



European Fears and the French Revolution: Was There a Turning Point?

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1. Introduction

Every century has had its old and new fears and the eighteenth century is no exception. If we take a rapid look at the pages that Jean Delumeau (Delumeau 1978) devoted to the eighteenth century in his classic work on fear, or if we browse *La peur dans l'histoire* (Palou 1958) or *La peur au xviii^{ème} siècle* (Berchtold - Porret 1994) we find a list of fears that will not surprise us at all. Diseases, plagues, and punishments still constituted in Voltaire's century a significant part of the reflections of intellectuals as well as common people's worries and experiences. Moreover, as regards fear, the eighteenth century had also its *maître à penser*: Montesquieu, who considered fear the dynamic principle of despotism, a category he used as a polemical weapon against absolutism (Robin 2000; Shklar 1989).

The age of Enlightenment as a period of profound cultural, social and political transformations was a period of great hopes (Baczko 1979) but also of great fears (Masseau 2000; McMahon 2001). However, the obvious question is this: what about the French Revolution? Was it a turning point in this regard? The answer is: no, it was not; and yes, it was. On one hand, it was not, because what indeed the Great Fear of 1789 tells us is that the beginning of the Revolution was marked by the re-emergence of traditional fears, of the same ancestral fears that accompanied human history: above all the fear of starvation and famine (Lefebvre 1932). On the other hand, everything changed with the French Revolution even the universe of fear: as Michel Vovelle wrote, "the French Revolution marks a decisive turning point in the history of fear" (Vovelle 1987: 67) from long-standing fears to new ones.

Hope and fear were the fundamental features of the revolutionary mentality, which was continuously preoccupied with the fear of internal conspiracy, aristocratic conspiracy, foreign invasion, etc. (Burstin 2016); while the alternation of fears and hopes characterized the daily experience of that variegated world which actively opposed the Revolution or passively lived on its margins (Cobb 1990; Sutherland 2000). Furthermore, the Terror - replacing spontaneous violence with organized repression - erected what André Chénier eloquently called the "*autels de la peur*" (Chénier 1984). In short, the massive presence of the sense of fear characterized all the revolutionary years. This is well illustrated by the

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extraordinary rich iconography produced by the French Revolution, where the number of images of fear *under* the Revolution are countless (Vovelle 1988), and by historiography. In fact, the latter has deeply investigated this research field, analysing it in its various forms (fear, panic, terror, violence) and from different disciplinary perspectives (history of mentality, political anthropology, etc. (Vovelle 2014: 231-246)).

Nevertheless, the aim of this paper is to argue that the French Revolution not only influenced the history of modern fears but also and deeply influenced the history of *European fears* as such. It contends that the French Revolution *incidentally* created the concept itself of *European fear* because it prompted the counter-revolutionaries to conceive Europe as the first victim of the French Revolution. In this sense, around the counter-revolutionary discourse on Europe there consolidated the fears provoked by the endangering of the religious, political, social and cultural structure typical of the *ancien régime*.

In the next three sections, my discussion is organised as follows: the first section deals with the fears expressed by counter-revolutionary thinkers in relation to Europe's fate. It points out the transformation undergone by the discourse on Europe in response to the emergence of the discourse on Nation (Chabod 2015: 82-121). The second section investigates counter-revolutionary critical analysis of the doctrines that had led Europe to the brink of disaster. The third section focuses on counter-revolutionary historiographical invention of the myth of Christian medieval Europe as a balanced order characterized by peace, spiritual harmony, and strong social cohesion: a nostalgic myth the origin of which is attributable to the controversy concerning the French Revolution. The Europe of the counter-revolutionaries assumed the characteristics of a "desperate remedy" (Febvre 2014: 260) in which to seek shelter from the revolutionary fears which threatened to destroy Europe and its values. The outcome was the creation of a myth designed and conceived for use by counter-revolutionary concerns and struggles, a nostalgic myth with a powerful attractive force.

2. Towards the dissolution of Europe

The French Revolution was conceived by counter-revolutionary thinkers as a true "European wound" possibly degenerating into the dissolution of Europe. As Louis de Bonald's words made clear, "today [...] it is the Christian religion that must be defended, it is the civilization of Europe and of the world that must be preserved" (Bonald 1806: 240). Joseph de Maistre declared in turn, "Before leaving for Turin I burnt the manuscript of my *Lettres savoisiennes* that I wrote at the time when I didn't have the least *illumination* on the French Revolution or, perhaps I should say, on the European Revolution". Two decades later, Louis de Bonald reiterated, "The French Revolution or, rather, the European revolution, was a call to all the passions and faults; to use the force of a geometric expression, it was evil at its maximum strength".

As observed by Martyn P. Thompson (Thompson 1994: 38), the “European moment” began with the French Revolution, which gave rise to a heated debate on Europe led by counter-revolutionary thinkers. In fact, in the opinion of the latter the French Revolution was a *European* revolution, not simply because of its extensive impact but also because of its political objectives. The outbreak of the French Revolution radically changed the notion of Europe. In a few years Montesquieu’s Europe, “a term midway between ‘fatherland’ and ‘humankind” (Febvre 2014: 200; Delpiano 2017: 19-34) was overshadowed by the emergence of the nation. Voltaire’s Europe, the ideal country of cultured and refined people, was silenced by the cries of nation to which the revolution, assigned an absolutely new political value (Nora 1994: 899-911; Tuccari 2000). For the revolutionaries, Europe became a threat, a controversial target against which to take up arms. In the revolutionaries’ eyes, it was “the kings’ Europe, the hostile Europe of which the emigrants on the one hand, and the king and queen of France on the other, tried to mobilize the armies against the Revolution” (Febvre 2014: 220).

It is precisely the perception of being subject to aggression of pan-European extent, shared by all counter-revolutionary thought that explains why Joseph de Maistre - one of the leading voices of the counter-revolution - in *Considérations sur la France* (1797) tackled the subject of the destructive power of the Revolution and, highlighted its dangerous consequences for Europe (Maistre 1994: 4-9). The idea that Europe was in unprecedented danger had become part of counter-revolutionary arguments - whose networks, thanks to emigration, extended throughout Europe (Godechot 1988: 149 *et seq.*) - since Edmund Burke had declared in 1790 that “it looks to me as if I were in a great crisis, not of the affairs of France alone, but of all Europe, perhaps of more than Europe” (Burke 1986: 92; Furet 1986). In the *Reflections on the Revolutions in France* - a work that the radical intellectual James Mackintosh scornfully called the “manifesto of the Counter-revolution” (MacKintosh 1995: 274) - Burke claimed that the Europe upheld by “knightly virtue and Christian faith”, which for centuries had been at the head of the process of *civilization*, risked being lost forever. Burke’s ideas and preoccupations were echoed in the main counter-revolutionary works: so, for instance, Jacques Mallet du Pan, Swiss by birth but French by adoption, stated in 1793 that whatever happens in France “Europe cannot long bear without being infected” (Mallet du Pan 1793: 3). From the outset, the final goal of the French Revolution had been - in his opinion - “the subversion of the social order throughout Europe” (Mallet du Pan 1793: 12). What the Revolution was staging in the counter-revolutionary’s opinion was the drama of the disintegration of Europe. The sacrilegious acts performed by the Revolution meant to a certain extent also the end of Europe. The idea of rethinking the European political profile on the basis of national self-determination seemed pure folly: such a notion embodied the very essence of modernity, centred on the desire to break away from the authority of God and tradition. From the French Revolution onwards, Europe had followed a road that was leading to suicide: for this reason, Maistre wrote in 1819 with an emphasis as tragic as it was sarcastic, “*je meurs avec l’Europe, je suis en bonne compagnie*” (Maistre 1979-1980: t XIV, p. 183).

The counter-revolutionary discourse, imbued with fears and the inventor of a well-defined style, that of “*vitupération*”, did not limit itself to condemning the

revolutionary "cataclysm" (J.-P. Bertaud 2013: 101-121), conceived as an expression of divine wrath; it also sought to determine the long-term causes of the Revolution. In this endeavour to explain the unprecedented, the diagnosis of counter-revolutionary thought was unanimous: the combined attack of Protestantism and of the Enlightenment doctrines had jeopardized the fate of Europe.

3. The great enemies of Europe: the mortal doctrines behind the Revolution

According to the counter-revolutionaries, Europe's mortal wounds had not been inflicted only by the Revolution, but also by the Enlightenment and the false doctrines that had silently eroded the laws, customs and institutions that made up its time-honoured foundation (Gengembre 1989). Europe, Bonald wrote, "cannot perish except by wasting away. The day when the atheistic dogma of the sovereignty of the people replaces in politics the sacred dogma of the sovereignty of God; the day when Europe ceases to be Christian and monarchical, she will perish, and the sceptre of the world will pass to other hands" (Bonald 1815: 22).

The legacy of the pernicious doctrines that had undermined Europe and its monarchies could be traced back to the limitless trust of the *philosophes* and revolutionaries in the capacity of human reason, a confidence inculcated initially by Protestantism. There was a direct connection among Protestantism, the Enlightenment and the Revolution. In the ranks of the blameworthy, a special place was reserved for Protestantism because it had inoculated Europe with the virus of discussion, the challenge made by individual reason to God and tradition. Among the counter-revolutionary thinkers, Maistre was indubitably the author who most emphasized this point. In *Du Pape*, he wrote that in order to stem the impending misfortunes it was necessary to "remove from the European dictionary this menacing word, PROTESTANTISM" (Maistre 1819: 524). In the essay *Sur le protestantisme*, written in 1798, Maistre insisted that Protestantism was the "great enemy of Europe" (Maistre 1798: 64). By dint of attacking and corroding everything, Protestantism had undermined the principle of sovereignty and faith in God, placing Europe on a slippery and insecure slope, as slippery and insecure as anything that did not come from the hands of God.

Enlightenment principles had amplified and broadened the senseless reevaluation of individual reason advocated by Protestantism. Even Chateaubriand, at the time one of the "most liberal" thinkers belonging to the counter-revolutionary movement, did not spare criticism of the Enlightenment. In his *Essai historique, politique et moral sur les révolutions anciennes et modernes, considérées dans leur rapports avec la Révolution Française* (1797) he wrote that the principles of the *philosophes* "have become the machines that demolished the edifice of the current governments of Europe" (Chateaubriand 1978: 369) The Enlightenment, blamed for having promoted a form of reason capable only of destruction, was accused of having ignored the nihilistic power of Enlightenment reason: "What, therefore, was the spirit of this sect [the Encyclopaedists]?"

Destruction. To destroy was their aim; destroying their argument. What did they want to put in the place of what was already there? Nothing" (Chateaubriand 1978: 359).

Human institutions displayed all their inadequacy when they claimed to replace tradition and authority with rational inquiry. On the contrary, as Maistre wrote with reference to the "miracle" of the Church, "No human institution has lasted eighteen centuries. This achievement, which would be surprising anywhere, is even more surprising in the bosom of noble Europe. Idleness is anathema to the European and his character contrasts sharply with the immobility of the Oriental. For the European it is necessary to act, to strive, to innovate and change everything possible" (Maistre 1819: 431). In its diagnosis of the long-term causes of the European crisis, counter-revolutionary discourse deemed Europe to be the victim of the process of pluralization and secularization: outside France, Novalis' famous fragment of 1799, *Christianity or Europe*, insisted precisely on this aspect (Novalis 2002; Verga 2017: 36-37).

In contrast to this Europe, wounded and pursuing the path of decadence, counter-revolutionary discourse proposed another: that of Christian-medieval Europe. In opposition to the Europe of the people and nations, and against the society envisioned by the Revolutionaries and built on abstract notions of human rights, freedom, equality and fraternity, counter-revolutionary discourse proposed the tangible society of the past, built on the solid ground of history, authority, tradition and religion. Within this clash, which turned history into a polemical discipline, was born the myth of medieval Europe.

4. A lament for Europe

As shown by Carolina Armenteros, in the age of the Revolution medievalism acquired a specific political significance, allowing supporters of the monarchy to disguise their enthusiasm for the restoration of the throne (which in fact dated from the Middle Ages) as erudite investigations, without exposing themselves to the risk of violent attack (Armenteros 2014: 20-47). Furthermore, medievalism—like much of the rhetorical arsenal of the counter-revolution—found, for opposition, its *raison d'être* in the Enlightenment attitude towards the Middle Ages. It is now well known that the verdict of the Enlightenment on the Middle Ages was far from unique. Two things, however, cannot be ignored. First, the cliché that the *philosophes* built around the eighteenth century: that of the *siècle des Lumières*, illuminated by the light of reason and in polemical opposition to the dark centuries of the Middle Ages, living in the shadow of prejudice. Second, the judgment on the medieval period expressed by Voltaire, whose mortal remains were transferred to the Panthéon in 1791 with the most imposing of ceremonies. For him, the Middle Ages symbolized dogmatism, fanaticism, intolerance (Montoya 2013).

It is reasonable to argue that the anti-medievalism of Voltaire and the Revolutionaries prompted the counter-revolutionaries to explore the argumentative potential of recalling a medieval Europe, described with lament and nostalgia for

something lost. Such an argument was in fact a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it brought with it the obvious reference to a historical period before the rupture of the Reform, a period imbued with Christian religious sentiments in which the power of the pope and the Church was at its zenith. An age consequently presented in counter-revolutionary discourses as the highest point of European civilization. On the other hand, the evocation of the Middle Ages as a golden age of European society went hand in hand with a severe verdict on modernity, which far from being a path of progress, equated to gradual degeneration. The counter-revolutionary Middle Ages were intended to be anti-modern, since the Protestant reform, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution were conceived as embodiments of modernity.

Thus, for example, Bonald identified Charlemagne, Christianity, the papacy, the Crusades and the nobility as the drivers of a process of European civilization that was led by France (Bonald 1800: 113), while Maistre argued, "there will come a time in which the popes that we have recriminated against, like Gregory VII, will be considered in all countries as the friends, the tutors, the saviours of the human race, as the true founding geniuses of Europe" (Maistre 1814: 261). Behind the discourse on medieval Europe lay three themes that were typically counter-revolutionary. The first was the desire to restore the centrality of God, which impelled the counter-revolutionary thinkers to insist on religion as the indispensable source of legitimacy of socio-political institutions and as the guarantee of their lasting duration. The second was the counter-revolutionary concerns about the dissolution of social ties, the decline of social hierarchies and the birth of that entirely modern "passion" which was individualism. Consequently, what Reedy wrote about Bonald must be considered true for most of the counter-revolutionary thinkers: their "medievalism—a highly selective, even fantastic, interpretation of the civilization of the Middle Ages—functions as the obverse of the modern individualism they reviled" (Reedy 1995: 53; Pranchère). The third was a new kind of historical attitude generated by the excesses of the Revolution, which railed against the historical ruins that symbolized Catholic France and the *ancien régime*. This led the counter-revolutionaries, generally favourable to the early stages of the Revolution, to look backwards, to resort to the worship of ruins and of the past, thus leaning towards the veneration of the monarchy and the martyred king (Gengembre 1989: 234-238). In this respect, the *Génie du Christianisme* probably offered the most influential representation of a medieval Europe identified with *Christianitas*, marked by order and harmony that nurtured unity of thought and belief. The book, written by Chateaubriand in 1802, was designed as a refutation of Enlightenment doctrines and it was a resounding success. Its aim was to show that, in opposition to the monstrous campaign waged by the Enlightenment, Christianity had played an extraordinary role as a civilizing force, from its first appearance and throughout the subsequent centuries. The *Génie du Christianisme* painted a picture of a mythologized Middle Ages, described as the laboratory of freedom, an image barely credible from a historical point of view, but one that worked polemically in reference to a lost past devoured by the Revolution.

Last but not least, medieval Europe, in the counter-revolutionary account, was a continent that had over time rid itself of the propensity for violence and

conquest: it was a peaceful Europe depicted in open contrast to the bloodiest days of the Revolution and the years of the Napoleonic wars. Bonald wrote, "Europe until the sixteenth century lived by these two principles of monarchy and Christianity. Peace was interrupted by wars between neighbours. But such wars without hate, these passing struggles between two peoples united by the same political and religious doctrines had only served as an outlet for the forces of states, without any danger to their power and independence" (Bonald 1815).

Being forced to stand on enemy ground and to confront the issues and language of the Revolution, counter-revolutionary thought organized its discourse in reaction to its adversary. Its vocabulary, arguments and polemics were dictated by the agenda of the Revolution. When the Revolution invoked the language of the rights of man, the counter-revolution invoked those of duties. When the Revolution fought in the name of the nation, the counter-revolution fought in the name of Europe. In the age in which the problematic relationship between Europe and its constituent nations arose, Europe became a weapon in the rhetorical arsenal of the counter-revolution, if "nation" was *le mot de la Révolution*, "Europe" was the rallying cry of the counter-revolution. In the polemics of those crucial years, Europe thus appeared as a discourse *against* the very idea of Revolution and against a certain idea of mankind, of history and of man's role in history. The Europe of the counter-revolutionaries had its roots in the ground abandoned by their foes: history, religion, tradition.

5. Conclusion

The Congress of Vienna gave rise to a political and diplomatic system whose importance for the history of Europe is unquestionable. Indeed, however one interprets the Restoration, it is impossible to deny its significance as a turning point in the construction of modern Europe. However, in counter-revolutionary opinion, the Revolution, far from ending in 1815, from being buried under the principles of balance and legitimacy, had also triumphed at the Congress of Vienna. The Holy Alliance, in the *Preamble* drafted by Tsar Alexander I, denounced the clear desire to found the Concert of Europe on the basis of religious indifference: the union of Christian sovereigns in Europe virtually affirmed equality between its different churches. Despite its name, the Holy Alliance appeared to the counter-revolutionaries to be the heir of Bayle, Voltaire and religious indifferentism. The idea of restoring the centrality of God, religion and church seemed lost forever. While on the other hand, the importance acquired by nations and nationalities seemed definitively to compromise the idea of a peaceful, civilized, powerful Europe. For this reason, counter-revolutionaries continued to view Europe's prospects with pessimism. As Antoine Compagnon wrote, counter-revolutionaries, "untimely and outdated, pessimistic and sceptical, now appear, with their disenchantment" - and I add with their fears for Europe - "to be our real contemporaries".

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