Louis XII, the Father of the People. Significantly, this body of literature was generally not belligerent in tone. "We are like children

5 Mona Ozouf, *L'école de la France. Essais sur la Révolution, l'utopie et l'enseignement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 273.

6 Diego Venturino, "La naissance de l'« Ancien Regime »" in *The Political Culture of the French Revolution*, vol. II, 12.