

# THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AND MODERN POLITICS

**T**he contours of the modern world have been defined essentially by two eighteenth century departures from tradition. The first, and without doubt the farthest reaching of the two, was the so-called Industrial Revolution, which heralded a gradual but irresistible shift to a new mode of economic production characterised by apparently unlimited growth, constant change as opposed to stability, mass production and mass markets, the unprecedented growth of urban society and the creation of the now familiar capitalist and wage-earning classes with their distinct and generally mutually hostile goals.

However, if we wish to grasp the origins of modern politics, the source of so many of our modern political ideologies, it is to the second upheaval, the French Revolution, that we must turn. For the turbulent 1790s in France did not, indeed could not affect that country alone. The Revolution, through its ideals, slogans and transformations, particularly those exported after war broke out in 1792, left an indelible mark on most parts of Europe. Try as they might, committed opponents of the Revolution failed to eradicate its traces, as the political history of the nineteenth century demonstrates with such clarity. It is the purpose of this article to indicate,

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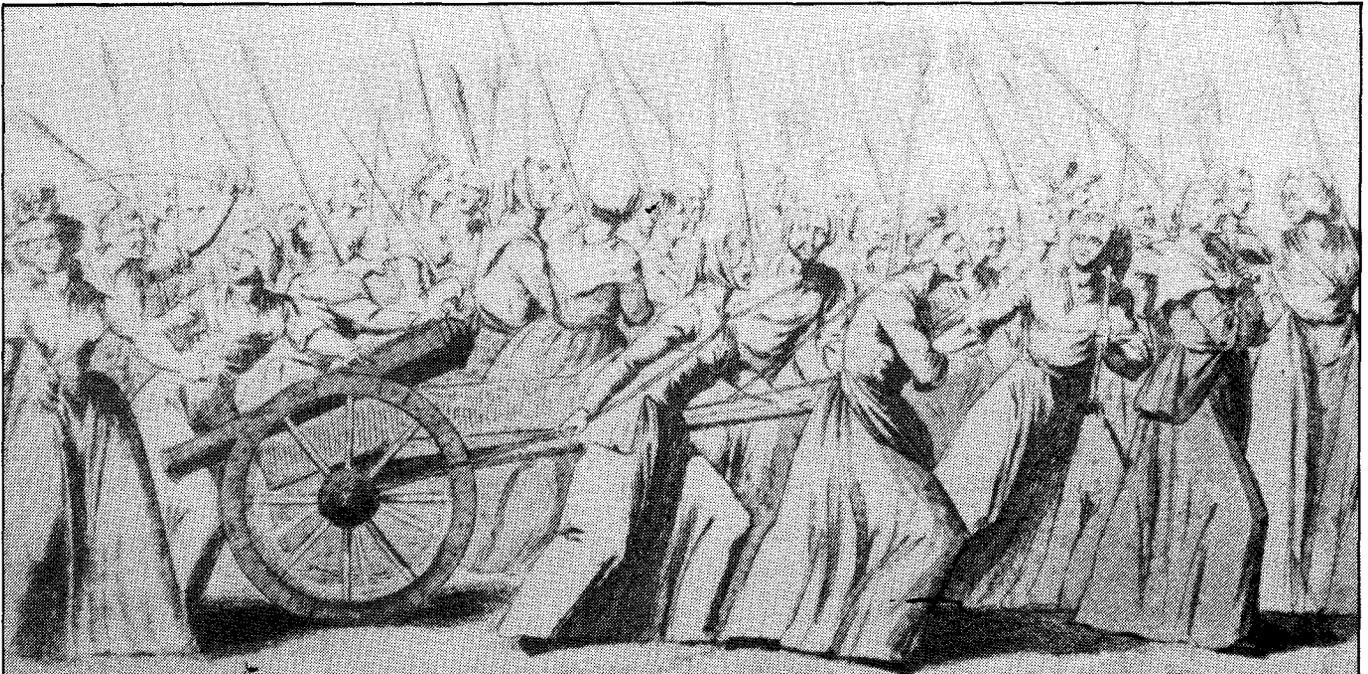


*Jean-Jacques Rousseau.*

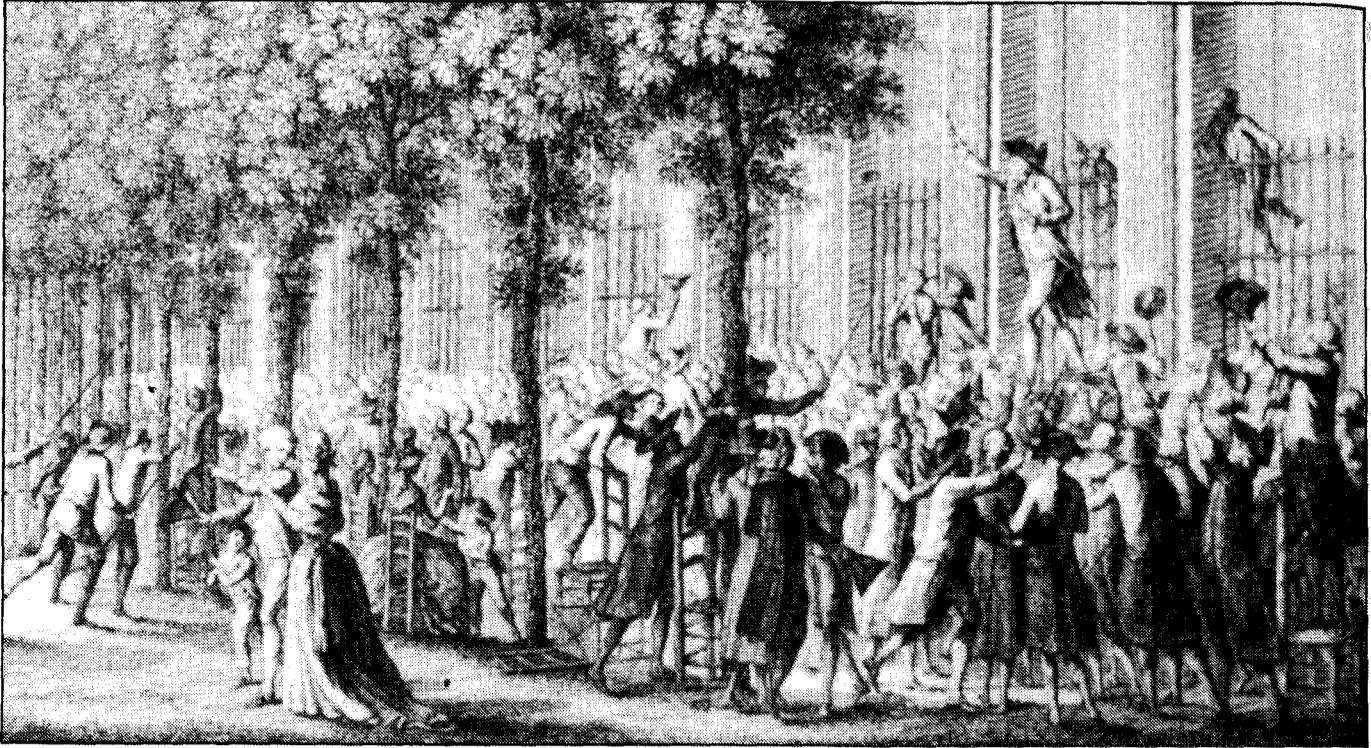
briefly, some of the more important legacies of the Revolution, whose two hundredth anniversary is commemorated this year.

In the first place, the French Revolution marked a radical departure from the past in its redefinition of the state. No longer was the state to be instrument of control in the service of a

monarchy or oligarchy. Rather it was to be the servant, the property of the people, the guarantor of the rights and liberties of citizens rather than the regulator of subjects. The redefinition turned on the Revolution's reversal of sovereignty. In principle, at any rate, it was the people who embodied sovereignty, not the prince or monarch. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, promulgated in August, 1789, makes this quite clear in its preamble, reminding us that the decisions and actions of legislators and administrators, the purpose of all political institutions should conform to the basic principles of safeguarding the inalienable and natural rights of man. It followed from this redefinition of the relationship of the citizen to the state that all public offices should be filled by elected citizens, who should then be accountable for their actions. Certainly, at different times during the Revolution, different groups interpreted the elective principle and the notion of accountability variously - the very restricted franchise of the men of 1789 came under fire from the popular strata who were excluded, but these 'took their revenge' in 1793 by enforcing daily accountability on their elected representatives, at the local level at least. Even at the height of the 'Terror', that period of war dictatorship, the war cabinets, the Committees of Public Safety



*A Versailles, A Versailles' - an engraving of the famous women's march of October, 1789, to demand bread; a practical piece of feminine direct action.*



*Desmoulins brandishing pistols as he addresses the crowd outside the Palais-Royal.*

and General Security, had to have their remit renewed every ten days by the National Convention, the elected representatives of the people. And it is worth remembering that the Convention was able to topple Robespierre and his associates when it became convinced that his policies were no longer appropriate.

The notion of popular sovereignty was itself based on the most fundamental principle enunciated by the revolutionaries, the belief that 'men are born and remain free and equal in rights' (Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, article one). The notion that man might be a citizen and might have rights as well as obligations was a dramatic shift of emphasis to a position that we now take for granted. When taken in conjunction with the destruction of privilege announced on the night of 4 August, 1789, and defined on 11 August somewhat less liberally, this proclamation of equal and inalienable rights was the cornerstone of the French Revolution, and was a truly revolutionary proposition as far as the nature of politics was concerned. From it stemmed logically the modern tradition of mass politics and advancement based solely on merit, of one legal system to be applied to all and open to all. During the course of the Revolution, the latter consequence, that of one law for all, proved more acceptable to many than did the notion of political democracy, although circumstances imposed this from 1792 to 1795, and it was no more than a reasonable interpretation of article six of the Declaration of the Rights of Man which stated that 'The law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to participate

personally or through their representatives in its formulation'.

Personal liberty was also at the heart of the Revolution's work. Here we see an understandable reaction to the arbitrary and repressive denials of what we would now deem to be basic human rights: freedom of worship, freedom of thought, freedom of speech. The Revolution's basic definition of freedom was utilitarian and expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man as 'being able to undertake anything as long as it does not harm others'. It was up to the law to ensure that one citizen's liberty did not curtail the natural rights of another citizen. These basic liberties did make a significant difference. Men had the right to think differently than their landlords or employers, at least in law; Jews and Protestants had the right to worship freely and publicly - no small change given the former monopoly of the Roman Catholic church on religious matters, and the minimal concession of tolerance of the Protestant denominations embodied in the 1787 Edict of Toleration after a century of official intolerance of Protestantism.

It is of great importance to note that the rights and liberties set out in the declarations and decrees of the National Assembly had a universal import. The revolutionaries were not talking about the rights of the Frenchman or of the French citizen. The 'lessons' of 1789 and the ideals of the Revolution were universal. This is what made the French Revolution a European affair from the very beginning. If the French could establish a political system based on the rights of man and on popular sovereignty, why could other peoples not

do the same? Freedom was not restricted to France.

If the early phase of the Revolution was concerned with freedom and rights of the citizen, war, self-inflicted in 1792, led to an extension of the role of the state once again. More than one commentator has seen in the First French Republic's war effort the origins of modern totalitarianism, the subordination of the individual's rights to the claims of the state in a manner much more comprehensive than any *ancien regime* state could have contemplated. Defence of the Republic led to the mobilisation of the entire population in the war effort. It led to rationing and to the Terror - the enforced acquiescence of the population in the national struggle on pain of ostracization, confiscation of property, imprisonment and finally death. The concept of the sovereignty of the people was never lost, but the way in which it was interpreted points very plainly to the Bolshevik concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the sense that democracy was set aside during a crucial, transitional period, and effective leadership was entrusted to an elite which combined expediency with ideology and justified its action in the name of the people. Or, in more general, but similar twentieth-century terms, one might see in the rule of the committees of the French Republic the prototype of modern war cabinets and dictatorships which all place national salvation above the human rights and freedoms of the individual.

In these terms, the French Revolution embodies all the ambiguities inherent in the relationship between the individual and the state in the modern world - the

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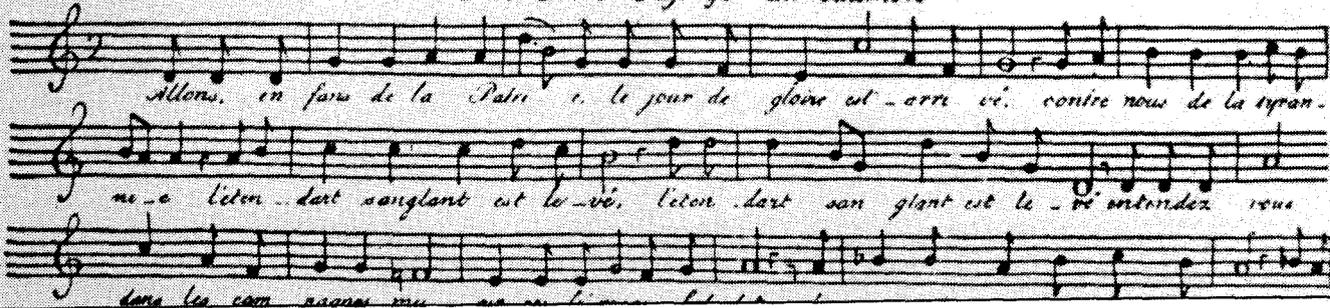
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## MARCHE DES MARSEILLOIS

CHANTÉE SUR DIVERSES THEATRES

Chez Frere Pasquage du Saumon



The most famous National Guardsmen were the volunteers from Marseilles who marched on Paris singing their famous song, the 'Marseillaise', which had been composed by Rouget de L'Isle. A song-sheet illustrates the scene.

desire of the individual to maximise his or her freedom, and the need, perceived or alleged, of the state to limit that freedom in the name of class interest or the national interest, both of which are modern, ideologically based concepts having little or nothing to do with traditional interests like dynastic claims or the whims of rulers, and which, far from resulting from arbitrary decisions, require the force of duly passed laws or the invocation of ideology and/or constitutional provisions.

Closely related to the concept of the people and the nation as legitimising political values was nationalism. In many respects, the French Revolution gave birth to the political doctrine of nationalism and did much to export the doctrine. The nation was adopted by the revolutionary state as a higher value to inspire and coerce as the occasion demanded. It was assumed that peoples or nations throughout Europe could free themselves by adopting the principles of the Revolution, and by substituting the nation for the dynasty as a focus of loyalty. It should be said that the Revolution's concept of nationalism was generous and benign in relation to subsequent examples of nationalist

thought. Anyone who accepted liberty and popular sovereignty as the highest values could style himself a French citizen - hence the citizenship conferred on Tom Paine, Priestly and Wolfe Tone. There was none of the cultural, linguistic or racial exclusiveness associated with many subsequent brands of nationalism.

It must also be said that the Revolution promoted nationalism quite unwittingly as Germans, Dutch, Belgians and Spaniards began to feel the presence of the French 'liberators' as a burden in the later 1790s, when French taxation, requisitioning and conscription made more of an impression than political principles and fostered a growing anti-French sentiment which ultimately translated itself into the assertion of native virtues and values within the modern political and administrative structures instituted by the French. Nevertheless, the French Revolution firmly imprinted the notion of national self-determination on the European mind. One has only to consider the number of nation states which adopted the tricolour flag in emulation of the French to appreciate the significance of the Revolution in creating and legitimising what is still probably the

most compelling force in political life in most parts of the world.

It should be said that the French Revolution did not proceed according to a preconceived plan. We should remember that it began as a reform movement. Certainly, the reformers had political ideals, but rarely did circumstances allow them to apply the ideals in a thorough manner, or even to hammer out the practical consequences of the ideals they proclaimed freely in the period before the war. Most of the ideals became assimilated into the general public awareness in the form of slogans - the best known of which was, of course, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Drawn from Rousseau, Montesquieu, Locke and others, the ideas which animated the Revolution were for the most part the slogans of an age, those of the Enlightenment and the American Independence movement, with a number of interpretations of the English 'Glorious Revolution' of an earlier century. Ultimately, circumstances dictated the course of the Revolution. But this is not to say that slogans and ideals did not play their part. The very vagueness of many of the ideals meant that they were open to a number of interpretations, and



they were indeed interpreted variously, giving rise to profound conflicts about the meaning of liberty and equality. If the better-off citizens stressed liberty, meaning freedom from oppression and a free market economy, the poorer strata of French society sought freedom from hunger and economic insecurity. While the better-off interpreted equality as equal opportunities, irrespective of one's background, and equality before the law, the poorer citizens interpreted it as fair shares for all, particularly during the period of shortages imposed by the war. These different interpretations have marked nineteenth and twentieth century political history in the form of the political ideologies which can trace their origins to one phase or another of the French Revolution.

A fundamental political legacy of the Revolution is the now familiar division between Left and Right. The origins of the terms come from the positions taken in the National Assembly by progressive deputies (to the left of the president's desk) and by conservative groupings (to the right of the president's desk), but the grouping of deputies reflected acceptance of and rejection of the notion of popular sovereignty as the underlying principle of the new regime. Obviously there were shades of Left and of Right. As the Revolution became more radical (and bloody), the Left fragmented and some 'Lefts' became more and more radical while some 'Rights' became more reactionary. There is a clear difference between the political radicalism of a Saint-Just and the economic radicalism of Babeuf, just as there is a difference between the pragmatic opposition to the Revolution of Edmund Burke and the theocratic opposition of Joseph de Maistre. Nevertheless the French Revolution marked the beginning of the division between those who believed in progress and in government as a social contract, the product of rational debate, and those who accepted human nature as flawed and incapable of producing its own laws and organisation without constant reference to tradition, authority and religion.

The most obvious Left wing heir to the Revolution was the democratic republican movement which sought one-man-one-vote and looked for its inspiration to the militants of the Year II (1793-94), adopting the red cap of freedom and the pike as its symbols. For much of the nineteenth century, republicans were feared and persecuted by European regimes until these discovered that the introduction of adult male suffrage in the right conditions could be a socially conservative measure, notably after the emergence of socialist movements with social and economic demands.

It would be stretching a point to identify any significant source of socialism in the French Revolution. Revolutionary France was a pre-

industrial society, and the radical democrats had no notion of collective ownership of the means of production. Certainly, East German, Soviet and French Marxist historians have explored individual radicals with a view to finding forerunners of socialism, but these have proved to be very tenuous forerunners: Jacques Roux, who was condemned by the Jacobin Convention in 1793, was only demanding traditional state intervention on behalf of the needy; François-Noël 'Gracchus' Babeuf



*Saint-Just, Robespierre's faithful follower.*

envisaged in his conspiracy of equals no more than a redistribution of food and goods on the basis of fair shares for all. And how could it be otherwise? Socialism was a response to industrial society even if twentieth-century theorists have applied it to agrarian societies. Nevertheless, the period of mass democracy, of the literal application of popular sovereignty, did much to pave the way for socialist thought.

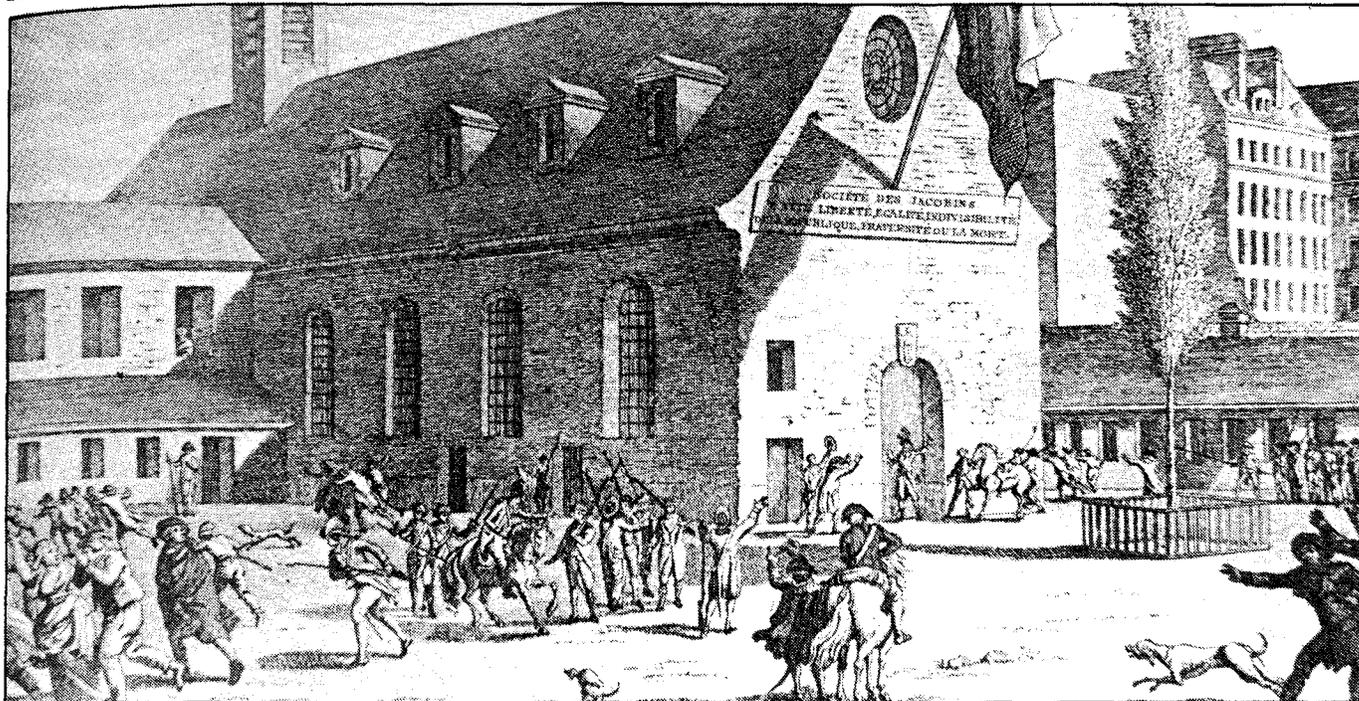
At the other end of the political spectrum, conservatism owes its formulation as a political ideology to the French Revolution. Edmund Burke was the first of many critics of the abrupt rapture with the inherited past that characterised most aspects of the Revolution's political dimension. He argued that a sudden shift from political received wisdom could lead only to chaos, to the loss of direction and continuity. Burke was one of the more moderate 'right wing' critics of the Revolution. His European counterparts adopted a much more ideologically grounded stance. In general, however, conservatives took the problems of the Revolution to substantiate their feeling that change of any sort should be embarked on cautiously, with constant reference to tradition, certainly not in the arrogant way the French embarked on a total reconstruction of society relying solely on reason.

Perhaps the most successful strand of political thought to emerge from the French Revolution was liberalism. The entire thrust of 1789 was the emancipation of the individual from corporative, legal and social constraints. Instead of a birth certificate, individual wealth became the qualifying examination for political office on the grounds that the acquisition of property or capital demonstrated an aptitude to succeed and conferred on the subject a stake in the social order. All of the Revolution's formal texts betray this stress on the primacy of the individual entrepreneur and property owner. Article 17 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man states that 'property is an inviolable and sacred right'. The constitution of 1791 distinguished between active and passive citizens, that is to say between property-owners or taxpayers and the rest. The former could participate in politics according to their wealth, while the latter had no role at all. The Le Chapelier law of July, 1791, created the conditions for a free market, and the decrees governing the sale of national lands - essentially the ecclesiastical property which the state took over when the Church was dissolved as a corporation - were undertaken in a way which paid no attention to the public good but enabled individual entrepreneurs to make lucrative investments.

With the brief exception of the Year II (1793-94) when, in order to further the war effort and to defeat counter-revolution, controls were imposed on prices, the Revolution encouraged the economically greedy and politically ambitious, putting individual success above the common good, at the same time conscripting the common people in defence of a regime which benefited only a fraction of the population. Even the Jacobin constitution of 1793, promulgated and then set aside for the duration of the war effort - and never implemented - declared the right to property to be sacred and inalienable, only to be interfered with in the case of extreme national danger, and then to be compensated appropriately. The only brake on greed was the mealy-mouthed exhortation in article six: 'Do not treat another as you would not wish to be treated yourself. *Ne fais pas à un autre ce que tu ne veux pas qu'il te soit fait.* History has demonstrated amply that such utilitarian exhortations never prevented liberals from setting aside the 'rights' of others, most notable, perhaps, in the name of economic liberty.

In purely political terms, the liberal strand represents what the men of 1789 sought: political participation for the capable middle classes, a constitutional regime reflecting the American slogan of 'no taxation without representation'. It had the advantage of excluding from political life both the old privileged classes and the dangerous popular

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*The Jacobin Club: the premises of the Society of the Friends of the Constitution at the convent of the Jacobins in rue Saint-Honoré.*

classes. Liberalism also proved successful in exploiting nationalist sentiment. New nation states with constitutions were in most respects tailor-made for the bourgeoisie, dispensing with the older, often more cosmopolitan landed elites.

In western Europe liberalism has been the most pervasive of the Revolution's political heirs. Since the 1970s, there has been a notable resurgence of a rawer, economically inspired liberalism which has flourished in many countries under a variety of misleading party titles - the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom, and Fine Gael/Fianna Fáil/Progressive Democrats in the Republic, for example.

Besides bequeathing specific political traditions to European politics, the French Revolution created a modern political culture involving the use of the press, clubs and societies, and the pressure of public opinion. From the first meetings of the Estates-General, the public galleries were filled with spectators and commentators. After the day's session, the debates were analysed in terms of the issues and individuals who spoke. As the Revolution progressed, the establishment of the network of Clubs of the Friends of the Constitution, the Jacobin Clubs and the Popular Societies carried the debates from the assemblies of the Revolution to the cafes and streets of provincial France. Increasingly, Representatives of the People realised that they had an audience far wider than that of their fellow-deputies in the Assembly. Lobbying and street demonstrations became commonplace. In short all the techniques of modern politics were exploited within the limits of the

technology available to the late eighteenth century. It was the Revolution which introduced, in 1793, the referendum, that magnificent device which permits governments to oversimplify grossly a question and to demand a crude 'yes' or 'no' reply, accepting as final the majority decision of whatever proportion of the electorate that cares to respond.

On a more important note, there is one aspect of modern political culture the Revolution raised and failed to solve, and which remains a contentious matter in a number of countries. The Revolution's religious policy was a disaster. It was not a disaster because the revolutionaries set out to persecute Christians in general and Roman Catholics in particular: The notorious 'dechristianizers' were a small minority and were disowned by the government. Rather, it was a disaster because it was not thought out appropriately. The men of 1789 wanted to remove the Roman Catholic Church from its privileged position as a corporation within the state. This measure followed logically from the Assembly's abolition of all privilege in August, 1789. At the same time, the revolutionaries wanted to extend toleration to the sphere of religious faith. Article ten of the Declaration of the Rights of Man stipulated that 'nobody should be victimised for their views, including their religious beliefs, as long as these do not cause a breach of the peace as defined by the law'. In effect, the state was to become neutral in matters of religion. Despite the Revolution's mishandling of the Roman Catholic clergy and the latter's increasing opposition to the revolutionary regime, this neutrality remains an ideal of states

which would acknowledge the principles of the French Revolution, explicitly or through their constitutional provisions. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, church-state relations proved to be an enduring source of conflict in many countries, particularly in those where a majority of the population adhere to a church which believes it has a right to regulate secular matters. In Europe and in parts of Latin-America, the French Revolution has bequeathed a legacy of anti-clericalism which has distracted energy from other, perhaps more important, areas of political activity, diminishing in the process the contribution which both secularists and churchmen could make to society.

Finally, it should be said that the French Revolution continues to provoke animated debate on its relevance and influence. Marxists continue to emphasize its position in world-historical developments as the classic bourgeois revolution which brought a new social class to prominence and paved the way for the growth of modern capitalism. Unwilling to accept the Marxist view, other, mainly western, historians and commentators, have played down the Revolution's social dimension and have stressed variously its accidental character or its place as part of a wider north-west European democratic movement - this view representing in its extreme form a Cold War attempt to demonstrate a 'natural' Atlantic solidarity. Whether it should be placed in either context or in neither, no other event in modern history has been claimed by such diverse political movements as part of their tradition, and no other political upheaval has cast such a long shadow over the political development of Europe.