

# The Nation.

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## EDITORIAL

### PREFERRED MANAGEMENT?

President Bush begins his Administration in a frame of mind and a manner of speaking that could have been copied from Michael Dukakis's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention. Competence, not ideology, seems to describe the Bush project. With few exceptions, the new President has peopled his Cabinet with levelers rather than sharpeners, gray managers who seek to contain imminent crises rather than advance new strategies to resolve them.

It's a far cry from the first hundred days of 1981, when Reaganism was running at full throttle. Then, the President's men embarked on a radical plan to redistribute wealth upward at home and roll back insurgent forces abroad, to militarize the national budget, to destroy collective endeavor and privatize communal life. From the creation of the *contras* to the restriction of social spending for America's poor, Reaganism represented an ideological break with a half-century of presidential political practice.

Reagan's repression did provoke a progressive response on the left, culminating in an impressive show of strength in the 1986 and 1988 election campaigns, and joined even by Dukakis in the last days of his drive. Almost all the voters who made up their minds in the final three weeks of the campaign voted for him.

What they liked was the economic populism Dukakis had embraced, the visions of social justice he expressed. Now powerful Democratic voices are demanding that those visions be suppressed. Joseph Califano Jr., late of the Kennedy Pentagon and the Carter Cabinet, suggested recently that only a candidate who renounces "many programs aimed at disadvantaged blacks" and denounces Jesse Jackson can win white votes and the Presidency. If that becomes Democratic ideology, we could almost be grateful we got Republican management instead.

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1789 AND ALL THAT

### DANCING ON THE GRAVE OF REVOLUTION

DANIEL SINGER

Long live the Revolution—as long as it is dead and buried with no prospect of resurrection. That thought springs to mind as the French begin to celebrate the bicentennial of their Great Revolution. The program is most impressive. Books and documents published or reissued for the occasion run into the hundreds. In Paris alone fifty-six conferences devoted to the subject are scheduled for this year, not counting the massive exhibition on Europe and the French Revolution, various smaller exhibits and innumerable plays, operas, concerts and other shows (including 1789, a Maurice Béjart ballet based on Beethoven's symphonies). Provincials and Parisians alike are already flocking to *La Liberté ou la Mort*, a spectacular play that reconstructs the most famous scenes from the Revolution. But the climax will come, naturally, on July 14, when French President François Mitterrand will be accompanied by such iconoclastic sans-culottes as George Bush, Maggie Thatcher and Helmut Kohl—a party that appears more suited to honor Marie Antoinette than commemorate the storming of the Bastille.

This is not the only irony of history. The paradox begins with the very patron of this revolutionary jamboree. Mitterrand's new claim to fame is to have "normalized" his country and brought it into the realm of compromise and consensus—in other words, to have deprived it of its revolutionary heritage, the belief in the possibility of radical change through political action. No wonder, then, that the media

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# BOOKS & THE ARTS.

## Revolution

(Continued From Front Cover)

should have promoted the historian François Furet as the oracle for this year's ceremonies. His book *La Révolution* is a sort of funeral oration: Its subtitle might well be "And the Worthy as Well as Difficult Means of Bringing It to an End." His 1989 is the French Revolution as celebrated by the Thermidorians, the gravediggers of the Revolution who took over after the fall of Robespierre and his companions on July 27, 1794—the ninth of Thermidor.

Furet's commercial success is in a sense puzzling. His is not a moving description of the great upheaval, a lyrical narrative like that of Jules Michelet, which carries the reader along in spite of its errors and omissions. Furet's *Révolution* is really an essay, a commentary on French history from 1770 to 1880 that requires from the reader a fairly good knowledge of events. Such books do not as a rule do well. Furet's has been on the best-seller list for ten weeks now, and there are two possible explanations. One is that the French, like anyone else, buy their coffee-table books to look at, not to read, and Furet's *Révolution*, a most handsome book that costs a most handsome \$70, is sumptuously illustrated. The other reason is that the media do in fact have real influence, and Furet provided just the message they were looking for.

Furet's main thesis is that the age of revolution is over. From the very start, his sympathies are with those, beginning with Mirabeau, who try to arrest the course of events. Yet it still takes ninety years in Furet's version for the revolutionary process to come to an end. It takes the massacre of the Communards in 1871, exorcising for a time the ghost of revolution, as well as a deal between their murderer, Adolphe Thiers, and moderate Republicans, for a Royalist assembly to proclaim the Third Republic and for July 14 to become France's national holiday—as it did in 1880. "The French Revolution," the author concludes, "had come into harbor." Or, to put it another way, the bourgeois Republic was firmly established at last (although to main-

tain his thesis of a completely finished process, Furet has to drop the adjective "bourgeois").

Some historians, influenced by rather primitive Marxism, may well have tended to analyze the Revolution in too crudely economic terms. Furet and his friends, however, are all-political. In his other contribution to the occasion, a critical dictionary of the Revolution co-edited with Mona Ozouf, there is no entry for Robespierre's young companion Saint-Just (famed, *inter alia*, for his contention that "happiness is a new idea in Europe"). This is quite evidently a question of judgment and political bias. The absence of an entry for the "bourgeoisie," however, is a matter of fundamental conception. For Furet's version to stand, democracy as a concept must be stripped of any economic and social context. The purely political treatment of events in his *Révolution* is therefore not accidental. Toward the end of the book he cites Léon Gambetta as expressing "quite a different idea: not of a social conflict rooted in the economy, of which 1789 would be only the preface and that a new revolution must inevitably settle. But, on the contrary, of democracy as an irresistible force of integration on the march." Attributed to Gambetta, this is in fact the author's own credo.

But Furet himself seems hardly convinced that the revolutionary journey was over by 1880. The Paris Commune of 1870-71, despite its tragic ending, acts as a link between the sans-culottes of 1793 and the Bolsheviks of 1917. Throughout Europe it proved impossible to limit the idea of equality to a purely legal fiction. The bourgeois order, whether republican or monarchical, was threatened from within and from without by socialist subversion. Dropping any pretenses to the detachment of the historian, the prolific Furet has also joined with two companions in a book eloquently titled *La République du Centre*, in which he announces the second death of the French Revolution. In this version, it takes another century, the dissolution of Stalinist mythology, the exposure of the gulag, the collapse of the French Communist Party and the end of the great conflict over religious versus lay schools for France to join the European mainstream.

Thank God, Furet sighs, it is no longer the odd one out among the "western democracies."

The French, probably more than any other people, tend to view the past through the prism of current confrontations. Attitudes to the Great Revolution once marked the dividing line between Republicans and Royalists, between left and right, though that line rapidly became blurred. After that, views on the Revolution became a litmus test for divisions within the left. Sympathy for Danton, for Robespierre or for the *enragés* was a fairly safe guide to a person's place on the political spectrum. In Stalin's time, a defense of Robespierre was quite often read as an indirect plea for the Moscow trials. Furet, himself a zealous practitioner of Stalinist history in his youth, subsequently attacked his former fellows for their political contortions. Yet he and his new companions are equally guilty of projecting their present prejudices onto the past.

As head of the Raymond Aron Institute and co-chair of the Saint-Simon Foundation, François Furet is a high priest of the cult of "Rocbar" or, if you prefer, "Baroc"—terms coined by coupling the name of Michel Rocard, the most moderate of French Social Democrats and the present Prime Minister, with that of Raymond Barre, a moderate Conservative and former Prime Minister. It is the French equivalent of Britain's Butskellism of the 1950s and 1960s, the middle-of-the-road philosophy identified with R.A. (Rab) Butler, the liberal Conservative, and Hugh Gaitskill, the right-wing Labor Party leader. Rocbar/Baroc, like Butskellism an expression of the golden mean, is quite naturally favored by the media.

In France, as far as the Revolution is concerned, the Rocbar crowd really did have to shift back to the center, having moved too far to the right at one stage. Influenced by the *nouveaux philosophes*, they had tried for a time to discredit the whole idea of revolution, attributing to it an innate tendency toward terror. They were quickly overtaken on this terrain by such truly rabid reactionaries as the group of historians around Pierre Chaunu, who exploited this breach to publicize books about, say, the revolutionary "genocide" in the Vendée. Furet and his friends then had to retreat. When he talks about his dictionary of the Revolution, for instance, Furet takes pains to note that the list of contributors, while containing no

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Marxists, also excludes any "anti-moderns." Politically, too, Rochbar adherents would like to occupy the vast territory between the Communists and the National Front. But what is really striking is the extent to which these French thinkers, like their Anglo-Saxon counterparts who preach the "end of ideology," positively ooze their own brand of it. Read, for example, Michel Winock's rather lively 1789: *Une Année Sans Pareil*. The author gives the game away in his concluding section when he argues that "the abolition of private property is but a preamble to the suppression of liberties." This is familiar stuff in the flimsiest of disguises, offered up by latter-day evangelists preaching the same old gospel of capitalism from here to eternity.

If the idea of revolution is unpopular for the time being—at least outside some parts of the Third World—this is due to more than just the clever tactics of its opponents and their servants. In 1917, when Russians demonstrated that workers could seize power, the revolutionary idea made a leap forward. But then, as the Revolution failed to spread westward, Marxism began to pay the price for its vagaries in a backward country for which it had not originally been designed, and for the continued identification of socialism with the crimes committed in its name. That price is being paid outside the West as well, as I was reminded last October in Barcelona at a conference attended by Soviet intellectuals. The well-known novelist Fazil Iskander spoke movingly, with a peasant's earthiness, of the rhythms of nature and the seasons and the terrible danger of artificially speeding the pace of events. Throughout the Soviet bloc, a vast proportion of the intelligentsia, once bitten and twice shy, is now fearful of taking shortcuts, of accelerating history—gun in hand—of vast upheavals and mass movements from below.

It is our duty, when the occasion arises, to remind them that revolutions are not just the handiwork of active minorities but the combined result of accumulated discontent and the inability of a system to offer solutions. To remind them, too, borrowing the words of Bertolt Brecht, about the violence not just of the current but of "the riverbanks that squeeze the current between them." Yet in the present Western context, the danger is not remotely of shortcuts or premature action. As higher productivity in the West produces great unemployment, revealing the contrast between our

technological genius and the absurdity of our social and political organization, the image that springs to mind is not one

## REV READINGS

François Furet's *La Révolution, de Turgot à Jules Ferry 1770-1880* is published by Hachette; the *Dictionnaire Critique de la Révolution Française*, which he co-edited with Mona Ozouf, is published by Flammarion.

Michel Vovelle's latest, *La Révolution contre l'Eglise: De la Raison à l'Etre Suprême*, is published by Editions Complexe. He has also written a new preface to Jean-Paul Marat's *Les Chaînes de l'Esclavage* (same publisher). Another classic just reissued, by Armand Colin as a single-volume compilation, is Georges Lefebvre's *La Grande Peur de 1789* and *Les Foules Révolutionnaires*.

For those particularly interested in the debates over the rights of man there are two new books: Christine Faur's *Les Déclarations des Droits de l'Homme de 1789* (Payot) and de Bacque, Schmale and Vovelle's *L'An 1 des Droits de l'Homme* (Presses du C.N.R.S.).

The new biographies, significantly, do not deal with the radical heroes of the Revolution. There are three books on Condorcet, of which the best known is Elisabeth and Robert Badinter's *Condorcet: Un Intellectuel en Politique, 1743-1794* (Fayard). Also in print is a new biography of the author of the famous essay "What Is the Third Estate?" Jean-Denis Bredin's *Sieyès* (Editions de Fallois). For a good, easy read with lots of illustrations, try Georges Soria's three-volume *La Révolution Française* (Bordas).

Not surprisingly, books by Edmund Burke, Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël are being reissued. Most classics on the Revolution are available. Two years ago Editions Messidor completed a new edition of Jean Jaurès's *Histoire Socialiste de la Révolution Française*. *La Grande Révolution*, by Pierre-Alexandre Kropotkin, is hard to find, but Daniel Guérin's *La Lutte de Classes sous la Seconde République*, though not reissued, is still in print.

—D.S.

of premature birth but of the monsters that result from an overextended, unending pregnancy.

"Pregnancy" leads to "midwife," which opens up a potentially dangerous metaphor: Marx's reference to revolutionary violence as the midwife of history has sometimes been taken too literally, reducing the historical process to its most spectacular outbursts. In practice, 1789 and 1917 were very different in nature. Whereas the French bourgeoisie gained its ascendancy within the feudal order, the Russian proletariat did nothing of the sort. Yet can one envisage a socialist revolution that would gain power at all levels before it seized power at the top—that is to say, winning cultural hegemony in the Gramscian sense as part of its conquest of power?

In any case, the historians who dismiss revolution as the curse of the Third World or merely a historical feature are not maintaining that the next social upheaval will inevitably be different from the storming of the Bastille or the seizure of the Winter Palace. They are really arguing that there will be no such upheaval at all. Clearly they are too clever, and too keen on their profession, to proclaim openly the end of history. Yet like all faithful servants of an established order, they treat that order as something fixed in perpetuity. By denying its class nature, by dismissing the possibility of radically altering property and other social relations, they allow for quantitative but not qualitative change. Precluding an alternative, they limit their own vision, and that of their readers, to the capitalist horizon.

Twenty years after 1968, with the ghost of revolution no longer haunting Europe, its leaders think they can afford to take certain risks. While I have put the accent on Furet and his friends, because they are fashionable and because that fashion is significant, they are not the only ones to be appearing in print this year. One should also mention the work of Michel Vovelle and his colleagues from the Institute of the History of the French Revolution, as well as the documents and the old classics that are being reissued for the occasion (see box, this page). Besides, the public is not forced to accept the tame messages or the bowdlerized versions of history being peddled by these quasi-official voices. The example of people trying to change their life by political action is by its very nature contagious, and the revival of revolutionary history—whatever the efforts of

its Thermidorian chroniclers—inevitably contains an element of subversion.

For instance, in the conclusion to his classic book *The French Revolution*, Georges Lefebvre stresses that, in addition to the bourgeois interpretation of the Revolution as a question of the equality of rights, it was open to two other interpretations—the Social Democratic and the Communist. Supposedly buried by Napoleon Bonaparte, both were revived in the nineteenth century and have remained vigorous. For friends and foes alike, Lefebvre wrote, “it is the Revolution of Equality and, as such, though the passing of time drags it slowly into the past, its name will not be silenced soon on the lips of men.” In today’s Europe, with its millions of unemployed, its welfare state threatened and inequality once again raised to the status of a new gospel, this message sounds more topical than ever.

Europe’s deep freeze may be drawing to an end. The first cracks are already visible in Moscow and its dominions. Who knows when a new climate will take hold in Paris, London or Berlin? The champions of the established order—François and George, Maggie and Helmut—who will flock to the French capital in July for the farcical celebration of a revolutionary anniversary, as well as their prophets, employed to recite the funeral oration for the second and final death of the revolutionary spirit, would do well to pay attention. If they stand by the ornate column that now graces the vast square where the symbolic prison fortress of the Bastille once stood and listen carefully, they may hear the rising echo of Rosa Luxemburg’s parting words: “You stupid lackeys, your order is built on sand. Tomorrow the Revolution will raise its head again and proclaim to your sorrow amid a brass of trumpets: I was, I am, I shall always be. . . .” □

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## Tell It Like It Is

ROY ROSENZWEIG

**THAT NOBLE DREAM:** The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession. By Peter Novick. Cambridge University Press. 648 pp. \$49.50. Paper \$15.95.

Some years ago, Harvard University historian Oscar Handlin recalled the “exhilaration” he felt in 1936 when he attended his first American Historical Association meeting. His colleagues, Handlin wrote in reverential tones, were “internally cohesive and held together by adherence to common standards and convictions,” with a “sense of unifying purpose that overrode differences in background, interpretation and points of view.” Handlin may have thought that rigorous professional standards overrode differences in background, but this was far from universally true in those days. In 1935, for example, his adviser, Arthur Schlesinger Sr., found it necessary to include in a letter of recommendation the reassurance that Handlin, a Jew, had “none of the offensive traits which some people associate with his race.”

Schlesinger’s letter was not exceptional. His colleague Roger Merriman recommended Daniel Boorstin in similar terms as “a Jew though not the kind to which one takes exception.” Even non-Jewish historians with vaguely Jewish names required “protection.” When Wallace Notestein was being considered for a post at Yale, Charles Hull of Cornell provided the helpful clarification that “his family are Presbyterians, very much so, except Wallace himself, who is a somewhat straying sheep.”

Handlin’s wistful evocation of the historians of the 1930s was later republished in a volume titled *Truth in History*. Peter Novick’s *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* is, in some respects, the historiographic and epistemological opposite of Handlin’s book. Not only does Novick’s exhumation of fifty-year-old letters of recommendation expose the anti-Semitic underside of Handlin’s

beloved profession; Novick’s larger purpose is to argue that there is no such thing as “truth in history,” that the quest for historical objectivity—the founding myth of the historical profession—is an “incoherent” and “dubious” goal.

Novick, then, has really written two books. The first is a detailed, witty and engaging social and intellectual history of the American historical profession from its founding in the late nineteenth century to the present. It rests on extensive research in the personal papers of more than fifty prominent historians (an ironic piece of revenge on historians who have been rummaging through other people’s mail for centuries) and on an impressive mastery of the key historiographic debates of the past hundred years. Even people who expect a book about historians to be dull will find Novick’s graceful style and skeptical tone a refreshing departure from the standard chronicles of the profession. “Most historians,” Novick complains, “generally write about their colleagues the way Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., writes about the Kennedys.”

Not surprisingly, historians, like the Kennedys, turn out to have their flaws, and anti-Semitism (or the tolerance of anti-Semitism) is hardly the only one. Novick does not hesitate to disclose the others—the pervasive racism of early twentieth-century historians, the embarrassing propagandistic writings of World War I-era historians, and the all-too-compliant embrace of cold war politics by post-World War II historians. Novick may be a debunker, but he is a fair and even generous one. He refuses, for example, to dismiss entirely Handlin’s sunny version of the historical profession of the 1930s, even though his own evidence suggests that he would echo C. Vann Woodward’s contemporary exclamation about his calling: “My God, is this what I have dedicated my life to?”

In any event, Novick’s main purpose is not really to detail the failings of historians. The second and more important book within *That Noble Dream* is a meditation on the central epistemological problem of historians, the “objectivity question.” By showing the professional, political, psychological and cultural pressures undergirding the epistemological stance of historians, Novick effectively intertwines his two stories, the philosophical and the professional. Novick, then, has combined a subject that historians

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