

The Revolutionary Character of the French Revolution

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What was so revolutionary about the French Revolution? The question might seem impertinent at a time like this, when all the world is congratulating France on the 200th anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, the destruction of feudalism, and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. But the bicentennial hoopla has little to do with what actually happened two centuries ago.

Historians have long pointed out that the Bastille was almost empty on July 14, 1789. Many of them argue that feudalism had already ceased to exist by the time it was abolished, and few would deny that the rights of man were swallowed up in the Terror only five years after they were first proclaimed. Does a sober view of the Revolution reveal nothing but misplaced violence and hollow proclamations – nothing more than a “myth,” to use a term favored by the late Alfred Cobban, a skeptical English historian who had no use for guillotines and slogans?

One might reply that myths can move mountains. They can acquire a rock-like reality as solid as the Eiffel Tower, which the French built to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Revolution in 1889. France will spend millions by the end of 1989, erecting buildings, creating centers, producing concrete contemporary expressions of the force that burst loose on the world two hundred years ago. But what was it?

Although the spirit of '89 is no easier to fix in words than in mortar and brick, it could be characterized as energy – a will to build a new world from the ruins of the regime that fell apart in the summer of 1789. That energy permeated everything during the French Revolution. It transformed life, not only for the activists trying to channel it in directions of their own choosing but for ordinary persons going about their daily business.

The idea of a fundamental change in the tenor of everyday life may seem easy enough to accept in the abstract, but few of us can really assimilate it. We take the world as

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** Robert Darnton, a PhD in History from Oxford University, is an Associate Professor at Princeton University and a Visiting Professor at École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris, France). His latest books include *Gens de lettres, gens du livre* (1992), *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1995) and *George Washington's False Teeth: an Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century* (2004).

it comes and cannot imagine it organized differently, unless we have experienced moments when things fall apart – a death perhaps, or a divorce, or the sudden obliteration of something that seemed immutable, like the roof over our head or the ground under our feet.

Such shocks often dislodge individual lives, but they rarely traumatize societies. In 1789 the French had to confront the collapse of a whole social order – the world that they defined retrospectively as the Ancient Regime – and to find some new order in the chaos surrounding them. They experienced reality as something that could be destroyed and reconstructed, and they faced seemingly limitless possibilities, both for good and evil, for raising a utopia and for falling back into tyranny.

To be sure, a few seismic upheavals had convulsed French society in earlier ages – the bubonic plague in the fourteenth century, for example, and the religious wars in the sixteenth century. But no one was ready for a revolution in 1789. The idea itself did not exist. If you look up “revolution” in standard dictionaries from the eighteenth century, you find definitions that derive from the verb to revolve, such as “the return of a planet or a star to the sane point from which it parted.”

The French did not have much of a political vocabulary before 1789, because politics took place at Versailles, in the remote world of the king's court. Once ordinary people began to participate in politics – in the elections to the Estates General, which were based on something approximating universal male suffrage, and in the insurrections of the streets – they needed to find words for what they had seen and done. They developed fundamental new categories, such as “left” and “right,” which derive from the seating plan of the National Assembly, and “revolution” itself. The experience came first, the concept afterwards. But what was that experience?

Only a small minority of activists joined the Jacobin clubs, but everyone was touched by the Revolution because the Revolution reached into everything. For example, it recreated time and space. According to the revolutionary calendar adopted in 1793 and used until 1805, time began when the old monarchy ended, on September 22, 1792 – the first of Vendémiaire, Year I.

By formal vote of the Convention, the revolutionaries divided time into units that they took to be rational and natural. There were ten days to a week, three weeks to a month, and twelve months to a year. The five days left over at the end became patriotic holidays, jours sans-culottides, given over to civic qualities: Virtue, Genius, Labor, Opinion, and Rewards.

Ordinary days received new names, which suggested mathematical regularity: primidi, duodi, tridi, and so on up to décadi. Each was dedicated to some aspect of rural life so that agronomy would displace the saints' days of the Christian calendar. For example November 22, formerly devoted to Saint Cecilia, became the day of the turnip, November 25, formerly Saint Catherine's day, became the day of the pig; and November 30, once the day of Saint Andrew, became the day of the pick. And the names of the new months made time seem to conform to the natural rhythm of the seasons. January 1, 1793, for example, would be the 12th of Nivôse, Year 1, Nivôse being the month of snow, located after the months of fog (Brumaire) and cold (Frimaire) and before the months of rain (Pluviôse) and wind (Ventôse).

The adoption of the metric system represented a similar attempt to impose a rational and natural organization on space. According to a decree of 1793, the meter was to be “the unit of length equal to one ten-millionth part of the arc of the terrestrial meridian between the North Pole and the Equator.” Of course, ordinary citizens were slow to adopt the meter and the gram, the corresponding new unit of weight, and few of them favored the new week, which gave them one day of rest in ten instead of one in seven. But even where old habits remained, the revolutionaries stamped their ideas on contemporary consciousness by changing everything's name.

1400 streets in Paris received new names, because the old ones contained some reference to a king, a queen, or a saint. The Place Louis XV, where the most spectacular guillotining took place, became the Place de la Révolution; and later, in an attempt to bury the hatchet, it acquired its present name, Place de la Concorde. The cathedral of Notre Dame became the Temple of Reason; Montmartre became Mont Marat. Thirty towns took Marat's name – thirty of 6,000 that tried to expunge their past by name changes. Montmorency became Émile; Saint-Malo became Victoire Montagnarde; and Coulanges became Cou Sans-Culottes (anges or angels being a sign of superstition.)

The revolutionaries even renamed themselves. It wouldn't do, of course, to be called Louis in 1793 and 1794. The Louis called themselves Brutus or Spartacus. Last names like Le Roy or Lévêque, very common in France, became La Loi or Liberté. Children got all kinds of names foisted on them – some from nature (“Pissenlit” or Dandelion did nicely for girls, “Rhubarb” for boys) and some from current events (“Fructidor,” “Constitution,” “The Tenth of August,” “Marat-Couthon-Pique.”) The foreign minister Pierre-Henri Lebrun named his daughter “Civilisation-Jémappes-République.”

Meanwhile, the queen bee became a “laying bee” (“abeille pondeuse”); chess pieces were renamed, because a good revolutionary would not play with kings, queens, knights, and bishops; and the kings, queens, and jacks of playing cards became liberties, equalities, and fraternities. The revolutionaries set out to change everything: crockery, furniture, law codes, religion, the map of France itself, which was divided into departments – that is, symmetrical units of equal size with names taken from rivers and mountains – in place of the irregular old provinces.

Before 1789, France was a crazy-quilt of overlapping and incompatible units, some fiscal, some judicial, some administrative, some economic, and some religious. After 1789, those segments were melted down into a single substance: the French nation. With its patriotic festivals, its tricolor flag, its hymns, its martyrs, its army, and its wars, the Revolution accomplished what had been impossible for Louis XIV and his successors: it united the disparate elements of the kingdom into a nation and conquered the rest of Europe. In doing so, the Revolution unleashed a new force, nationalism, which would mobilize millions and topple governments for the next two hundred years.

Of course, the nation-state did not sweep everything before it. It failed to impose the French language on the majority of the French people, who continued to speak all sorts of mutually incomprehensible dialects, despite a vigorous propaganda driven by the revolutionary Committee on Public Instruction. But in wiping out the intermediary bodies that separated the citizen from the state, the Revolution transformed the basic character of public life.

It went further: it extended the public into the private sphere, inserting itself into the most intimate relationships. Intimacy in French is conveyed by the pronoun tu as distinct from the vous employed in formal address. Although the French sometimes use tu quite casually today, under the Old Regime they reserved it for asymmetrical or intensely personal relations. Parents said tu to children, who replied with vous. The tu was used by superiors addressing inferiors, by humans commanding animals, and by lovers – after the first kiss, or exclusively between the sheets. When French mountain climbers reach a certain altitude, they still switch from the vous to the tu as if all men become equal in the face of the enormity of nature. The French Revolution wanted to make everybody tu.

A delegation of sans-culottes petitioned the national Convention in 1794 to abolish the vous “...as a result of which there will be less pride, less discrimination, less social reserve, more open familiarity, a stronger leaning toward fraternity, and therefore more

equality.” That may sound laughable today, but it was deadly serious to the revolutionaries: they wanted to build a new society based on new principles of social relations.

So they redesigned everything that smacked of the inequality built into the conventions of the Old Regime. They ended letters with a vigorous “farewell and fraternity” (“salut et fraternité”) in place of the deferential “your most obedient and humble servant.” They substituted Citizen and Citizeness for Monsieur and Madame. And they changed their dress.

Dress often serves as a thermometer for measuring the political temperature. To designate a militant from the radical Sections of Paris, the revolutionaries adopted a term from clothing: sans-culotte, one who wears trousers rather than breeches. In fact, workers did not generally take up trousers, which were mostly favored by seamen, until the nineteenth century. Robespierre himself always dressed in the uniform of the Old Regime: culottes, waistcoat, and a powdered wig. But the model revolutionary, who appears on broadsides, posters and crockery from 1793 to the present, wore trousers, an open shirt, a short jacket (the carmagnole), boots, and a liberty cap (Phrygian bonnet) over a “natural” (that is, uncombed) crop of hair, which dropped down to his shoulders.

Women's dress on the eve of the Revolution had featured low necklines, basket-skirts, and exotic hair styles, at least among the aristocracy. Hair dressed in the “hedgehog” style (“en hérisson”) rose two or more feet above the head and was decorated with elaborate props – as a fruit bowl or a flotilla or a zoo. One court coiffure was arranged as a pastoral scene with a pond, a duck hunter, a windmill (which turned), and a miller riding off to market on a mule while a monk seduced his wife.

After 1789, fashion came from below. Hair was flattened, skirts deflated, necklines raised, and heels lowered. Still later, after the end of the Terror when the Thermidorean Reaction extinguished the Republic of Virtue, fast-moving society women like Mme Tallien exposed their breasts, danced about in diaphanous gowns, and revived the wig. A true merveilleuse or fashionable lady would have a wig for every day of the decade; Mme Tallien had thirty.

At the height of the Revolution, however, from mid-1792 to mid-1794, virtue was not merely a fashion but the central ingredient of a new political culture. It had a puritanical side, but it should not be confused with the Sunday-school variety preached in nineteenth-century America. To the revolutionaries, virtue was virile. It meant willingness to fight for the fatherland and for the revolutionary trinity of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

At the same time, the cult of virtue produced a revalorization of family life. Taking their text from Rousseau, the revolutionaries sermonized on the sanctity of motherhood and the importance of breast feeding. They treated reproduction as a civic duty and excoriated bachelors as unpatriotic. “Citizenesses! Give the Fatherland Children!” proclaimed a banner in a patriotic parade. “Now is the time to make a baby,” admonished a slogan painted on revolutionary pottery.

Saint-Just, the most extreme ideologist on the Committee of Public Safety, wrote in his notebook: “The child, the citizen, belongs to the fatherland. Common instruction is necessary. Children belong to their mother until the age of five, if she has [breast]fed them, and to the Republic afterwards...until death.”

It would be anachronistic to read Hitlerism into such statements. With the collapse of the authority of the Church, the revolutionaries sought a new moral basis for family life. They turned to the state and passed laws that would have been unthinkable under the Old Regime. They made divorce possible; they accorded full legal status to illegitimate children; they abolished primogeniture. If, as the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen proclaimed, all men are created free and equal in rights, shouldn't all men begin with an equal start in life? The Revolution tried to limit “paternal despotism” by giving all children an equal share in inheritances. It abolished slavery and gave full civic rights to Protestants and Jews.

To be sure, one can spot loopholes and contradictions in the revolutionary legislation. Despite some heady phrasing in the so-called Ventôse Decrees about the appropriation of counter-revolutionaries' property, the legislators never envisaged anything like socialism. And Napoleon reversed the most democratic provisions of the laws on family life. Nevertheless, the main thrust of revolutionary legislation is clear: it substituted the state for the Church as the ultimate authority in the conduct of private life, and it grounded the legitimacy of the state in the sovereignty of the people.

Popular sovereignty, civil liberty, equality before the law – the words fall so easily off the tongue today that we cannot begin to imagine their explosiveness in 1789. We cannot think ourselves back into a mental world like that of the Old Regime, where most people assumed that men were unequal, that inequality was a good thing, and that it conformed to the hierarchical order built into nature by God himself. To the French of the Old Regime, liberty meant privilege – that is, literally, “private law” or a special prerogative to do something denied to other persons. The king, as the source of all law, dispensed privileges and rightly so, for he had been anointed as the agent of God on Earth.

His power was spiritual as well as secular, so by his royal touch he could cure scrofula, the king's disease.

Throughout the eighteenth century, the philosophers of the Enlightenment challenged those assumptions, and pamphleteers in Grub Street succeeded in tarnishing the sacred aura of the crown. But it took violence to smash the mental framework of the Old Regime, and violence itself, the iconoclastic, world-destroying, revolutionary sort of violence, is also hard for us to conceive.

True, we treat traffic accidents and muggings as everyday occurrences. But the daily experience of violence was different on 18th in France. In the eighteenth century, Parisians commonly passed by corpses that had been fished out of the Seine and hung by their feet along the riverbank. They knew a “mine patibulaire” was a face that looked like one of the dismembered heads exposed on a fork by the public executioner. They had witnessed dismemberments of criminals at public executions. And they could not walk through the center of the city without covering their shoes in blood.

Here is a description of the Paris butcheries, written by Louis-Sébastien Mercier a few years before the outbreak of the Revolution:

They are in the middle of the city. Blood courses through the streets; it coagulates under your feet, and your shoes are red with it. In passing, you are suddenly struck with an agonized cry. A young steer is thrown to the ground, its horns tied down; a heavy mallet breaks its skull; a huge knife strikes deep into its throat; its steaming blood flows away with its life in a thick current....Then bloodstained arras plunge into its smoking entrails; its members are hacked apart and hung up for sale. Sometimes the steer, dazed but not downed by the first blow, breaks its ropes and flees furiously from the scene, mowing down everyone in its paths....And the butchers who run after their escaped victim are as dangerous as it is....These butchers have a fierce and bloody appearance: naked arras, swollen necks, their eyes red, their legs filthy, their aprons covered with blood, they carry their massive clubs around with them always spoiling for a fight. The blood they spread seems to inflame their faces and their temperaments... In streets near the butcheries, a cadaverous odor hangs heavy in the air; and vile

prostitutes – huge, fat, monstrous objects sitting in the streets – display their debauchery in public. These are the beauties that those men of blood find alluring.

A serious riot broke out in 1750 because a rumor spread through the working-class sections of Paris that the police were kidnapping children to provide a blood-bath for a prince of the royal blood. Such riots were known as “popular emotions” – eruptions of visceral passion touched off by some spark that burned within the collective imagination.

It would be nice if we could associate the Revolution exclusively with the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, but it was born in violence and it stamped its principles on a violent world. The conquerors of the Bastille did not merely destroy a symbol of royal despotism. 150 of them were killed or injured in the assault on the prison; and when the survivors got hold of its governor, they cut off his head, and paraded it through Paris on the end of a pike.

A week later, in a paroxysm of fury over high bread prices and rumors about plots to starve the poor, a crowd lynched an official in the war ministry named Foulon, severed his head, and paraded it on a pike with hay stuffed in its mouth as a sign of complicity in the plotting. A band of rioters then seized Foulon's son-in-law, the intendant of Paris Bertier de Sauvigny, and marched him through the streets with the head in front of him, chanting “Kiss papa, kiss papa.” They murdered Bertier in front of the Hôtel de Ville, tore the heart out of his body, and threw it in the direction of the municipal government. Then they resumed their parade with his head beside Foulon's. “That is how traitors are punished,” said an engraving of the scene.

Gracchus Babeuf, the future leftist conspirator, described the general delirium in a letter to his wife. Crowds applauded at the sight of the heads on the pikes, he wrote. “Oh! That joy made me sick. I felt satisfied and displeased at the same time. I said, so much the better and so much the worse. I understood that the common people were taking justice into their own hands. I approve that justice... but could it not be cruel? Punishments of all kinds, drawing and quartering, torture, the wheel, the rack, the whip, the stake, hangmen proliferating everywhere have done such damage to our morals! Our masters... will sow what they have reaped.”

It also would be nice if we could stop the story of the Revolution at the end of 1789, where the current French government wants to draw the lane in its celebrating. But the whole story extends through the rest of the century – and of the following century,

according to some historians. Whatever its stopping point, it certainly continued through 1794; so we must come to terms with the Terror.

We can find plenty of explanations for the official Terror, the Terror directed by the Committee of Public Safety and the Revolutionary Tribunal. It was not very devastating, at least not by twentieth-century standards, if you make a bodycount of its victims and if you believe in measuring such things statistically. It took about 17,000 lives. There were less than 25 executions in half the departments of France, none at all in six of them. 71% of the executions took place in areas where civil war was raging; three quarters of the guillotined were rebels captured with arms in their hands; and 85% were commoners – a statistic that is hard to digest for those who interpret the Revolution as a class war directed by bourgeois against aristocrats. Under the Terror the word “aristocrat” could be applied to almost anyone deemed to be an enemy of the people.

But all such statistics stick in the throat. Any attempt to condemn an individual by suppressing his individuality and by slotting him into abstract, ideological categories is inherently inhuman. The Terror was terrible. It pointed the way toward totalitarianism. It was the trauma that scarred modern history at its birth.

Historians have succeeded in explaining much of it (not all, not the hideous last month of the “Great Terror” when the killing increased while the threat of invasion receded) as a response to the extraordinary circumstances of 1793-1794: the invading armies about to overwhelm Paris; the counter-revolutionaries, some imaginary, many real, plotting to overthrow the government from within; the price of bread soaring out of control and driving the Parisian populace wild with hunger and despair; the civil war in the Vendée; the municipal rebellions in Lyons, Marseilles, and Bordeaux; and the factionalism within the national Convention, which threatened to paralyze every attempt to master the situation.

It would be the height of presumption for an American historian sitting in the comfort of his study to condemn the French for violence and to congratulate his countrymen for the relative bloodlessness of their own revolution, which took place in totally different conditions. Yet what is he to make of the September Massacres of 1792, an orgy of killing that took the lives of more than 1,000 persons, many of them prostitutes and common criminals trapped in prisons like the Abbaye?

We don't know exactly what happened, because the documents were destroyed in the bombardment of the Paris Commune in 1871. But the sober assessment of all the surviving evidence by Pierre Caron suggests that the massacres took on the character of a

ritualistic, apocalyptic mass murder. Crowds of sans-culottes, including men from the butcheries described by Mercier, stormed the prisons in order to extinguish what they believed to be a counter-revolutionary plot. They improvised a popular court in the prison yard of the Abbaye. One by one the prisoners were led out, accused, and summarily judged according to their demeanor. Fortitude was taken to be a sign of innocence, faltering as guilt. Stanislas Maillard, a conqueror of the Bastille, assumed the role of prosecutor; and the crowd, transported from the street to rows of benches, ratified his judgment with nods and acclamations. If declared innocent, the prisoner would be hugged, wept over, and carried triumphantly through the city. If guilty, he would be hacked to death in a gauntlet of pikes, clubs, and sabres. Then his body would be stripped and thrown on a heap of corpses or dismembered and paraded about on the end of a pike.

Throughout their bloody business, the massacrers talked about purging the Earth of counter-revolution. They seemed to play parts in a secular version of the Last Judgment, as if the Revolution had released an undercurrent of popular millenarianism. But it is difficult to know what script was being performed in September 1792. We may never be able to fathom such violence or to get to the bottom of the other “popular emotions” that determined the course of the Revolution: the Great Fear of the peasants in the spring of 1789; the uprisings of July 14 and October 5-6, 1789; and the revolutionary “days” of August 10, 1792, May 31, 1793, and etc. In all of these “days” the crowds cried for bread and blood, and the bloodshed passes the historian's understanding.

It is there, nonetheless. It will not go away, and it must be incorporated in any attempt to make sense of the Revolution. One could argue that violence was a necessary evil, because the Old Regime would not die peacefully and the new order could not survive without destroying the counter-revolution. Nearly all the violent “days” were defensive – desperate attempts to stave off counter-revolutionary coups, which threatened to annihilate the Revolution from June 1789 until November 1799, when Bonaparte seized power. After the religious schism of 1791 and the war of 1792, any opposition could be made to look like treason, and no consensus could be reached on the principles of politics.

In short, circumstances account for most of the violent swings from extreme to extreme during the revolutionary decade. Most, but not all. The violence itself remains a mystery, the kind of phenomenon that may force one back into metahistorical explanations: original sin, unleashed libido, or the cunning of a dialectic. For my part, I confess myself incapable of explaining the ultimate cause of revolutionary violence, but I think I can make out some of its consequences. It cleared the way for the redesigning and

rebuilding that I mentioned above. It struck down institutions from the Old Regime so suddenly and with such force that it made anything seem possible. It released utopian energy.

The sense of boundless possibility – “possibilism” one could call it – was the bright side of popular emotion, and it was not restricted to millenarian outbursts in the streets. It could seize lawyers and men of letters sitting in the Legislative Assembly. On July 7, 1792, A. A. Lamourette, a deputy from Rhône-et-Loire, told the Assembly's members that their troubles all arose from a single source: factionalism. They needed more fraternity. Whereupon the deputies, who had been at each other's throats a moment earlier, rose to their feet and started hugging and kissing one another as if their political divisions could be swept away in a wave of brotherly love.

The “kiss of Lamourette” has been passed over with a few indulgent smiles by historians who know that a month later the Assembly would fall apart before the bloody uprising of August 10. What children they were, those men of 1792, with their overblown oratory, their naive cult of virtue, their simple-minded sloganeering about liberty, equality, and fraternity!

But we may miss something if we condescend to people in the past. The popular emotion of fraternity, the strangest in the trinity of revolutionary values, swept through Paris with the force of a hurricane in 1792. We can barely imagine its power, because we inhabit a world organized according to other principles, such as tenure, take-home pay, bottom lines, and who reports to whom. We define ourselves as employers or employees, as teachers or students, as someone located somewhere in a web of intersecting roles. The Revolution at its most revolutionary tried to wipe out such distinctions. It really meant to legislate the brotherhood of man. It may not have succeeded any better than Christianity christianized, but it remodeled enough of the social landscape to alter the course of history.

How can we grasp those moments of madness, of suspended disbelief, when anything looked possible and the world appeared as a tabula rasa, wiped clean by a surge of popular emotion and ready to be redesigned? Such moments pass quickly. People cannot live for long in a state of epistemological exhilaration. Anxiety sets in – the need to fix things, to enforce borders, to sort out “aristocrats” and patriots. Boundaries soon harden, and the landscape assumes once more the aspect of immutability.

Today most of us inhabit a world that we take to be not the best but the only world possible. The French Revolution has faded into an almost imperceptible past, its bright light obscured by a distance of two hundred years, so far away that we may barely believe

in it. For the Revolution defies belief. It seems incredible that a whole people could rise up and transform the conditions of everyday existence. To do so is to contradict the common working assumption that life must be fixed in the patterns of the common workaday world.

Have we never experienced anything that could shake that conviction? Consider the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. All of us who lived through those moments remember precisely where we were and what we were doing. We suddenly stopped in our tracks, and in the face of the enormity of the event we felt bound to everyone around us. For a few instants we ceased to see one another through our roles and perceived ourselves as equals, stripped down to the core of our common humanity. Like mountaineers high above the daily business of the world, we moved from vous to tu.

I think the French Revolution was a succession of such events, events so terrible that they shook mankind to its core. Out of the destruction, they created a new sense of possibility – not just of writing constitutions nor of legislating liberty and equality, but of living by the most difficult of revolutionary values, the brotherhood of man.

Of course, the notion of fraternity comes from the Revolution itself rather than from any higher wisdom among historians, and few historians, however wise, would assert that great events expose some bed-rock reality underlying history. I would argue the opposite: great events make possible the social reconstruction of reality, the reordering of things-as-they-are so they are no longer experienced as given but rather as willed, in accordance with convictions about how things ought to be.

Possibilism against the givenness of things – those were the forces pitted against one another in France from 1789 to 1799. Not that other forces were absent, including something that might be called a “bourgeoisie” battling something known as “feudalism,” while a good deal of property changed hands and the poor extracted some bread from the rich. But all those conflicts were predicated on something greater than the sum of their parts – a conviction that the human condition is malleable, not fixed, and that ordinary people can make history instead of suffering it.

Two hundred years of experimentation with brave new worlds have made us skeptical about social engineering. In retrospect, the Wordsworthian moment can be made to look like a prelude to totalitarianism. The poet bayed at a blood moon. He barked, and the caravan passed, a line of generations linked together like a chain gang destined for the gulag.

Maybe. But too much hindsight can distort the view of 1789 and of 1793-94. The French revolutionaries were not Stalinists. They were an assortment of unexceptional persona in exceptional circumstances. When things fell apart, they responded to an overwhelming need to make sense of things by ordering society according to new principles. Those principles still stand as an indictment of tyranny and injustice. What was the French Revolution all about? Liberty, equality, fraternity.