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The French Revolution De-Jacobinized

Daniel Guérin

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1956

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himself, in *State and Revolution*, was torn between anarchism and state “communism,” between mass spontaneity and Jacobin iron discipline. Yet the real synthesis of these two currents is still to be effected. As H.E. Kaminski wrote, it is not only necessary, it is inevitable: “History itself constructs its compromises.”⁶⁷ The degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the collapse and historical bankruptcy of Stalinism places it more than ever on the agenda. It alone will allow us to remake our “baggage of ideas” and to forever prevent our revolutions being commandeered by new Jacobins utilizing tanks, in comparison with which the guillotine of 1793 will look like a toy.

⁶⁷ H.-E. Kaminski, *Bakounine, La vie d'un révolutionnaire* (Paris: Aubier, 1938), p. 17. [Republished by Editions La Table Ronde, 2003. Hanns-Erich Kaminski (1899–1963) was a socialist journalist originally from Eastern Prussia. He published a book about Italian fascism and campaigned for an alliance of the German Socialist and Communist Parties in the face of the Nazi threat. Having immigrated to Paris in 1933, he moved closer to anarchosyndicalist circles and visited Barcelona in 1936. It was this experience which led to a book about the Spanish Revolution (*Ceux de Barcelone*, 1937) and the biography of Bakunin. In 1940 he immigrated to Argentina. —DB]

against the capitalists and claimed to act, like them, with “Jacobin inflexibility.”⁶⁵

Lenin’s Jacobin attitudes brought him a sharp reply from Trotsky in 1904. For the latter, who had not yet become a Bolshevik, Jacobinism “is the maximum degree of radicalism that bourgeois society can provide.” Modern revolutionaries must protect themselves from Jacobinism as much as from reformism. Jacobinism and proletarian socialism are “two molds, two doctrines, two tactics, two psychologies separated by an abyss.” If both are intransigent, their intransigence is qualitatively different. The attempt to introduce Jacobin methods into the proletarian revolutions of the twentieth century is nothing but opportunism. Just like reformism, it is the expression of “a tendency to tie the proletariat to an ideology, a tactic, and finally a psychology foreign and hostile to its class interests.”⁶⁶

Towards a Synthesis

In conclusion, the French Revolution was the source of two great currents of socialist thought which, across the twentieth century, have lasted until today: an authoritarian Jacobin current and a libertarian current. One, of a “bourgeois disposition,” oriented from the top down, is above all concerned with revolutionary effectiveness and claims to be taking account of “necessities.” The other, of an essentially proletarian spirit, is oriented from the bottom up, and places the safeguarding of freedom to the fore. Between these two currents numerous more or less shaky compromises have already been elaborated.

Bakunin’s anarchist collectivism attempted to reconcile Proudhon and Marx. Within the First International, Marxism sought a middle way between Blanqui and Bakunin. The Commune of 1871 was an empirical synthesis of Jacobinism and federalism. Lenin

⁶⁵ Lenin, *Œuvres*, vol. XXI, pp. 213, 227, 232.

⁶⁶ Trotsky, *Nos taches politiques*, p. 66.

Today, we are surrounded by nothing but ruins. The ideologies that were drummed into us, the political regimes that we were made to submit to or were held up as models are all falling to pieces. As Edgar Quinet said, we have lost all our baggage.¹

Fascism, the ultimate and barbarous form of man’s domination of man, collapsed a quarter century ago in a bloodbath. And the very people who clung to it like a life raft, who had called it to the rescue against the working class, even at the point of foreign bayonets, got skinned in the adventure and are forced, even though they still secretly prefer it, to offer their merchandise in a camouflaged form.

The least that can be said is that bourgeois democracy was not reinvigorated by the crushing defeat of fascism. In any event, it had made the latter’s bed and showed itself incapable of standing in its way. It no longer has a doctrine or any faith in itself. It has not succeeded in restoring its image by capturing for its benefit the fervor of the French popular masses against Hitlerism. The Resistance lost its *raison d’être* on the day its enemy disappeared. Its false unity immediately disintegrated. Its myth was deflated. The politicians of the postwar period were the most pitiful we have ever endured. They themselves vaporized the overly credulous confidence of those who, for want of anything better, turned to London against Vichy.² Bourgeois democracy showed itself to be totally incapable of resolving the problems and contradictions of the postwar period, contradictions even more insoluble than they were before the so-called crusade undertaken to find a solution to them. It was only able to survive at home through a shameful and hypo-

¹ “Nous avons perdu nos bagages.” Edgar Quinet, *La Revolution* (Editions Lacroix, Vanoeckhoven & Cie, 1869 [865]), vol. I, p. 8. [Quinet was a prominent republican writer and historian. —DB]

² ‘Vichy’ is shorthand for the quasi-fascist, collaborationist ‘French State’ created in 1940 under Marshal Petain with its capital in the southern spa town of Vichy (the northern half of the country, including Paris, having been occupied by German forces). [DB]

critical caricature of fascist methods, and abroad through colonial wars and even wars of aggression. It has capitulated. Its succession is open. And the anachronistic Fifth Republic was only able to put an ineffective band-aid on the wound, one more harmful than the previous medicines and, what is more, ephemeral.³

And then Stalinism, which claimed and which many believed to be made of sterner stuff and to be historically destined to substitute itself for the moribund (fascist or “democratic” forms of bourgeois domination, collapsed in its turn in the scandal of the ignominies revealed in Khrushchev’s secret report, in the horrors of the Hungarian repression, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia.⁴

But a world that is collapsing is also a world being reborn. Far from allowing ourselves to fall into doubt, inaction, confusion or despair, the time has come for the French working-class movement to start again from zero, to rethink the very bases of its problems, to remake, as Quinet said, all of its baggage of ideas.

It was a concern of that order that, in the days following the Liberation, led me to go back to the French Revolution.⁵ If my intentions were not clear enough and if as a result and through my fault, they escaped many of my readers and opponents, a British critic nevertheless understood: “Each generation must re-write history for itself. If the nineteenth century in Western Europe was the

³ France’s postwar Fourth Republic (1946–1958) was notorious for its political instability and inability to resolve the Algerian war of independence; it finally collapsed in 1958 under pressure from a generals’ putsch in Algiers, and General Charles de Gaulle was made head of the government (and later president). The Fifth Republic, which he created, saw a reduction in the powers of parliament, a reinforced executive and the creation of a semi-presidential regime, widely perceived at the time on the left (including by Guérin) as being Bonapartist or quasi-fascist. Today there are still widespread calls for its democratization or even for the creation of a Sixth Republic. [DB]

⁴ The Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the Prague Spring of 1968 were both crushed by Soviet bloc tanks. Both events led to a haemorrhage of members from Western Communist Parties. [DB]

⁵ *La lutte de classes sous la Première République, 1793–1797* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946; revised edition 1968), 2 vols.

one-sided interpretation of the French Revolution. Lenin, it is true, clearly saw its permanent revolution aspects. He demonstrated that the popular movement, which he incorrectly called a “bourgeois democratic revolution,” was far from reaching its objectives in 1794, and that it would only succeed in doing so in 1871.⁵⁸ If total victory was not won at the end of the eighteenth century, it was because “the material bases for socialism” were still lacking.⁵⁹ The bourgeois regime is only progressive in relation to the autocracy that precedes it, as the final form of domination and “the most fitting arena for the struggle of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie.”⁶⁰ Only the proletariat is capable of pushing the revolution to its final end, “for it goes much further than the democratic revolution.”⁶¹

But Lenin long rejected the concept of permanent revolution and maintained that the Russian proletariat, after the conquest of power, had to voluntarily limit itself to the bourgeois democratic regime. This is why he often tends to overestimate the heritage of the French Revolution, affirming that it will remain “perhaps for all time the model for certain revolutionary methods,” and that the historians of the proletariat should see in Jacobinism “one of the culminating points that the oppressed class reached in the struggle for its emancipation, [one of the] best examples of democratic revolution.”⁶² This is why he idealized Danton⁶³ and did not hesitate to proclaim himself “Jacobin.”⁶⁴ This is why, with much exaggeration, he attributes to bourgeois revolutionaries radical measures

⁵⁸ Lenin, *Pages choisies* (Bureau d’édition, 1926–7), vol. II, pp. 372–3.

⁵⁹ Lenin, *Œuvres*, (First edition), vol. XX, p. 640.

⁶⁰ Lenin, *Pages choisies*, vol. II, p. 93.

⁶¹ Lenin, *Pages choisies*, vol. II, pp. 115–6.

⁶² Lenin, *Pages choisies*, vol. II, p. 296; *Œuvres*, vol. XX, p. 640.

⁶³ Lenin, *Pages choisies*, vol. III, p. 339.

⁶⁴ Lenin, *Œuvres*, vol. XX, p. 640; *Pages choisies*, vol. I, p. 192.

“social revolutions of our day have nothing or almost nothing to imitate in the revolutionary methods of the Jacobins of 1793.”⁵⁴

Marx and Engels deserve this reproach far less than other authoritarian and statist socialist currents of the nineteenth century. But they had some difficulty in freeing themselves of the Jacobin tradition. For example, they were slow in ridding themselves of the Jacobin myth of the “rigorous centralization offered as a model by the France of 1793.” They finally rejected it, under the pressure of the anarchists, but not before having stumbled, hesitated, and modified their analysis and, even after all these corrective measures, they still went down the wrong road.⁵⁵ This wavering would allow Lenin to forget the anti-centralist passages in their writings—notably a clarification by Engels in 1885⁵⁶—and to retain only “the facts cited by Engels concerning the centralized French Republic from 1792 to 1799,” and to baptize Marx a “centralist.”⁵⁷

Indeed, the Jacobin hold was much stronger on the Russian Bolsheviks than it was on the founders of Marxism. And in large part this deviation has its origin in an occasionally incorrect and

⁵⁴ Proudhon, *Idee generale*, pp. 254–323; Bakunin, *Œuvres*, vol. II, pp. 108, 228, 296, 361–2; vol. VI, p. 257.

⁵⁵ Engels, *Karl Marx devant lesjuers de Cologne* (Ed. Costes, 1939), p. 247 and note; Marx, *Le Dix-Huit Brumaire de Louis-Bonaparte* (Ed. Scleicher freres, 1900), pp. 342–4; Marx, *La Guerre civile*, pp. 16, 46, 49; Engels, *Critique du programme d’Erjurt*, op. cit.

⁵⁶ See the note by Engels in the 1885 edition of Marx’s ‘address of the Central Committee to the Communist League’ where Marx proclaimed that workers “must not only strive for a single and indivisible German republic, but also within this republic for the most determined centralisation of power in the hands of the state authority.” Engels noted that “this passage is based on a misunderstanding” and that it was now “a well-known fact that throughout the whole [Great French] revolution ... the whole administration of the departments, arrondissements and communes consisted of authorities elected by the respective constituents themselves, and that these authorities acted with complete freedom within general state laws [and] that precisely this provincial and local self-government ... became the most powerful lever of the revolution.” (The *Marx-Engels Reader* [New York: WW. Norton & Co, 1978], pp. 509–10) [DB]

⁵⁷ Lenin, *State and Revolution* (1917).

century of Liberty, the present century is that of Equality. The twin ideals of the French Revolution, so long separated by the political ascendancy of nineteenth-century Liberalism, are coming together again. This *rapprochement*, dictated by the course of events and the direction of the historical process itself, makes new demands on all who aspire to describe and interpret that process. If the twin ideals which Western civilization owes so largely to the French Revolution are to be again reconciled in action, they must surely be also—and perhaps first—reconciled in the description of their evolution by historians.” And this anonymous critic found it “natural that when France is passing through a phase of political and economic reconstruction ... she should seek guidance from a more many-sided social interpretation of her history.”⁶

But in my opinion, the necessary synthesis of the ideas of equality and liberty that this critic recommended in far too vague and confused a fashion cannot and must not be attempted within the framework and for the benefit of a bankrupt bourgeois democracy. It can and should be within the framework of socialist (and communist) thought, which remains, despite it all, the sole solid value of our epoch. The dual failures of reformism and Stalinism place before us the urgent duty of reconciling proletarian democracy and socialism, freedom and Revolution.

And it was precisely the French Revolution that first provided us with the material for this synthesis. For the first time in history the antagonistic notions of freedom and coercion, of state power and the power of the masses confronted each other, clearly if not fully, in its immense crucible. From this fertile experience, as Kropotkin saw, emerged the two great currents of modern socialist thought on the basis of which we can remake our ideological “baggage” only if we finally succeed in finding the correct synthesis.⁷

⁶ *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 November 1947. [Guérin’s text incorrectly gave the year of publication as 1946. He also failed to notice that the author’s name was given in the contents page: Professor David Thomson. —DB]

⁷ See Kropotkin’s *The Great French Revolution, 1789–1793*, first published

The return to the French Revolution has, until today, been relatively fruitless, because modern revolutionaries, all of whom have nevertheless studied it closely and passionately, have only been concerned with superficial analogies, with formal points of resemblance with this situation, or that political group, or some other personality of their time. It would be quite amusing to recapitulate all these fantasies, sometimes brilliant, sometimes simply absurd, about which historians of the Russian Revolution like Boris Souvarine, Erich Wollenberg, and Isaac Deutscher were right to have reservations.⁸ But we would need pages and pages to do this, and we have better things to do. If, on the other hand, we abandon the little game of analogies and attempt to get to the heart of the problems of the French Revolution and analyze its internal mechanism, we could draw lessons from it which would be extremely useful for understanding the present.

The Direct Democratization of 1793

The first thing to emphasise is that the French Revolution was the first coherent, wide-scale, historical manifestation of a new type of democracy. The Great Revolution was not simply, as too many republican historians believed, the cradle of parliamentary democracy: because at the same time that it was a bourgeois revolution it was also the embryo of proletarian revolution, it bore

as *La Grande Revolution, 1789–1793* (Paris: Stock, 1909). Most historians of socialist thought have failed to emphasise adequately the fact that these currents of thought were not simply born in the minds of the nineteenth-century ideologists (themselves the heirs of the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century), but from the lived experience of class struggles, in particular that of 1793. This gap is particularly evident in the chapter on the French Revolution with which the late lamented G.D.H. Cole opened his monumental history of socialist thought (*A History of Socialist Thought*, vol. I, 1953, pp. 11–2).

⁸ Boris Souvarine, *Staline* (Editions Champs Libre, 1977 [935]), p. 265; Erich Wollenberg, *The Red Army* (London, 1970), pp. 78–80; Isaac Deutscher, *Staline* (Gallimard, 1953), p. 7.

capitalism an indispensable halfway house on the road from feudalism to socialism, they stressed the advantages of that halfway house, its progressive features, its civilizing influence, its attractive atmosphere and so on.”⁵²

If we examine the many passages in Marx and Engels concerning the French Revolution it has to be said that sometimes they see and sometimes they lose sight of its character as a “permanent revolution.” To be sure, they do see the revolution from below, but only occasionally. To give an example, Marx does not hesitate to present the humble supporters in the working-class quarters of Jacques Roux and Varlet as the “main representatives” of the revolutionary movement, but Engels nevertheless writes that to the “proletariat” of 1793 “in its incapacity to help itself, help could, at best, be brought in from without or down from above.”⁵³

And so we can already understand better what Deutscher means by Jacobin spirit, namely the tradition of bourgeois revolution and dictatorship from above of 1793, somewhat idealized and insufficiently differentiated from compulsion from below. And by extension, we can understand the tradition of Babouvist and Blanquist conspiratorialism which borrows the dictatorial and minoritarian techniques of the bourgeois revolution in order to put them at the service of a new revolution.

One can see why the anarchists discern in the socialism and communism of the nineteenth century a certain “Jacobin.” “authoritarian.” “governmentalist” tendency; a propensity towards the “cult of state discipline” inherited from Robespierre and the Jacobins; that they define a “bourgeois frame of mind.” “a political legacy of bourgeois revolutionism” to which they oppose the affirmation that the

⁵² Deutscher, *Stalin: A Political Biography* (Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 30. Cf. also John Maynard, *Russia in Flux: Before October* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 118.

⁵³ Marx in ch. 6 of *The Holy Family* (1845), available on the Marxists Internet Archive at www.marxists.org; Engels, *Anti-Duhring*, translation from Marxists Internet Archive: www.marxists.org.

can be found within Bolshevism holdovers from Jacobinism more accentuated than in the original Marxism. But I think that Marxism itself never completely overcame an analogous contradiction. There is within it a libertarian frame of mind as well as a Jacobin and authoritarian frame of mind.

In my opinion, the origin of this duality can mainly be found in an at times correct, but also at times erroneous appreciation of the real content of the French Revolution. The Marxists see that the latter betrayed popular aspirations because it was, objectively and in its immediate results, a bourgeois revolution. But at the same time they are blinded by an abusive application of the materialist concept of history, which sometimes leads them to consider it only from the point of view and within the limits of the bourgeois revolution. Of course they are right to stress those relatively and inarguably progressive features of the bourgeois revolution, but there are moments when they present these features, which even anarchists like Bakunin and Kropotkin, if not Proudhon, exalted in a unilateral fashion, overestimating and idealizing them.

Because he was a Menshevik, Boris Nicolaevsky exaggeratedly stresses this tendency of Marxism. But there is something true about his analysis. And the German ultra-leftist of 1848, Gottschalk, was not completely wrong in balking at the Marxist perspective of “escaping the hell of the Middle Ages” only to “voluntarily leap into the purgatory” of capitalism.⁵¹ What Isaac Deutscher says of the Russian Marxists prior to 1917—for, paradoxically, there was much “Menshevism” in these “Bolsheviks”—is also, I think, valid to a certain extent for the founders of Marxism: “Since they saw in

⁵¹ Boris Nicolaevsky, *Karl Marx* (Paris: Gallimard, 1937), pp. 146 and 158. [Nicolaevsky (1887–1966) was a Marxist revolutionary and member of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. A prominent Menshevik intellectual, he was deported from the USSR in 1922 and settled for a time in Amsterdam where he became director of the International Institute for Social History. His *Karl Marx: Man and Fighter* was first published in German in 1933 and translated into English in 1936. —DB]

within itself the seed of a new form of revolutionary power whose features would become more distinct over the course of the revolutions of the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The thread that runs from the Commune of 1793 to that of 1871, and from that to the soviets of 1905 and 1917, is clear.

I would here like to limit myself to briefly summarizing some of the general features of the “direct democracy” of 1793. If we step into the “sections,” the popular societies of the Year II,⁹ we have the feeling of a reinvigorating immersion in democracy. The periodic self-purging of each “popular society,” each candidate mounting the podium to offer him or herself to the scrutiny of all; the concern to ensure the most perfect possible expression of the popular will, to prevent its stifling by the golden-tongued or by idlers; permitting the working people to lay down their tools without any financial sacrifice and so to fully participate in public life; ensuring permanent control of the representatives by the represented; and the placing of the two sexes on a level of complete equality in deliberations.¹⁰ ... These are some of the features of a democracy truly propelled from the bottom up.

The General Council of the Commune of 1793, at least until the decapitation of its magistrates by the bourgeois central power, also offers us a remarkable example of direct democracy. The members of the Council were the delegates of their respective sections, constantly in contact with them and under the control of those who gave them their mandates, always up to date on the will of the base

⁹ As part of a broader move to do away with everything related to the pre-revolutionary regime and the reactionary influence of the Catholic Church, a new Republican calendar, with months named after seasonal aspects of the natural world, was instituted. ‘Year I’ began after the declaration of the Republic in 1792. The calendar was later abolished by Napoleon, but taken up again very briefly during the Paris Commune of 1871. [DB]

¹⁰ See, amongst others, Marc-Antoine Jullien in the “Société populaire” of La Rochelle, 5 March 1793, in Edouard Lockroy, *Une mission en Vendée, 1793* (Paris: Paul Ollendorf éditeur, 1893), pp. 245–8, quoted in Daniel Guérin, *La lutte de classes*, vol. I, pp. 177–8.

through the admission of popular delegations to the sittings of the Council. At the Commune there was no such thing as the “separation of powers” between the executive and the legislative. The members of the Council were both administrators and legislators. These modest sans-culottes did not become professional politicians; they remained the men of their professions or trades, still exercising them to the extent that their functions on the Commune allowed this, and ready to exercise them again at the end of their mandates.¹¹

But of all these features the most admirable one is doubtless the maturity of a direct democracy experimented with for the first time in a relatively backward country, barely out of the night of feudalism and absolutism, still plunged in illiteracy and age-old habits of submission. No “anarchy,” no confusion in this unprecedented and improvised management by the people. To convince oneself of this it is enough to leaf through the minutes of the popular societies, of the sittings of the general council of the Commune. There one can see the masses, as if aware of their natural tendency to indiscipline, animated by an ever present concern for self-discipline. They organize their deliberations and they impose order on those who might be tempted to provoke disorder. Even though in 1793 their experience of public life was relatively recent, even though most of the sans-culottes, guided it is true by educated petit-bourgeois, did not yet know how to read or write, they already demonstrated a capacity for self-management that even today the bourgeoisie, anxious to preserve its monopoly over public affairs, persists against all the evidence in denying. And certain revolutionary theoreticians, full of a sense of intellectual superiority, sometimes also tend to underestimate this capacity of the masses for self-government.

¹¹ See Paul Sainte-Claire Deville, *La Commune de l'an II* (Paris: Pion, 1946).

society and authority. “If the entire people, as sovereigns, becomes the government, one seeks in vain where the governed would be ... If the people, organized as the authority, has nothing above them, I ask who is below?” There is no middle way, one must “either work or rule.” “The people passing en masse over to the state, the state no longer has the least reason to exist, since there no longer exists a people: the result of the governmental equation is zero.”

How to escape this contradiction, this “vicious circle”? Proudhon answers that the government must be dissolved in the economic organization. “The governmental institution ... has its *raison d'être* in economic anarchy. Since the Revolution puts an end to this anarchy and organizes the industrial forces, there is no longer a pretext for political centralization.”

The “Jacobin” Tradition

Bakunin in turn stresses that since their thought was “nourished” by a certain theory, which “was nothing but the Jacobin political system more or less modified for the use of revolutionary socialists, the socialist workers of France never wanted to understand [that] when, in the name of the Revolution, you want to build a state, even if only a transitory state, it is a reactionary step and you are working for despotism.”⁴⁹ To a certain extent the disagreement between Marxists and anarchists flows from the fact that the former do not always view the French Revolution in the same way as the latter. Deutscher saw that within Bolshevism there were two spirits, the Marxist and the Jacobin, a conflict that would never be resolved, neither in Lenin nor in Trotsky.⁵⁰ As we will see, there

⁴⁹ Bakunin, *Œuvres*, vol. II, pp. 108 and 232. It was the same for the German socialists: Rudolf Rocker emphasised (in his *Johann Most*, Berlin, 1924, p. 53) how Wilhelm Liebknecht, the co-founder with August Bebel of the Social Democratic Workers' Party of Germany, was “influenced by the ideas of the old communist Jacobins.”

⁵⁰ Trotsky, *op. cit.*, p. 95

to reconstitute tyranny.” “The people gave themselves a tyrant instead of a protector. Everywhere and at all times the government, however popular it was at its origin, after having shown itself to be liberal for a certain time, gradually became exceptional and exclusive.”

He harshly condemned the centralization carried out through the decree of December 4, 1793.⁴⁷ This centralization was understandable under the former monarchy, but “under the pretext of a One and Indivisible Republic, to remove from the people the right to dispose of their forces, to call those who speak in favor of liberty and local sovereignty ‘federalists’ who are to be proscribed, means putting the lie to the true spirit of the French Revolution, to its most authentic tendencies. The system of centralization that prevailed in ’93 was nothing but a transformed feudalism. Napoleon, who put the final touches to it, testified to this.” Later, Bakunin, a disciple of Proudhon, would echo him: “A strange thing, that great revolution which, for the first time in history, proclaimed the freedom, not only of the citizen, but of man; but in making itself the heir of the monarchy it killed, it at the same time revived the negation of all freedom: the centralization and omnipotence of the state.”⁴⁸

But Proudhon’s thought goes farther and deeper. He fears that the exercise of direct democracy, that the most ingenious formulas aimed at promoting an authentic government of the people, by the people—the fusing of the legislative and executive powers, the election and revocability of functionaries recruited by the people from within their number, and permanent popular control—that this system, which may be “irreproachable” in theory, “in practice encounters an insurmountable difficulty.” In fact, even in this optimal hypothesis the risk remains of the incompatibility between

⁴⁷ The decree of 14 Frimaire, Year II (by the revolutionary calendar) strengthened the power of the central authorities in Paris (especially the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security) and reduced those of local authorities. [MA & DB]

⁴⁸ Bakunin, *Œuvres*, vol. I, p. 11.

Direct Democracy and Vanguard

But at the same time the difficulties and contradictions of self-management made their appearance. The lack of education and the relative backwardness of their political consciousness were obstacles to the masses’ full participation in public life. Not all of the people have a sense of their true interests. While some demonstrated extraordinary lucidity for the period, others allowed themselves to be led astray. The revolutionary bourgeoisie took advantage of the prestige it earned in its uncompromising struggle against the remnants of the *ancien régime* to inculcate in the sans-culottes a seductive but false ideology which in fact went against their aspirations for full equality. If we flick through the voluminous collection of reports from the secret agents of the Ministry of the Interior, we can see that informers reported comments made on the streets by men of the people, the contents of which are sometimes revolutionary, sometimes counter-revolutionary.¹² And these remarks are all lumped together and considered to be the expressions of the *vox populi* without any attempt to discriminate among them or to analyze their obvious contradictions.

The relative confusion of the people, notably of manual workers deprived of education, left the field open to better educated or more conscious minorities. This was how the Maison Commune Section, made up largely of masons, a small core group “got it to do whatever they wanted.”¹³ In many popular societies, despite all the care taken and the concern to ensure the most perfect functioning of democracy, factions led the dance in one direction or the other, and they sometimes even opposed each other.

The great lesson of 1793 is not just that direct democracy is viable, it is also that the vanguard of a society, when it is still a mi-

¹² Pierre Caron, *Paris pendant la Terreur* (Paris: Alphonse Picard, 1910–1964), 6 vols.

¹³ In Pierre Caron, *Paris pendant la Terreur*, vol. 6 (“observer” Boucheseiche, 29 March 1794).

nority in relation to the mass of the country that it carries along with it, cannot avoid, in that life-or-death battle that is a revolution, imposing its will on the majority, first and preferentially through persuasion, and, if persuasion fails, by force.

It was in the experience of the French Revolution that Marx and Engels found the source for their famous notion of the “dictatorship” of the proletariat. Unfortunately, it was never truly elaborated by its authors. Without claiming, like Kautsky in the period when he was a reformist, that in their work it is nothing but a *Wörtchen*, a little word occasionally used but of no importance,¹⁴ one is forced to say that they only ever used it too briefly and too vaguely in their writings. And when in particular they discover it in the French Revolution the terms they employ are far from clear and are debatable.¹⁵ In fact, the revolutionaries of the Year II, convinced though they were of the need for exceptional measures, for having recourse to force, had a horror of using the word dictatorship. The Commune of 1793, like its heir of 1871, wanted to guide and not “impose its supremacy.” Marat himself, the sole revolutionary of his time who called for a dictatorship, was forced to resort to careful language: he asked for a guide and not a master. But even in this veiled form he scandalized his brothers in arms and earned their loud protests.

Let it be understood: democracy had just issued its first cry. The tyrant had just been overthrown and the Bastille razed. The word “dictatorship” had a bad ring to it. It evoked the idea of a descent once again into tyranny, into personal power. In fact, for the men of

¹⁴ Karl Kautsky, *Die Diktatur des Proletariats* (Vienna 1918); published as *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* in 1919 (National Labour Press) [DB]. See also his *Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung* (1927), vol. II, p. 469. Cf. Lenin’s *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (1918).

¹⁵ Thus in his critique of the Erfurt Programme, Engels wrote that the democratic republic was “the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the Great French Revolution has already shown.” ‘A Critique of the Draft Social-Democratic Program of 1891’, *Marx-Engels Complete Works*, vol. 27, p. 217.

and the Hebertists before being snuffed out, would have issued from Babeuf’s doctrines, if Babeuf had been able to think through the logical consequences of his own premise.”⁴⁵

It is Proudhon who, in 1851, had the merit of having drawn from the French Revolution a truly profound analysis of the problem of the state. The author of *The General Idea of Revolution in the Nineteenth Century* started with a critique of bourgeois and parliamentary democracy, of democracy from above, and of democracy by decree.⁴⁶ He denounced its fraudulent nature. He attacked Robespierre, an open enemy of direct democracy. He stressed the failings of the democratic constitution of 1793, a departure point, to be sure, but a bastard compromise between bourgeois democracy and direct democracy, which promised the people everything and gave them nothing and which, in any case, was no sooner promulgated than its implementation was indefinitely put off.

Getting to the heart of the problem, Proudhon declared, after Varlet, that “in proclaiming freedom of opinion, equality before the law, the sovereignty of the people, and the subordination of authority to the country, the Revolution made two incompatible things of society and the government.” He affirms “the absolute incompatibility of authority with freedom.” And he pronounced a fiery condemnation of the state: “No authority, no government, not even a people’s government: the Revolution resides in this ... The government of the people will always be the swindling of the people ... If the Revolution allows government [the state] to survive somewhere, it will return everywhere.” And he attacks the boldest of thinkers, the “authoritarian” socialists who, while admitting the misdeeds of the state “still said that while government is doubtless a scourge ... it was still a necessary evil. “This is why,” he adds, “the most emancipatory revolutions have always ended in an act of faith and submission to authority, why all revolutions have only served

⁴⁵ Proudhon, *Idee genirale*, p. 195.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 177–236.

ernment” of having, in the name of public safety, established a dictatorship.⁴¹ “This is the conclusion,” wrote two historians of anarchism, “that the first of the Enrages drew from 1793, and that conclusion is anarchist.”⁴² Varlet’s pamphlet contained a profound idea: a revolution led by the masses and a strong authority (against the masses) are two incompatible things.

The Babouvists drew this conclusion in their turn. “The rulers,” wrote Babeuf, “only make revolutions in order to continue governing. We want to make one to eternally ensure the people’s happiness through real democracy.” And Buonarroti, his disciple, foreseeing the commandeering of future revolutions by new elites added, “If there was formed within the state a class exclusively knowledgeable about the principles of the social art, laws, and administration, it would soon discover the secret of creating distinctions and privileges for itself.”⁴³ Buonarroti deduced from this that only the radical suppression of social inequalities, that only communism would allow society to be rid of the scourge of the state: “A people without property and without the vices and crimes it engenders would not feel the need for the great number of laws under which the civilized societies of Europe groan.”⁴⁴

But the Babouvists were not able to draw all the consequences of this discovery. Isolated from the masses, they contradicted themselves, as we saw, by calling for the dictatorship of one man or of a “wise” elite, which would later lead Proudhon to write that “the negation of government, which shone briefly through the Enrages

⁴¹ Varlet, *L’Explosion*, 15 Vendémiaire, Year III.

⁴² Alain Sergent and Claude Harmel, *Histoire de l’Anarchie* (Le Portulan, 1949), p. 82. (Republished by Editions Champ Libre in 1984.)

⁴³ Born into the Italian nobility, Philippe Buonarroti (1761–1837) went to France in 1793 and was granted French citizenship for his services to the Revolution. He met Babeuf in prison after Thermidor and became a follower. Buonarroti’s *History of Babeuf’s ‘Conspiracy of Equals’* (1828) was very influential. [DB]

⁴⁴ Babeuf, *Tribun du peuple*, II, 294, 13 April 1796; Buonarroti, op. cit., pp. 264–6.

the eighteenth century, nourished on memories of antiquity, dictatorship had a precise and formidable meaning. They recalled—and the *Encyclopedie* was there to remind them—that the Romans, “having driven out their kings saw themselves obliged, in difficult times, to temporarily create a dictator enjoying greater power than any enjoyed by the ancient kings.” They recalled that later, the institution having degenerated, Sulla and Caesar proclaimed themselves perpetual dictators and exercised absolute sovereignty, in the latter case going as far as being suspected of having monarchist aims. They did not want either a new monarch or a new Caesar.

The men of 1793 had an even clearer memory of England. How could they forget that a century earlier Oliver Cromwell had overthrown an absolute monarch, usurped popular power, established a dictatorship, and even attempted to have himself crowned king? They feared a new Cromwell like the plague, and this was one of their complaints against Robespierre on the eve of Thermidor.¹⁶

Finally, the rank-and-file sans-culottes, the men and women of the popular societies, instinctively distrusted the word dictatorship, for it would have represented only a portion of revolutionary reality: they first of all wanted to convince, to open to everyone the doors to the nascent democracy, and they only resorted to force when those they wanted to convince and admit into democracy answered them with lead.

Perhaps they intuited that it is always an error to borrow words from the enemy’s vocabulary. “The sovereignty of the people,” as Henri de Saint-Simon pointed out, is one of those unfortunate borrowings. From the day they administer themselves the people are

¹⁶ When Saint-Just proposed the concentration of power in the hands of Robespierre, the idea of a personal dictatorship caused a furore among his colleagues, and Robert Lindet exclaimed: “We did not make the Revolution in order to benefit one individual.” In Armand Montier, *Robert Lindet* (1899), p. 249. [Thermidor was a month in the revolutionary calendar, and 9 Thermidor Year II was the date of the overthrow of Robespierre and the Jacobins; “Thermidor” has thus come to be shorthand for counterrevolution. —DB]

the sovereigns of no one. “The Despotism of liberty” (a phrase the men of ’93 sometimes used in preference to “dictatorship” for it has a more collective resonance) and “dictatorship of the proletariat” are no less antonymic. The form of coercion that the proletarian vanguard finds itself forced to exercise against counter-revolutionaries is of so fundamentally different a nature from the past forms of oppression, and it is compensated for by so advanced a degree of democracy for the formerly oppressed, that the word dictatorship clashes with that of proletariat.

Such was the opinion of the libertarian collectivists like Bakunin, who were of course aware that the possessing classes would not voluntarily renounce their privileges and that they must be forced to do so, and who were determined to “organize a revolutionary force capable of triumphing over reaction”; but at the same time they categorically rejected any slogan of “so-called revolutionary dictatorship, even as a revolutionary transition,” even if it is “revolutionary in the Jacobin manner.”¹⁷ As for reformists, they not only reject the words “dictatorship of the proletariat.” but also what we have just seen defined as valid, namely the idea of revolutionary constraint or coercion. And so, for too long, Marxist revolutionaries have not dared to express any reservations concerning the

¹⁷ Bakunin, article in *l'Egalite* (26 June 1869) reproduced as an appendix in *Memoire de la Federation jurassienne* (Sonvillier, 1873); *Œuvres* (Stock), vol. IV, p. 344; ‘Programme de l’Organisation révolutionnaire des Freres internationaux’, in *Ul.liance internationale de la democratie socialiste et l’Association internationale des travailleurs* (London & Hamburg, 1873). It is true that Bakunin, when under the influence of the Blanquists, would occasionally use the word “dictatorship”, but he would always pull himself back immediately: “dictatorship, but not one sanctioned by the officer’s sash, governmental title or legal institution, and all the more powerful for having none of the accoutrements of power” (Letter to Albert Richard, 1870, in Richard, *Bakounine et l’Internationale a Lyon*. Cf. also Fritz Brupbacher, ‘Soixante ans d’heresie’ in *Socialisme et Liberte* (Editions de la Baconniere Boudry, 1955), p. 259.

voted but incompetent sans-culotte generals a new type of young chiefs risen from the ranks, capable but consumed by ambition and who would later be the instruments of reaction and military dictatorship. To a certain extent, these future Marshals of the Empire were the prefiguration of Soviet marshals.

“Anarchy” Deduced from the French Revolution

The French Revolution had hardly ended before “theoreticians” plunged into the analysis of its mechanisms and the search for its lessons with passionate ardor and an often remarkable lucidity. Their attention was concentrated essentially on two great problems: that of permanent revolution and that of the state. What they discovered first was that the Great Revolution, because it had been only bourgeois, had betrayed popular aspirations and had to be continued until the complete liberation of man. What they all deduced from this was socialism.³⁹ Some of them also discovered that within the Revolution a new type of people power, oriented from the bottom up, had made its appearance on the historical stage and that it had finally been supplanted by a powerfully reconstituted top-down oppressive apparatus. And they wondered with fright how the people could avoid seeing their revolution commandeered in the future. From this they deduced anarchism.

The first person who saw this, in 1794, was the Enragé Varlet.⁴⁰ In a short pamphlet written right after Thermidor he wrote this prophetic sentence: “For any reasoning being, government and revolution are incompatible.” And he accused the “revolutionary gov-

³⁹ The expression “permanent revolution” can be found in the writings of Bakunin as well as in those of Blanqui and Marx. [See also Proudhon’s ‘Toast to the Revolution’, 17 October 1848: “From this it follows that revolution is always in history and that, strictly speaking, there are not several revolutions, but only one permanent revolution.” In *Property Is Theft!*, p. 359—DB]

⁴⁰ Jean-François Varlet (1764–1837) was a supporter of the sans-culotte Hebert and was imprisoned more than once for his insurrectionism. [DB]

and property flowed from their greed, they nevertheless had individual interests to defend against the revolutionary bourgeoisie. The latter, in fact, only wanted to leave them as small a piece of the pie as possible, first because that enormous budget-devouring plebs was expensive; second, because the bourgeoisie distrusted its origins among and its links to the people and, above all, the support from the working-class quarters which it had obtained demagogically with a view to occupying all posts; and finally because the bourgeoisie intended to keep the control of the revolutionary government in the hands of its tried and tested experts.

The struggle for power that opposed the plebeians to the experts was a sharp one and, in the end, it was settled by the guillotine. Certain important sectors such as the Ministry of War, the secret funds,³⁷ and the war industries were the stakes in this rivalry. The battle over the war industry was particularly revealing, for it was here that two modes of economic management confronted each other: free enterprise and what is today called state capitalism. If the plebeians had achieved their goals and if the war industry had been nationalized as they demanded, a portion of the profits coveted and finally seized by the revolutionary bourgeoisie would have gone into their pockets.

Trotsky, incompletely informed, is not totally correct when he asserts that Stalinism “had no prehistory,” that the French Revolution knew nothing that resembled the Soviet bureaucracy, derived from a single revolutionary party and having its roots in the collective ownership of the means of production.³⁸ I think, on the contrary, that the Hébertist plebeians were, in more ways than one, a foreshadowing of the Russian bureaucrats of the Stalinist era.

In the same way, once the generals of the *ancien régime*, traitors to the revolution, were eliminated, there arose alongside the de-

³⁷ The Ministry of War used the *fonds secrets* (secret funds) to fund intelligence activities. [DB]

³⁸ Trotsky, *Staline* (Paris: UGE, 1979 [948]), pp. 485, 556–60.

words used, for fear of being suspected of “opportunism” regarding their essence.¹⁸

The inappropriateness of the terms appears still more clearly if we go back to the sources. The Babouvists (followers of Babeuf) were the first to speak of revolutionary “dictatorship.”¹⁹ Although they had the merit of drawing a clear lesson from the bourgeoisie’s theft of the revolution, we know that they appeared too late, at a moment when the masses had surrendered. A minuscule and isolated minority, they doubted the people’s capacity to lead themselves, at least in the near term, and they called for a dictatorship, either the dictatorship of one man or that of “hands wisely and resolutely revolutionary.”²⁰

The German communist Weitling and the French revolutionary Blanqui borrowed this concept of dictatorship from the Babouvists.²¹ Incapable of joining up with a mass movement that was still embryonic, with a proletariat still too ignorant and demoralized to govern itself, they believed that small, bold minorities could seize power by surprise and establish socialism from above by means of the most rigorous dictatorial centralization, while waiting for

¹⁸ They shook with fear at the thought of contradicting Lenin, for whom anyone who did not understand the necessity of dictatorship had understood nothing about the Revolution and could therefore not be a true revolutionary. See his ‘Contribution à l’histoire de la dictature’ (1920), in V.I. Lenin, *De l’Etat* (Paris: Bureau d’éditions, 1935).

¹⁹ Gracchus Babeuf (1760–1797), guillotined for his part in the Conspiracy of the Equals, was widely influential in the nineteenth century and is regarded as a precursor of revolutionary socialism. See Ian Birchall, *The Spectre of Babeuf* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016). [DB]

²⁰ Philippe Buonarroti, *Conspiration pour l’égalité, dite de Babeuf* (Librairie romantique, 1828), vol. I, pp. 93, 134, 139, 140. [*History of Babeuf’s ‘Conspiracy of Equals’* —DB]

²¹ Wilhelm Weitling (1808–1871), a Prussian tailor, lived in Paris from 1837 to 1841 and was influenced by Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, Etienne Cabet and early millenarian Christian movements. A member of the communist League of the Just, he was admired by many leading revolutionaries of the time, including Marx and Bakunin. [DB]

the people to be mature enough to share power with their leaders. While the idealist Weitling envisaged a personal dictatorship, that of “a new messiah,” Blanqui, more realistic, closer to the nascent working-class movement, spoke of a “Parisian dictatorship,” that is, a dictatorship of the Parisian proletariat, though in his mind the proletariat was only capable of exercising this “dictatorship” in the person of one man, through the intermediary of its educated elite, of Blanqui and his secret society.²²

Marx and Engels, though opposed to the Blanquists’ minoritarian and voluntarist concepts, in 1850 made them the concession of adopting the famous formula,²³ going as far as identifying communism and Blanquism.²⁴ There is no doubt that in the minds of the founders of scientific socialism, revolutionary coercion seemed to be exercised by the working class and not, as in the case of the Blanquists, by a vanguard detached from the class.²⁵ But they did not differentiate such an interpretation of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” clearly enough from that of the Blanquists. Later Lenin, claiming to adhere both to Jacobinism and Marxism, would invent the concept of the dictatorship of one party substituting itself for the working class and acting in its name.²⁶ And his disciples in the Urals, taking his logic to its ultimate conclusion, frankly pro-

²² Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*; Preface by V.P. Volguine in Albert Soboul, Pierre Angrand and Jean Dauty (eds.), *Textes choisis de Blanqui* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1955), pp. 20 and 41; Maurice Dommanget, *Les idées politiques et sociales d’Auguste Blanqui* (Paris: Librairie Marcel Riviere, 1957), pp. 170–3.

²³ Cf. *Les Cahiers du bolchevisme*, 14 March 1933, p. 451.

²⁴ Marx, *La Lutte de classes en France* [850] (Ed. Schleicher, 1900), p.147. [“The proletariat rallies more and more around revolutionary socialism, around communism, for which the bourgeoisie has itself invented the name of Blanqui. This socialism is the declaration of the permanence of the revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally” –Marxists Internet Archive. DB]

²⁵ Maximilien Rubel, *Karl Marx, pages choisies pour une éthique socialiste* (Paris: Marcel Riviere, 1948), pp. 224–5.

²⁶ A reference to Lenin’s comment: “A Jacobin who wholly identifies himself with the organisation of the proletariat—a proletariat conscious of its class

made it submit to central power, when he persecuted the authentically revolutionary tendencies and crushed the Left opposition, that the “ebbing of the Revolution, preface to 9 Thermidor and, later, to the Napoleonic dictatorship of the sword,” began.³⁵ Rocker concluded with bitterness in 1921: “In Russia they are repeating to-day what occurred in France in March 1794.”

The Embryo of a Plebeian Bureaucracy

Because the Great Revolution was not only bourgeois but was also accompanied by an embryonic proletarian revolution, one sees in it the germ of a phenomenon that will only assume its full scope in the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Already, in 1793, democracy from below gave birth to a caste of parvenus differentiating themselves from the masses and aspiring to commandeer the popular revolution to their profit. In the ambivalent mentality of these plebeians, revolutionary faith and material appetites were closely intertwined. As Jaurès phrased it, the Revolution looked to them to be “both an ideal and a career.”³⁶ They served the bourgeois revolution at the same time that they used it. Robespierre and Saint-Just, like Lenin in his time, denounced the appetite of this nascent and already invasive bureaucracy.

A certain number of them entered into open conflict with the Committee of Public Safety. If their attachment to bourgeois law

³⁵ *Der Bankrott*, op. cit.

³⁶ Jean Jaures (1859–1914), a schoolteacher and university lecturer turned politician, was one of the principal figures in the history of French socialism. Initially a left-wing republican, he was instrumental in creating and became the leader of the French Socialist Party (opposed to the Socialist Party of France led by the self-proclaimed Marxist Jules Guesde), and in 1904 he founded the newspaper *L’Humanité* (which from 1920 would be the paper of the French Communist Party). In 1905, the two socialist parties merged to create the Unified Socialist Party, French Section of the Workers’ International (PSU-SFIO). Because of his outspoken pacifism, Jaures was assassinated by a nationalist in 1914 shortly before the outbreak of war. [DB]

sworn enemies of the sans-culottes. During a revolution a man lacking in competency but devoted body and soul to the people's cause, when he assumes civil or military responsibilities is worth more than a competent individual ready to betray.

During the six months or so of the flourishing of direct democracy the people demonstrated their creative genius; they revealed, though in a still embryonic form, that there exist other revolutionary techniques than those of the bourgeoisie, than one that is top-down. Certainly it is the latter that prevailed at the time, for the bourgeoisie had a maturity and an experience that conferred on it an enormous advantage over the people. But Year II of the Republic, if one knows how to decipher its message, foretells that the fertile potential of revolutionary techniques from below will one day win out in the proletarian revolution over the techniques inherited from the Jacobin bourgeoisie. Albert Mathiez, accustomed, as Georges Lefebvre admits, to "considering the Revolution from above,"³³ felt that he needed to draw an enthusiastic parallel between the "harsh" dictatorship of Public Safety of 1793 and that of 1920 in Russia.³⁴

But even during the period when Mathiez was invoking the revolutionary bourgeois dictatorship of 1793 in an attempt to legitimize Lenin's Jacobin dictatorship, the German anarchist Rudolf Rocker supported the contrary thesis: "Referring to the French Revolution to justify the tactics of the Bolsheviks in Russia," he said, demonstrates "a total misunderstanding of historical facts ... Historical experience demonstrates the exact opposite: at every decisive moment of the French Revolution the true initiative in action rose directly from the people. The secret of the Revolution resides in this creative activity of the masses." On the other hand, it was when Robespierre deprived the popular movement of its autonomy and

³³ Georges Lefebvre, *Etudes sur la Revolution française* (Paris: PUF, 1954), p. 21.

³⁴ Albert Mathiez, *L'Humanite*, 19 August 1920; quoted in Guy-Grand, op. cit., p. 225.

claimed, without being disavowed, that the dictatorship of the proletariat would be a dictatorship over the proletariat.²⁷

From 1921 the German anarchist Rudolf Rocker, noting the "bankruptcy of state 'communism'" in Russia would maintain that the dictatorship of one class in and of itself is "absolutely unthinkable." and that in reality it is a matter of the dictatorship of one party claiming to speak in the name of a class. And he would forcefully rise up against the illusion of transforming the state, an organ of oppression, into an organ for the liberation of the oppressed, baptized "dictatorship" of the proletariat. "The state," he wrote, "can only be what it is, the defender of privilege and the exploitation of the masses, the creator of new classes and monopolies. Whoever does not know the role of the state does not grasp the essence of the current social order and is incapable of showing humanity the new horizons of its evolution."²⁸

The Reconstituting of the State

The dual experiences of the French and Russian Revolutions teach us that we are touching upon the central point of a mechanism at the end of which direct democracy, people's self-management, gradually mutates, through the establishing of the revolutionary "dictatorship," into the reconstitution of an apparatus for the oppression of the people. Of course, the process was

interests-is a revolutionary Social Democrat." (Collected Works 7: p. 383) Rosa Luxemburg challenges this claim in her 'Organizational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy', while Kropotkin stressed the fundamentally bourgeois nature and role of the Jacobins in *La Science Moderne et l'Anarchie* (Paris, 1913) and *The Great French Revolution, 1789-1793* (1909). [DB]

²⁷ Cf. Leon Trotsky, *Nos taches politiques* [904], notably the final chapter entitled 'Dictature sur le proletariat'.

²⁸ *Der Bankrott des russischen Staatskommunismus* (Berlin, 1921), pp. 28-31; published in French as *Les soviets trahis par les bolcheviks* (Spartacus, 1973, new edition 1998). [This text, whose title means "The Bankruptcy of Russian State-Communism", does not seem to have been translated into English. DB]

not exactly identical in the two revolutions. The first was that of an essentially bourgeois revolution, though already containing the embryo of proletarian revolution. The second was an essentially proletarian revolution, though having at the same time to fulfill the tasks of the bourgeois revolution. In the first case it was not the “dictatorship” from below, which had however already made an appearance, it was the dictatorship from above, that of the bourgeois revolutionary government, which provided the starting point for a new oppressive apparatus. In the second case it was from the “dictatorship from below,” that of the proletariat in arms, for whom the party almost immediately substituted itself, that the oppressive apparatus was finally reconstituted. But in the two cases, despite this important difference, an analogy can be seen: the concentration of power, the “dictatorship,” is presented as the product of necessity.²⁹ The revolution is in danger from both within and without. The reconstituting of the oppressive apparatus is invoked as indispensable for the crushing of counter-revolution.

Was the “necessity”—the counter-revolutionary danger—really the only reason for this abrupt turnabout? This is what most left-wing historians claim. Georges Lefebvre assures us that the Revolution could only be saved if the people were “organized and led by bourgeois cadres.” It was necessary to bring together all the nation’s forces for the benefit of the army. This could only occur by means of a strong and centralized government. Dictatorship from below could not succeed in this, since apart from the fact that it lacked the needed abilities, it could not forego an overall plan and a center of execution.³⁰ Albert Soboul considers that the direct democracy of the sans-culottes was, due to its “weakness,” impracticable in the crisis through which the republic was passing.³¹ Be-

²⁹ Cf. Proudhon, *Idee generate de la Revolution* (1851) in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Riviere, 1926), pp. 121–6; Deutscher, *Staline*, pp. 8–9.

³⁰ Georges Lefebvre, *Annales historiques ...* April-June 1947, p.175.

³¹ Albert Soboul, ‘Robespierre and the Popular Movement of 1793–1794’ in *Past and Present* (May 1954), p. 60.

fore them, Georges Guy-Grand, minimizing the political capacity of the popular vanguard, maintained that “the people of Paris did not know what to do with their riots. The riots were valid means of destroying, and destruction must sometimes be done. But demolishing Bastilles, massacring prisoners, aiming cannons at the Convention are not enough to make a country live. When cadres needed to be reconstituted, when industries and the government had to be made to function, there was no choice but to rely on the sole elements available, which were bourgeois.”³²

But it is not certain that the Revolution could only be saved by these techniques and from above. A relatively effective collaboration had been established at the base between the administration of staple goods and the popular societies, between the government and the revolutionary committees. The reinforcement of central power stifled and killed the initiative from below that had been the heart of the Revolution. Bourgeois ability was substituted for popular enthusiasm. The Revolution lost its essential strength, its internal dynamic.

What is more, we must be wary of those who invoke the pretext of “competence” to legitimize the exclusive and abusive use of bourgeois expertise during a revolutionary period. First, because men of the people are less ignorant, less incompetent than some people claim in order to make their case. Second, because the plebeians of 1793, when they were lacking in technical abilities, overcame that deficiency by their sense of democracy and their higher awareness of their obligations to the revolution. Finally, because the bourgeois technicians, reputed to be indispensable and irreplaceable, too often profited by their situation, which was considered impregnable, to intrigue against the people and to even develop suspicious ties with counter-revolutionaries. People like Carnot, Cambon, Lindet, and Barère were the agents of the great bourgeoisie and the

³² Georges Guy-Grand, *La Democratie et l’apres-guerre* (Paris: Gamier, 1920), p.230.