

## The Attack on the French Revolution

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The approaching bicentennial of the French Revolution of 1789 seems to be intensifying the national divisions that are its legacy. Strangely enough, it is the counter-revolutionaires who are getting the most sympathetic treatment in the press and the popular media.

Maurice Agulhon, Professor at the University of Paris-I, spoke on “Current French Debates Concerning the Revolution of 1789,” at the Fourteenth Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, in February, 1984, at Duke University. He saw two reasons for the current hostility to the Revolution, one deep-set as a fundamental part of the new French mentality and the other related to contemporary politics. The first and most important is related to the change in French mentality symbolized by the triumph of the *Annales* school of history. This school, taking its name from the journal, *Annales (Economics, Sociétés, Civilisations)*, devotes itself to a study of the basics of life (food production, demography, mentality) over long periods of time. Like Fernand Braudel, the *Annales* historians (Agulhon considers himself to be one of them) tend to look for a gradual “sea changes” and to ignore ephemeral political cataclysms like the French Revolution, which one of them calls a “magnificent irrelevance.” The pages of the *Annales* are filled with statistical tables and graphs rather than political narrative. The triumph of the *Annales* school in France, according to Agulhon, has had two effects. First the role of the military has become less significant, because *Annales* historians seldom mention battles. Second, political thought has also lost its central place because less attention is paid to political leaders.

A second issue related to contemporary politics is giving the French Revolution a bad press. Regionalism is the strongest political force in France today, and in a nation devoted to the ideals of personal freedom and regional autonomy the Revolutionary Jacobins represent dictatorship and centralization. Now that the Socialists are in power there is an additional fear that the nationalization of industry could lead to totalitarianism. Some newspapers have made heroes of the counter-Revolutionary monarchist Chouans because they opposed a strong central government.

Agulhon sounded an alarm lest the French people move from buying busts of kings to accepting their ideas. He did not, however, give any evidence that the Revolution's basic ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity are under assault. In fact, the cases he cited all show the distaste of French people for a Revolution that turned

against its own ideals. Perhaps Agulhon is sounding a false alarm. The attack on the Revolution is related to the contemporary fear of dictatorship and desire for local autonomy, personal liberty, and freedom of religion. It has no love of the Old Régime's frozen social structure and lack of political and religious freedom. But finally, Agulhon's observation that "liberalism is always centrist" seems relevant, because it is the political center that seems least comfortable with the Revolution.

Agulhon's talk pointed out a basic difference between the United States and France. American society, as the American Bicentennial of 1976 pointed out, is fundamentally united by its Revolution, whereas French society, as the coming French Bicentennial of 1989 will show, is fundamentally divided by its Revolution. The issues that divided Jacobin from Girondin are as yet unresolved, and not everyone has accepted the liberal beliefs of Voltaire and the Enlightenment. Meanwhile, historians on the political left have attempted to reshape the French Revolution so that it will serve their current political interests. This, at least, was the accusation often made against Albert M. Soboul, and the attack upon Soboul, which was the subject of a session at the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, illustrates Agulhon's point.

The first speaker at this session on Soboul was Sanford Elwitt, who noted that Soboul was attacked more often as a symbol than as a historian. Soboul was a lifelong member of the French Communist Party and so his writings were often caricatured as mindless reflections of a rigid ideology. Francois Furet, who is closely associated with the *Annales* School, called Soboul's textbook on the French Revolution "a kind of Leninist-populist vulgate." But Elwitt cited Soboul's opposition to Marxist historians like Daniel Guérin. Soboul never accepted the Marxist formula (which Karl Marx also never accepted) that the French Revolution was a victory of the industrial bourgeoisie over the feudal nobility, and he never said that the French Revolution brought about the immediate triumph of capitalism in France. He insisted, however, that the Revolution was the political result of an underlying struggle among France's social classes. He raged against those historians who simply presented facts without looking for an underlying "conceptualization and theorization," which alone could "make sense of the anatomy and the physiology of human societies."

Soboul's great thesis, *The Parisian Sans-Culottes of the Year II of the French Revolution*, had attempted to measure the ideas and mentality of the common people of Paris during the Jacobin Terror. These popular radicals, he had concluded, were not a proletarian socialist revolution within the capitalist revolution. Instead, they represented the ideals of the small independent producers and craftsmen who would be swept aside by industrial capitalism just as Jacobinism would be swept aside by socialism. But Richard M. Andrews, the second speaker in the session, said that Soboul was wrong.

Soboul, according to Andrews, had fallen into the trap of believing what people said when they talked to the police. Soboul's thesis was based upon the political statements, descriptions, and denunciations in the archives of the Paris police. Naturally, many political leaders during the Terror had portrayed themselves

as "poor" and as "men of the people." Soboul, anxious to make contact with the popular classes, had believed them. By means of a further search of the archives, however, Andrews showed that most of Soboul's *sans culottes* were really wealthy bourgeois. Some of them were men with decayed businesses that they wanted the state to save. Others were former provincial magnates who were now Parisian nobodies. All of them were using the Revolution to move into positions of influence.

How could Soboul have believed that men of the popular classes had become politically active and begun to attend political meetings? Only a few residents of each neighborhood attended the section meetings, and these were not Soboul's "popular masses." Even after the "40 sous law" started to pay people for attending their section meetings few workers came. Those workers who did attend had been brought by their employers as a kind of *claque* to applaud their speeches and support (with their fists if necessary) their point of view. Thus some of the popular patriotism that Soboul detected in the sections was merely the result of the clamor made by arms manufacturers and their employees. The rich politically active Parisians did share with the people a respect for those who, like themselves, did useful labor. But these men were not themselves of the people, and consequently Soboul had made a fundamental error in using them as models of Parisian popular sentiment in the Year II of the French Revolution.

Lynn Hunt, the next speaker, rose to Soboul's defense. Of course, she agreed, Soboul's material came from the radical *avant-garde* rather from the common ranks of the *sans culottes*. But the fact that Soboul's speakers were not poor does not mean that they were not *sans culottes*. They were, in fact, the leaders of the *sans culottes*, and their beliefs were widely shared by their followers. If anything, their position as men of wealth and as employers strengthened their ability to speak for their districts. Andrews is right in pointing out that these leading radicals hungered for political office and feared downward mobility. But Soboul was also right in saying that the *sans culottes* as a whole were patriotic advocates of a strong national defense, and that they favored harsh measures against the nobility and priests, whom they despised. It does not matter that Soboul called these people *sans culottes* while Andrews calls them bourgeois. The fact is (as Soboul pointed out) that there was little proletarian class-consciousness at the time. Workers and owners had joined together as part of one group, the *sans culottes*, who were united against their common enemies: the priests, the nobles, and the foreign powers. Hunt quoted Colin Lucas' statement that it was the Revolution that made the *sans culottes* and not the *sans culottes* who made the Revolution.

Jeffrey Kaplow, the final speaker, repeated Hunt's statement that Soboul had never used Marxist determinism to describe the French Revolution. But Kaplow, contradicting himself, added that Soboul had seen the Jacobins as representatives of a "disintegrating social class": the small shopkeepers and artisans who would be replaced by industry and big business. These threatened independent businessmen "made the Revolution" and "were made by the Revolution." Kaplow's self-contradic-

tions, of course, reflect internal contradictions in the writings of Soboul, who saw the sans culottes of the Year II both as representatives of a particular social class (the independent artisans and shopkeepers) and as a socially heterogeneous political group.