Democracy and Utopia

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The subject of democracy and utopia may be approached in a philosophical fashion. Since the eighteenth century, democracy has presented itself to the modern individual as a promise of liberty, or more precisely, of autonomy. This is in contrast to earlier times when men were viewed as subjects, and consequently were deprived of the right of self-determination, which is the basis of the legitimacy of modern societies. Ever since the democratic idea penetrated the minds and peoples of Europe, it has not ceased to make inroads nearly everywhere through a single question, inherent in its very nature, that crops up continuously and is never truly resolved. That question, which was posed very early on by all the great Western thinkers from Hobbes to Rousseau and from Hegel to Tocqueville, was as follows: "What kind of society should we form if we think of ourselves as autonomous individuals? What type of social bond can be established among free and equal men, since liberty and equality are the conditions of our autonomy? How can we conceive a society in which each member is sovereign over himself, and which thus must harmonize the sovereignty of each over himself and of all over all?"

In the course of these probings into the central question of modern democracy, one is necessarily struck by the gap between the expectations that democracy arouses and the solutions that it creates for fulfilling them. In the abstract, there is a point in political space where the most complete liberty and the most complete equality meet, thus bringing together the ideal conditions of autonomy. But our societies never reach this point. Democratic society is never democratic enough, and its supporters are more numerous and more dangerous critics of democracy than its adversaries. Democracy's promises of liberty and equality are, in fact, unlimited. In a society of individuals, it is impossible to make liberty and equality reign together or even to reconcile the two in a lasting way. These promises expose all democratic political regimes not only to demagogic appeals, but also to the constant accusation of being unfaithful to their own founding values. In premodern systems, legitimacy, like obedience, found its guarantee in la durée. In the democratic world, neither legitimacy nor obedience is ever lastingly secured.

A century and a half ago, one of the best minds of French liberalism, Charles de Rémusat, explained how the congenital instability of liberal democracy is a consequence of the limitless vistas that it makes available to the human imagination:

The speculations of social philosophy, particularly when everyone gets involved in them, have an inconvenient way of making people disgusted with real things, of blocking all contentment while the dream of the absolute remains unrealized, and of casting discredit upon all the opportunities for improvement and progress that fortune offers to nations. All that is not yet ideal is misery. If the principle of authority is not
established without restriction, all is anarchy. If pure democracy is still to come, all is oppression. There is never anything to do in the present except start a new revolution, and it is necessary to agitate incessantly, to roll again and again the dice of politics in an attempt to turn up some abstract number that may not even exist.

Thus the modern world is a place that is particularly sensitive to the claims of utopia. It is necessary, in this context, to give the word "utopia" a slightly different meaning than it had in earlier centuries. Before the modern era, the word referred either to a literary genre or to an eschatology tied to Christianity. In the first case, it attached to that type of work in which the author imagines a perfect social universe, exempt from human vice and wickedness, outside of space and time. In the second, it designated the messianic emotions that animated a number of popular insurrections in Christian Europe, notably at the end of the Middle Ages, through the passion for obtaining eternal salvation by means of action here below. The utopia of democratic times, however, belongs to a third category, one that was unheard of until the French Revolution. While it also can be bookish, as so many political works from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries attest, it is [End Page 66] never outside of time and space; on the contrary, it tends to be based upon time—in the guise of "history"—and to incarnate itself within a specific territory. It has severed all ties with religious hopes, and seeks only earthly human happiness. It is charged with emotions of a political kind. These emotions are nourished by the frustrations engendered by the promises of democracy, and seek to fulfill these promises by making liberty and equality finally real. The commitment is merely terrestrial, but it is so total that the legitimacy of the social contract depends upon the fulfillment of these promises.

We might thus undertake a philosophical analysis of the psychological inevitability of utopianism in modern politics, by listing the traits that characterize it during the contemporary age, in contrast to the past. But I prefer to follow a mode of exposition that is more historical than philosophical. Let us trace the course of democratic utopias from their first appearance during the French Revolution up to our own day, the end of the twentieth century, in the hope that in studying their history, we might clarify their nature and profundity.

**The French Revolution and the American Revolution**

Let us begin, then, with the French Revolution, that laboratory of modern democracy. And let us consider its first objective: to make a tabula rasa of the past. This was a goal that was shared by the American Revolution, but which in France carried a particular utopian charge.

In both cases, the notion of erasing the past bespeaks modern artificialism, the obsession with constructing society rather than considering it as given by the natural or divine order of things, with founding it upon nothing but the free consent of its members. Thus the original founding is clothed in a particular reverence and solemnity. "Original" does not necessarily mean "definitive," since, as Jefferson once said, society must be refounded every 20 years so that each generation may have the opportunity to correct or remake the constitution according to its own will. Yet this attempt to institutionalize revolution at periodic intervals merely emphasizes the extraordinary character of a society whose members must never be bound by a contract that they would not have freely subscribed to themselves.

United by this common ambition to invent a society that would be the product of free wills, the American Revolution and the French Revolution nonetheless display a capital difference in this regard. The former did not need to overturn an aristocratic social order to institute a society of free and equal individuals. The American colonists had left the aristocratic social order behind them when they left England or Europe to live in freedom and equality in a new land: It was the trans-
Atlantic voyage that effected a revolutionary rupture, which emancipation from the British Crown would later merely reinforce. The difference from the French case is so great that Tocqueville, drawing a contrast with what happened in France in 1789, saw in the American case an example of the nonrevolutionary establishment of democracy. "The Americans' great advantage," he wrote, "is to have arrived at democracy without having suffered democratic revolutions, and to have been born equal instead of becoming equal." For Americans, the conventional founding of society by the will of its members accords with the reality of their history.

Lacking the option of moving to a new territory, the French at the end of the eighteenth century had to deny their nation's feudal and aristocratic past in order to invent themselves as a new, or, to use the vocabulary of the time, regenerated, people. It was on this condition only that they could act out the grand drama of the social contract, which so many philosophers of the age had identified as the basis of legitimacy. That is no doubt why they tended to go too far in the vein of democratic philosophy and the universality of natural rights. The Americans had no need to make a great effort of abstraction in order to proclaim themselves free and equal, since their social condition was not too far from these ideals.

The French, by contrast, had to insist all the harder on the normative character of their "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen," for which their history offered neither precedent nor support. On the contrary, it was precisely under the ancien régime that these rights were trampled underfoot. In its French setting, then, the idea of "revolution" was inseparable from the condemnation of the past, which sharpened the will to exclude or eliminate those corrupt beneficiaries of the old order, the aristocrats. The American revolutionaries, it is true, also had to fight a certain number of their compatriots who rallied to the English cause. But the American republic, once it became independent, possessed only a single history, which served as a source of pride and unity. The French, on the other hand, quickly became--and long remained--that strange people incapable of loving their whole national history: For loving the Revolution meant detesting the ancien régime, and loving the ancien régime meant detesting the Revolution.

This tendency penetrated more and more deeply into the national consciousness, extending the revolutionary tabula rasa into the future and renewing the emotion surrounding it for the generations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Yet this tendency also perpetuated a fiction by hiding the Revolution's relationship to the past from which it sprang--namely, absolutism. While the Anglo-Americans formed a new people by means of their exodus from the Old World, the French of the late eighteenth century became obsessed with a passionate desire to cut themselves off from their past, and thus were condemned to overlook that this passion for separation was itself a legacy of this past: The ancient constitution of the kingdom already had been destroyed by a series of absolute monarchs before the men of 1789 made their solemn proclamation of a new starting point and principle of regeneration. Revolutions, wrote Guizot, "are far less the symptom of something beginning than the declaration of something that has already occurred." Viewed from this angle, the two revolutions of the late eighteenth century, the American and the French, are the offspring of two preceding revolutions. The American reinforced what had begun when people left England in the name of individual liberty. The French was heir to the subversion of the traditional order by the administrative monarchy. This was a subversion that the Revolution appropriated and completed, through the proclamation of the tabula rasa, before weighing its consequences for the reconstitution of a body politic. Yet the failures that the Revolution met in this very enterprise would constantly give new life to the idea of an absolutely fresh start: If this enterprise failed in 1789 or 1791, it had only to be resumed in 1792 or 1793. In France, revolutionary consciousness combined the view of the times as a curse with the view of the times as a new dawn.
This consciousness was thus free of any reference to a restoration, to say nothing of a return to a golden age. Like its opposite, the idea of the ancien régime, this consciousness constituted itself very quickly, taking the form of a universal promise opening out onto an unlimited future. In this sense, as Michelet wrote when trying to characterize the spirit of 1789, "time no longer existed; time had perished." Yet this fictitious exorcism of an accursed past did not exempt the French Revolution from also being, in its turn, a history, constantly judged against its promise, and therefore constantly obliged to begin anew its efforts to fulfill it. The American idea of revolution found its fulfillment in the founding of an independent republic through the federal Constitution of 1787 and the constitutions of the several states. The French idea of revolution passed from one phase to the next of revolutionary history, searching for a fulfillment that it could never attain.

**Restarting the Revolution**

The French Revolution was utopian in the sense that it had nothing but abstract objectives, and thus no foreseeable end. It left in its wake an initial, failed Revolution (that of 1789) in order to begin its course anew, this time solemnly decked out with a new calendar dating time from the beginning of the Republic on 21 September 1792. Its goal was no longer to embody itself in constitutional law, but rather to ensure that liberty and equality would triumph over their enemies-an indispensable first step in the making of a new man, delivered from his age-old subordination to his fellows. This is why the Revolution stressed its character as an annunciation, which gave a unique value to its course. It was the extraordinary contrasted with the ordinary, the exceptional contrasted with the quotidian, to the point where the adjective that appeared to define it could only be tautological: the Revolution was "revolutionary," just as the circumstances were "revolutionary" and the government was "revolutionary." It was no longer solely a question of the health of the fatherland, as in the great perils of the monarchy, or of a Roman-style temporary dictatorship, as described in Rousseau's *Social Contract*. It was a regime new to history, as Robespierre underlined in his famous speech of 5 Nivôse, Year II (25 December 1793), where he drew the contrast between "revolutionary" and "constitutional" government. His goal was not to preserve the Republic, but to found it, getting rid of its enemies by means of the Terror.

Hence his superiority to the law and consequent independence from it: Thus what authorizes the provisional suspension of law goes beyond the public safety; it is the higher imperative to found society upon the virtue of its citizens. The Revolution inherited corrupt and denatured human beings from the ancien régime; before the Revolution could be ruled by means of the law, it would have to regenerate each actor in the new social contract. What for Rousseau constitutes the difficult, even almost impossible passage from man to citizen became for Robespierre the meaning of the Revolution, to be realized through the radical actions of the revolutionary government.

Thus the Revolution of 1789 found itself pregnant with a second Revolution, that of 1792. The latter aimed at being both a correction and an expansion of the former: more radical, more universal, more faithful to its emancipatory goal than its predecessor had been. By means of this intensification, it unfolded in a movement of negation and self-transcending that had no limit. Its horizon--the regeneration of humanity--was so abstract that it fostered political passions that tended toward the quasi-religious, although invested in the world of here and now. It is this which imparts to revolutionary politics its character of ideological intolerance and, at the same time, leaves it open to a constant upping of the ante. Yet this is also what protects the revolutionary idea against its own eventual failure: Those who take it up again find its seductive power intact, for the revolutionary idea contains all that modern politics can offer in the way of messianic charm. It is thus that the French Revolution overflows its chronological definition and escapes being trapped amid the prosaic shoals of Thermidoreanism. To those who came after, the Revolution bequeathed
The political impasse had been grasped at the end of the Terror by the actors in or witnesses of the Revolution themselves. To understand this, one need only think back to the period that followed Robespierre's fall, after the month of Thermidor, Year II (July 1794). Circumstances demanded the rehabilitation of the "legal" at the expense of the "revolutionary" by writing the Revolution into the law--hence the Constitution of the Year III. Those who had toppled Robespierre found themselves caught between two contradictory imperatives. They neither wished nor were able to renounce the Revolution, since it alone had made them what they were. Yet they could not totally endorse it, since the Terror had been part of it. It was the young Benjamin Constant, a newcomer to Paris in 1795, who furnished the solution to this dilemma by distinguishing two types of revolutions. The first results from a gap between the institutions and the ideas of a people, and consists in the violent adjustment of the former to the latter; it is the manifestation of a historical necessity. The second, on the contrary, comes about when the revolution, lost within utopia, has passed beyond the progress of the human spirit. The revolution loses itself in the unreal, the impossible, and the arbitrary, eventually provoking the threat of an about-face. Yet this young Swiss thinker's historicist philosophy was too biased to avoid appearing as a rationalization of power, or to erase the messianic dimension of revolutionary hope.

Moreover, at the very moment when Benjamin Constant was seeking to "fix" the Revolution within the movement of history, Gracchus Babeuf was working to start the Revolution up again, since it had produced merely the bourgeois world, such a far cry from its revolutionary promises. Constant invoked the laws of history, Babeuf the Jacobin cult of will. For the former, the Revolution was the achievement of a necessity; for the latter, it was the invention of a future. The European left would thenceforth ceaselessly explore these two alternatives, contradictory yet born of the same event. Marx would spend his intellectual life trying to reconcile them, but he would remain too deterministic for his voluntarist side, and too voluntaristic for his determinist side. The principal charm that Bolshevism held for some imaginations, 120 years after the French Jacobins, was that it reprised the revolutionary enterprise within this combination of necessity and will.

**The Role of Religion**

Yet before we turn to that, we must highlight a final aspect of the revolutionary idea, one that has furnished a foundation for democracy in Europe--namely, the notion that the promise of a good society is no longer inscribed in sacred texts (as in the English case), or in political and religious harmony (as in the American example), but must be fulfilled solely by the unfolding of history. This story is too long and too complex to go into here, but we may at least attempt to sketch its consequences by continuing my comparison, following many historians of the last century. The English Revolution of the seventeenth century offers an example of the mutation of a religious revolution into a political revolution, with the former laying down the spiritual and moral basis of the latter. The American republic, founded at the end of the following century, was born out of an insurrectionist movement that was never cut off from its Christian roots. In France, on the contrary, the men of 1789 were forced to break with the Catholic Church, one of the pillars of the hated ancien régime, without ever succeeding in substituting another Christian or post-Christian cult in its place. At that time, Protestantism's hour had passed, and deist rationalism, whatever form it took, left people indifferent. The upshot was that the spirit of the Revolution revealed merely politics pure and simple, even though, by virtue of the universal character of its promise, this politics shared something with the message of the gospels. The paradox of modern French history lies in recovering the spirit of Christianity only through revolutionary democracy. Or to put it another way: The French Revolution renewed universalism without ceasing to limit
itself to the level of the political. The French divinized modern liberty and equality without giving the new principles any support other than the historic adventure of a people still otherwise faithful to the Catholic tradition. For a republican historian like Edgar Quinet, this contradiction spelled out the inherent failure of the French Revolution. It is also by means of this contradiction that we can best come to understand the utopian dimension of the Revolution, and of the tradition that it inaugurated.

The problem, moreover, is older than the Revolution. It was already present within the philosophy of the Enlightenment, which in its French version was, not more antireligious, but surely more anticlerical than any other in Europe. The Catholic Church and its priests in France were the quintessential targets (think of Voltaire) of that great movement toward the reappropriation of man by man that formed the basic tendency of the age. But eighteenth-century philosophy, unlike that of the sixteenth, showed itself powerless to fashion any religious renewal or even any new spiritual principle from the critique of tradition. Voltairean deism, parliamentary Jansenism, the doctrine of Rousseau's Savoyard vicar, the natural religion of the physiocrats, and Masonic esotericism were all alike in this regard: they served more to embellish political expectations than to shape collective beliefs. The France of the Enlightenment lived under the empire of the political even before it became the France of the Revolution. And those elements of religion it retained, as Tocqueville perceived, were reinscribed within the core of the political: the universalism of "civilization," faith in progress, and the emancipation of the human race. Marx also keenly sensed this; he defined the French Revolution, at the time when he was seeking to decode its mystery, as "the illusion of the political."

The boundless investment in historical action, a flame that burned brightest during the years of the Jacobin dictatorship, led the French revolutionaries toward such utopian objectives as the regeneration of humanity. Condemned to waste away under the weight of actual history, as can be seen after Thermidor and under Napoleon, this messianic hope nonetheless survived the event that formed it, as a universal promise of [End Page 72] earthly salvation, oriented simply toward the future. There may be found its link with Bolshevism, to which I now turn.

The October Revolution

If you will allow me, I would like to take a giant step across the nineteenth century to examine our own, which is richer still in the utopian idea. Indeed, if we take the nineteenth and twentieth centuries together we can consider them as belonging to the same category, for between them, they constitute the European experience of democracy. Yet they may be viewed as two separate epochs, each of which possesses (both by itself and in relation to the other) enough distinctive traits to have its own esprit du temps. Nineteenth-century Europe, which followed upon the French Revolution, mastered the storm that preceded it. Condemned to waste away under the weight of actual history, as can be seen after Thermidor and under Napoleon, this messianic hope nonetheless survived the event that formed it, as a universal promise of earthly salvation, oriented simply toward the future. There may be found its link with Bolshevism, to which I now turn.
democratic century in human history (given that the nineteenth remained partially aristocratic), and it is not by chance that it has also been the one in which the utopian vision of politics has played an essential role.

Hence I come to the question that I sought to understand in my most recent book, *Le passé d'une illusion*. This question was not the history of communism. It was rather the very different one of the sway that the communist idea held over so many minds during the twentieth century: a sway so deep and so vast that it gave rise to a universal belief whose geographic reach exceeded that of Christianity. Born in Europe during the nineteenth century, the idea of communism spread throughout the whole world during the twentieth. I mean by this not that it dominated everyone's imagination, but simply that it was endowed with an exceptional ubiquity; not that it failed to arouse adversaries, but simply that it was more universal than any known religion. Whether in its soft or hard versions, whether reassuring or demanding of sacrifices, it spanned nations and civilizations as a prospect inseparable from the political order of every society in the modern epoch.

Yet this prospect presented the paradoxical character of being linked to a historical event and a historical reality: the October Revolution of 1917 and the regime to which it gave birth. Without the October Revolution, without the USSR, the communist idea would have remained what it had been in the nineteenth century: a vague promise, a far horizon, a post-bourgeois-alienation world that each could imagine according to his own inclination. It was October 1917 and the USSR that gave this vision its unity, its substance, and its force. Its voyage through the century would never stop depending on discussion of the regime that was supposed to illustrate it. The communist idea was no longer free, as it had been in the preceding century, but subordinated to the constraint of a constant affirmation of the veracity of its Soviet incarnation. This was its strength--that the idea had taken root in history--but also its weakness, for the idea was dependent upon its manifestation in reality. The interesting thing is that its strength triumphed over its weakness. Until its end, the Soviet Union managed to embody for millions of people the promise of a new society. The mere fact of its existence and its expansion justified its claims. No amount of massive, organized violence committed by its government and no failure in the economic realm could ever snuff out the dogma of its superiority to capitalism. The mystery of the communist idea in this century is thus that of a hope grafted onto a tragedy.

Another way to make the same observation is to consider the recent end of the USSR. This end came about in a nonrevolutionary fashion, through the self-dissolution of the metropolitan regime—which had itself set the stage for the fall of the satellite regimes—without a purge of old personnel from the new system. Yet what was a gentle transition for the system's personnel (so different in this respect from the liquidation of fascism in 1945) stood in stark contrast to the radical abandonment of communist ideas: The ex-communist countries all tried to base their rebirth on the very "bourgeois" principles that they once had claimed to have abolished and surpassed. As a result, the presence or return to power of former members of communist parties did nothing to change the fact that communism had come to an end along with the regime that had taken it as its banner; communism died with the Soviet Union. The proof is that the European of the present fin de siècle finds himself bereft of a vision of the future. If bourgeois democracy is no longer what comes before socialism, but rather what comes after it, then those living in bourgeois democracy can no longer imagine anything beyond the horizon within which they now dwell.

Thus nothing less than the disappearance of the USSR was required to break the spell that had linked the October revolution to the idea of a better society. The hour of general disillusionment came not from the spectacle of Soviet history, but only from its end. This permits us to attach [End Page 74] precise dates to the lifespan of the illusion, from Lenin to Gorbachev,
and also to gauge the extent to which, powerful though it was, it possessed a very ephemeral character: The illusion did not survive beyond its object, that is, it was to last less than three-quarters of a century. Hence the word *illusion*, in the title of my book, does not designate the same type of belief that Freud had in view in his *The Future of an Illusion*. He was writing about religion, whereas I attempted to analyze the brief trajectory of a political idea tied to the history of a government and a regime. If I have used this same term, illusion, it has been to indicate that while the object may be earthly rather than divine, a comparable psychological investment is at stake. Moreover, the idea of the universality of men forms a minimal common ground between Christianity and communism. Finally, this particular illusion, unlike religious belief, has the advantage (for the observer, at least) of no longer having anything but a past. Today, the history of communism is closed, and thus can be documented. This is not to say that modern democracies shall henceforth live without political utopia; I believe the contrary. But in the form through which it exerted such power over men's minds during our century, the communist idea has died before our eyes and will not be reborn. The mystery of its strength and its short lifespan forms the subject of my book.

**The Political Imagination of Twentieth-Century Man**

I had no intention particularly to focus on the case of intellectuals. If I accorded them a large role, it is because they write things down and thus leave testimony behind--and God knows that, in our time, they have written a great deal on politics! But what is interesting about them is less their case in itself than what it reveals about opinion in general. Contrary to what is usually written, the communist illusion was not peculiar to those who write and think for a living. It was far more widespread, and the intellectuals drew it from the atmosphere of their times, where they found it in all its forms, from a militant faith to a vague notion about the meaning of history. But in every case it endows the political universe with much vaster stakes. It superbly illustrates the character of an epoch when politics was the great dividing line between good and evil. In the illusion of communism, in the imaginary and fraught journey of the communist idea, I have tried to recover one of the starting points, perhaps the principal one, from which twentieth-century man has imagined his situation in the world. My book is a contribution to the history of the political imagination of twentieth-century man.

At the heart of this political imagination, stands the figure of revolution, established since the end of the eighteenth century in the minds of Europeans--even those who hate it--as the quintessential means of historical change. The revolution took place in order to inaugurate the reign of the bourgeoisie over the feudal world. It must recommence in order to inaugurate the reign of the proletariat--precursor to the emancipation of humanity--over the bourgeois world.

The idea is first of all nourished by hatred of that which it seeks to destroy. Its mainspring is the rejection and even the hatred of the bourgeois, the central personage of modern society and the scapegoat for all the troubles that this society is constantly fostering. The bourgeois is the symbol of man's division within himself, first diagnosed by Rousseau, and this existential difficulty has weighed ceaselessly upon his destiny. All his inventions turn against him. He rises by means of money, which has allowed him to dissolve aristocratic gradations of "rank" from within, but this instrument of equality transforms him into an aristocrat of a new type, even more the prisoner of his wealth than the noble was the prisoner of his birth. He inaugurated the Rights of Man, but in fact prefers the right of property. Liberty frightens him, and equality scares him even more. He was the father of democracy, in which every man is the equal of every other, associated with all in the construction of the social order, and in which each one, by obeying the law, obeys only himself. Yet democracy has exposed the fragility of bourgeois governments along with the threat
posed by the masses, that is to say, by the poor. Thus the bourgeois is more reticent than ever about the principles of 1789, even though they facilitated his spectacular entrance into history.

If the bourgeois is the man of denial, it is because he is the man of falsehood. Far from incarnating the universal, he has but one obsession, his interests, and one passion, money. It is money that arouses the worst hatred against him, that unites in opposition to him the prejudices of the aristocrats, the jealousy of the poor, and the contempt of the intellectuals, past and present, who expel him from the future. The source of his power over society also accounts for his weak hold over the imagination. A king is infinitely more vast than his person, an aristocrat derives his prestige from a past far older than he is, a socialist preaches struggle to bring forth a better world where he will no longer exist. But the rich man is only what he is: rich, that is all. Money is not a sign of his virtue, or even of his labor, as in the Puritan understanding; instead, it is a sign of his luck or his greed. Money, moreover, divides the bourgeois from his fellows without bringing him the respect that allows the aristocrat to govern his inferiors; it reduces the bourgeois to a private condition by closing him up within the economic realm. The bourgeois has no appeal against this political deficiency, since it arises from a handicap of birth. It is at the very moment when the consent of the governed becomes explicitly necessary for the government of men that it is the most difficult to unite them.

The revolution represents the inversion of the bourgeois world as well as the principal sign of its having been transcended. As its inversion, the revolution is the revenge of the public on the private, the triumph of politics over economics, the victory of will over the everyday order of things. As the transcending of the bourgeois world, the revolution tears society away from its past and its traditions in order to undertake anew the construction of a social world. The revolution carries modern artificialism to its absolute form by rejecting all traditions. If bourgeois interests foiled the French Revolution's drive to wipe the slate clean, the only thing to do is to direct the struggle against them.

**Necessity, Will, and the Revolutionary Idea**

I am well aware that there is another version of the revolutionary idea, one that does not attribute such a Promethean role to the human will. Far from it, since this version consists not in making, but in waiting for, the revolution, as one waits for fruit to ripen, from the maturation of mentalities and things. The analogy with a natural cycle indicates that a more or less deterministic vision of the evolution of societies has taken the place of the creative virtues of human initiative. In both versions, the revolution constitutes the privileged mode of history's unfolding; but the second leaves nothing or almost nothing to the poetry of action, while the first exalts political invention without stripping from it the dignity of a necessary accomplishment. Marx never ceased oscillating between the two conceptions, and his heirs have done so still more. One of the Bolsheviks' great charms, perhaps their main one, was their extreme voluntarism, drawn from the example set by the Jacobins: what could be more extraordinary than to make a proletarian revolution in the land of czars and muzhiks? Yet Lenin managed to drape even this extraordinary event in the authority of science: The revolutionary party had grasped the laws of history. He thus recovered the necessity of the revolution, yet did so by putting it at the service of political decision. It matters little that the two ideas are contradictory. Their peculiar marriage beguiles the imagination as the union of liberty and science. There, modern subjectivity finds both its plenitude and its guarantee.

As a rupture in the temporal order, although it fulfills history's promises, the revolution is invested with almost infinite social expectations. It must free the world from the bourgeois curse: from the reign of money, from the alienation brought by the market, from the division of classes, and even
from the division within man himself. For it emancipates not only the proletarian, or the poor, but also the bourgeois, or his son. It makes everything depend upon history, which henceforth becomes the arena of human salvation, and upon politics, through which people choose their destiny: Everything can be achieved by a good society, if one can be established. Modern society disrupts the social bond by imprisoning individuals within the obsessive urge for money. Burdened from the start with a political deficit, it ignores the idea of the common good, since all those who compose it, plunged in relativism, each have their own good. Such a society is incapable of forming a community of members freely associated around a collective project. [End Page 77] The revolutionary idea is the exorcism of this unhappiness. It divinizes the political so as to avoid having to be contemptuous of it. In these traits we can recognize the hopes invested in the foundation of socialism by the revolution of October 1917.

Now one of the features--and one of the novelties--of the twentieth century is fascism's appropriation, to the profit of the right, of the revolutionary idea. One can easily understand this by looking back through the thought of the nineteenth century. During that epoch, revolution formed part of a conception of history that was monopolized by the left. It was a conception so powerful that even the right depended on it to a large degree, under the inverted form of its negation: the right was counterrevolutionary. But the idea of counterrevolution was compromised by this very dependence, for it evokes a return to a bygone past, out of which was born the revolution that the counterrevolutionary idea wanted to erase. This return, moreover, could only be achieved by means of revolutionary violence, which the counterrevolutionary idea claimed to detest. Whether seen as an end or a means, the counterrevolution was caught in a contradiction. It offered neither a policy nor a strategy. It was from this impasse that fascism delivered the European right that opposed the principles of 1789. Fascism gave the right a future.

Fascism fought the modern individualism and bourgeois egotism for which the French Revolution had paved the way, but it did not do so in the name of a return to aristocratic society. Fascism had no more esteem for the old aristocracy than it did for the new bourgeoisie. It aimed to destroy both in the name of the people, assembled without distinction of rank or class under the authority of a leader who incarnated that people. To serve this end it stopped at nothing, no matter how violent or illegal it might be, for the national or racial community of tomorrow could be brought into being only at the price of overthrowing the classes in power.

To fascism, then, were annexed all the seductions of the revolutionary idea, so essential to the modern absolutization of history. Fascism presented itself as an uprooting of the past, a violent and radical triumph over the corruption of the world of yesterday, an instance of political will revenging itself upon the alienating forces of the economy. It also fulfilled the conditions for a refoundation of the social, but in the name of the nation. One cannot recover a sense of the popularity that fascism enjoyed during the period between the two world wars unless one considers the promises of which it claimed to be the bearer. One can grasp nothing of our century's tragedies, moreover, unless one sees that the revolutionary idea took not one, but two paths into people's minds.

The End of Utopia?

I shall not recount these tragedies here, contenting myself with having underlined what they owed, from the outset, to the divinization of political [End Page 78] action that is one of the characteristics of the utopian thought of the democratic age. I would instead like to offer some observations on our situation today, when this type of thought has been discredited by history. Communism never conceived of any tribunal other than history's, and it has now been condemned by history to disappear, lock, stock, and barrel. Its defeat, therefore, is beyond appeal.
But must we conclude from this that it is necessary categorically to banish utopia from the public life of our societies? That might perhaps be going too far, because it would also mean destroying one of the great props of civic activity. For if the social order cannot be other than what it is, why should we trouble ourselves about it? The end of the communist idea has closed before our eyes the greatest path offered to the imagination of modern man in the matter of collective happiness. But it has by the same token deepened the political deficit that has always characterized modern liberalism.

In reality, this collapse affects not just communists, nor even just the left. It forces us to rethink convictions that are as old as democracy, especially that famous notion of a clear direction of history that was supposed to have anchored democracy in time. If capitalism has become the future of socialism, and the bourgeois world has succeeded that of the "proletarian revolution," what becomes of this conviction about time? The inversion of the canonical ordering obscures the articulation of epochs along the road of progress. History again becomes a tunnel where man enters as in the darkness, without knowing where his actions will lead, uncertain of his destination, dispossessed of the illusory sense of security about what he is doing. Most often bereft of belief in God, the democratic individual of our fin de siècle sees that the divinity called history is trembling on its foundations. From this comes an anguish that must be dispelled.

The democratic individual finds himself poised before a closed future, incapable of defining even vaguely the horizon of a different society from the one in which we live, since this horizon has become almost impossible to conceive. We need only to look at the crisis into which political language has been plunged in today's democracies in order to understand this. The right and the left still remain, but they are stripped of their reference points, and almost of their substance: The left no longer knows what socialism is; the right, deprived of its best argument (namely, anticommunism), is also searching for something which can distinguish it. The political scene in both France and Italy offers good examples of this situation.

Can such a situation last? Will the end of communism deprive democratic politics of a revolutionary horizon for long? With this question, I take my leave.

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