1

The Legacy of the French Revolution

Janet Polasky

France remembers its first revolution. "As the founding event of modern French history," historian Gordon Wright explains, the French Revolution has defined the French understanding of themselves ever since 1789.[1]* This essay explores the revolutionary legacy that has shaped the political history of modern France.

"France is revolutionary, or she is nothing at all," the poet and nineteenth-century revolutionary leader Alphonse de Lamartine proclaimed on the eve of the second great French revolution, in 1848. French history has not evolved gradually; rather it has catapulted from one revolution to another. Historian Stewart Edwards calls these revolutions historical "tiger leaps."[2] Dreaming of an ideal new political and social order, French revolutionaries toppled traditional institutions in 1789, 1848, and 1871, and repeatedly over the course of the twentieth century, they have threatened them. The French have made revolutionary change their tradition.

The French set out to transform their world in the Revolution of 1789. They expected not only to overthrow their government but to change absolutely everything, including the conditions of everyday life. The eighteenth-century revolutionaries destroyed an old regime and created a completely new one on its ruins. The French revolutionaries even reordered the way they measured time and space: their new calendar began with the beheading of the king; the metric system rationalized weights and measures.

These first French revolutionaries were not content to rest when many people believed their project had been accomplished. Their project could never be completed because it was so far-reaching. Their missionary vision led them to

*The bracketed numbers refer to the Endnotes at the end of this chapter.

condemn despotism and fanaticism wherever they lurked, even beyond the borders of France. Thus the French Revolution of 1789 to 1799 became a European project as well.

Alexis de Tocqueville, the great nineteenth-century observer of society, explained: "France alone could have given birth to revolution so sudden, so frantic, and so thoroughgoing, yet so full of unexpected changes of direction, of anomalies and inconsistencies."[3] Very few vocal opponents of the French Revolution have troubled the politics of modern France since de Tocqueville described the French Revolution as "a grim, terrific force of nature, a newfangled monster, red of tooth and claw." The eighteenth-century counterrevolutionaries have not found many nineteenth- or twentieth-century champions. Instead, it is the heirs of the French Revolution who have been fighting among themselves over the legacy of the Revolution. The revolutionary fault lines created by the "unexpected changes of direction, anomalies, and inconsistencies" that de Tocqueville described have divided the French people for the last two hundred years. Celebrations of Bastille Day have not been without their detractors. Popular movements of contestation continue to worry elites in the hierarchical French society. Over the last two hundred years, the threat of Parisian crowds has spurred governments to heed the demands from below.[4]

THE REVOLUTIONARY HERITAGE

Above all, the French Revolution bequeathed to modern France a tradition of revolutionary change. With power centralized in Paris, popular movements have overtaken and toppled the French government at regular intervals

throughout modern French history. Over the course of the last two hundred years, French women as well as men have taken to the streets to protest their exclusion from the political order and to assert their vision of a new society. The basic principles of the French Revolution have echoed again and again on nineteenth- and twentieth-century barricades.

A lover of liberty and a passionate believer in equality, de Tocqueville's Frenchman "at one moment . . . is up in arms against authority and (at) the next we find him serving the powers that be." Consequently, French history has ricocheted between democratic chaos and men on horseback. "So long as no one thinks of resisting, you can lead him on a thread, but once a revolutionary movement is afoot, nothing can restrain him from taking part in it," de Tocqueville concludes.[3] In sum, the balance of liberty, equality, and fraternity has proved to be an unstable one in modern France.

Outside Paris, too, art exhibitions were no rarity; interest in viewing and acquiring pictures was by no means confined to the metropolis. Local artists contributed to these exhibitions, naturally, but they were also widely used by painters who had their studios in the capital. Thus at Nantes, in 1839, some of the leading landscapists, Corot, Théodore Rousseau and Jules Dupré exhibited, as did Delacroix: two of his pictures now in the art gallery at Nantes were purchased by the municipality on that occasion. The chance of selling their works to the provincials was undoubtedly the principal attraction for exhibitors. After 1830, a number of 'Sociétés des Amis des Arts' sprang into being all over France, made up of groups of art-lovers whose subscriptions were used to make purchases which would then be raffled among the members.

With the slowly increasing prosperity of these years of peace, more and more middle-class art-buyers were making their requirements known and finding ready suppliers. It did not take long for the effects to be noticed in the annual *salons*, where small easel pictures, of the kind that could be conveniently hung on the walls of a town apartment or a small country retreat, were observed to be increasingly displacing the *grandes machines*, the large historical or religious compositions that were now rarely undertaken unless specifically commissioned.[51] The same tendency towards reduced dimensions showed itself in sculpture, as statuettes replaced statues, and bronze table ornaments came into fashion. There were, of course, conservative critics who mourned the decline of the grand tradition; but the greater danger was the invasion of the whole art world by the crude and tasteless standards of the hundreds of new middle-class purchasers.

The kind of art these people looked for, and bought when they saw it, was not that of a particular group or school, but it had certain definable characteristics none the less. The composition had to be intelligible on the lowest level and pose no problems. Just as there was no mystery about the subject, so there had to be no ambiguity in its presentation. Objects must be clearly outlined and given the colours the ordinary man, who preferred to take such matters on trust instead of using his eyes, assumed they had; so, oranges were orange and violets were violet. It was an eminently conventional art: faces and figures accorded with the currently accepted standards of beauty or nobility. The execution was taken to the point where the work would look 'finished' to the average spectator.

Every picture had to tell a story; many, indeed, could almost be taken to represent scenes from some costume play or pageant. Well-known historical incidents were particularly suited to the purpose, and the painter most successful at exploiting this vein was Paul Delaroche, who specialized in

illustrating scenes from British history made familiar to the French by Scott's novels and by the numerous plays and operettas drawn from them. It was a peculiarity of Delaroche's pictures that they would have been quite meaningless without their titles. Two dejected boys sitting on a bed in a darkened room, a man in riding boots looking down at a coffin, such compositions could only have the intended effect once the viewer understood that the first represented the Princes in the Tower about to be done to death by their uncle's hired assassins, and the second Oliver Cromwell contemplating Charles I after his execution.

Contemporary events also found their illustrators, but the bourgeois art-purchaser, who always wanted to be 'taken out of himself', had no time for pictures that showed him familiar scenes of everyday life; hence his refusal to pay any attention to the landscapists of the Barbizon school: all those trees, and never anything more exciting going on than a village priest sitting down to read his breviary . . . But he was delighted with the pictures Horace Vernet painted of battle scenes in Algeria, *La Prise de Bône* (1835), *Le Siège de Constantine* (1839), *La Smalah* (1845). They had the appeal of the exotic and, besides, they testified to the invincibility of French arms, and no one was a stauncher patriot than the average small tradesman and *garde national*.

The popularity of such slick painters as Delaroche and Vernet – and a dozen lesser men whose names are all but forgotten and whose works are seldom seen today – constitutes a phenomenon of some importance in French cultural history, since it is here that one can trace the beginning of the rift between the truly creative artist and the mass of the public, a rift which widened into a dangerous chasm later in the century. The hostility that Manet and the Impressionists met with in the 1860s and 1870s, the ostracism to which they were subjected, the lordly disdain of those of their colleagues – Meissonier, Bastien-Lepage, Carolus-Duran – who made the concessions they refused to make, all this can be seen as having started under the July Monarchy. The genuinely original artist found he had no channel of communication with the bourgeois who held the purse-strings. A diary entry made by Delacroix on 26 January 1847 has the value of a prophetic utterance: 'Dined with M. Thiers. I have no idea what to say to the people I meet in his house and they have no idea what to say to me.'