

## Revolution — still the stuff of dreams? A conversation with Sophie Wahnich

*Éric Aeschimann's interview with Sophie Wahnich was first published in L'obs on 23 March. Translated by David Broder.* From Danton (1983). The last time that the French Revolution was the object of real public discussion was in 1989, with the bicentennial ceremonies staged by François Mitterrand, Jack Lang, and Jean-Paul Goude. Since then, there has been silence. Who today still refers to the Tennis Court Oath, the night of 4 August, the vote on the "Declaration of the Rights of Man" in 1793? At the Elysée [presidential place], 14 July has become the occasion for a presidential chatter where we speak more of political rehashes than of any revolutionary vision. And when leaders or intellectuals refer to the nation's history, they cite the Resistance, the Popular Front, the Third Republic's laws on *laïcité* and schooling, or even the Enlightenment. Rarely 1789. One exception was Manuel Valls's allusion... to Marianne's naked breasts. But things are starting to move. In autumn the philosopher Jean-Claude Milner published *Rélire la Révolution*, where he rehabilitates the project of universal justice asserted by the Revolution by way of the 1793 "Declaration of the Rights of Man." At the Amandiers theatre, Joël Pommerat has staged *Ça ira (1) Fin de Louis*, first part of a far-reaching depiction of the Constituent Assembly, which has encountered quite an echo around France. In June the film-maker Pierre Schoeller (*L'Exercice de l'Etat*) will shoot a film on this subject. Most importantly, the Arab revolutions and the square occupations à la Indignados have shown that the time of popular

movements may return. And together with this, crucial questions: how to avoid one-upmanship, chaos, violence? How to avoid returning to a worse state than before? The men of 1789 confronted these dilemmas already; it might be useful to see how they responded to them.

**"The French Revolution is over"; this verdict, given by the historian François Furet in 1977, is at the heart of your essay. For you — quite the contrary — the Revolution is still something very much alive. In what sense can this more than two-hundred-year-old event help us to understand today's world?** François Furet wrote this line at a moment when the idea was spreading that the Western democracies' social and political system was now complete. For him, this inheritance was no longer in question, and the history of the French Revolution ceased to be a political concern. In 1989 Francis Fukuyama generalised this argument by decreeing "the end of history." We had to accept that we were living in a now-fixed world, presented as almost natural. Yet today the upheavals provoked by globalisation force us to reconsider this idea. No, nothing is ever finished. All across the planet peoples are showing their insistent will to reconquer their sovereign power and to turn the course of history. In this context, are we really going to continue saying that the French Revolution can no longer offer us anything relevant to reflect on? This was no small event. Rather, it was a vast laboratory in which most of the questions that the Arab Spring, the squares movements or Nuit debout ran in to had already been posed. Take the question of the revolution as conquest of state power, which we often counterpose to the revolution as the profusion of civil society initiatives. Well, the French Revolution was highly inventive on both these planes, and in their articulation. It created a great legislative power, up

till 1794, with the National Assembly, and it saw the blooming of a democratic space in full profusion, with political clubs, fraternal societies, the "sections," the village assemblies, and the fêtes. All that made up what I would call an effective "communal" power. **Can this "communal" power be compared to the "horizontal" power of participatory democracy, which we hear a lot about today, as opposed to the "vertical" power of political institutions?** We could put it like that, but in our own time these two worlds are cut off from one another, which was not the case during the Revolution. The "deputations" to the Assembly (delegations of citizens allowed to address the deputies), the addresses, the petitions, and the correspondence ensured an intensive flow of communication. And that can be a source of inspiration for us. It is always interesting to understand how a people takes hold of sovereignty. That is why I think that it is useful to re-open the debate on the French Revolution, which certain 1970s thinkers had declared closed. **This same "closing" process, we discover in your book, began from the 1960s onward with two great thinkers: Sartre and Lévi-Strauss. What did they say about the Revolution?** Sartre speaks at length about this in a major work which — and this is no coincidence — has been widely forgotten: namely, *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Here he deploys a subject that becomes free when they participate in the collective action of a freedom-event. Sartre sets up the French Revolution as a symbol of these emancipatory moments, and elaborates a conception of history similar to that of Walter Benjamin, whom he had published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1947. For him, the only study of history is that inhabited by the concern for the present, and which seeks to return more lucidly into this present. Lévi-Strauss criticised this conception. In this

anthropologist's estimation, going back into the past to seek tools for the present does not correspond to the scientific spirit that must animate any researcher. For Lévi-Strauss, Sartre made history — and more particularly, the history of the French Revolution — play the same role that myths have in the tribes that he himself studied. Western societies do perhaps need histories that play the role of myths, but these latter do not have to enjoy any scientific status. Indeed, Lévi-Strauss questioned the role that history plays in Western societies. The Left makes it into a site for reflection on the contradictions of the moment, in order to produce a political dynamic. For its part, structuralism wants to reduce it to a scientific method in order to understand the temporal variability of human societies. The French Revolution would be the privileged terrain of this epistemological debate.

**In your book, you recount your reaction when, still as a student, you discovered this injunction to depoliticise the Revolution** It was in 1985, and I was starting to specialise in the revolutionary period. Being of Jewish descent, it was evident to me that history — even learned writing — ought to enlighten societies' political development, from inspiring political dreams to serving as an antidote to the very worst of things. For the Jews of the twentieth century, to come to France was to choose the land of the Rights of Man, where Jews had a political status equal to other citizens, and thus to choose the land of the Revolution. I saw the Revolution as the opposite to Nazism, because it had freed the Jews.

**But the backdrop to this discussion was not Nazism, but the USSR and the refusal of the communists of the time to recognise the crimes of Stalinism. François Furet paired the line mentioned above with another statement: the French Revolution was the "matrix of the Gulag."** Yes, and in this

regard the ideological question once again stole a march on methodical matters. In the context opened up by the 1974 publication of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*, Furet's reasoning consisted of saying that the Russian Revolution, which produced the Gulag, considered itself a daughter to the French Revolution, which itself produced the Terror. So wasn't that the proof that the revolutionary phenomenon itself entails this political cruelty? The Revolution was thus characterised as the "matrix of totalitarianism," and the historiographical discussion focused on the Terror. Who was responsible for it? Was it necessary? And if any revolution is cruel, should we aspire to revolution? Is it desirable? This reflection took a stance opposite to that of the earliest anti-totalitarians. From 1946, the anti-totalitarians of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group, with Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, had denounced the Soviet bureaucracy, the violence of the repression and the Gulag. For these latter, only the communalist revolutionary utopia could destroy totalitarianism. This communal, constantly deliberating power is one of the specificities of the French Revolution. The new — and in fact very belated — anti-totalitarians, masking this dimension of the French Revolution and comparing the Terror to Stalin's total state, banish the very principle of any revolution. **How was this rejection of the Revolution received?** It really soaked into people's minds, as we see from Andrzej Wajda's 1983 film *Danton*. In the Polish producer's framing, the "Declaration of the Rights of Man" gets lost under the Terror. In the opening scene we see a child learning the "Declaration" by heart. He is in the bath, naked, and gets a slap every time he loses his footing. There is something sadistic about this learning process. At the end, the same child appears to give a compliment to Robespierre,

but his voice gets lost amidst the terrible music, evoking a Terror that wipes away even the very promise of rights. When the then Culture Minister Jack Lang attended a screening of this film, he got up and lost his rag... In the philosophical field, Claude Lefort's response is one worth holding onto. He accepted a reflection on the parallel between Terror and totalitarianism, but he pointed to one fundamental difference. While the totalitarian state works away in secret, without discussion and without leaving traces, the revolutionaries of the Terror spent their time setting out the arguments, asking themselves whether they were right or wrong, establishing relations, convincing the Convention and the clubs. As Lefort put it, "the Terror spoke," and in so doing it remained democratic. There was no coup d'état: the laws of the Terror were passed by the Convention — the same one that later overthrew Robespierre. **But what about the idea that the French Revolution did indeed feature monstrous episodes — is this false?** A revolution is not an electoral battle. It is a radical struggle against the counter-revolutionary resistance. The constant risk is war — civil war, and international war. The whole question, for a revolutionary power, is to limit as far as possible the violence that it will have to use in opposition to the violence of those who want to destroy it. It has to reject mimicry, and refuse to resemble its enemies. The deputies of the Convention were acutely aware of this problem. They constantly invented measures designed to calm the conflict and impose some control on the cruelty. While they did not always succeed in so doing, some of their inventions were of great quality. During the seizing of the Tuileries Palace on 10 August 1792 the royal guard deliberately shot at the *fédérés* and the *sans-culottes*. The people demanded justice, which did not come fast enough, and this led to the September massacres — a very violent

punitive event. People who had little were cornered into imposing a rather meagre justice. When Danton proclaimed "Let us be terrible, to stop the people from being so," he was saying that justice had to be done in order to prevent the feeling of injustice from exploding in a disorderly way. Fundamentally, what was necessary was to avert any break from the democratic art of politics. As for the Great Terror, which is at the heart of our imaginary of the Terror, the philosopher Jean-Pierre Faye reminds us that only 1,376 people from across the whole of France were sentenced to death. Seen from 2017, with the death penalty abolished thirty-six years ago, this seems like an enormous figure. But we have to remember the Stoic imaginary of the era. For the Stoics, the inhuman being had to be destroyed, in order to avert the risk of it destroying the human race. That was an action to protect the common humanity. Death did not have the same meaning as it does today, and the revolutionaries did not seek to avoid it — including for themselves. For those who had known the *ancien régime*, freedom was such an intense experience that they could not imagine any step back. "Freedom or death," they said, for only the free life was now imaginable. And it was necessary to risk one's life — and thus will the Terror — in order to maintain this freedom. Robespierre was melancholic, he suffered putting his friends to death, and on 9 Thermidor he allowed his own arrest and execution, without protest. That would not have been the case in a totalitarian regime.

**Let us get back to the twenty-first century: how can understanding these episodes enlighten the contemporary Left?** I talk about this in *Le radeau démocratique* ["The Democratic Life-Raft"; a selection of articles published by Éditions Lignes in February 2017] The French Revolution posed questions that are also posed today. Certainly, it did not always

resolve them, but it formulated them in a rather robust manner. In a period of confusion like our own, where we have such difficulty in posing the right questions, there is an evident interest in returning to what the revolutionaries had to say on violence and war, but also on the universal, the foreign, equality and honour. We have to try to understand what has been rejected by the oblivion over the Revolution, and observe what we are missing from that, for the purposes of confronting what is attacking us today. **In the book you mention another hidden theme: the enthusiasms that the Revolution awakened, contrasting with the apathy we often find in our contemporary societies.** Be they Catholics, deists or atheists, the revolutionaries of 1789 were great believers. Enthusiasm — which, etymologically speaking, means "having God in one's self" — is something that accompanies all revolutions. Kant, who fervently followed the French Revolution, saw the enthusiasm it aroused as proof that the human race itself bears an aspiration for the universal good. Even Foucault — like Lévi-Strauss and Furet, very distant from the idea of revolution — turned his position in favour of a reportage on the Iranian Revolution. He then took interest in uprisings and the enthusiasm they provoke. The revolution then became a potentiality constantly reborn. It seems to me that when part of today's youth becomes enthusiastic about the movements that are attacking injustice, it gives a spark to this potentiality. I do not believe that the enthusiasm for the Revolution can definitively die. But today, undeniably, the counter-revolution is in a position of strength. There is but a life-raft remaining, of the Revolution in the social imaginary.

*CNRS research director and specialist in the French Revolution, Sophie Wahnich is author of l'Impossible Citoyen. L'étranger dans le discours de la Révolution française (1997) and la Liberté ou la Mort. Essai sur la Terreur et le terrorisme (2003). In February she published Le Radeau démocratique [Editions Lignes] and this week she is bringing out La Révolution française n'est pas un mythe (Klincksieck).*

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