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Hist. 398R

July 21, 2005

A Reflection[2]

The Lasting Achievements of the French Revolution

A candle burns briefly and then is extinguished. We need not lament the end of its fire so much as celebrate the room if offered finally to our view. Furnished perhaps with articles that defy immediate recognition; with shadowy Platonic forms that seem to obviate our greedy grasp; with twisting multilayered mystifications; with hanging art that seems too idyllic to be in any manner a representation of present or future reality; with accoutrements immediately understood and put to good use. The candle yet revealed the room and its contents and its existence and its contents can never more be denied.

In many respects the whole revolutionary period of French

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[1]I continue to be bemused by your grading. Firstly I write a B+ essay that is recommended to the class as a paradigm of papers; secondly I write an A- paper that is scribbled as an "Excellent paper." Either my thinking is wrong, the grading is wrong, or your comments are wrong. Amen.

[2]Once again this heading is seen as an opportunity in liberty-taking, particularly in regards to style and form.

history resembles a series of such short lived and longer lived candles; candles disclosing developments that sometimes lasted barely longer than the candle itself, and other times developments that became firmly entrenched in the social fabric and individual expectations.

To carry our analogy to its comic conclusion, we must acknowledge at once that the ubiquitous candle factory was established during the preceding period of *enlightenment*, roughly 1687-1789, and that without such candle-makers as Rousseau, Voltaire and Montesquieu, the revolution would perhaps have proved greater in blood and lesser in ideologies--a rebellion without a cause.

The constitution of 1791, a constitution of feeble constitution--not so much in its material as in its longevity--was a constitution of a character greatly in keeping with its bourgeois authors: it sought to subjugate Royal despotism, Noble privilege--which was only nefarious in so much as it was an unpurchasable commodity to the middle class--and finally the dangerous licentiousness of the immoral majority. In many respects it was a compromise constitution that copied the constitutional monarchy achieved in England ages before. Although short lived, it did nevertheless offer a new system that was both workable and an improvement upon its precedent and which, under less volatile circumstances, might have endured. More importantly, however, at least within the context our perspective, the army was largely removed from Royal

control--a move which necessitated the expulsion of aristocratic officers. The significance lies in the void that must needs be filled, and commissions were finally open to all. This detail would lead, in its most singular instance, to Napoleon's comet-like passage through the political heavens, and to the general and more meaningful principle of advancement by merit. This principle carried over into the civilian sector when, following the composition of the Declaration of Rights, all public offices, previously and increasingly the reserve of aristocrats, become, at least theoretically, open to all.

We have already mentioned that, in several respects at least, the adopted system of France at this time was similar to that established a century before in Tudor and then revolutionary England. Although less stable and with a weaker central government, the departments were granted a good deal of autonomy which is also reminiscent of their cross channel neighbour. Indeed, in terms of franchise, though still limited, had only been surpassed by the anomalistic Prussia.

In terms of justice, also, the foundations of future society were being builded: free and equal to all was its most notable attribute, with judges and juries elected to try criminal cases and a network of courts established at the various levels of municipal, departmental and national. Though much of this period was shortly to be overturned--to reappear in the shadowy form of influence and precedent--the

reforms of justice were, by and large, set in tablet, particularly in respect of the nobility who had lost for ever their rights of *private* justice.

Indeed, looking towards the estates of the nobility we see the most dramatic and most permanent permutations: the parks surrounding their chateaux were perhaps still vast, yet the game and statues had been metaphorically removed, shoddiness subjugated structural upkeep, and the surrounding walls demolished. The nobility had lost not only their tax exemptions--to appropriate modern terminology, but also the feudal dues owed them by the peasants. Besides this, their nobility had, in a sense, been robbed of them: titles were abolished. Social equality, passe-partout of contemporary and future Utopians Socialist, an essential of the commoner's demand and expectation, had finally been achieved--at least to a limited yet none the less important degree.

The disestablishment of nobility, besides it *cognomenatival* context, also possessed more material qualities: rights of hunting and fishing and rights to maintain mills and wine presses, to levy taxes and labour obligations, and, most importantly, to keep peasants in personal servitude were, amongst others, banished to feudal times gone by.

It was with the arrival of the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security that regional autonomy was reduced and the Republic form superseded that of the

previously federal system. Although both these institutions would soon flicker and die, the political body they revealed would prove durable and, indeed, permanent.

The struggle for power that soon ensued, though entirely glimmering and flaring, nevertheless effectuated several important and lasting changes. Most obvious, of course, came from Louis XVI's struggle to regain the powers of what he failed to realise was an archaic age; but it was an archaic age only in limited areas of Europe, England being the especial example, and was therefore a mistake more understandable in its making than its avoidance. Regardless, it was the King's prevarication regarding royal capitulation with the principal tenets of the revolution, evidenced both in attempted flights and, most damning, secret letters subsequently discovered, plotting with foreign monarchs and *emigrés* for the overthrow of the revolution and a restoration of the old regime, that finally led to the removal of his head.

With muffled fanfare we introduce what is perhaps the most essential aspect of the French revolution, at least according to contemporary political philosophy which, like Louis XVI, is certain to die an ignominious and sudden death--and the sooner the better. The struggle for power, besides ridding the nation of a duplicitous monarchy, saw the Jacobin faction finally reach its apex. With no time to enjoy the view from that greatly mutable political peak, they set about instead to plant the flag. The constitution

of 1793 settled a charter which, for the first time in European history, provided a government both republican and democratic in which--on paper and please read the small print--all adult males possessed the vote.

It was a possession which was a heavy burden to bear, and Napoleon would soon lighten their load. Nevertheless, it was a sign of things to come--a sign, which, unfortunately, at least in terms of philosophical development, pointed nowhere.[3]

In terms of a "Reflection," abundant primary points and fraudulent eloquence has been provided to earn the commonplace A grade. Enough tongue in cheek and half hearted humour has concomitantly reduced that to the scornful A-. Next comes the arrogance.

The brick wall, no matter how solid and brickwallish, must needs begin with the idea of a brick wall. Similarly, Revolution begins with the idea of change: the physical world, like it or not, is moulded by conception, by imagination, by contemplation.

Without doubt, France finally entered the modern world with the ingress of revolution, and those flickering candles provided gleaming glances at the way it--and the world--would soon become. But just as the enlightenment, that most cerebral of periods, made, to a large extent, the revolution

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[3]This stems from my essential disdain for democracy and should be passed by without a second thought.

possible, so too we must look inward and not outward to discover the most important consequences of the revolution. A subtle hint was long since offered to the attentive reader: the Utopian Socialists.

Although England was certainly as Literary as France during this period--indeed the Novel had recently been "invented" by DeFoe; although England was hardly suffering an aridity of philosophic minds, it is clear that the Utopian Socialist was as French as a big bottle of Beaujolais. Indeed, England's sole exemplar was the pragmatic social experimenter, Owen. The plethora of Utopian Socialists featured such notables as Morelly, Saint-Simon, Cabet, Blanc and the Sensational Fourier. The possibility of human perfectibility, developed in the Enlightenment, and the possibility of actual social reorganisation, demonstrated in the revolution, in combination, allowed for this burgeoning Utopianism. Although such idealism seems unrealistic to the realistic reason of twentieth century reasonableness, although their ideas were certainly the most shadowy forms revealed by the flickering candles of revolution, it is perhaps these shadows, much like those dancing upon Plato's eternal cave wall, that most represent true form, perfect form, the form the society might some day assume.