Two centuries have passed since the French Revolution. Barely have we worked out whether to support or to oppose our ‘own’ bicentenary and we are faced with another. Who cares? Spare us the jingoism, the toy flags and gimmicks, the vomit on the footpaths, the TV jingles and hype. Yet there is something significant about the French Revolution something which is in no way narrowly ‘French’, but rather universal in its message and impact.

The French Revolution has always been a dramatic symbol for socialists. Its mythology became part of the mythology of Revolution. People against the Old Regime, as Proletariat would stand against Bourgeoisie, French Revolution as dress rehearsal (of sorts) for the October Revolution, Jacobinism as the first form of Bolshevism, Red Terror as prelude to Stalinist Terror, the guillotine as forerunner to the Moscow Trials.

More than this: the French Revolution also gave us the language of human rights, of liberty, equality, sociability (who today would call it fraternity?), the hope of democracy, the project - however flawed - of putting the Enlightenment to work. Here I want to discuss mainly issues connected with those. In the first part, I refer briefly to the French Revolution as such. In the second, I discuss the Enlightenment and its recent, negative reception and, in the third, the positive legacy of the Enlightenment and the question of citizenship.

1789

The French Revolution is, for us, like the Russian, bound up with its images. Just as many of us think of Eisenstein movies when there’s talk of October so are our images of the French Revolution caught up in film, from British black-and-whites to Depardieu as Danton, the tricolour, the Bastille - even the Angels have a song about storming the Bastille. Somehow the ghosts won’t disappear, we think of the contemptuous Sun King, the breadless masses, the scribbling philosophes, the hard-headed, then beheaded Robespierre, left, right, tennis courts... tumbrils.

The French Revolution also had its less spectacular dimensions. Few today would view it as the birthplace of the welfare state but, in a sense, it was. Price controls were one sign of this. The idea that citizens had rights as citizens and not as the ranked members of different estates was another. Social rights were born with Article 21 of the June 1793 Declaration, where public assistance was first viewed as social obligation, whether by way of work creation or support of subsistence. The idea of intervention in the popular interest had its genesis here. Yet the Revolution is typically viewed solely as the progenitor of revolutionary violence, which it also, among other things, was. As the young Trotsky put it, the problem with Robespierre was (and with Lenin) was that he juxtaposed Rights of Man and Citizen with the Guillotine. The Guillotine obviously spoke louder. Modernity was thus inaugurated by coercion - Robespierre’s utopia was a republic of compulsory virtue, welfare state was overshadowed now by police state, by committees for protecting the public from themselves.

Yet the Revolution was also an attempt to make history, to work upon the premise that history could, in fact, be made by people. And here we need to talk of the Enlightenment, which preceded the Revolution and, in one way, made it possible. These days the Enlightenment gets consistently bad press. These days it is absolutely unfashionable to talk of making history. Radicals themselves have led the way with new, hopeless case. The marxist cultural thinkers Adorno and Horkheimer set out in 1944 to chart the dark side of the civilising process in their major study The Dialectic of Enlightenment. The logic of their case, however, was that ‘western rationality’ produced the ‘totally administered society’. It was as though the Enlightenment only had a dark side. A similar case has been put with apparently unremitting pessimism and even more widespread influence by Michel Foucault, for whom
modern societies are ‘carceral’, modelled in *Discipline and Punish* upon Bentham’s panopticon-principle of the all-seeing jailer. Foucault implicitly plays on the symbolic connection between surveillance, the Eye and Enlightenment, as though the aim of Enlightenment were social transparency. What this seems to suggest is that critics of Enlightenment now view it unanimously as domination, just as earlier conservative opponents of the Revolution viewed it as ‘nothing but’ the Guillotine. Poor creatures we are, without hope.

Rethinking Enlightenment

Amidst this gloom, it’s worth asking what exactly the Enlightenment stood for. The short answer is that it stood for lots of different things, many of which would be completely unrecognisable to the postmodern reader. First of all, it needs to be recognised that the Enlightenment was not French, but cosmopolitan – German, English, Scottish, Dutch and Italian as well as Parisian. Second, and even more controversially, it was not purely rationalistic. Rousseau and Diderot argued for the primacy of the passions; even David Hume agreed with Crotocos, not ‘reason’, was its central value. Romanticism was arguably as central to it as the defence of critical rationality. To put it in other terms, Bentham, Foucault’s new spook, was not ‘representative’ of the Enlightenment project at all. As Cassirer has argued, the central figures, if any, are Kant, Goethe and Rousseau, and what’s most striking about this triumvirate is how very different they are.

To read in the Enlightenment is, in fact, to be struck by its differences, and its defence of difference. Reason is a central value, but not in the sense that everything can or ought be explained; it is more often a reason of curiosity and scepticism than an ethic of rational mastery. Autonomy is frequently its central value. Yet Kant, who argued powerfully for autonomy as the central value of Enlightenment, also argued for the limits to knowledge. Similarly Goethe argued that we can never know all, yet we still pursue truth. Cultural relativism, similarly, finds its roots in Montesquieu, and there was no more vehement enemy of the idea of progress than Rousseau or for that matter Voltaire in *Candide*. So antimodernism, like romanticism, was also part of the Enlightenment. Thus, ‘modernity’, the period which opens with the Enlightenment, itself already contains what others these days call postmodernity. Postmodernity, in other words, is too often a trick of definition: it constructs ‘modernity’ as *Enlightenment=Rationalism* and therefore classifies what no longer fits as peculiarly ‘postmodern’, which it often isn’t.

In this context, it’s worth saying something about Marx. Unrepentant modernist? Child of the Enlightenment he certainly was, but a bruising opponent of Bentham. For as the Enlightenment meant difference, so is there difference in Marx. The early Marx, in particular, agrees with Kant and Schiller in his romanticism. Marx shared the fascination of modernity with antiquity. He also held to the romantic sense that humans restricted in their lives by social arrangements could still self-develop in contexts which were less severely circumscribed than those of capitalism. This argument became shared by socialists and social liberals in Anglo cultures into the twentieth century.

For Marx, as in different ways for William Morris, R.H. Tawney and T.H. Marshall, the social question concerned the way in which private property constrained the self-development of individuals. The ideal of a society of co-operating individuals, possessing integrity and integration, working through a division of labour but not governed by it was their hope, and it is an Enlightenment hope. But modernity makes this hope possible while working against it: economic life determines political life, the dull compulsions of economic life make political participation difficult and diverse self-development impossible.

If we trace the development of Marx’s thought from the *1844 Manuscripts* through the *Grundisse* to *Capital*, we see him adjusting to the dawning necessity of divisions of labour beyond our control. The realm of freedom is now placed outside work. But the sense of diversity and social development of individuals merely ‘academic’ interest, unless we imagine that we can develop arguments for socialism without thinking about the currents in modernity. As the later Foucault was prepared to recognise, we are stuck with the Enlightenment, whether we like it or not. The Enlightenment, like modernity, has its bright as well as its dark side. We thus need to address our situation using the arguments with which the Enlightenment has endowed us. Children of Enlightenment, we need to develop our endowments into talents, which has never yet been done.

Like the French Revolution, we can view the Enlightenment as an attitude, or a project, rather than an event. The implication of this case is that while we need new arguments and theories, there is likely also a stock of discourse which has hitherto been little used, or else ill used. Some of the problems which face us are absolutely new, and need new responses. Some aren’t. Reformism in particular has been exhausted because it has not really been tried. Democracy remains a core value because it has still not been realised. Citizenship remains a catchcry because it has not yet been taken seriously.

More Citizenship

Citizenship itself is an ancient value. Only modernity, however, has worked with the sense that property made citizenship problematical, rather than identifying it with wealth or status. Into the twentieth century the idea of citizenship, like that of democracy, has been sullied by its institutional reduction to mechanical practices. Just as democracy has been tokenised into its allegedly representative forms, so has citizenship been channelled into ‘civics’ and then...
forgotten. As Stuart McIntyre has argued, citizenship in Australia has been constructed in terms of duties to the effective exclusion of rights. And as Weber argued in The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, ours is a culture which collapses into the fetish of appearances - the good citizen is the person who gives the outward appearance of civic behaviour.

So why the recent fuss about citizenship? The idea has a long heritage on the left, and has been revived in order to rethink the relationship between economy and polity beyond the limits of class theory, which privileges proletarians over citizens. Class theory, in both its marxist and its labourist forms, has traditionally addressed political questions via a commonsense version of the labour theory of value: rights were to be accorded to those who really produced value, not to the capitalists who legally appropriated it. Questions of value as such were thereby cast in economic terms: rights, like wealth, should go to the "real producers" of wealth. The terms of calculation here are those of bourgeois political economy: domestic labour, the work of caring, the work of providing services somehow fell beyond the pale.

The idea of citizenship better addresses the issue of social contribution as such. Citizens are just that: individuals who contribute to social life in different ways, more or less private or public; members of a community, however defined, whose rights ought to be established by this belonging and not by their economic class or status, wealth or power. Citizenship is a concept without specific gender or ethnic attributes. It privileges only the idea of the person, the social individual as a being with spiritual and material needs and rights to civil, political and economic justice as well as social responsibilities.

As far as social rights are concerned, the argument about citizenship is that society needs to enable them, for the economy serves to limit the capacity of social individuals to develop and to participate in public and private life. This kind of enablement may be sponsored by the state, but it need not be monopolised by the state. Into the twentieth century ethical socialism became immersed in the statist tradition established by the post-war welfare state and implicit in the work of the Fabians. But as even the Fabians knew, in their better moments, municipal socialism was incredibly important, as was the principle of co-operation. People obviously need housing and education for themselves and their children, but there is no absolute necessity that central planning need deliver them.

The value of citizenship as a slogan here is not that it solves problems, for no concepts or theories at all can themselves solve our problems anyway. The point, rather, is that it can help us begin to address some of the problems which, in a sense, have been on the agenda since the French Revolution - since, in fact, a public agenda has existed. To argue in this way means to take seriously, once again, the legacy of the Enlightenment, and of socialism as its troubled inheritor.

With marxism, it is arguably Gramsci who comes closest to addressing these issues: the 'bourgeois revolution' should be held to its claims, on which it cannot deliver because it is bound not to the pursuit of freedom but to that of private property. More, Gramsci understood the significance of belief, and thus of language and ideas, and he understood our historicity, our embeddedness in historical relations of our making, or those of the generations before us. Our own traditions are not speechless before our present situation.

I do not mean by this to suggest that we do not need new theories, but rather that we do not need completely new theories, for not all of our problems are completely new. Postmodern radicals too easily overlook that modernity, in which we live, combines elements of the premodern as well as modern and postmodern. The spread of modernity is not novel to the 1980s and 1990s. Older questions may therefore also have some older answers - we should at least take the possibility seriously. Into the 'nineties the rate of change may be sufficient, like Gramsci's times, to allow radicals to exert more influence on their times than they may have expected. Plainly, the timeliness of ecological radicalism is one such possibility, the image of 1789 two centuries on in China (despite its recent terror) another.

I do not want to suggest then that modernity is a project yet to be fulfilled out of the Enlightenment legacy and it alone, exclusively. The point, indeed, is that we still work within its field, and can use its arguments positively, and not just in a strategic way. They are good arguments. The dialectics of the French Revolution set into motion the trends which led both to totalitarianism and to 'liberal socialism'. Dance as the marketeers might on the grave of socialism, theirs is a danse macabre which we cannot applaud. The market cannot cope with the crises of our age. Social theories which advocate refuge in the margins cannot give us much more hope than stoicism. 'Liberal socialism', or social liberalism may be more useful than we have been prepared to think because it at least offers some contributions to a radical vocabulary for the 1990s. For if the French Revolution is still talking to us, it is surely asking us why, in human terms, we have progressed so hesitantly toward liberty, equality or sociability since 1789. The French Revolution, Luther-like, nailed up some anticipation of what humanity might be striving towards. That it failed to live up to its hopes, over a few short years, is surely less surprising than what we, as socialists, have failed to achieve since. In this, symbolic sense we should say that the French Revolution has just begun. Modernity is full of surprises. Maybe some of those coming can yet be ours.

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