Review Articles


For a couple of decades now, the wind of restoration has been blowing through the historiography of revolutions. The celebrations of the bicentennial of 1789 consecrated the hegemony of the school created by the French historian François Furet. Rejecting the notion of ‘bourgeois revolution’, the latter had found his inspiration in two conservative forerunners. First, and above all, in Tocqueville, who helped him to define the French Revolution as an avoidable and unlucky explosion of violence: ‘even if it had not taken place, the old social structure would none the less have been shattered everywhere, here sooner, there later. The only difference would have been that instead of collapsing with such brutal suddenness it would have crumbled bit by bit’. Then in Auguste Cochin, who, a century ago, had condemned the French Revolution as a product of revolutionary ideology, fanaticism and passion. The bicentennial had not yet ended when the fall of the Berlin Wall, and then the implosion of the USSR, nourished a new conservative wave. With a swing of the pendulum, social history was abandoned for the sake of rediscovering the old interpretations of Communism that had dominated the 1950s, at the beginning of the Cold War. In the United States, Richard Pipes depicted the Russian Revolution as a kind of virus propagated by the Russian intelligentsia (the homologue of the Enlightenment philosophers) and Martin Malia denounced a totalitarian régime engendered by a pernicious ideology. Just before his death, Furet presented a new, more sophisticated variant of those commonplaces in his last book, The Passing of an Illusion. It was an intellectual testament exalting the insuperable virtues of classical liberalism as well as a definitive condemnation of all revolutionary attempts, viewed as inevitably producing totalitarian effects. But the breach was opened and a troop of zealous disciples quickly rushed into it, sometimes reducing Communism to a criminal parenthesis in the history of the twentieth century (Stéphane Courtois) and sometimes interpreting the war in the Vendée as the first modern genocide (Alain Gérard, Patrice Guenniffey).

With The Furies, we hear a very different music. Arno J. Mayer’s latest, very ambitious work troubles the prevailing conformism and disturbs the conservative chorus, introducing a dissonant voice. But it goes far beyond simply acting as a salutary spoilsport, because

2. Furet 1981; notably his last chapter is devoted to Cochin.
Mayer renews the historiography through the magnitude of his perspective and the originality of his approach. Though he strongly criticises the conservative wave, he does not defend the old historical schools. In fact, he shares something with Tocqueville and Furet; not, of course, the condemnation of the revolutionary outbreak; what he shares with them is the attempt to grasp it as a process in the long view. On the other hand, he shares with Albert Mathiez the idea of a fundamental analogy – in their aims, forms and means – between the French and Russian Revolutions. The latter had been experienced by its actors if not as a simple repetition of 1789 then, at least, as a radical transformation of society the understanding and mastering of which might find a useful paradigm in its French forebear. Such an analogy explains the choice of a comparative approach. The result is a great historical fresco that some critics have compared, for the breadth of its horizon, to a Delacroix painting. But Mayer does not resort to epic narrative and his book is built on a solid conceptual framework, surveying some great collective representations. Rather than Michelet, Trotsky or Deutscher, the models of this book are Marx, Quinet and Weber.

Mayer rejects the traditional historiography that distinguishes between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ revolutions. For classical liberalism, the former should be bearers of individual liberties, the liberal state, markets and capitalism – like the English ‘Glorious Revolution’ or the American Revolution – while the others, the great majority, would be inspired by ideology and fanaticism and result in violence. This approach always separates, within the same revolution, a ‘constructive’ step from its totalitarian derailing: 1789 against 1793, February against October 1917 (but there is also a Marxist version of this approach, distinguishing between the Jacobin dictatorship and Thermidor, the Leninist dictatorship and Stalinism). Mayer does not focus on these dichotomies. He considers the revolutions as ‘furies’ in which terror is an unavoidable, substantial and structuring moment.

Let us summarise, in its main outlines, the definition of revolution suggested by Mayer. Its paradigm is 1789, which, as he emphasises, renders obsolete the old vision – borrowed from astronomy – of the revolution as a return to an ancient order through a cyclical movement akin to terrestrial rotation (like the English ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1668 which definitively restored the monarchy). Revolution is a rupture that creates a new order, carried out by a mass movement that seizes power (or occupies a vacant power) at the apex of a political crisis. Generally aware of its historical mission, the revolution affirms universal values and projects itself into the future. According to Mayer, Machiavelli already prefigured this definition at the beginning of sixteenth century, but one might add that it also recovers the Schmittian concept of ‘sovereign dictatorship’ and, more recently, Toni Negri’s idea of a ‘constituent power’, a subversive force creating its own legitimacy. Such a rupture presupposes the use of violence. There is no revolution without violence, a founding violence in the Marxian sense of ‘the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one’. Such a revolutionary violence should not be confused with the counter-revolutionary kind, restorative of order and power, which was theorised by Hobbes and Bodin at the time of the wars of religion or by Schmitt and Weber after the First World War and the Russian Revolution. Every revolution, Mayer explains, is deeply linked to the counter-revolution: