

FRENCH REVOLUTION AND ITS INTELLECTUAL LEGACY

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*I am not afraid that they will find in
their leaders tyrants, but rather tutors.*

Alexis de Tocqueville

What is nowadays seen as passionate appeals for new rights and freedoms exhibit a structural similarity with the progressive ideals of the French revolution. They reflect aspiration for “totalitarian democracy.”¹ In contrast to liberal democracy, a proud child of 19th century liberalism, totalitarian democracy presupposes reconciliation of social and individual freedom. It is the place where the paradox between freedom and desirable social order is to be resolved.²

Conceptually, the totalitarian aspect of democracy is realized where all individual volitions transform into one, where there is no difference between the state and society. But there is an important

1 Cf. Jacob Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, London: Mercury Books, 1961.

2 Since having individual freedom, by definition, presupposes that different social virtues are acceptable to those who can choose, the only way to impose a particular ideal of social virtue is by force, that is, by state imposition of the “preferred” social virtue.

difference here between the brutality of Nazism or Stalinism and totalitarian democracy. For the latter involves *voluntary* adjustments, acceptances, and decisions of the large portion of a population during a longer time, leading to the constitutional erosion. In such a democracy, gas chambers and gulags are not necessary; people consciously decide to renounce individual freedom through democratic means: in fair and democratic elections, referenda, through petitions, social activism, etc. Government is not there to safeguard the borders defined by the constitution, but to please the majority whose opinion is already manufactured by influential media, organizations, “scientific community” or individuals, regardless of the set limits. In totalitarian democracy, wills are freely and responsibly expressed. Dissent voices are precluded from the start and abolished as “fringe,” “obscure” and even “unscientific.” You do not need to kill or to imprison anybody, if you manage to secure that dissenters are stigmatized as conspiracy theorists, right-wingers or simply unreliable and irresponsible individuals. You just need to push them to social margins, where their voice can be heard only by an inaudible minority.

In totalitarian democracy’s contemporary, emerging form, all traditional institutions of liberal society, such as free speech, diversity, tolerance, religious freedom, and sanctity of property are cherished insofar they affirm what priests of new progressivism postulate as the civilization’s values and standards. There can be no other social ideal apart from the one totalitarian democracy cherishes. Between modern despotism of Putin or the Islamic fundamentalism on the one side, and the outdated 19th-century ideals of freedom and an unfettered market on the other, the only civilizational response left to follow is democracy based on enlightened, revolutionary ideal.

The ideal’s rudimental, brutal embodiment during the Reign of terror is supplanted by piecemeal and humane version. The goal remains the same: piecemeal, but revolutionary construction of social reality. In some respects, the paradox between freedom and social virtue is already resolved, and the “truth” established. From

the jargon of political correctness³ to the institution of “fact-checkers,”⁴ policymakers are promulgating that the truth is consensually acknowledged, and it is to be blindly followed. For in totalitarian democracy “a sole and exclusive truth in politics exists.”⁵

What the French Revolution brought about in a highly condensed form of its short-lived, but profoundly devastating totalitarian phase, has been steadily evolving through the political history for more than two centuries now, sometimes in extreme form of the twentieth century’s red and black terrors and sometimes as crawling totalitarianism disguised under the cloak of democratic legitimacy. To fully understand the significance of the revolution, we should delve deeply into the roots of intellectual change it brought to modern society.

INTELLECTUAL RECEPTION

Although the revolutions’ ideals were initially centered around the values of liberty and the rule of law as conceived in Lockean

3 Jeff Deist suggests that even this term is obsolete and that should be replaced with “broader and even more amorphous” one, such as “woke”; “woke demands ever changing language, and constantly creates new words while eliminating old ones.” See Jeff Deist’s “Evolution or Corruption? *The Imposition of Political Language in the West Today*,” *The Austrian* vol. 8, no. 6 (November-December) 2022, p. 5.

4 Outside of political instrumentalization, the institution of fact-checkers has proven beneficial as an additional instrument for establishing credibility in journalism and might support free society in general. This is especially noticeable in cases where the fact of the matter can be easily established by answering straightforward questions – who, where, what, and how (see Graves, Lucas. *Deciding What’s True: The Rise of Political Fact-Checking in American Journalism*. United States: Columbia University Press, 2016.) But when this cannot be done, for example, in the cases of long-standing scientific controversies or where there is a plethora of conflicting evidence supported by credible studies – or when the institution lacks competence in a specific field, then the logical question arises: who will fact-check the fact-checkers?

5 Ibid. p. 1.

tradition, they were promptly supplanted with the leveling down egalitarianism of Rousseau. Historian Niall Ferguson,⁶ as well as libertarian author David Boaz⁷ stress the ambivalent character of the *Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen* of 1789. The document embodies classical liberal or Lockean primacy of liberty simultaneously with the concept of sovereignty of *volonté générale*. The former rests on the idea of legitimate property from which the concept of a state – the minimal one – emerges, with free cooperating (or non-cooperating) individuals and associations of individuals (also free to disassociate). The latter is the idea of sovereignty of *volonté générale* that must be imposed, coercively, by the repressive apparatus of modern state.

Nevertheless, the general appraisal of the revolution is predominantly favorable. Yes – it brought unprecedented terror, but the terror was avoidable, for it did not logically follow from the humanitarian premises of the Declaration *per se*. It was rather a consequence of historical contingency – psychological factors, such as the bad mentality of Jacobins. The lessons were learned, and the rise and establishment of modern liberal democratic states was perceived as the confirmation that humanity has finally overcome the state of “self-incurred immaturity” (Kant). On the other side, the rise of national socialism was seen as retrograde and irrational setback, and the Bolshevik revolution as merely belated abolishment of feudalism. This simplified perception neglects ideological similarities and structural analogies between the revolution and these historical events.

Classical liberal and libertarian authors nourish optimistic or mostly neutral-to-optimistic view of the revolution. Scholars such as Murray Rothbard, David Boaz, Deirdre McCloskey acknowl-

6 Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest*. London: Allen Lane, 2011.

7 David Boaz, *the Libertarian Mind: A Manifesto for Freedom*, Simon & Schuster, 2015.

edge that the revolution had its aberrations, but on the other side, these are explained away as a natural and expected outcome of the centuries of monarchial absolutism.⁸ The pendulum had just swung in the opposite direction. The days of old regime were numbered. Under the pressures of a political and ideological shift of epochal scope the last remnants of feudalism and its hierarchies were crumbling away. Their majesty, the “abstract individual” with their “rights” – set by God or Nature – enters the scene of history. *This* was the revolution’s undisputed contribution that marked the definitive turning point in history and spread the word throughout Europe (and the World) that nothing is the same anymore.

On the opposing end of ideological spectrum, the revolution enjoys favorable reception for various reasons. The mainstream, liberal left and all its branches see in the revolution the inspiration for the much-needed changes in social life, economy, and politics. From Green agenda to identity politics, everywhere left-inclining voices praise the revolution for its determination to radically challenge, and change, the entrenched status quo. They cherish the idea of permanent and radical change, predominantly in intellectual sphere, where they strive for “purity,” as did Jacobins.⁹ The

8 It does not need to be stressed that the libertine side of this intellectual school finds even more praiseworthy elements in the revolution. To find confirmation for this, one should only recall sheer revolutionary devastation of all norms of behavior and standards of decency and compare that with the philosophy of free lifestyles of modern libertines and their not-so-distant relatives, hippies.

9 Samuel Gregg fittingly summarizes the point about the similarity between wokedom and Jacobinism: “The primary similarity between revolutionaries like Robespierre and twenty-first century wokedom is a yearning for ever-increasing ideological purity, something which lends itself to identifying more and more categories of people and ideas as unacceptable. That generates chronic instability as people can never quite know if they and their ideas remain among the elect. Indeed, cancel culture cannot help but actively seek out opponents whose existence is seen as obstructing the creation of a new world purified of error. For without new enemies, it loses its *raison d'être*.” See: Samuel Gregg, “Our Great Awokening and France’s Great Terror” available at: <https://lawliberty.org/our-great-awakening-and-frances-terror/>

revolution is a role model for social activism on the wings of the “cancel culture” as well.

Marx himself was cautious though. He was not as cynical as his contemporary followers, who pretended to be horrified by the Terror, while simultaneously accepting the logic that brought the Terror about. He was aware that radical change brings radical violence. In revolutionary events he saw a confirmation of the thesis of class-struggle and historical determinism, but with actors that did not articulate the interest of the popular masses. The revolution was the reaction of the new class, whose interests opposed the needs of the exploited workers of nascent capitalist order. It was the “bourgeois” revolution, the turning point in the historical chains of necessity that Marx postulated by turning upside down Hegel’s philosophy of history. Bourgeoisie will eventually be replaced by Proletariat, the most vanguard and advanced class. To delve into the moral illegitimacy of violence while the historic mill grinds the social and political status quo, is petty talk of those still not fully dispensed with bourgeois ethics and its pathetic sentimentality.

Other prominent leftists demonstrated a more ambivalent attitude towards the revolution, especially after the gloomy events of the XX century. Here and there rejecting the dogmatic elements of original doctrine of Marx and Engels, they embark on critical assessment that revealed not only underground stream of historical development through which one should understand the epoch, but also opportunities for a new political mobilization. Members of the Frankfurt school saw in the revolutionary terror¹⁰ the most drastic implementation of “instrumental reason,” a child of Enlightenment, whose development brought even worse calamity with the rise of Hitlerism and gas chambers, whereas others sought in the bloody

10 While simultaneously turning the blind eye to the Stalinists purges. In *Towards a New Manifesto* (1956), Max Horkheimer asserts: “The Russians are already halfway towards fascism.” Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto*. London: Verso, 2019, p. 49.

climax of the revolutionary terror an inspiration for the appropriate answer for the supposed misdeeds of their own time. The latter is reflected most vividly in the deification of the idea of a revolution in the thought of Herbert Marcuse¹¹ whose name, alongside the names of Marx and Mao Zedong was hailed during the students' unrests of 1968 and the rise of American New Left. Furthermore, leftist intellectuals felt that revolution revealed the true character of human nature and some prominent structuralists and poststructuralists supported the thesis. Man is *nobody* – echoing the answer of Ulysses to the Cyclope Polypheme, and thus he can be *anything* – a saint, but also a bloodthirsty beast. No transcendence, no sense, no purpose, nothing whatsoever underpins a human cosmos, but ever-sweeping nihilism. Rousseau opted for the benevolent savage as the role model for a new society, but his modern followers could not afford such an optimistic perspective. Underneath Foucault's concept of power lurks the dark vision of human nature fully disclosed in all its bestiality during the revolutionary terror of 1793 and depicted in the writings of de Sade.¹²

But how in the XXI century, after all totalitarian and authoritarian experiences of the past, one should think about the revolution? Should our time take the critical, but nevertheless positively tuned attitude as some libertarians do? When thinking about the revolution, one must always keep in mind that its much-admired aspects – namely, that it initiated the termination of preexisting order of privileges and hierarchies in Europe must be taken into consideration simultaneously with all other important developments that it inspired, such as the formation of contemporary

11 Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969; *Counterrevolution and Revolt*. London: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 1972.

12 The human nature conceived in such a way was deeply suppressed in the dungeons of the new bourgeois state only to be revealed with the eruption of National Socialism and Bolshevism. It is still waiting to be rediscovered in so-called neoliberal era. The leftist *Gleichstellung* being its sole panacea.

highly-centralized and over bureaucratized (democratic) state.

Erik Ritter von Kuehnelt-Leddihn effectively captured this point:

...it seems that ... monarchs such as Louis XIV, Frederick II, or George II are genuine liberals by modern standards. None of the aforementioned could have issued a decree whereby he drafted all male subjects into his army, a decree regulating the diet of his citizens, or one demanding a general confession of all his economic activities from the head of each household in the form of an income tax declaration. We had to wait for the democratic age to see conscription, prohibition, and modern taxation made into laws by the people's representatives who have much greater power than even the absolute monarchs of old dreamed of. (It must be noted further that in Western and Central Europe the "absolute" monarchs—thanks to the corps intermediaries—never were really absolute: the local parliaments in France and the regional Landtage and Stände in the Germanies never failed to convene.) Modern parliaments can be more peremptory in all their demands because they operate with the magic democratic formula. "We are the people, and the people that's us."¹³

The very acknowledgment of the fact that the power of the modern state and totalitarian potential it invokes enormously surpasses the most autarchic monarchy of the past, should diminish and relativize initial appreciation for the revolution – especially among people who cherish liberty.¹⁴

THE PERVERTED IDEA OF FREEDOM

Complementary with these considerations, the intellectual legacy of the revolution raises the question of the philosophical character of political ideas and their historical incarnation. It, thus,

13 Erik Ritter von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *Leftism: from de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Marcuse*. Arlington House, 1974, p. 34.

14 Those sympathies should be suppressed from the start, lest their advocates share the same fate as Malesherbes.

raises the question of the relation of ideas to time. We see how lapse of time can reveal their full practical potential, while only few of great minds were capable to pass a sign of warning in advance: Socrates and his sacrifice, Plato and Aristotle on the pernicious logic of democracy, Burke's gloomy observation one year in advance of the terror, de Tocqueville's prophetic insights about the coming of the new age of sublime totalitarianism. French revolution is the most striking example of how attractive political concepts tend to blend with entirely different and even opposing ideals that pollute the political mind and make preconditions for all sorts of manipulations.

For Kuehnelt-Leddihn, the paradigmatic case was the drowning and disappearing of liberty in the longing for equality. The identification of two opposing ideas rests on "psychological reasons."¹⁵ "If all are equal," Leddihn says, "nobody is 'superior,' nobody has to be afraid of everybody else."¹⁶ A person is free from fear of everybody else, he is always "at home" and pleased, he is "safe" and "secure."¹⁷ He directs us then to Treitschke, who showed how the distorted idea of freedom blended with the Rousseau's general will, since in democracies the majorities are seen as "the whole."¹⁸

Drawing inspiration from Plato and Tocqueville, Leddihn locates the roots of egalitarianism and democracy in envy and fear. They both nurture what he calls identitarian instincts that stand in opposition to the traditional liberal urge for diversity. The identitarian drive, stemming from the feeling of fear and envy, tends to absorb every sphere of personal and social life into one – political. It seeks for sameness, for identical conditions in every regard, often from the

15 Erik Ritter von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *Liberty or Equality: The Challenge of Our Time*. Mises Institute, 2014, p. 304. note 368.

16 Ibidem.

17 It is remarkable how this identification resembles today's culture of safety, or "safetyism" which seems nowadays to become the primary individual and social value. Cf. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The coddling of the American mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. Penguin Books, 2019.

18 Ibidem.

inferiority complex and generally from a fear of embracing personal responsibility and life challenges. Identitarian always needs a tutor, but a tutor who he himself recognizes as such, and whom he trusts, who can anticipate his thoughts and react promptly whenever some transgression of acclaimed standards is attempted.

The story of benevolent dictatorship echoes in prophetic words of Tocqueville:

So the State is full of solicitude for the happiness of the citizens, but it wants to be the unique agent and the sole (illegible word) of it. It is the State that takes care of providing their security, facilitating their pleasures, directing the principal affairs; the State itself creates roads, digs canals, directs industries, divides inheritances. It may even be able to plow the earth and finally take away from each man even the difficulty of living! Equality of conditions has prepared men for all these things; it has disposed them to bear them and often even to regard them as a good.¹⁹

For a contemporary man, and contemporary Western-democratic-liberal-civilized man is a *progressive man*, this idea of separation of politics from personal life is not self-evident as it was for the liberal of 18th or 19th century. This is perhaps even more manifest in the case of a peasant under the rule of Maria Teresia. Very often the peasant did not know what his ruler looked like – the sphere of politics was as distant as was the semblance of his king. But still, as Kuehnelt-Leddihn observes, the peasant was freer than “the average dweller in New York Lower East Side tenement.”²⁰ Freedom in this sense is gradually becoming more detached from our own understanding of personal and political freedoms.

If this psychological urge finds its political institutionalization – which it tends to in many spheres of modern political life

19 Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of de La Démocratie En Amérique*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010, p. 1254.

20 Erik Ritter von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *Liberty or Equality: The Challenge of Our Time*. Mises Institute, 2014, p. 109.

(sexuality, interpersonal and intercultural relations, attitude toward markets, ecology, education...) – and if this institutionalization becomes decisive, then the road to the leveling egalitarianism is wide open and prospects for liberty, conceived in its true, classical form, are grim. What now becomes readily comprehensible for an average man is the vision of the world in which everything is predetermined and known, and where everyone shares the same views, speaks in the same manner, and loves the same things. The equalization of all conditions cannot be done without the coercive force of the State which leads, naturally, to the blessed state of ignorance and improvidence, of not being disturbed, of not being responsible, of not even being able to think and observe. Leddihn states: “Egalitarianism, ... cannot make much progress without the use of force: Perfect equality, naturally, is only possible in total slavery.”²¹

Thus, we can see how under intense identitarian pressures, the idea of freedom becomes perverted and lost under the urge for sameness. What once was personal liberty has now become freedom for a democratic, national, or racial herd pleased to be served by a demagogue (“a leader of a mob” – an ancient Greek term for leaders in democracies), an attractive label for the will of the collective in which no dissonant voices can be heard.

THE PIECEMEAL JACOBINISM

The idea of ubiquitous equality,²² which was conceived in the democratic ideal of Rousseau, his concept of *volonté générale*, had an effectful, but short-lived realization during the Reign of Terror. But

21 Erik Ritter von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, *Leftism: from de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Marcuse*. Arlington House, 1974, p. 25.

22 It has become trendy among the proponents of progressivism to use the term “equity” instead of “equality.” The latter connotes old-fashioned Marxist concept of equality of outcomes as opposed to equality before the law. Cf. Jeff Deist’s “Evolution or Corruption? The Imposition of Political Language in the West Today,” *The Austrian* vol. 8, no. 6 (November–December) 2022, p. 7.

did the disastrous phase of the revolution mark the end of revolutionary ideal itself, the one cherished by the Jacobins?

François Furet reminds us how ideas have the quality of transcending the present moment. At least in intellectual sense, the revolution “has a birth but no end.”²³ Because the revolution comes with “a promise of such magnitude that it becomes boundlessly elastic,” it enabled the trajectory of the endless human emancipation towards the ideal of full equality. Moreover, in the words of famous French historian, the revolution “does not simply ‘explain’ our contemporary history; it *is* our contemporary history.”²⁴ The same ideal is still shaping the dynamics of political life, because it is the point of departure, the main inspiration and driving force for the ones who perceive themselves as keepers of civilizational progress. Progressive politics would not be the *spiritus movens* of contemporary politics if its ideal was not inherently attractive and promising, almost utopian.²⁵

23 Ibid. p. 3.

24 François Furet. *Interpreting the French Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 3.

25 At least in understanding economic life, and with few exceptions, the contemporary right-wing movement (right-wing “populism”) also accepts the perverted idea of freedom and, indirectly, associates itself with the ideological legacy of the revolution. We do not need to delve here into Bismarckian *Staatsocialismus* and its French origins, to acknowledge the connection. One of the most prominent conservatives today, Patrick J. Deneen, defends it as an original tenet of conservatism that should be set as programmatic aspect of the populist right: “...a great deal of the economic program of the ‘the new right’ takes its cues from the older social democratic tradition of the left. [...] This tendency is more than merely accidental but represents a *return* of conservatism to its original form – a consolidated opposition to liberalism.” See: Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future*, Sentinel, 2023, xiv. One thing is certain, wherever there is economic redistribution backed up by the need to level up those “underdeveloped” with the ones who are better off, equality transforms into equity. There are plenty of works today demonstrating the shift of right-wing parties from initial “neoliberal” economic views towards the ideology of the welfare state. See for example, Sarah L. de Lange, “A New Winning Formula? The Programmatic Appeal of the Radical Right.” *Party Politics*, vol. 13, no. 4, 2007, p. 411-435. See also, Juliana Churi, “An emerging populist welfare para-

What was unachievable in 1789 becomes achievable today with all ideological, institutional, and technological capacities of the modern state, albeit democratically and voluntarily. For only a fully operational and centralized democratic super-state that has already claimed much of the private sphere of its citizens, and in which the ideal is deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of people through educational system, can demonstrate how one's mind can be enslaved without even been aware of the enslavement.

The concept of piecemeal Jacobinism is not unknown. Tocqueville was fascinated with the idea, which he traced in democratic ideal of equality, but was struggling to find an adequate term.²⁶ Finally, in the absence of more suitable expression, he coined the phrase “administrative despotism.”

Above those men arises an immense and tutelary power that alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyment and of looking after their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-sighted and mild. It would resemble paternal power if, like it, it had as a goal to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary it seeks only to fix them irrevocably in childhood; it likes the citizens to enjoy themselves, provided that they think only about enjoying themselves. It works willingly for their happiness; but it wants

digm? How populist radical right-wing parties are reshaping the welfare state” *Scandinavian Political Studies*, no. 45, 2023, 383– 40; Christian Joppke, “Explaining the Populist Right in the Neoliberal West” *Societies* 13, no. 5, 2023, p. 110; Laurenz Ennsner-Jedenastik, “Welfare Chauvinism in Populist Radical Right Platforms: The Role of Redistributive Justice Principles” *Social Policy & Administration*, no. 52, 2018, pp. 293– 314.

- 26 “So I think that the type of oppression by which democratic peoples are threatened will resemble nothing of what preceded it in the world; our contemporaries cannot find the image of it in their memories. I seek in vain myself for an expression that exactly reproduces the idea that I am forming of it and includes it; [the thing that I want to speak about is new, and men have not yet created the expression which must portray it.] the old words of despotism and of tyranny do not work. The thing is new, so I must try to define it, since I cannot name it.” Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of de La Démocratie En Amérique*. Eds. Eduardo Nolla, and James T. Schleifer. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010, p. 1248.

*to be the unique agent for it and the sole arbiter; it attends to their security, provides for their needs, facilitates their pleasures, conducts their principal affairs, directs their industry, settles their estates, divides their inheritances; how can it not remove entirely from them the trouble to think and the difficulty of living?*²⁷

There are numerous contemporary descriptions of the concept. Talmon's totalitarian democracy is already mentioned, but traditionally, libertarian authors are most ardent in their attacks on what they depict as "Nanny State." A libertarian icon Ronald Regan famously summarized the essence of the role: "Government exists to protect us from each other. Where government has gone beyond its limits is in deciding to protect us from ourselves."²⁸ More conservative writers such as Paul Gottfried direct our attention to the concept of therapeutic dimension of "managerial state."²⁹ However, the idea of managerial state is underpinned by the insights of psychiatrist Thomas Szasz and his notion of therapeutic state.³⁰ On the other side, philosopher Peter Sloterdijk is keen to speak about "the Hand of the state that gives." In most recent publications, he even cautions us that the State has taken off its "velvet gloves."³¹

Tocqueville was indeed prophetic. The rise of the State he envisaged is neither a subject of theoretical imagination any longer, nor

27 Ibidem, 1250.

28 Cf. Alan Greenspan, *The Age of Turbulence: Adventures in a New World*, Penguin Press, Chapter 4 (Private Citizen), 2007, p. 87.

29 The central places where Gottfried developed his idea of managerial state are *After Liberalism: Mass Democracy in the Managerial State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001.) and *Multiculturalism and the Politics of Guilt: Toward a Secular Theocracy* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004).

30 Thomas Szasz, *The Myth of Mental Illness*. New York: Harper & Row, 1961; *Law, Liberty, and Psychiatry: An Inquiry into the Social Uses of Mental Health Practices*. New York: Collier Books, 1963.

31 Cf. Peter Sloterdijk, "Die Revolution der gebenden Hand." *FAZ* vom 13. Juni 2009; Sloterdijk, *Der Staat Streift Seine Samthandschuhe ab. Ausgewählte Gespräche und Beiträge 2020–2021*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021.

a matter of a more developed sense for political history. Of course, Tocqueville could not depict concrete forms of administrative despotism, but he nevertheless presented the essence of the phenomenon that is unveiling in front of our eyes.

THE INTELLECTUAL LEGACY

It does not need to be stressed that the revolution cannot be responsible for all the negative developments of several centuries of modern history. The bureaucratic centralization was the proud achievement of absolutistic monarchies; democracy, as a perverted form of political organization was acknowledged as such in the political life of ancient Greek city states and in the political theory of Plato and Aristotle, while proto-national sentiments were detectable in Europe long before 1789. Neither should its true contribution be sought in the sheer scope and brutality of the revolutionary terror, with the episodes of sadistic enjoyment in bestiality. The revolution's "contribution" is to be sought rather in intellectual sphere, in a legitimization of dangerous conception created to solve the paradox of social organization – *once and for all*.

We should seek to uncover those intellectual presuppositions working behind the scene, which made this perverted idea of freedom possible and self-evident. What is then, from the pure intellectual perspective, the true legacy of the French Revolution? Or, in other words, what *intellectually* supports this perverted idea of freedom?³² It is not the Declaration, for all the proclaimed ideas form the Declaration were already known and circulated long before the revolution; it is not even the pathos of *égalité, liberté*, and

32 Now deeply entrenched in the mind of European man. This would not be possible had the Bourbon Restoration not been an act of historical recognition of *fait accompli*, the tacit acknowledgement that revolutionary ideals were civilizational ideals. For the situation in France during the period of the Restoration, see Bertier de Sauvigny Guillaume, *The Bourbon Restoration*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967.

fraternité that swept over Europe like nothing else before. From our own perspective, and time, it is not the human rights ideology prone to endless interpretations and innovative upgrades, for it is only a manifestation of the underlying intellectual presupposition. The ideology, and consequently the perverted idea of freedom would not be possible had it not been supported by the refined change in self-perception. The change was brought about most vividly and effectively by the revolution. Its true legacy, thus, is to be sought in a subtle, but definite intellectual transformation, in the idea that man does not owe anything to his own origin, his culture, his civilization – *his past*. It is the idea of an entirely self-consciousness being, a moment when genuinely modern man – as a citizen of centralized democratic state – emerges on the scene of history.

No one summarizes the insight more eloquently than one of the most ardent supporters of the revolution, Thomas Paine. In *The Rights of Man*, Paine confronts Edmund Burke's thesis of society as a partnership of the dead, the living and the unborn consistently applying what would become the credo for any future social constructivism:

Every age and generation must be as free to act for itself, in all cases, as the ages and generations which preceded it. The vanity and presumption of governing beyond the grave, is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies. Man has no property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generations which are to follow. [...] Every generation is, and must be, competent to all then purposes which its occasions require. It is the living, and not the dead, that are to be accommodated.³³

The revolution brought about the idea of absolute and devastating critique of everything – even itself; it presented liberated individual, liberated from any preceding social relations and bonds, habits, and traditions. It demonstrated that one could build anything in the

33 Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man, Common Sense and other political writings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 91-92.

present if one does not owe anything to the past. And one does not owe anything to the past because such expectations and commitments are excluded by the revolutionary mindset as reactionary atavism. Precisely this, the self-consciousness that “one does not have to” was the spark that ignited the revolutionary fire. Theoretically, it conceived of a concept of a man as a creature possessing no previous obligation to anything whatsoever. “Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains” (Rousseau). This has opened the door wide for all other historical experiments that followed, but also the ones in which we live today. There are no limits to social constructivism. Everything is allowed and possible if it is legitimized democratically and based on the progressive ideals of the revolution. A man is a free being, free in the *absolute* sense of the words, and the feeling was the most inspiring and, at the same time, the most dangerous legacy of the revolution which still inspires progressive souls. In this very important respect, the revolution is in complete accord with the way contemporary man understands himself and understands time. Everything is changeable, and everything is a construct – no sanctity, transcendence, no permanency in the world which is in constant flux of change and construction.

The idea of the limitless possibility of the construction of social reality is the idea that shapes modern understanding of life and politics. The revolution brought it about in a condensed form, but it started to be fully exploited only when all remaining elements of the *Ancien Régime* were dismantled throughout the Western world, paving the way for the rise of modern Leviathan – highly centralized democratic super-State.

THE HISTORICAL EMBODIMENT

The revolution, and its intellectual legacy, laid down presuppositions for the structural changes that define the modern world of politics and life in general. And although the sole responsibility for

such changes cannot be leveled completely on the revolution and its legacy, the influence is detectable.

In the political sphere, this amounts to a decommissioning of the monarchical systems and the introduction of general suffrage, with a rising model of a highly bureaucratized and centralized state.³⁴ In the sphere of culture and the questions of identities, the heterogeneous hierarchical societies of Europe were transformed into states in which a single identity – national – is constitutive.³⁵ The model of a new political subject, the citizen, being empty and abstract in its nature, favors certain identity over all others. In egalitarian societies, where each individual is legally equal to any other and where a citizen is always a citizen of a specific state, the notion of ethnic nationalism is coterminous with the notion of a citizen. It might be said that only a national state brings the question of identity to the fore. Previously, the question was under the radar of political life; it started prevailing only with the rise of a society of mass culture spurred by the informational possibilities of a technological age. However, since the premise of modern understanding of politics is a constant change and a (re)construction of social reality, it took time to accept that nothing, not even the national sentiments developed through centuries and cherished vociferously, is exempted

34 Cf. Hans-Hermann Hoppe, *Democracy, the God That Failed: The Economics and Politics of Monarchy, Democracy, and Natural Order*. New Brunswick: Transaction, 2001.

35 As Kuehnelt-Leddihn concludes: “The significance of the French Revolution lies not only in the revival of democracy, and it represented not only the adoption of political patterns prevailing in antiquity and among primitives, but it also gave a new impetus to state worship and to ethnic nationalism. The all-powerful polis-state again made its appearance. In other words, the identitarian drives culminated not only in a frantic demand for equality (which went so far that only Robespierre’s fall prevented the destruction of all steeples and towers), but also of ethnic sameness.” (*Leftism: from de Sade and Marx to Hitler and Marcuse*. p. 97.) Together with many conservative and liberal authors Kuehnelt-Leddihn also notes that the only way to escape this totalitarian destiny is to reverse existing trends. Whether that is possible is another question.

from being abolished or replaced. The new era of progressive democracies sought new content to fill the abstract denominator of “citizen” reacting in such a way to the fact of erosion of national identities. And new identities emerged – from those of indigenous peoples, women, to, most recently, those of immigrants and transgender persons – that should be protected and cherished, not less arduously. This has put an enormous amount of pressure on the constitution of the modern, liberal state and its idea of individual rights, by subverting it and paving the way for the installation of the tribal idea of society (institutional multiculturalism), in which new tribal leaders, democratically elected, are choosing, every now and then, an identity that will be cherished and protected, depending on the contingency of what tribe has an advantage over others.

In an economic sphere, the introduction of central banking with the abolishment of the golden standard opened the door for unrestricted monetary manipulation and interventionism.³⁶ The short-lived era of laissez-faire capitalism could have persisted only before the implementation of these changes.³⁷ The risk-taking of millions of (crazy) courageous individuals destined to pay the price of their own business failures was quickly supplanted by the irresponsible adventurism of the State, which was (and still is) responsible to no one. Regardless of its causes, the Industrial Revolution saved the world from poverty and paved the way to unprecedented technological innovation.³⁸ But this victory of capitalism and the wealth it generated did not receive a deserved

36 Cf. Murray N. Rothbard, *The Mystery of Banking*. Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2008.

37 Cf. Ludwig von Mises, *Liberalism: in the Classical Tradition*. 3rd. ed. pref. by Bettina Bien Greaves. New York: Found. for Econ. Ed., 1985.

38 For the explanation how this was possible see the trilogy of Deirdre N. McCloskey, *The Bourgeois Virtues – Ethics for an Age of Commerce* (2006), *Bourgeois Dignity – Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World* (2010), and *Bourgeois Equality – How Ideas, not Capital or Institutions, Enriched the World* (2016), University of Chicago Press.

reward³⁹ and instead provided resources for the political class of the modern Leviathan. The welfare state born out of Keynesianism supplanted the minimal state of the classical liberal era of the 19th century. Together with the rise of flammable collectivism, the apparatus of the modern state, armed with an arsenal of high-tech military resources, has enabled mass depopulation by dragging a “civilized” part of humanity into world wars.

Symbolically, the revolution marked the beginning of the erosion of political traditions of spontaneous social change. Now everything is produced and constructed and almost nothing is taken as such and unquestioned (except for the omniscience and omnipotency of the benevolent super-state.) *Taxis* took a decisive victory over *cosmos*.⁴⁰ Laws are declarations of political arbitrariness, they are not discoveries based on the insight of existing practices and informal rules, but rather expressions of the will of social planners. Of course, the political and legal heritage of spontaneous order could not be dismantled at once, but the revolution was the impetus, the driving force that changed the perspectives on how one should perceive laws, rules, and social norms in general.

The question of contemporary totalitarian excursions, like the one with the Covid lockdowns and suppression of traditional freedoms, directs one’s attention to those remaining elements of life and politics that are still taken for granted, *but should not be*. Global calamities of various sorts, from economic to health crises, might have at least some beneficial effects on the dormant denizens of the democratic world. They might shake them up, making their atten-

39 Because it was in the nature of capitalism to create “that atmosphere of almost universal hostility to its own social order.” Cf. Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*. London and New York: Routledge, 206, p. 143.

40 On the difference between these notions see: Friedrich A. von Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty: a New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy* New pbk. edition. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982, pp. 35-55.

tion focused and sharpened. Sadly, it seems that only events of such a magnitude can help restore the receptiveness to the dimensions of life for which regular circumstances do not provide an opportunity to be felt.

CONCLUDING REMARK

The intellectual legacy of the revolution, as sketched here, is the ideological precursor of the most recent attempts to infringe on individual freedom and erode the barriers set forth by modern constitutions. The attacks on the foundations of free society come from outside, too, from those regimes that seek to take advantage of what they call the “decadency of the West.” Modern constitutionalism is, thus, under attack from both inside and outside, and its adherents should not seek support from the very forces working on its demise; they should not make alliances neither with the rogue regimes nor with progressives – the ardent supporters of piecemeal Jacobinism. The answer should come from commitment to the productive traditions – embodied most notably in the American Constitution – that still present the strongest barriers to the rise of the state’s relentless power. For if there is at least one comforting thing in our not-so-optimistic time, it is the fact that the world is not solely shaped by the historical and intellectual legacy of the French Revolution. The great past traditions and their modern transformation centered on the freedom of the individual and the sanctity of property⁴¹ are at the foundations of our world. As long as they are preserved, there might be chances to repel the pernicious legacy of the revolution.

41 What Richard M. Weaver calls “the last metaphysical right.” Cf. Richard M. Weaver’s “The Last Metaphysical Right” in *Ideas Have Consequences*, University of Chicago, 2013, pp. 129-147.

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