

REVOLUTION AND NATIONS:
A SPECIFICALLY EUROPEAN HISTORY?

ANTONINO DE FRANCESCO *

ABSTRACT

The paper analyses the long-debated relationship between the American and the French Revolution. Specifically, it aims to underline how the birth of a historiography characterised by national peculiarities distanced (and even counterposed) these historical facts. From this point of view, it seems that the developments of the idea of Europe and the growth of global history after the changes occurred at the beginning of the century do not have contributed to renovating the interest in the comparison between the two revolutions. However, a comparative approach still remains fundamental in order to understand the fortunes and misfortunes of modern political culture.

Keywords: American Revolution, French Revolution, National Exceptionalisms, European Constitution, Global History.

“The French Revolution could never have happened in America, and the American Revolution could never have happened in France”

(Ceaser, “The Two Revolutions”: 81).

Thus a 1996 paper explains the belief – still widely held, despite being both superficial and hardly truthful – that the American revolution and the French revolution spawned two very different political systems. The American federalist solution of 1787 laid to rest the feeble experience of the Articles of Confederation, allowing the sound foundations of the Union to be laid down. The balance between powers and individual states, in addition to stabilising freedom, facilitated the mutual recognition of parties. On the

* Università di Milano. Address for correspondence: antonino.defrancesco@unimi.it.

other hand, the birth of democracy in France, following the insurrection of 10 August, 1792 against King Louis XVI, did not entail further developments of freedom beyond those gained through the 1789 revolution. Political life in the republic quickly degenerated into conflict between factions, drawing France into the authoritarian period known as the Terror, and – after the short respite of the Directory – on to Bonaparte's coup, which would lead that great revolutionary stream to a new season. Within the frame of an authoritarian project, Bonaparte's great efforts maintained juridical equality, a secular state, individual rights and the promotion of merit over privilege – and bestowed them to most of continental Europe. However, the expectations of freedom resulting from the 1789 revolution were not sufficiently met.

The two revolutions, which have for so long been held to have opened the door to the modern age, were soon considered to give rise to such distinctive outcomes, that it was certainly no coincidence that two distinctive national historiographies should develop out of the confrontation between them. The political tradition in the United States was quick to emphasise the fact that it was only in the new world that the revolution had established freedom and destroyed tyranny forever.¹ At the same time, for completely different though albeit similar reasons, French historians were soon drawing attention to the exceptional nature of the 1789 revolution, suggesting that the Jacobin seizure of power stood in line with the previous process of liberation, since it marked a first victory for democracy in that fight against a form of liberalism that was oftentimes bigoted and unreservedly conservative which would last throughout the 19th century.²

This contrast between the two historiographical traditions, which accompanies the entry of the United States onto the international scene, was then reinvigorated by the events of 1917 in Russia, which, in Europe, helped to create a direct link between Jacobinism and Bolshevism, thus supporting those who considered the French revolution the true beginning of modernity,³ whereas, on the other side of the Atlantic, for the very same reason, those events confirmed, under the banner of freedom, the unrepeatable originality of the US political experiment.⁴ It was no coincidence that Robert Roswell Palmer should receive heavy criticism for his attempt, well after the Second World War, to write a history of the Atlantic revolutions connecting the whole of Europe to America. Such criticism came not

¹ RODGERS (1998: 21-40).

² DE FRANCESCO (2018: 83-95).

³ LUZZATTO (1992: 103-145).

⁴ WEBER (1998: 208-210).

only from American historians, all in favour of the doctrine of exceptionalism on their side of the Atlantic, but, even more, from European historians, right and left of the spectrum, who rejected any notion of the political and cultural subordination of Old Europe to the New World.⁵

Such controversies show how – on either side of the Atlantic – partisan interests looked to backdate to the very beginnings of the two revolutions political differences which only subsequent events – especially those from the long 19th century – would conjure up. In several respects, events from the end of the 18th century in either case suggest divergent interpretations, underlining how the differences in the two political systems were the consequence of, and not the reason behind, each revolution. In other words, it pays to remember that the very events and, in particular, internal conflicts, impressed a very original direction on the French revolution, quickly distinguishing its political system from that of the United States, a direction which, however, no one intended to deliberately pursue, in any case not in 1789, and which no one could even have foreseen.⁶

Let us contemplate this aspect a little, as it tells us how revolution and nations – the hendiadys on which the political identity of the old continent was built – are actually imported products since the revolution of 1789 occurred in the wake of the great unrest across the Atlantic.⁷ It was precisely on the basis of the US example that many members of the Estates General were convinced that here was the chance to found a virtuous society with no more privileges. The American precedent led them to believe that they would be able to redefine the rules of civil society and of state government. It was not long before the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen followed the 1776 example from across the Atlantic, already prefiguring a constitutional revolution, with calls for a re-foundation of the social order in the context of an even wider collective upheaval through which the different communities of the French king's subjects would form – on the basis of juridical equality – a new body politic, that is, a nation, which would radically distinguish itself from the centuries-old polity that had developed under the French monarchy.⁸

What is more, the great outcome of the Constituent Assembly, which ensured the foundations of contemporary public and private law within the framework of a liberal model, was, in turn, born of a constant dialogue with the other revolution, while the very constitution of 1791, though mo-

⁵ COX (2011: 70-85) and HARVEY (2011: 1-17).

⁶ ALBERTONE and DE FRANCESCO (2009: 7-13) and SERNA *et al.* (2013, 8-23).

⁷ DUBOIS (2009: 655-661).

⁸ ARMITAGE (2013: 191-213).

narchical and unicameral, was not considered so far off its American counterpart of 1787, in terms of its guiding principles, despite the latter being republican and bicameral. The evidence for this lies in the translations of the *Defence of constitutions* by John Adams and of the *Federalist* which had appeared in France, on the initiative of a group of monarchists close to Lafayette,⁹ during the initial months of the constitution's implementation, in 1792. The same goes for an early treaty on constitutional law which clearly shows how the examples of the United States in 1787 and of France in 1791 jointly competed in setting the terms of a political modernity which, from that moment on, all states, whether monarchies or republics, would have to conform to.¹⁰

It is no coincidence that towards the end of 1791, in a dramatic discussion with Robespierre at the Jacobin society on the merits of launching a revolutionary war in Europe, Jacques Pierre Brissot should bring up the American example, recalling how hostilities would have strengthened the spirit of sacrifice, educated the new generations and renewed solidarity among the French, thereby leading to “une nation régénérée, neuve, morale”, since, against the persistence of the old regime, he was convinced that “la guerre seule peut égaliser les têtes et régénérer les ames”.¹¹

When Brissot declared that, in America, seven years of war had been worth centuries of morality, he was showing that it was a new nation that had created the culture of revolution, one seen in totally original terms vis-à-vis the past, a nation which had become the authentic legitimate foundation for all political action and all institutional systems. In this sense, the war against European powers would, in turn, have been a demonstration of revolutionary momentum, since it aimed at produce a palingenesis that would provoke other nations, still under the oppression of tyranny, to immediately join the uprising side by side with French soldiers. As is well known, these expectations soon turned into disappointments. The war quickly took a turn for the worst, and, in a serious predicament, with increasing reasons for tensions, the Republic did indeed come into being in response to the tragedy of a foreign invasion, but it then found itself unable to meet the challenge of guaranteeing freedom against a backdrop of total war and was soon forced to rummage through the paraphernalia of the old regime in order to recover those instruments that would allow it to survive the many challenges to come in the course of 1793: the war on the borders, the War in the Vendée and the federalist revolt.

⁹ DE FRANCESCO (2011: 61-110).

¹⁰ DELACROIX (1791-1792) and MAGONI (2011: 1-14).

¹¹ BRISSOT and ROBESPIERRE (2013: 73-75).

In other words, the policy of the Terror established a mix of authoritarian government practices, which had mostly been inherited from the old regime, instilled with powerful coercive capacity by the general will of a nation presented as a monolithic body, where any dissent was seen, as a result, as a form of plotting and the guise of treason.

The experience of government in Year II marked a turning point for the revolution in France: the country lost its true value of freedom, which had gained its momentum from single local communities, as had been the case in America, and turned instead to further reinvigorating state power, enhancing it with a peculiar idea of the nation which would legitimise the Terror first, and the rise of Bonaparte later.

The nation thus became the characteristic feature of revolutionary developments, the new category under which was subsumed the extraordinary novelty that went back directly to 1789 and which had, in turn, a social character, marked by equality for all under the law, as well as juridical significance, legitimising all established powers, but also symbolic meaning, since it conferred historical identity on a community, allowing it to mould the past according to its likeness so as to imagine, on that basis, how to reconfigure the future.¹²

It is precisely on this ground that we can measure the impact that the revolution had outside France, thanks to the wars of the Directory, which immediately after the Terror and until the rise of Bonaparte, saw French troops pour into Holland, Switzerland and throughout Italy, everywhere imposing their idea of a nation which, on one hand, encouraged the emergence of polities modelled on the French republic, while, on the other hand, creating friction with Paris, since what was held in common in social and juridical terms, would inevitably come into conflict with each nation's historical peculiarities. In the so-called sister republics, as many new nations were coming into being, all of them ideologically connected to the French nation, but, for this very reason, all equally destined to distinguish themselves from it, since, especially after the Napoleonic age, each would identify its own distinctiveness as the central element of political life through 19th-century Europe.¹³

The extensive impact that the idea of the nation had on the politics of the old continent is well known and while it need not be belaboured here, it is worth recalling that in the second half of the 20th century, after the two nationalist conflicts, that idea of the nation was long held in suspicion, with a *cahier de doléances* around the issue which still dominates the current

¹² BELL (2003: 140-167).

¹³ ODDENS, RUTJES and JACOBS (2015: 25-32).

political debate. And yet, how significant such a political-ideological node was (and still is) in the uneasy balancing acts of Europe is evidenced by the number of historiographies that would arise around this topic, all magnifying the exceptional nature of each individual nation. In France, this was the era of Jules Michelet, who built his entire historical opus around the people, often surging in polemical tones against his English counterparts looking askance at France's intricate political process. In his wake, due to the shared political and cultural experience from which they originated, other national historiographies arose across continental Europe, all of which were forced to distance themselves from their shared French template in some way, to underscore the distinct features of the historical process of each individual territory.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that in the course of the 19th century, the revolution and the Napoleonic age would soon be put in the dock, even though they had been crucial to the development of the new ideas of the nation. This is particularly evident in the case of Italy, where 19th century Risorgimento-style historiography would mostly boast about not being beholden to the French era in terms of dating back the origins of the nation to previous times, whether it be in the reforming spirit of the Two Sicilies or of Piedmont-Savoy, the policies of Tuscany's Leopold II or the enlightened policies in Habsburg Lombardy.¹⁴ In any case, when cross-referencing testimonies of Bonaparte's legacy in the individual historiographies of continental Europe, rejection of the French example, though clearly instrumental, stands out as by no means an Italian peculiarity since the same pattern appears in virtually all the other historiographies. From Belgium – whose origins in terms of national identity can be traced back to just 1830 – to Holland, where the Batavian Republic and the kingdom of Louis Bonaparte were quickly shrouded in indifference; from Switzerland, where the years of the Helvetic Republic (1798-1803) helped to give momentum to the civil war and were used as supporting evidence – in ways that are short of delusional – for the idea of Bonaparte as the restorer of a kind of federalism marked by isolationism and neutrality, to Spain, where the construction of the nation and a distinct constitutionalism are built around the rejection of the Napoleonic model; from Germany, whose *Sonderweg* appears distinct from, and singularly in contrast with, France's political model, to such an extent that Ranke and von Sybel were led to legitimise 1870 in the history of Germany (and also of the whole of Europe) as a sound alternative to 1789, to Poland, where the delay in the construction of a polity allows the memory of the revolution

¹⁴ DE FRANCESCO (2007: 9-28).

to live on since it is regarded as being fundamental to the birth of national sentiment.¹⁵

The exception lay on the other side of the English Channel – and from the very beginning of the French revolution – in the confrontation between 1688 and 1789 which would boost British national identity in support of a political framework then in turmoil as a result of the events in France. How else should Edmund Burke's notes be read, if not in this light? Thanks to his felicitous style, they have become a handbook of political theory, and yet they were created (and in some respects they would long remain so) as a militant act, aimed at preserving the island from the contagion of a revolutionary disease which appeared to be dominated by mob violence. And yet, as a result of the long armed conflict between France and the United Kingdom, his *Reflections* – promptly denounced by many supporters of 1789 in England itself – became the frame of reference through which to interpret (and attack) the revolution as the product of an authoritarian political culture, which, thanks to the events of 1688, England had managed to escape. Moving down one century, leafing through Lord Acton's reflections in the early 20th century, one cannot fail to identify a running thread in English historiography, which, by conjoining the glorification of 1688 to the rejection of the French example, would constitute its characteristic feature and claim its own political and cultural leadership in respect of France, the land of unfinished revolutions and of authoritarian rule, ever ready for a comeback.¹⁶

This dividing line between Great Britain and continental Europe, as regards how to consider the origins of modernity in Europe, arose from the same concern with retrieving, out of a far-off past, the reasons for British exceptionalism in present times. It is precisely this shared origin of the idea of a nation, in any and every case seen in the light of primacy, whether of one or the other or of someone else, that would spread throughout Europe to the point of shaping – at one and the same time – aspirations to freedom and hegemonic claims, expectations of liberation and will to power.

This Europe of nationalities, bound for suicide during the First World War and, thus, destined to further spread the disease of nationalism, seemed to many to find its cure in the Russian revolution, which, not by coincidence, at first stood to claim direct descent from the national precedent of France, while seeming to revive the reasons for political democracy within a patriotic framework. However, in the wake of the establishment of Leninist power, under the Bolsheviks the political leadership of revolu-

¹⁵ KOSTANTARAS (2020: 79-106).

¹⁶ DE FRANCESCO (2018: 243-246).

tionary France soon came to be questioned by the appearance of a new government praxis, marked by an original ideology, which saw itself as being able to achieve what the 1789 revolution had only begun and which Year II had unsuccessfully tried to implement.¹⁷

Thus, the role taken on by the French revolution in the political and ideological context of the 19th century was subjected to significant upheaval. Due to the recognition from Soviet Russia of the French revolution as a harbinger of the October revolution, the former revolution took on a universal dimension and acquired a historiographical vigour across Europe which it had never enjoyed earlier, even though – let this point be stressed – its newly acquired significance in the academy was inversely proportional to the possibility that it could constitute a political example for contemporary society. This role went instead to the October Revolution, because the revolution of 1789 was being rolled back to the dawn of contemporary times and while Year II had certainly been a glorious attempt, it had failed to emancipate commoners. The French revolution was being downgraded – in particular, from the terrain of political and ideological militancy on to the narrow field of academic delectation – and yet this process would prove to be most fruitful, allowing national historiographies to be challenged in the name of internationalism, while allowing, to some extent, for a reconciliation of the different positions held by the schools of the different polities herein outlined so far.

It is no coincidence that, in the period between the two wars, interest in the issue of revolution should grow across Europe, widely distinguishing it from that of the nation, as can be seen in the English-speaking world – on either side of the Atlantic – for the first time willing to regard the French events as the harbinger of a democratic time which the October revolution had distorted, but whose direction could not be completely erased.¹⁸

And yet, while this was a significant trend, through which an attempt was made to keep the connection between revolution and nationality alive in that patriotic key which the events of 1789 had defined, it would be misleading to turn away from the fact that, at the same time, that same hendiadys was behind Europe's many authoritarian turns between the two wars. It took no time at all before the arrival of national revolutions, including Fascism, in its incarnation as a social movement, which is the most evident example of a direct appeal to the precedent of the French revolution. Mussolini's regime, as is well known, claimed to have emerged out of a national revolution, which had moved beyond the individualistic revolution of 1789,

¹⁷ SHLAPENTOKH (1997: 168-171).

¹⁸ DE FRANCESCO (2018: 279-281).

without completely recanting it, claiming to have found a solution to the many social and economic problems which the latter, in its social dimension in Year II, had raised without managing to solve them.¹⁹

This explains the fortunes of the perspective of a corporate state, called upon to dissolve the many contradictions which the 1789 revolution had passed on to the 19th century, not only in Fascist Italy, but in most of Mediterranean Europe, where the values of the 1789 revolution had been rejected, but where, at the same time, it was expected that they would surpass the French revolution in terms of a return to a balance between the social parties.²⁰

The Second World War later reestablished order among the different forces on the ground, putting an end to any claims to national revolution in the 20th century, reviving on one hand the liberal-democratic identity of 1789, and the communistic character of Year II, on the other. It was the start of the Cold War and the two interpretations were forced into a bitter confrontation, so much so that it was no surprise that Great Britain should once more open fire against a political tradition which had by then become accustomed to indiscriminately associating the French revolution to the October revolution. The revisionist debate inaugurated in the mid-1950s by Alfred Cobban supplied the English side with enough polemical weaponry against France, a country unable to blaze its own distinct path towards liberalism, and made several critiques of the 1789 revolution seen as a conflict lying completely within the framework of *ancien régime* politics rather than as a crowning moment for modern politics in Europe.²¹

Later, as is well known, came Furet's critique, directly from the French side, which set great store by Cobban's and by the debate against Soviet totalitarianism. The traditional interpretation of the revolution, which had been forged at the time of the Third Republic and which, readjusted to the changing political and ideological context of the 20th century, extended well beyond the end of the Second World War, and was openly challenged in the very heart of France's academy.

Furet lost no opportunity to highlight the extensively authoritarian nature of the connection introduced between Year II and the October revolution and to strongly oppose a reconstruction which seemed to him to invest interest in the French revolution with a partisan political effect in openly ideological terms. Now is not the time to insist on a controversy which

¹⁹ SALVATORI (2021: 111-126).

²⁰ PASETTI (2016: 85-93).

²¹ CROOK *et al.* (2020: 512-560).

would shake the foundations of such a 'classical' interpretation of the revolution on which Marxist historiography, in the wake of the later Lefebvre, had based all interpretations of the 1789 revolution. This was the situation when the bicentenary came, which Furet, increasingly more critical of the specifically national aspect of the revolution, feared would be translated into a show of patriotism destined to reinforce France's worship of the state. Things took a different turn, as President Mitterrand sought to find balance between the parties, historiographical and political, which were in conflict at the time. The anniversary thus became a chance for France to conjoin the classical with the revisionist interpretation within the embrace of the Republic, placing both – and this is the point to be stressed – under the banner of that French exceptionalism which would soon shine its light over Europe and the other continents.

The image of revolutionary France around the world – where freedom and the rights of man dominated – was after all the subject of the conference organised in Paris under the patronage of President Mitterrand. The topic was suggestive of a patriotic *rassemblement* towards which Michel Vovelle, considered at the time the stalwart doyen of orthodox historiography with its stronghold at the Sorbonne, was very sensitive and which Furet himself could not overly challenge. The running thread of the conference confirms to what an extent the organisers believed that revolution and nations went hand in hand, that is to say, the passionate regard in which the revolution was held outside of France, and to what an extent its example soon became a reference point to induct other countries into political modernity.²²

Certainly, the issue of nationality had not been raised explicitly, though it structured the whole initiative, so much so that the very proceedings were divided along national lines, thus confirming the hendiadys in the title of the present conversation. At first glance, such a perspective seemed bound to succeed: after all, moving the goalposts surrounding the meaning of the revolution outside the Hexagon meant restoring France's political and cultural distinctiveness before the whole world, on which everyone could agree, at least in principle, as long as one were not to quibble on the type of inheritance that was left to the others.

The results were not particularly unsatisfactory, since, internationally, the bicentenary seemed to side with those who regarded the 1789 revolution as the universal event of the contemporary age, with even Furet and the traditional historiography represented by Vovelle reaching an agreement. However, after a few weeks, the meteorite of another '89 crashed down, which would soon put an end to the division of Europe resulting

²² KAPLAN (1993: 459-653).

from the Second World War.²³ The democratic revolutions in the communist world seemed to be the sentence without appeal for that referral to the October revolution which had long dominated 20th-century revolutionary historiography, thus securing Furet's definitive triumph, he who had never tired of condemning the deeply authoritarian nature of that connection.

New nations were now returning to the framework of a single Europe, from which they had been removed by communist power and this change seemed to give succour to the image of the 1789 revolution that the bicentenary celebrations intended to promote: the huge political turning point following the fall of the Berlin wall favoured a reinterpretation of Europe's history as a whole, allowing the events of the old continent to be interpreted in the light of a series of mostly shared features, providing for the relaunching of those ideals of freedom and equality around which the French revolution had built its fortunes.

Furet himself seemed to seize the opportunity to reinterpret the history of Europe in the light of political democracy, which by then he considered irreversible. At an event held in Rome, as a guest of the Italian Chamber of Deputies towards the end of 1991, not long after the fall of the Soviet Union, he went as far as to prophesy a future for Europe where civil rights, magnified by the call for a revolution which the Terror had in its time swept away, could once more lead democratic politics on the old continent. In his words, it almost seemed that his previous interpretation of the revolution, which he from the start had considered an incubator for future totalitarianism, was clearing the way for a much more measured approach, where the "principles of the 1789 revolution [...] side by side with the experience of the American tradition" were the horizon of new politics within which the whole of Europe could once again be compacted.²⁴

The future of the old continent seemed to be charted along the highways of representative democracy, in which the whole of Europe, having overcome the unnatural division which it had inherited from the Second World War, could at last recognise itself. This perspective, however, had to deal with several problems, since the new Europe, to which the countries which had just left Soviet oppression were looking in hope and admiration, was the product of a history that had attempted, after the tragedy of the Second World War, to separate revolution from nations, and replace the latter with societies. That Europe which was to embrace the peoples of the East was after all the lucky alternative to a world which had long expressed itself through national identities. Only economic growth and

²³ MARK *et al.* (2019: 73-95).

²⁴ FURET (1992: 5).

wealth had managed to convince many to distance themselves from said identities, without a need for actual divorce from them. The same plan was now being addressed to the newcomers, who had the disadvantage of being new to democracy – which they had almost never before experienced and which they had long been convinced to have overcome – whereas they were provided with a specific national identity, which, though it had been kept under wraps for some time, had also been held as a sort of defence instrument against Soviet oppression.

As a result, in relations with countries which had once been on the other side of the iron curtain, it was necessary to engage with those nationalities, since it went without saying that, while the history of the second half of the 19th century had overcome many a difficulty in the West, a renewed European drive would have to be the inspiration in the East.

However, whereas, starting with the 1990s, the birth of a new European community had become the paradigm that would subsume and crown the political turning point following the events of 1989, there remained the problem of what symbolic dimension that community would have to take on in order to put a damper on the nationalities now finding new vigour as a result of the fall of Soviet power. In this context, the historical past could only do so much and the meeting point had to be exclusively cultural, both because an age-old tradition was a reminder of the fact that the *ur*-stasis of the old continent could not be recovered and that those who had laboured on the issue for centuries had given different and conflicting answers, all based on the notion of the primacy of some over the others. In order to have a dialogue with the societies which had grown beyond the iron curtain and to dissolve their national spirit, it was necessary to put aside the issue of autochthony, which had been the strong point of the cultural construction of all nations during the 19th century.²⁵ The solution that was found, in line with the preposterous genealogies to which ancient history had made them accustomed, was to make Europeans the descendants of as many immigrants reaching the continent at the dawn of humanity. In such a way, by recalling a mythical past shared by all the inhabitants of the continent, a shared origin was being charted under the banner of shared immigration.

This is what is stated in the preamble of a constitutional text rejected by the sovereign peoples of both France and Holland in 2005,²⁶ which says that Europe, the bearer of a civilisation, is the product of peoples “that reached the continent in successive waves, from the dawn of humanity”, where they developed the values which then became the foundations of

²⁵ DE FRANCESCO (2017: 5-18).

²⁶ HAINSWORTH (2006: 98-117) and BINZER HOBOLT and BROUARD (2011: 309-322).

humanism. This is followed by the acknowledgement, once again generic and therefore apparently all-encompassing, of Europe's cultural, religious and humanistic heritage, which would guarantee the respect of human rights and of the law, which is then followed by such flights of fancy as the unshakable trust in a Europe, reunified at last, which will increase peace and equality and will forge its common destiny, while remaining proud of the specific past of each, but hoisting up its firm will to overcome age-old divisions. The result is an agreement on unity within diversity, which was supposed to enshrine the role of the new Europe as a great place concerned with human hope.²⁷

The preamble cannot by itself bear responsibility for the failure of the project when it was put to the test of the popular vote. And yet, the superficiality of those words cannot be passed under silence, since it sums up in an exemplary way the top-down attitude informing the text. In the face of the many hurdles that past and recent history, as well as cultural traditions, had placed on the road to unity, supporters of the new Europe answered only with a declaration of principles which alone should have dissolved the numerous contradictions of the old continent's society and politics.

Present times have taken on the responsibility of showing how the former project reflected a very different world, in which the effects of the economic crisis and of religious terrorism had not yet come to light, a world where one could still believe in the irreversible march towards human rights. However, even discounting similar considerations that may only be proved in hindsight, the fact remains that the constitutional proposal of the time reflected the hopeful expectation that the idea of Europe that had followed in the wake of 1989 would be returned to its place of honour, and that its new uniformity based on the values of freedom and equality would be able to dissolve the incrustations of a past which had given rise, at the beginning of the 20th century, to that aggressive form of nationalism which the Second World War had flattened in the West but which in the East had merely been silenced.

The preamble was intended to be an antidote in the face of the identitarian myth which had not so much gone hand in hand with the construction of national states, as overbearingly favoured the return of violent nationalism with renewed strength, which had resulted in the dissolution of Yugoslavia, and the effects of which had become patent everywhere in the territories once forming the Soviet Union and its satellite states. Nonetheless, the proposal was destined to be fraught with obstacles also in the Western half of the continent, since the issue of identity remained central

²⁷ VERGA (2003: 31-37).

to the basic political and cultural tenets not just of the national states but also of those secessionist movements which were acquiring new vigour in their opposition to the states themselves.

However – and this is history of these days – the real stumbling block for the European Union was at home, as, since the time of the Thatcher government, the United Kingdom had never concealed the idea that Europe should not move beyond the “free cooperation among sovereign states” while, on the terrain of culture, it had expressed many a reservation with regard to dissolving its own tradition into another, where everyone, on the strength of their own heritage, would and could compete. In other words, the United Kingdom refused to turn the Europe that had arisen out of the events of 1989 into an arena where the historical and cultural experience of continental Europe would enjoy a serious advantage.

It is worthwhile highlighting, as we wind our way to the conclusion, the role played once again by historiography in this respect: since 1999, ten years on from the bicentenary of the revolution, when interest in European civilisation seen in unitary terms was enjoying the strongest support, it was John Pocock who took pen to paper to stubbornly reiterate that the old continent had no history as a well-defined body, but rather a number of histories which were all very different and could in no way be traced back to the same running thread.²⁸ Pocock was not new to such considerations, but he had been convinced to insist once more on the matter thanks to a largely favourable situation, since, on one hand, the new British History and, on the other hand, the just as new Atlantic history – which seemed to him not only to criss-cross one another, but even to overlap – were destined, in his opinion, to encourage the construction of a historiography under the banner of an Atlantic archipelago that would keep the old and the new world together, and within which the Anglo-American mark seemed to take on a decisive as well as homogenising character.

It goes without saying that such a perspective would collide with any suggestion that the old continent was central to the construction of new interpretative models and that it was precisely British exceptionalism, in recent historiographic literature, that had led to openly question the 1789 revolution, considered merely as one among many passages accompanying the difficult birth of contemporary society. From Christopher Bayly’s successful work – suggesting a global, rather than a European nature of the construction of the contemporary world – to the work by Armitage and Subramanyam, which turns the age of revolutions into a momentous upheaval lacking any well-defined root in Western revolutions, over-

²⁸ POCOCC (1999: 125-139).

coming national histories – identified as the legacy of the old continent’s historicism – appears to be an insuperable condition.²⁹ Furthermore, the new Atlantic history, which has now become a highly successful interpretative paradigm, came into being with a clearly Anglo-centric profile, since its approach had been built on a close cultural connection between the United Kingdom and its colonies, and whose aim was to reaffirm the fundamental difference (when it was not a glaring conflict) between 1776 and 1789.³⁰

And yet, it is no coincidence that a Whig interpretation of American independence should once again reassert itself on the specific issue of the revolution, and that, consequently, the idea that the French revolution had inaugurated a different and new age has been greatly downplayed, precisely as being incomparably different from the *libertas americana* that preceded it. As a result, even recently, there has been an attempt to turn the Glorious Revolution into the first authentic contemporary revolution, as a pivotal event in world history.³¹

From this perspective, one should not underestimate the suggestion that 1688 should replace 1789 in the construction of the foundation of contemporary society: suggesting that everything had its start in England and that the turning point of the late 17th century was a decisive moment for establishing the perspective of freedom also in France, implies a different interpretation of 1776 America, which, in many a way, would have to be traced back to a British political and cultural tradition from which not a few had tried to prise it in the second half of the 20th century, both in Europe and in America. Such a perspective is the true threat to the significance of the revolution of 1789 in the 21st century, because the English-speaking world is once more reminding us, with hitherto unknown force and in its own dogged way, that European civilisation consists in a plurality of histories which are all very different from one another and can in no way be traced back to the same running thread, and that, in any case, of these, Britain’s distinctive history holds the best international perspective.

Faced with this challenge, scholars more particularly attentive to 1789’s centrality in the construction of modernity responded by resorting both to traditional interpretative lines and to those instead that took into account the demands imposed by the expansion of the geographical and chronological framework of revolutionary time. Those that chose the former route, within the framework of a history of ideas invited to explain the

²⁹ BAYLY (2004) and ARMITAGE and SUBRAHMANYAM (2010).

³⁰ BAILYN (2005: 59-81).

³¹ PINCUS (2009: 223-234).

extraordinary change that took place following 1789, but also the various prospects and digressions it would quickly initiate, include Jonathan Israel's great attempt (*Revolutionary Ideas* 2015) to take a resolutely democratic approach towards the first revolutionary years, distinguishing the legacy of the radical Enlightenment from the authoritarian directions that soon followed. Not surprisingly, it was a venture that aroused strident lamentation from those who accused him of simplistic recourse to anachronism in order to legitimise a pre-established thesis with no solid documentary basis. In reality, there was a simple and linear aspect to his work: going back to the old idea of a direct connection between the Enlightenment and the revolution, Israel suggested a detailed redevelopment of that traditional link, indicating that only radical philosophy, derived from the thinking of Diderot, D'Holbach and H elvetius, lay at the origins of the democratic and republican revolution. Israel never shies away from putting forward his own point of view and all his comments, designed to orientate the reader, are aimed at distinguishing those who might have been benefactors of humanity (the Girondins) from those (Robespierre and the Montagnards) who, while speaking in its name, simply threw open a Pandora's box of dark and disturbing modernity.

This explains why his work was greeted with great hostility: he was accused of wanting to track down, teleologically, the iniquities of the 20th century to the revolutionary past. However, rather than insisting on the strictly historical weakness of his ideas, it would more be appropriate to situate Israel's work in the context of a present time that the author deliberately has no intention of ignoring and around which he constructs his entire, positive, reading of the French Revolution. His insistence on the nature of a democratic and republican movement inspired by the profound values of tolerance and political radicalism constitutes the reflection of a reaction to present times darkened by religious and political fanaticism. The Western world, in Israel's view, has to face up to such extremism by rediscovering its history of freedom and progress.

The fact remains that the challenge of globalisation constitutes a strong cause for concern for many European historians, sensing as they do the idea of definitively setting aside the cumbersome legacy of national historiographies. In a specifically French context, perhaps the most ambitious operation is Annie Jourdan's, *Nouvelle histoire de the R evolution* (2018): in this work, she suggests yet another interpretative path, where unanimity is replaced by division and the impulse of solidarity by partisan opposition. The revolution no longer involved the sudden appearance of a unanimous dream of freedom, but rather the dramatic collision course of divergent positions, which soon faced off against one another through the armed violence that would lead to civil war.

In this particular context, it was an easy matter for Jourdan to back-date the clash between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries to 1789 itself, underlining, through meticulous investigation into the sources, the repeated attempts of the revolution's opponents to overturn to their own benefit the political equilibrium that emerged from the Estates General. Hence the idea that civil war was not only an instrument of acceleration for the revolutionary event, but, if not above all, the factor that would make it possible to read the many elements of revolutionary violence in a more restrained light. In the author's view, the long-standing idea that the ideological (and authoritarian) nature of the revolution was due to the obligation to foster liberty was contradicted by the fact that revolutionary violence was above all the consequence of a power vacuum and not at all an instrument of government – in other words, the sign of a sudden, and, to a certain extent, unpredictable collapse of the political framework rather than the result of an ideology with strict rules.

Jourdan's work marks an important, and in some ways decisive, step in moving away from a historiographical rhetoric that had, through reference to national identity, built its strength on French exceptionalism and patriotism. The success of a globalised world, but also a nationalism ready to rediscover an original form, have certainly been the driving force for a less unilateral approach – one in which it was possible to leave behind the contrast between economic moment and ideological aspect through a resurgence of political practices designed to produce an onerous emancipation from an order of values still strongly permeated by the weight of tradition.

And yet, the work today that reflects even more clearly the new political-cultural sensibility regarding the revolution is Jeremy Popkin's very recent effort, *A New World Begins: The History of the French Revolution* (2019). This is perhaps the most ambitious attempt to bring together the history of 1789 with the developments that research has latterly produced in relation to certain, hitherto very neglected, aspects. Popkin's own intellectual biography follows the route, fraught with contrasts and sudden slips, which, especially since 1989, has been a feature of the revolutionary field. It is in this context that his desire to return to the revolutionary history of France must be read, with a work rich in new perspectives: on the role of women in revolution, on the importance of the political-cultural debate about race and slavery, on the historical significance of the decree of abolition and on the difficulties involved in building a complete democratic political practice. Overall, his history of the French Revolution constitutes the most determined and accurate response to those who tend to divest 1789 of its profound stimulus to the birth of democracy. In this particular frame of reference, where surveying the French Revolution once again is an opportunity to read the difficulties and developments of democratic political

practice, it should not be surprising that Popkin's work stands out as a concrete answer to a trend that in the last two decades has invariably been on the defensive with regard to referencing 1789. Curiously, the answer comes from a European outside Europe: in the old continent, the questioning of national historiographies, in some respects well-merited, has left a worrying void, unable as it has been to formulate a proposition effective enough to balance the successful reading of modernity along an Anglo-American axis.

After all, given the fact that the strength of some often depends on the weakness of others, all this depends on the lack of a political project in the European world, where cultural choices have too often been questionable. Its decisions have turned out to be suicidal: on the one hand, public discourse on the unity of the old continent was decisive in indicating national historiographies as vestiges of a past time – an obstacle, therefore, on the way to the common history to be set in place as the foundation of the new political construction; on the other, the desire to bypass the national element in order to rush through the construction of a European identity imposed from above has ended up provoking expressions of rejection – while, in the area of historiography itself, it has not provided a single tool able to stand comparison with the new gospel of globalisation.

Nonetheless, the choice to set aside the national element to construct a European identity has ended up favouring displays of rejection, partly because the historiographical sector has not provided tools to support dialogue with the new globalisation. The result was not only contradictory, but, in a certain sense, disheartening. Letting go of the reference to 1789, with the excuse of attributing it to a wider world context, means willingly forgetting that the revolution was proposed as an exceptional, universal event, from the start, and had no intention of becoming anything else, for the very reason that it lay claim to the creation of new values, which had never before been experimented. The old continent should treasure these same values, which the matter of renewed nationality is clearly intrinsic to, in order to find once more legitimacy and strength in today's global context.

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