

NEWS



REVOLUTION – THE VIEW FROM PARIS

To discover the temper of a modern culture, it often pays to look at the advertising. Those guys spend an awful lot of money trying to find out about it. So, my first story from attending the World Congress on the French Revolution and other celebrations of the Bicentenary in July in Paris is not about the 400 historians squeezed into the Sorbonne, but about a hoarding in the Metro. One of the most popular songs of the Revolution was a dance number called 'Ca ira'. Roughly speaking, its theme is that the embattled Republic will win out in the end – everything will turn out okay ('ça ira'). The advertisers of Volkswagens are alert, and nothing if not cheeky. Their poster exploited their cars' reputation for reliability while celebrating the Bicentenary with a reference to the song. It just read: 'Ca ira. Ca ira. Ca ira Ca ira' (meaning 'It will keep going') from top to bottom. Bored or cynical as many French professed to be with the Bicentenary, they all know at least a few words of its language. In that sense, whatever François Furet may say, the Revolution is very much alive.

Let me cite another case, closer to the serious intellectual content of the celebrations. For years, a more or less acrimonious political debate had been going on about which version of the Revolution ought to be evoked in 1989. In the end, the dominant view, which was officially sanctioned, was that of the Revolution as the forge of the now universal idea of human rights. In a studiously relaxed TV interview at lunchtime on Bastille day, President Mitterand used all his skill to stay within that version. He was asked about the execution of the king. It was, he said, a tragically symbolic act. 'I feel, how can I say, touched by the death of a man who was, it seems, a good man...' He was asked about Robespierre: 'a great man who still leaves a memory that frightens some and intimidates others. I would not put him in the Panthéon because I am concerned not to put there men associated with too bloody an image. But I would not want to belong to a court that recommended his trial today.' And it all mattered! The papers the next morning took his words apart. To say one thing would have made Mitterand too royalist; to say another would have sounded totalitarian. Having skilfully weathered these issues, Mitterand went on to propose a reform in the great tradition of constitutional rights. This too was taken up by the papers the next morning. Both the French state and the French people still see themselves through their stereotypes of the Revolution.

The Congress itself must have gathered about equal numbers of French and foreign historians and hangers-on. Thus, its agenda naturally echoed the idea of the Revolution's international heritage. A typical paper from outside France (in-

cluding my own, on John Stuart Mill) set out 'What X intellectual/Y political movement in my country during Z historical period thought of the French Revolution'. It would be impossible to sum up the vast variety of influences that this worthy theme brought out.

For someone from the outside – neither French nor a professional historian – it was more interesting to watch for the tender nerves that will from time to time jangle in French discussions of the Revolution. There was, for example, a moment at the Congress when someone suggested from the floor that there were strengths in the Cobban thesis (that the Revolution was a movement by office-holders for the benefit of themselves and generations of future office-holders). There was something more than the calm pursuit of inquiry in the way speakers from all quarters pounced upon this echo of an old (and foreign) heresy. And weeks after the event, members of the Congress all received an angry note from another member (Jacques Solè), smarting at 'unfraternal' comments made in a review of a book of his by the doyen of current French, Marxist revolutionary historiography, Michel Vovelle. Far from a benign break with the past, the Revolution, Solè argued (echoing both Cobban and the much-celebrated book *Citizens* by the American historian, Simon Schama), resulted in a continuation of political developments which the populace at large sought to resist. We must have done with the Marxist interpretation of Soboul, which Solè took Vovelle to represent.

Solè is out of date, however. Since Soboul there has been Furet, whose meaningful absence from the Congress was publicly regretted. And now there is Vovelle himself, Professor of the History of the Revolution at the Sorbonne and president of the Congress, who bumbled benignly about the event, with an insouciant smile and a husky, unassuming way of speaking. He, more than anyone, could be taken to represent another new Left consensus about the Revolution, which the Congress greatly reinforced. He has, for example, been the academic patron of the huge exploration of diverse cultural artefacts from the Revolutionary period. This trend was hinted at in the title of the Congress itself: 'The Image of the French Revolution'. It was also very evident in the mass of specialist papers tracing the iconography of prints, cartoons, coins, clothes, revolutionary catechisms and so on.

Since Furet and Vovelle, one is better able to stand back and consider how the Revolution is, in the words of Claude Mazauric (another established figure amongst Marxist historians of the Revolution), a 'polysemic object overlaid by the contemporary history of France ... a means of taking sides and confronting adversaries, an almost inevitable operator in the

clarification of "principles".¹ The material of a more or less acknowledged accommodation between Left and Liberal historians can be found in the attitudes of both schools towards symbols and ideas. On the one side, there is the humane tolerance in Vovelle's Marxist history of the Revolution when it deals with ideological currents and symbolism. On the other, Furet (and his associates) have recently been exploring 19th-century ideas about the Revolution (e.g. in Marx and Quinet). As a result, they have come to think of it as a rich heritage of political ideas for Europe as a whole, rather than merely a catastrophic event.

However, those on the Left who, in keeping with the central tenets of the Marxist historiographical tradition, still maintain an interest in economic realities, were well represented by, amongst others, Mazauric himself, Claude Gindin and the great Anatole Ado. Mazauric pointed out the economic weakness of the current consensus. He emphasised the surviving French sense of a national identity caught up in the Revolution, and what Charles Tilly has called the continuing 'contentiousness' of French political culture. These factors, he argued, are reasons to doubt that the pan-European liberal consensus à la Furet will last. Gindin reported on the deliberations of a 1987 conference under the auspices of the Institut de Recherches Marxistes in Paris.² The spirit of their work, which has derived much from the theoretical openings of Mazauric and Ado, is to define numerous 'specific routes' towards the historical progress which the Revolution represents. By admitting both national and regional differences, it goes a long way to removing the chauvinistic triumphalism and the Jacobin centralism which used to characterise French socialist accounts of the Revolution.

Two decades back, Ado inspired a major shift in the old Lefèvre-Soboul model of the economic and social history of the Revolution. By distinguishing between objectively and subjectively progressive roles in history, he offered a way out of the problem that the peasantry posed to Communists, thanks to conditions in both France and Russia – not to mention Marx's brilliant, but disdainful comparison between them and a sack of potatoes! Yet, at the conference, what he said was attended to for what it could tell about studying the history of Revolutions under *glasnost*. At present, he remarked, we are confronted with 'the necessity of getting away from the teleological vision of the French Revolution'.³ Illustrations of how Soviet historians are doing just this could be found in the recent interest in the reciprocal interaction of different currents within the Revolution (such as official and popular terror), in a popular mentality independent of the political elites, and in 'bourgeois' revolutionary figures who used to have little standing in the Soviet perception of the Revolution.

Of course, the widespread focus on culture and representation has its theoretical pitfalls. This appeared in the remarks of various speakers undertaking the Herculean task of summing up the discussion in the final plenary sessions. Thus, Maurice Agulhon (another authoritative practitioner) and Alain Corbin underlined how the representations of the Revolution considered at the Congress had come to us through clusters in historical time, such as 1830, 1848, 1871, 1917, the 1930s and so on. And Roger Chartier remarked on the necessary but unstable role of an 'ideal' readership as target of the cultural material analysed by the historian. The present accommodation is insecure within itself as well as subject to attack from outside.

So, where can history focussing on culture go from here? It may be that the Anglo-Saxon historians will show the way: to the examination of *political* culture. A strand of cultural



history grounded in its social, economic and even biographical setting appeared in the contributions of a number of English-speaking historians: Timothy Tackett on the media which sustained relations between revolutionary political leaders and their agents and allies; Hugh Gough on the flowering of the provincial press and its competition with Paris; Alan Forrest on provincial rivalries with the centre; and Robert Darnton (now something of an academic super-star in France) on the ins-and-outs of Stock Exchange dealings and Parisian journalism. In his summing up, Colin Lucas, an Englishman who enjoys considerable confidence and respect from French historians on the Left, also pointed to the new political culture *after* the great struggles of the early 1790s as the absent guest at the feast of the Revolution. As consensus politics re-establishes itself in Britain, the topic of the coming years may be how a steadier (though also shabbier) political culture is re-established after periods of rapid upheaval.

Noël Parker

Notes

- 1 *L'Image de la Révolution Française*, ed. M. Vovelle (Paris and London: Pergamon, 1989), vol. 3, p. 2309. Eager readers are warned that the three volumes of proceedings weigh almost 5 kilos.
- 2 Details of the conference from 142 Boulevard Masséna, 75013 Paris.
- 3 *L'Image de la Révolution*, vol. 2, p. 1198.

REVOLUTION – THE VIEW FROM LEEDS

Using yet another approach to the French Revolution, a couple of dozen of us met together in Leeds in late September to look at 1789 with the techniques of discourse analysis and cultural history. Our topic: the crises or transformations of discourses in Britain in interaction with the Revolution across the Channel. The perspective proved revealing. However, the discussion did not at all deny a real role to individual subjects in the historical material. Rather, it gave an impression of how, trying to take contemporary political thinking in one direction or another, different writers had worked with resources of rhetoric which the collapse of the social order in France had thrown into flux.

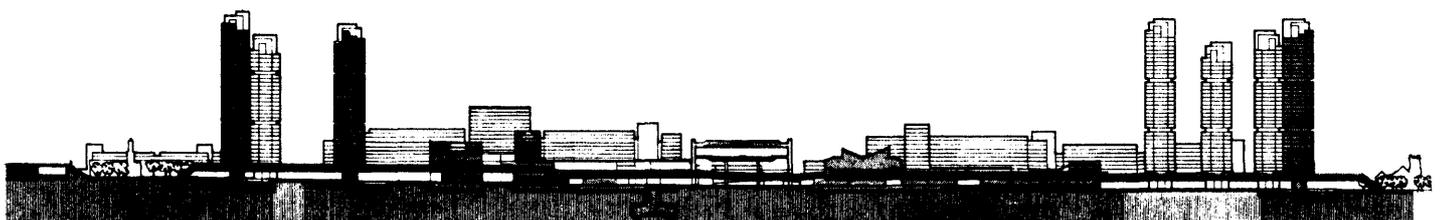
In such a debate, certain names re-appear again and again. Nowadays, the name of Wollstonecraft is so often evoked at a cultural history event that the embarrassment expressed by Judith Todd at having still more to say about her was understandable (though uncalled-for). Wollstonecraft's case illustrated the intense difficulty of finding the space one wants within the given discourse. She seemed usually to end as the loser in her struggle. Todd's own paper, for example, argued that Wollstonecraft's ideal of how women might commit suicide on rational grounds (both in her writing and her own attempt) had been swamped by a romantic perception (not least due to the editing of her widower, William Godwin) which returned women to passivity. A not dissimilar mood emerged from Susan Matthews' analysis of how, comparing the role of women and soldiers, Wollstonecraft found that femininity had been forced to be weak and negative. Yet the possibility of rational femininity in Wollstonecraft's thought was grounds for dispute between Tom Furniss and Vivien Jones. One argued that, struggling hard to define femininity as something other than weakness, Wollstonecraft had had recourse to the discourse of nature à la Rousseau, which mistakenly derived sexuality from biology. But, for the other, Wollstonecraft offered a model of rationalised feminine sensibility as the middle term to turn the cycle of tyranny and revolutionary violence.

Naturally, Burke and Paine figured prominently in the discussion – with Burke getting the run of the play. For John

Whale, Burke's treatment of the symbolic seemed a shrewder reaction to the late-18th-century crisis of representation than Paine's wish to have done with representation altogether (his 'literalism'). Burke's rhetoric also seems to have shaped the contemporary imagery. Christopher Reid considered the powerful portrayal of the French royal family in *The Reflections*: turning them into private persons who were victims of inhuman passions. Various writers (Wollstonecraft and Godwin included) had struggled to overturn this view of the Old Régime. Godwin naturally found defenders, too. Both Chris Jones and Pamela Clemit argued that, after the heady rationalism of *Political Justice*, he was actively seeking to extend the effectiveness of progressive political discourse by integrating sensibility and romantic plot-structure into it.

But we must not overlook certain of the surprisingly original minor characters in those post-1789 conflicts of discourse. John Mee, for example, exposed the strand of millenarianism in popular revolutionary debates, which filtered into the writings of Price and of Blake. And David Worrall explained how the much-persecuted Thomas Spence had worked out new rhetorical strategies in order to escape the growing censorship of republican clubs and publications. His tactics included stamping republican ideas on coins or ingeniously inserting errata slips to insinuate his true message into his popular pamphlets. Marilyn Butler, in an exposition of evolving uses of the Orient in the period, showed how, while some writers co-opted the language of the Revolution to underwrite progressive Westernising reforms in India, the female novelist who wrote under the name of 'Sydney Owenson' was putting forward an idea of specifically feminine knowledge to grasp the nature of the East. Finally, Kathryn Sutherland attempted a striking re-interpretation against the political current. Hannah More, she argued, should not be written off as anti-feminist and counter-revolutionary. Her popular success was attributable to an idea of female solidarity straddling class boundaries, which was a brief but politically realistic possibility in her day.

Noël Parker



DONS FLUNK ENTERPRISE TEST DESPITE LATE RUN

Under the Auspices of Tertiary Sector Enterprise Training Systems (England) (T.S.E.T.S.(E.)), an Upward Bound Discovery Programme was mounted from September 27th to September 29th at the Lancaster Academic Themes Park (formerly 'University') by the Centre for the Study of Cultural Values, one of the Heritage Units still maintained by the Government. Through the device of a 'Conference Experience Format', the predominantly Tertiary (Public) Sector employees were to be encouraged to develop their enterprise skills and, in an interactive context, to broaden their awareness of the need (both personal and institutional) for them.

Pre-conference 'orienteeing' experiences included applying on new forms for grants to attend, arriving at Lancaster Station with minimal clues (testing Imagination, Teamwork, Leadership, Athleticism), as well as the usual maze routine at the specially camouflaged Themes Park. (There was competitive bidding for the services of private guides.)

The principal format was that well-tried parallel sessions system interspersed with 'plenaries'. The T.S.E.T.S.(E.) method here is, as is well known, to impose a 'choice ethic' in the absence of 'adequate reasons'. Thus 'abstracts' were circulated with a view to create 'the need to choose'. Though the Upward Bound Cohort was at first unaware of this, abstracts were intended either to be vacuous or misleading, with a view to generating pressure for enterprise within and around the sessions, themselves intended to range across the Empty-Overload range. In addition, many representatives were bound by their institutions warning them against squandering 'Intellectual Property' in the absence of copyright, trade marks, commercial names etc.

Many speakers respected these norms. But, as Post-Experience Analysis revealed, attending representatives failed to exercise any of the hoped-for initiatives (storming out, protesting, assertively but not aggressively chang-



ing the subject), suggesting the continuing power of the communistic Dependency Culture within the Sector.

But T.S.E.T.S.(E.)'s principal organizational error was to place the Experience under the Local Control of the 'Centre for the Study of Cultural Values', which turns out not to be 'one of us'. This meant that the System's system was for much of the time violated by the excessive interest of many of the contributions that the Centre should be shut down or privatised. Abstracts available from the Centre will confirm this, as will the paper by organizer Russell Keat, 'What is an Enterprise Culture?'

Moreover, some plenaries backfired sadly. As he had moved from Lancaster to Chicago, it was hoped that Harold Perkin would advertise enterprise. Instead he abused his position by giving a detailed historical critique of Mrs. Thatcher's programme. Raymond Plant was guilty of the same thing at a more philosophical level. Even the marketeer Peter Saunders raised awkward questions. He contrasted the 'empowerment of individuals' in consumer-oriented privatisation (housing) with the 'irrelevance' of transfers of production (of electricity etc.) to private hands. Private sector television film-researcher Madeleine Bunting (from Channel 4's 'The Way We Live Now') even revealed grossly unpleasant scenes associated

with the Enterprise Culture, hardly her brief.

In the midst of this backsliding, extra pressure was placed on the Catering Unit. However, even parodic versions of institutional cuisine failed to induce a significant initiative towards private solutions. But T.S.E.T.S.(E.) is too experienced not to have anticipated this inertia. Hence on the last day, they contrived a triple plenary broken up by lunch. Lord Young 'of Graffham' rebutted almost all the claims contrary to the Enterprise Culture that had surfaced at the Experience. Still no one moved. Almost all returned to hear the Old Testament Scholar, Prof. Mary Douglas, deliver a paper on 'The Self as a Bundle of Claims' from a quite different conference. Still they stayed, to hear David Marquand speak. In the absence of an abstract, it is impossible to remember what he spoke about.

Yet it was only as they were transported towards Euston that the fact that T.S.E.T.S.(E.) knew their Brecht as well as their Gramsci bore fruit. After filling out their SELF-DISCOVERY ASSESSMENT FORMS, the Upward Bounders rushed uncompromisingly for the taxi rank, knocking several Welfare State dependants over in the contest. This was good to see.

Bernie Manderville

ECOLOGY IN NICARAGUA

Consider the following scenario: a group of North American volunteers in a rural co-operative in northern Nicaragua is cutting down trees to mill wood for use in the construction of houses for the co-operative. Two members of the co-operative ask to borrow a chain saw to cut down a tree, not for the wood, but to reach the honey from a nest in one of the upper branches. The request is refused on the grounds that unnecessary damage to the ecology should be avoided. A not uncommon encounter between cultures as ecological issues spread out from the First to the Third World, as First Worlders learn to their dismay that practices in the Third World may be affecting their environmental quality.

The evangelical fervour of some environmentalists has shades of those erstwhile savers of souls, the missionaries, who were quickly followed by the exploiters of the imperial powers. One can almost see the writing on the wall as concern for the environment in Brazil is followed by demands to take over the management of Brazil's forests on the grounds that they should be managed as a 'planetary' (read First World) rather than a national resource.

Recent years have seen a large increase in the numbers of foreigners with ecological concerns coming to Nicaragua raising a host of cultural, ethical and political questions that call for responses.

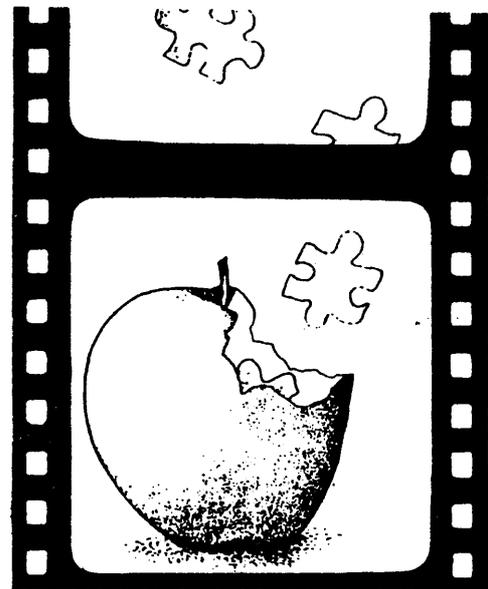
The visitor to Nicaragua sees much evidence of deforestation. Slash and burn agriculture is prevalent in the so-called agricultural frontier, and a general 'if it moves, kill it' policy to wildlife is common. The visitor often reacts with self-righteous indignation at the *campesino's* wanton disregard for ecological values. The response of the *campesino* is one of dismay and non-understanding of the concern. Why is this? Is there a resolution to the contradictions? If so, where does it lie?

If we are to approach those of the Third World with ecological issues, we have to do so with a great deal of humility and a large dose of self-criticism. As one sixty-year-old woodcutter said to me: 'Before the Revolution I spent fifteen years cutting down all the cedar and mahogany trees on this land with nothing but an axe, and hauling them with oxen to the Rio Viejo for an American company. Now you are telling me that even though we now own this land we cannot cut down trees to make lumber for our own houses, because if we do so it will cause damage to the air in America.' He paused for a while and then added: 'Maybe you can send our trees back.'

The impelling argument is irrefutable and illustrates serious shortcomings in the ecologists' approach. The clearest is the lack of any historical perspective. Ecological problems do not arise without a history although if you read the Western media reports you would be forgiven for thinking so. Neither do they arise in a social and political vacuum. There is an entire history of deforestation by foreign firms in Nicaragua. Whole populations of fish and other river life were exterminated by the arsenic pollution coming from the gold mines around Siuna and Rosita, not to mention the decimation of the indigenous people who wondered why they and their children were dying after eating these fish. Hundreds of square miles of pine forests were destroyed in the Autonomous North Atlantic Region. The deterioration of the atmosphere has a history that did not begin with the destruction of the tropical forest in Brazil or the Philippines.

One could start at the very least with the English forests that were cut down to make charcoal for the furnaces of the Industrial Revolution. If we are to start looking at ecological issues globally, then we also have to look at them historically. The English forests represent capital that was consumed in the initial push towards industrial wealth. Having used up their own oxygen-producing resources in this way the rich countries cannot rely on poor countries to maintain their own forests intact to replenish the needs of the atmosphere. If these tropical forests are of value to the rich countries, then they should be prepared to pay for them to stay intact. This income from what amounts to the export of oxygen would then allow the poor countries to invest in infrastructure that is not ecologically damaging.

The point can be illustrated by a look at another 'bête noir' of the ecologists; slash and burn agriculture. To start with, this too needs to be put into its historical context. The growth



of export-oriented agriculture such as cotton and coffee during and after the Second World War resulted in the expulsion of thousands of *campesino* families from some of the best agricultural land in Nicaragua. These *campesinos* who knew no form of agriculture other than subsistence were pushed into what was called the agricultural frontier, a mountainous and heavily forested zone in the interior of the country. Here the *campesino* began to clear the land ready for planting, burning what he cut down, not having the capital to exploit the trees as lumber nor the plough to turn the vegetation under. Having finally achieved a marginal level of survival, the *campesino* very often lost the cleared land through further confiscation by the growing and land-hungry bourgeoisie, aided by the Somoza National Guard. There was then no choice but to move farther east and begin the process again. The problem is compounded by the nature of tropical soils and the extremely slow process of humus formation. The net result is that land is stripped of its nutrients within a few years, which adds to the destruction of more virgin land.

There is a way to halt this process which the municipal

government of the Muy-Muy/Matiguas zone is encouraging in a pilot project. This is to make available to the *campesino* through medium-term loans oxen and metal ploughs and fertilizer. This will enable land to be used over and over again by ploughing back in the nutrients and by supplementing them with fertilizer. It is here that the connection with the rich countries comes in. With money from the 'sale' of oxygen more forest could be saved from the machete.

The *campesino* is above all a rational economic player, albeit one who is generally conservative, not a big risk-taker. Banning the cutting down of forests is not going to work; it is impractical to think of policing a prohibition and it is undesirable. Trees can be managed as a crop to be harvested. They are

after all a renewable resource, albeit one that takes a longer time to provide a return. For this reason a longer-term financing approach has to be taken to encourage a rational cropping programme that is sustainable. Reforestation is another area where the rich countries concerned with oxygen depletion could effectively insert themselves.

The *campesino*, often portrayed as the villain of the piece, is one of the most frugal and ecologically conservative of the planet's inhabitants. He is a master of recycling, a minimal consumer of energy and a highly efficient if not prolific producer. One who indeed 'lives lightly on the earth'.

Jeff Bishop

Richard Forsyth

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