

1789: Dream and Reality

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REVOLUTIONS ARE NOT MADE, they emerge, according to Lenin's dictum, meaning that the social phenomenon called a revolution has a pre-history. Uprisings and rebellions may result from concrete social evils such as the abuse of power, but since they are not aimed at a total and fundamental transformation, they do not involve a change in value systems. A revolution, on the other hand, is the annihilation of one system of order and values and the proclamation of an entirely new relationship between men. Such a thorough change demands an "incubation period," a pre-history.

The new order which the French Revolution of 1789 above all else proclaims is the Sovereignty of Man. The human being becomes the enthroned ruler of this world, at once as individual and collective, the universal master, expressing his power as Will, the sovereign Will of the People. No division appears between what the individual wills and discloses and what arises as the sovereign emanation of human power, the Universal Will.

The Kingdom of Man thus succeeds the Kingdom of God. This is the most profound significance of the French Revolution. What we are here calling the pre-history of 1789 is essentially the secularization of the West. Medieval scholasticism taught that man, upon entering being, possesses a consciousness given him by *inner spiritual light*, "the mind's eye," which illumines his mental faculties, pri-

marily his reason. Through the secularization which extends over more than half a millennium up to the so-called Age of Enlightenment and the Revolution of 1789, an uninterrupted weakening of this inner intellectual light takes place, along with a growing propensity to regard the mental faculties, especially reason, *ratio*, as the source of knowledge.

As the idea of God is weakened and creation and nature with their forces gradually lose their sacred character, a vacuum is inevitably produced in the human consciousness which secularized man seeks to fill. The scientific investigation of life becomes a powerful instrument by which to fill the void in man's knowledge of a world less and less regarded as being governed by God's providence according to the order of creation. Every scientific conquest heightens the feeling of power and the conviction that this world is but a field of exploration which man is to subdue.

Secularism can, as it were, be seen as two rivers, rationalism and sensualism, the one culminating in Descartes' scientific positivism and dualistic doctrine of a "pure" rational mode of thought; the other proclaiming the full legitimacy of human feelings and passions . . . a legitimacy which also receives a moral framework. It is through those two mighty currents, running parallel yet often mixing their waters, that secularism victoriously rushes on. The triumph of thought,

rationalism, feeling, and the victory of the passions attack all traditional hierarchical systems of order, and theology is in constant retreat. God is no longer active in the world. He has, like some superannuated chief engineer, retired to his heaven, whence he views the clockwork of nature in which man is the primary agent.

However rationalism and sensualism may differ in essence, they do have one thing in common, a thirst for power, explaining why the two seem to mix their waters so easily as in the French Revolution. At the same time both are in their own independent way innovative and revolutionary: reason becomes a profane, logical, discursive process in which the spiritual light of the Middle Ages has been thoroughly extinguished, while the complete autonomy of emotional life, the goal of sentimentalism, is reached. And this brings us to Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

Rousseau brings off the revolution of feeling by freeing the sense-powers from their spiritual origin, and by replacing every hierarchical order in man's interior life with the counter-balance of his mental powers. Rousseau holds that man attains this by shutting himself up within himself and entering an imaginary dream world where he can avoid meeting and being tormented by the conflicts of reality. Rousseau, however, has created a center in this emotional world, the heart, and this emotional locus plays a leading role in his thought: the heart becomes a sort of department of moral sanitation.

How is this possible? Rousseau argues that nature is essentially good, and the heart inside man is the altar of goodness. Rousseau is, so to speak, regarding his own heart in a kind of self-scrutiny and self-pity. This is a kind of catharsis in which sensation is rid of all dross and raised to a level of natural goodness.

Rousseau does not in any way praise sense-pleasures as such. On the contrary, he hails the simple and industrious

life. He dreams of a primordial humanity and there finds evidence for his concept of nature. "O man," he exhorts in one of his early works, "listen, for this is your history, not as told by liars in books but as told in nature; this nature which never lies" ("*dans la nature qui ne ment jamais*").

Rousseau thus seeks a social basis from which to continue his fabulating. Turning his back on the encyclopaedists and philosophes, he instead vents his anger on French court life and condemns the pleasures, games, opera, and theater of the aristocracy. And how does he discover the simple, genuine man, the popular life? Does he go out in the world and get in touch with the people? No, Rousseau remains consistent: he turns to his inner self and there discovers his own weakness. In everything he writes there is an element of weakness and appealing helplessness, and it is precisely this weakness which he turns into a point of departure for his social teachings.

He exploits his weakness and his helplessness with refinement: he humbles himself before himself, although not with pious humility. He inverts humility and makes it something sensory. He puts his humility on the altar of his heart, good nature's own sanitizer, and so is purified. In short he forgives himself. This is an autistic process, forgiveness coming under the auspices of the Kingdom of Man. A moral order based entirely on the emotional life has been founded. Furthermore, when man humbles himself and approaches the altar of his life in order to be purified, he is at the same time justified. The emotional revolution has been completed. Weakness thus purified in this fantastic manipulative process appears now in a radically new form: righteousness.

Now Rousseau can open the gates to the world. A campaign of vengeance can start. For as soon as weakness and helplessness equal righteousness, then maturity, strength, power become unrighteousness.

teousness. Enter *Emile*. This pedagogic novel of Rousseau's illustrates how, starting with the child, one can create the new man, the one able to live according to nature. Rousseau brings the whole range of sentiments into play here, combining observations of the spiritual life of man with plans for creating a united front against the false, pernicious, and powerful adult world. The transformation that Rousseau envisions not only demands the production of individuals purified by instruction, but also demands a social revolution. But for that Rousseau has to tell a new tale and it receives its definite form in *On the Social Contract*.

The point of departure is the same: the weak. It is the powerful who violate nature and in doing so are unrighteous. Rousseau sounds the alarm. There shall be a pilgrimage and the pilgrims are the weak, the simple, the righteous. But how are they to win the power which just nature holds in store for them?

The problem being constitutional, sovereignty then becomes the central issue. The Middle Ages, which conceived nature as a divine ordering in which men were to fulfill their earthly trusteeship, never arrived at a secular teaching of sovereignty—God and His earthly commissioners were the bearers of the one true sovereignty. It was not until the late Middle Ages that an Italian jurist, Bartolus, starting from the concept of corporation in Roman law, attempted to give the emerging nation-state the character of a "higher" corporation. It was the French sixteenth century philosopher Jean Bodin who first gave the secular concept of sovereignty its modern form. Following Bodin, the Baroque princes paved the way for a continued secularization of the power concept. The Christian concept of natural law faded as this secular consciousness of man's power grew. The contract theory won rising support, but both Hobbes and his compatriot Locke stuck to the theory of a

double contract: all men enter into a social contract, after which they enact a contract of sovereignty. Sovereignty as an act of popular will was thus caught in a duality and it is this duality which Rousseau overcomes.

Rousseau performs another of his many manipulative acts: he erases the sovereignty contract, which had been an essential part of all previous natural law speculation, and, figuratively speaking, standing on the shoulders of Hobbes and Locke, he makes a social contract in which all unite with all in a universal mutual transfer of power.

By this device Rousseau gives the concept of the "people" a new, pseudo-metaphysical content. He had shown little *Emile* and his brothers, the simple and weak, the route to nature's own healing, to forgiveness, goodness and righteousness. All this took place in a private sentimental sphere. But when it comes to his social contract, Rousseau needs a new meaning for "the people." What he here propounds is a theory of power carried out with an unparalleled consistency.

The source of all power is henceforth to be found in the people: all men are born free and equal and, being free and equal, they have signed a contract with themselves. Popular sovereignty means at once the unity and the totality of all human individuals inasmuch as that which eradicates every conflict between common and private, unity and plurality, is the Universal Will. This Superior Will, *la volonté générale*, lifts all the people, together with their private interests and pursuits, up to a higher civic level. Their Will ascends like a smoke-offering from the civil assemblies and it becomes the resultant configuration of their votes.

The popular will—the General Will—never errs, for its ultimate basis is Nature which makes it sacrosanct. Some individuals may, of course, have dissident opinions, but then it is a question of bringing them around to a right way of

thinking. After all, Sovereign Man is a unity as well as a totality, and the Popular Will is what all men "in their innermost heart" desire. Rousseau has brought the godless, boundless Kingdom of Man to completion. Man is now omnipotent with no overlord, his will united and indivisible. Yet the secret strength in this doctrine of popular sovereignty is that it is more than a mere abstract idea. The concept of "people," associated with the goodness of nature, carries a social and sentimental meaning, that of the simple, peaceful working people, those unaffected beings leading a life in the service of nature far from the artificial and perverted world of the courts and the manors. The people appear to us with a convincing moral strength. And so, a revolution of sentiment, commenced upon the altar of the heart, where man forgives himself and finds himself innocent and just, has received its social basis: the people, a social, sentimental category, who live in accordance with nature and are consequently righteous.

Rousseau constructs his philosophy by a trinity: the individual's self-pity and self-pardon, the people as the faithful servants of Good Nature, and, thirdly, the people as the sovereign bearer of the General Will, bearing an unlimited power. In the private sphere Rousseau opens up the way for intellectual energies, for that restless resentment in the face of which every aristocratic order at length finds itself powerless. Through his popular social sentimentalism Rousseau paves the way for a campaign of vengeance: he addresses the proletariat even before there are proletarians in the meaning of the following century. He equips the sovereign people with a totalitarian power that necessarily seeks the destruction of its enemies.

Rousseau performs some clever legerdemain with reality. It is not the externals that form his outlook; he gets his material from his inner self. He lives in

constant introversion, "*passant ma vie avec moi*," as he puts it, and from there he tells the story of Man. David Hume reproduces a conversation he had with Rousseau during the latter's visit to England. It seems Rousseau explained the secret of his style: to confront the reader with the monstrous. But the monsters of pagan mythology were worn out in an enlightened time, he continued. We have to create new figures in our story telling and what remains is to relate the monstrosity of life itself in the character and external conditions of men. It may be, he noted, that not all that I have said may be true; my mistakes may be considerable, Rousseau notes, but my feelings have made up for this. Rousseau forgives himself.

Every revolution has it outer and its inner life, the exoteric and the esoteric. The former consists in economic, social, and political conditions; the latter concerns those forces, those energies and that dynamism which give birth to revolutionary processes. During the latter half of the eighteenth century appeared a rich variety of books pleading for reform, change, and revolution. To mix reality and dream, practical demands for reform with utopian fantasies, often in the most astonishing way, is one thing, but it is quite another to initiate a revolutionary outburst as the ending of peaceful, civil coexistence. A revolution needs a cumulative, guiding force. It needs a storm center.

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had such a storm center, Lenin and his followers with their extreme single-mindedness stemming from a fanatical embrace of Marxism. The French Revolution of 1789 found its storm center in Robespierre and his Jacobin Club. Here is the nucleus, the armory, the esoteric side of the Revolution. And in no way underestimating the immense literature needed to prepare minds for a new way of thinking, it can be confidently stated the Jacobin Club rests on the incendiary

foundation of Rousseauism. Rousseau's book on the Social Contract is ever on Robespierre's night table and every thought of this Jacobin is permeated by the ideology of Rousseau.

Jacobinism became the storm center because it correctly understood the deeper esoteric meaning of every revolution: the intricacies of life are transcended and simplified into an integral, universal whole. Every opposition between the individual and the whole, between the absolute individual and the absolute state, is removed. Revolution, however, means the realization of total and noncontradictory—and righteous—power by means of the contractually derived General Will. Lastly, then, the pseudo-metaphysical change is effected, by which man (and his collective manifestation the people) is seated on the throne as the sovereign of life.

Rousseau creates an impression of identity by having all hand over the power to all. The identity crises of life are declared void. And so Robespierre can exclaim: I myself am the People—“*je suis peuple moi-même!*” All is incarnated in the individual, and the individual incarnates all. In this enclosed and self-righteous system the people wrathfully turn on every dissident and, as Robespierre adds, the wrath of the people always falls on the guilty. For in this totalitarian order there is no room for tolerance or forgiveness: the enemies of the people must be punished without mercy. Hatred, political rage, now enters the scene. “*Il faut colérer le peuple!*”—one has to inflame the people, as Robespierre, Nature's own spokesman, phrases it. Popular Will always appears as the common opinion, he declares untiringly, and it can be instrumentalized through popular tribunals and the guillotine. The bloodiest tyrant may one day face the people's rebellion against his oppression, but the Sovereign People neither is held responsible for its acts nor has it any advisors. Tolerance, grace, forgiveness are concepts

unknown in this Kingdom of Man where righteousness holds sway, where the deviant must be annihilated.

Man comes out of the social contract with innate rights. These are summarized in the trinitarian formula: liberty, equality, fraternity. Yet personal liberty should be recognized by most reasonable men as a necessary element in every life worth the name human. Equality is inevitably encountered in the situations of life. Moreover it seems evident that society requires brotherly compassion, some mutual caring, an existential community.

However, what the men of 1789 were preaching is something rather different. They proclaim the absolute, the total, the infinite. The declaration of human rights nullifies the timeless wisdom that God alone is Creator, transcendent over time and space and absolutely free, and that, in a world of limits and contradictions, men enjoy a liberty limited in the main to a freedom of choice. Equality in its absolute sense contradicts all that creation implies, insofar as biological and psychological life-processes are multidimensional and not bound to any single egalitarian perspective, a truth hidden by the smoke from the revolutionary fires. The dream of universal solidarity, fraternity, results from an indiscriminate confusion of the three fundamental human relationships: love, friendship, and camaraderie.

We have dealt here with the esoteric meaning and content of the French Revolution. But for the revolutionary fire to be kindled fuel from the material world is needed. Here we meet the exoteric side of the revolution. The esoteric is the world of ideas, the storm center, the armory where utilitarian dogmatism and harmony are forged with anger and hatred toward the opponents of the utopia, where a narcissistic cult of the ego raises man, to a moral, pseudo-metaphysical plane out of the reach of criticism.

Yet, the revolution lives and must live

an external life. The inner forces demand extroversion and a channel is supplied by the social conditions. The old society, *l'ancien régime*, denotes an order that was being dismantled. The comprehensive and continuous research on the subject sheds light on the process of the centuries preceding the Revolution. The feudal order was increasingly weakened; the nobility gradually lost its hegemony; secularization undermined the position of the Church and with it the clergy's task of being the spiritual estate. The free peasantry and the urban bourgeoisie became the dominating Third Estate. A growing need for far-reaching reforms was felt, above all, for that change of political institutions that would permit the political process to become more attuned to actual social conditions.

We can understand the need for basic reforms. We know a great deal about the blindness of the power-holders and about the resistance to constructive measures of reform. But just as the Bolshevik Revolution broke out in one of the most backward countries of the West and not where Marxism had anticipated it, so the French Revolution is hardly an example of a people rebelling to crush an unbearable feudal-noble and clerical oppression. Even when we go from a description of the Revolution as an idealistic dream to seeing it as series of historical events, we are hardly facing a set of neat and self-evident clichés.

In the old, truly feudal Europe the nobility was seen as a natural element in the order of hegemony. It imposed heavy taxes and other burdens upon the working people; it enjoyed and exercised without limitation considerable privileges. But the nobility also issued laws and decrees; it had judicial powers; it regulated to no small degree economic life; through the vassal system it acted as a stabilizing factor and it protected the weak. The nobility was an indisputable element of power in the preservation of

the public order.

This position of power was lost during a long historical process, not least of all in France. In Germany, to be sure, and above all in its eastern regions, a strong feudality survived: a peasant could not leave the estate at will, nor could he marry without the consent of his lord. Quite a different degree of freedom was the rule of France, where the parcelling of land and the creation of new estates was a process already under way decades before the outbreak of the Revolution. That "*servitude de la terre*" that had awakened so much rebellion in the minds of the people during the eighteenth century was not in France the reality which it had been, for instance, in England.

Did the nobility dominate the people in purely political ways? Even up to the end of the seventeenth century there were cities enjoying a high degree of popular self-government, where the magistrate was elected from the people and was also responsible to the people. Here were local communalities that carefully guarded their independence. This development into a provincial and municipal self-government, historically so significant in the Anglo-Saxon world, was disrupted by the *ancien régime*. State centralism in administrative and political matters, the commissariat system which prospered so during the eighteenth century, had devastating consequences. The exercise of central powers in Paris not only pushed the nobility into the background as a political and administrative power group, but also offered the people a more narrow scope for participation in various civil activities.

In this manner a nation can lose or face the loss of its civic vitality, its outlet for responsible action, its contact with reality. The central exercise of power, a centrally run bureaucracy, creates a feeling of anonymity, of diminished ability to identify with a living community. It is during a process of this kind that an

identity crisis emerges. Men start to think of their social existence as a void.

This is precisely what happened in France during the decades preceding the French Revolution. It is *l'ancien régime* which commits this devastation. Many were those who were accessory. Nor should we forget that even the Physiocrats who eagerly favored many necessary reforms were bewitched by the idea of centralism. Economic life should be left to itself, but political governance should rest with the enlightened monarch: that was the line of the Physiocrats. All the rich spectrum of assemblies, associations, all those local and federal counterweights to the paralyzing centralism, were branded by the father of Physiocracy, François Quesnay himself, as utterly injurious, "*une idée funeste*." Even Turgot spoke warmly of an "*opinion publique*" emanating from the state. Robespierre and his Jacobins would unswervingly follow the same track.

Without this process the French Revolution—its character, manifestations, and achievements—is incomprehensible. In order to achieve power and success every revolution must emerge in the midst of an identity crisis, of confusion and a perceived void. The lingering and therefore tantalizing remains of a dying nobility and a decaying monarchy, coupled with an administrative centralism, characterized by bureaucratic anonymity and soullessness, conspire to a feeling of emptiness. The identity crisis is that of a fatherless people.

During the eighteenth century it is obvious that the ongoing secularization did not remove that vacuous feeling of lost identity—and from then on we can observe an increased interest in utopias, a dreaming about an "ideal" society, just as we see many concepts reflecting a belief in external human progress. France becomes the focal point: its political centralism and its growing bureaucracy have

not least the effect that a brilliant intellectual elite is never allowed to participate in practical political and civil duties; indeed, in its rootlessness, it becomes the hot-bed for most unrealistic revolutionary speculation. The enormous part which the "*gens de lettre*" play from the mid-eighteenth century on makes it obvious that it is here the revolutionary storm is going to gather. In England the nobility was becoming more and more commercial, to the degree that the lower classes sought to imitate rather than to destroy the aristocracy.

Everything from the middle of the century is prepared for some kind of upheaval. The concept of human rights is so well embedded in the popular mind that these rights are even appealed to in royal decrees well before the revolutionary events begin. Deep social ills, unemployment, bad harvests, and rising food prices are part of the picture. Yet a further question must be answered: Where did the strength of the revolutionary hatred and of the revolutionary violence which it engendered come from?

Every genuine revolution implies a profound human crisis, an identity crisis, by which the belief in and ties to the old order are so weakened that they are about to burst. This crisis of identity leads to a confusion of identity, the confusion to a resentment towards whatever appears as treachery. A people finding itself in such straits is experiencing the loss of the authoritative identity of a father.

The step from bitterness, due to a lost filiation, to revolutionary rage and hatred is not wide. By 1789 everything is extraordinarily well prepared. In what we called revolutionary esoterism we find that which is needed for a Jacobin outburst of rage. The concept of equality is tied to nature—and nature is good and righteous—and through equality that is offered and that was lost with pater-nity—fraternity. The elevated idea of citi-

zanship becomes an essential part of the narcissism proper to man as sovereign. Man is also guiltless, as Rousseau points out, because in our heart where good nature meets us, we are able to forgive ourselves. In his self-worship man can raise himself and his acts up to a pseudo-metaphysical level. Last but not least: his sovereignty means that his power is total, because the social contract is an identity into which the parts enter in indivisible and unlimited unity. He who stands outside of this totality of power, this pseudo-metaphysical justice and goodness, is an enemy, and must be destroyed. Hatred, rage, and violence are the legitimate and inescapable consequence of this battle of annihilation.

The history of Jacobinism is short-lived. Did the Revolution die with it? That is what Napoleon claimed. Nothing, however, could be more mistaken. The centuries following are an uninterrupted march under the banner of the Kingdom of Man. Jacobin follies are succeeded by various ideologies, foremost of which are liberalism and socialism—the first atomizing life by arguing that man has an identity only within his individual ego; the second, caught by the identity crisis when capitalism, industrialism, and mechanization rob the workers of their patron father, seeking a solution in a collective fraternity on the basis of material interests.

With the end of World War II, an independent and equal man has been proclaimed and held to be the bearer of all

legitimate power on earth. The idea of human rights has been reawakened and cultural universalism has become the object of endless incantations. Nevertheless, identity crises continue to break out. Recall the student rebellions of 1968—they were perhaps but a harbinger, though there is something unique in these student movements: ultimately the young students did not turn their force against any concrete institutions or bearers of authority. They turned them against authority as such.

The symbolic image of society which Rousseau used was the oak in whose shadow the village men gathered to make their decisions. Forty years ago more than 40,000 Swedes, to take an example from my native country, could pride themselves on being municipal representatives. (The whole population is about 8.5 million people). In all more than 225,000 Swedes had some form of local political responsibility. Today less than 14,000 are members of municipal assemblies and only 40,000 bear some kind of local responsibility. The centralism and bureaucratism, the commissariat system that so fatally paved the way for the French Revolution, does not lack all similarity to our modern situation. Beyond all talk of democracy and democratic life-styles it is too easily forgotten that every genuine popular rule is the rule of laymen.

(Translated from the Swedish by
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