Illusion and Domination

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud makes an analogy between religious illusion and State illusion. I will discuss such illusions in relation to the State-form in some paintings by Jacques-Louis David, made in the context of Bonapartism.

The imbrication of the issues of domination and illusion in Freud includes the ‘image-idea’ of the *totem* as a visual sign for the stratification of a new correlation of forces, emerging from the overthrow of the previous order. The reference case is the murder of the father, a kind of regicide by the primitive horde of rebellious sons. New forces are awakened with rebellion, which either continue the struggle or stagnate. The latter occurs most frequently.

To freeze this correlation of forces, to end the revolution, was precisely the slogan of the Girondists in 1791. Let us set out a typology of historical desires: to put an end to the revolution was also the desire of the Thermidorian forces. This is also the case of recent interpretations of the Revolution.

A portrait of Robespierre, as the leading figure of the Jacobins, would indeed be a totemic picture, a *halt* in the Republican process, as seen from the sans-culotte point of view. This is not to mention a portrait of the Supreme Being, requested by Robespierre from David in order to stop the progress of dechristianisation among the sans-culottes. However, the frenzied speed and fluency of the revolutionary process, at this moment, did not allow David to partake in these totemic projects.

However, if, conversely, the struggle proceeds and divides the victorious forces, then the contradictions become radicalised. In the latter context it is the notion of ongoing, unfinished, or even permanent revolution that predominates.

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1 See Freud 2004, pp. 34–35.
3 See Furet 1985.
Voluptuousness

This latter dynamic is what happened between 1789 and 1794 in the ‘voluptuous’ time of the Revolution. This was the term used by Baudelaire, in a text whose completion was thwarted by death. In the draft of the preface to the novel *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782) by Choderlos de Laclos, Baudelaire wrote: ‘The Revolution was made by voluptuaries’.4

The Conspiracy of the Equals, of Babeuf in 1795, after the coup of Thermidor, equally belongs to the domain of voluptuousness. Benjamin’s stance in delimiting the conditions favourable to the revolutionary outbreak in the text ‘On the Concept of History’ (1940)5 is also *voluptuous*.

In this typology of historical notions and desires, Baudelaire’s voluptuousness is in line with the *iskra* (the Bolshevik spark), with the messianic moment of Benjamin, and with Trotsky’s ‘permanent revolution’.

Freud and the Revolution

In what field then does Freud’s image-idea of the *totem* situate itself? The notion, which introduced the idea of a previous rebellion, concerns the obstruction of the revolutionary processes or collective historical *stases*. Its objective is the defeat and conclusion, and not the continuation, of the Revolution. The notion of *totem* can be applied to processes contrary to those evoked by Baudelaire, Trotsky, and Benjamin.

Does that imply an opposite point of view?

By no means. In other texts, Freud articulates (like the revolutionaries) the desire for the historical progress of humanity, which he attributes to Eros. Thus, he affirms that ‘our best hope for the future ... is that intellect – the scientific spirit, reason – may in process of time establish a dictatorship in the mental life of man’.6

Does the idea of the Revolution comprise an ‘illusion of progress’? It should be noted in passing that Freud’s idea of an incessant struggle between Eros and the death drive suggests a certain parallelism or even synchronicity with the Trotskyist notion of ‘permanent revolution’, based on incessant conflicts.

In short, is the revolution an ancillary illusion of the ideology of progress? Not for Freud. Like Kant in 1798, who perceived the meaning of the French

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4 ‘La Révolution a été faite par des voluptueux ...’, in Baudelaire 2002o, pp. 68, 1115–1116.
5 See Benjamin 2005b.