

Jacobinism outside France

‘Succour to all peoples who want to recover their liberty’ was the promise held out by the Girondin-led convention of 1792. The war which Brissot proclaimed against the monarchs of Europe was not going to be an old-style war of conquest, he claimed, but a war of liberation. There were certainly many people outside France prepared to rejoice at any revolutionary advance:

This was a glorious mental dawn. All thinking beings shared in the jubilation of this epoch. Emotions of a lofty character stirred men’s minds...a spiritual enthusiasm thrilled through the world.⁴⁸

So the ageing German philosopher Hegel described the impact of the events in France on the world of his youth. His memory was not playing tricks on him. The message of revolution found an echo everywhere the Enlightenment had influenced people.

The English poets Wordsworth, Southey and Coleridge enthused about the storming of the Bastille. ‘From the general heart of human kind, Hope springs forth like a full-born Deity’, Coleridge wrote. The poet-engraver William Blake was almost arrested for defending the revolution’s principles in an argument with a soldier. The house of the pioneering chemist Joseph Priestley was attacked by a royalist mob. The German philosophers Kant and Fichte were as enthusiastic as the young Hegel. Even after Thermidor, Kant could say, ‘The misdeeds of the Jacobins were nothing compared to the tyrants of past time’.⁴⁹ Beethoven incorporated the melodies of revolutionary songs into his music and embodied the spirit of the revolutionary army in his great third symphony, the *Eroica* (although he removed the dedication to Napoleon in disgust after he proclaimed himself emperor). From Ireland, Wolfe Tone of the Belfast middle class and Lord Edward Fitzgerald, a member of an old aristocratic family, went to Paris to make contact with the revolutionary government. In Latin America a 16 year old from Caracas, Simon Bolivar, also from an aristocratic family, defended the revolution in an

argument with the Spanish viceroy in Panama in 1799; while a Mexican priest, Miguel Hidalgo, won students such as Jose Maria Morelos to the ideals of the revolution.

Revolution at bayonet point

Such enthusiasm meant advancing French armies found many local allies, at first, as they crossed the borders into Belgium, Holland, northern Italy and southern Germany. Middle class opponents of monarchist or oligarchic governments described themselves as 'Jacobins'—and even after the Jacobins had fallen from power this remained the general name for supporters of the revolutionary forces. Whenever the French army advanced, these forces would work with it to carry through from above reforms similar to those enforced, from below, in France—abolition of serfdom and feudal dues, separation of church and state, confiscation of church lands, abolition of internal customs posts, and the establishment of more or less democratic assemblies. But problems soon began to arise.

One of Robespierre's arguments against Brissot had been that the peoples of other countries would not welcome foreign invaders, however well intentioned. He was soon to be proved right, despite the initial enthusiasm of many intellectuals and some sections of the middle class. The victorious French army could only maintain itself by pillage and by imposing tribute on countries it conquered. What began as a war of liberation passed through a bitter period as a war of revolutionary defence, and ended up as a war of imperial conquest. Napoleon carried the process to its logical conclusion by annexing Belgium, Savoy and German statelets south of the Rhine, replacing democratic assemblies by monarchies and installing his brothers as kings in Italy, Westphalia, Holland and Spain.

Even under Napoleon the French army bulldozed away the remnants of feudalism and, in some cases at least, prepared the ground for the advance of capitalist production. But, without the *sans-culottes* and peasant risings that had been so important in France, its local allies lacked any base among the mass of people. The peasants and urban lower classes gained nothing from the French occupation to make them identify with the new order, since tribute paid to France and the costs of providing for the French army constituted a burden as great as the old feudal payments. The local 'Jacobins' were left high and dry

whenever the French army was forced to withdraw.

This happened everywhere in 1812-14. Napoleon over-extended his empire on two fronts, by trying to place his brother on the Spanish throne and by marching across the north European plain to Moscow. It was a disastrous strategy. His troops managed to put down a popular uprising in Madrid, but from then on were harassed by guerilla fighters as British troops led by Wellington fought their way across the Iberian Peninsula. Meanwhile, the occupation of a deserted Moscow turned into a disaster as enemy troops and harsh winter conditions destroyed his 1,000 mile supply lines. So unpopular were the French armies in the occupied territories that Spanish and Prussian liberals allied themselves with monarchist forces to drive them out in what seemed like wars of 'national liberation'—only to find themselves betrayed by victorious kings and driven down into the depths of oppression and depression expressed in the paintings of Goya's 'dark period'.

Napoleon's defeat (or rather his two defeats, since he staged an amazing 100 day comeback in 1815 before being defeated at Waterloo) allowed all the kings, princes and aristocrats to return in style, creating a weird half-world in which the old superstructures of the 18th century *ancien régimes* were imposed on social structures which had been transformed—at least in France, northern Italy and western Germany. This is the world brilliantly portrayed in the novels *The Red and the Black* and *The Charterhouse of Parma* by Stendhal (a former commissary in Napoleon's army), as well as *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexander Dumas (whose father, the son of a black slave, had been a general under Napoleon).

Britain: the birth of a tradition

It was not only in continental Europe that the revolution had a profound impact on political life. It had a mighty influence in Britain. The most important sections of the bourgeoisie had obtained a significant influence over political affairs before 1789 and saw no reason to play with revolution. But the French events stirred wide sections of the masses in the rapidly expanding cities and towns—the ever increasing numbers of craftspeople, journeymen and small shopkeepers, and along with them, some of the new industrial workers of the factories.

Tom Paine's two part defence of the revolution and call for similar constitutional principles in Britain, *The Rights of Man*, sold 100,000 copies. In Sheffield at the end of 1791, 'five or six mechanics... conversing about the enormous high price of provisions' and abuses in government, formed the Sheffield Constitutional Society, dedicated to universal suffrage and annual parliaments. By March 1792 it was 2,000 strong and organised a street celebration involving up to 6,000 after the revolutionary victory at Valmy in the autumn.⁵⁰ Similar societies were launched in Manchester, Stockport, Birmingham, Coventry and Norwich, with varying degrees of success.⁵¹ The London Corresponding Society, founded by shoemaker Thomas Hardy at the beginning of 1792, mushroomed until it had 5,000 members organised in 48 'divisions' (branches)⁵² and was establishing a national network with the provincial societies.

The movement was big enough to worry the British government as it prepared for war against the French Revolution at the end of 1792. Local bigwigs in Birmingham had already incited a mob to attack a dinner of local reformers commemorating the fall of the Bastille in 1791, sacking houses, burning down meeting places and driving people like the chemist Joseph Priestley from the city.⁵³ Now the government encouraged the anti-Jacobin agitation nationally. Loyalist societies were set up in each locality to whip up a nationalist war fever.

There was also a vicious crackdown against any attempt to propagandise democratic ideas. Tom Paine, charged with treason for *The Rights of Man*, was forced to flee the country. Two leaders of the Scottish Friends of the People, the young lawyer Thomas Muir and the English Unitarian preacher Thomas Palmer, were sentenced to transportation after a notoriously biased trial,⁵⁴ as were three delegates to a 'Scottish constitutional convention'. Thomas Hardy and a dozen other London leaders were put on trial for treason and Hardy's wife died as a mob attacked their home. When a sympathetic jury acquitted the defendants, parliament suspended *habeas corpus* so that activists could be imprisoned without facing a jury.

At certain points the agitation of the English and Scottish Jacobins met with a wide response among the urban classes. They could gather thousands to open air meetings, and some of the leaders of the great naval mutinies which shook the British navy in 1797 were clearly under the influence of their ideas. But the mass of the middle class were

prepared to unite with the landowning class in defence of the profitable status quo, giving the government a free hand to crush the movement. By the late 1790s it was very difficult for anyone to express sympathy for revolutionary ideals.

Yet the agitation of the Sheffield Constitutional Society, the London Corresponding Society, the Scottish Friends of the People and others did have one important effect. As Edward Thompson showed in his *The Making of the English Working Class*, it helped create a tradition that was to have great effect in the years 1815-48.

Ireland's Republican rising

The example of France had an even greater direct impact in Ireland, Britain's oldest colony, giving birth to a revolutionary nationalist tradition that persists today.

English governments had consolidated their hold over the island after smashing resistance in the 1650s by settling Protestant peasants (mainly from Scotland) on land taken from native Catholics in the province of Ulster. The descendants of these peasant settlers lived in fear of being driven from the land by a Catholic rising, leading them to feel a community of interest with the great Anglo-Irish landowners, who were also Protestants. They were frightened to challenge the policies imposed on them by British governments in case it encouraged the dispossessed Catholics. The Protestant parliament in Dublin acted, until the 1770s, as a rubber stamp for policies made in London.

Attitudes began to change in the last quarter of the 18th century. The American War of Independence gave the Dublin parliament increased bargaining power, since British governments wanted a militia of Irish volunteers to ward off any French attack. For a time, it seemed the Irish parliament could act in the interests of Irish landowners and businessmen. But these hopes were dashed once the war ended, and there was much bitterness against Britain, especially among the growing Protestant commercial middle class of Belfast.

These feelings coalesced in an enthusiastic response to the French Revolution. Volunteers began to drill, demand a constitutional convention and back Catholic emancipation. In 1792 'the town of Belfast, now foremost in the fight for democracy, celebrated by a grand procession and festival the anniversary of the French Revolution... A republican spirit pervaded the whole atmosphere.' Posters attacked

religious sectarianism: 'Superstitious jealousy, that is the cause of the Irish Bastille: let us unite and destroy it'.⁵⁵ One of the organisers of this event, the young Protestant lawyer Wolfe Tone, formed a new radical organisation, the United Irishmen, at a dinner in Belfast with a dozen men, mainly businessmen (a draper, a linen manufacturer, a tanner, a clerk, an apothecary, a watchmaker, and three merchants).⁵⁶

In Ireland, as in Britain, there was an attempt to destroy the new Jacobinism with repression. Laws passed on English orders by the Irish upper class forbade the carrying of arms and outlawed the United Irishmen. Forced underground, the organisation became increasingly revolutionary. Its aim became the overthrow of British rule, which had kept Ireland economically backward and riven it along religious lines. There had to be a revolutionary rising to create a modern nation, as in France. The United Irishmen took it for granted that this would be a capitalist nation, but one which had thrown off the dead weight of foreign rule and native aristocracy. Achieving this, Tone increasingly saw, depended on the middle class, mainly Protestant United Irishmen rousing the Catholic peasantry, which had a long tradition of anti-landlord agitation through armed, underground 'defender' groups.

The numbers prepared to back a rising were greater than those at the disposal of the British government—100,000 compared with about 65,000.⁵⁷ But they were much less well trained and armed. Success seemed to depend on getting military support from France.

The rising took place in 1798. But the French support was too little and came too late, with the landing of 1,100 troops in Mayo in August. By then the authorities had been able to arrest the leaders of the movement and forced those rebels who were already armed into premature action. Risings in Wexford and Antrim were crushed. The repression which followed made the terror of the French Revolution seem like a child's game. Reprisals against those suspected of supporting the rising cost an estimated 30,000 lives.⁵⁸

That was not the end of the story. As tension had mounted in the three years before the rising, the authorities had deliberately encouraged groups of Protestants to organise hate campaigns against Catholics. Local clashes between Catholic and Protestant peasants in the village of Diamond in Antrim in the autumn of 1795 had been followed by the founding of a semi-secret Protestant organisation, the Orange Order. The Anglo-Irish landlords despised peasants of any sort and stood aside from the new body at first. But they soon saw

it as invaluable in warding off the threat of revolt:

Gradually during 1796 and 1797...the Orange Order was transformed from a small, scattered and socially unacceptable fringe organisation, despised by the ruling class, into a powerful province-wide society, approved and actively sustained by some of the highest individuals in Britain and Ireland.⁵⁹

General Lake, commander of the armed forces, presided at Orange processions, and armed Orange groups increasingly worked alongside government troops and militia to punish supporters of the United Irishmen. They presented rebel Protestants with a choice—to be whipped and tortured or join the Orange Order to whip and torture other rebels.⁶⁰ In such ways, the British authorities and Anglo-Irish landowners not only crushed the rising, but gave an enormous boost to sectarian religious feeling.

The two political traditions which have dominated Irish politics for the last 200 years, Republicanism and Orangeism, were born as offshoots of a Europe-wide struggle of revolution and counter-revolution.

For the time being, however, this was hardly a matter of concern for the 'civilised' statesmen of the British government. Having successfully prosecuted a policy of divide and rule against the United Irishmen, two years later they were able to persuade the Irish parliament to vote itself out of existence. Irish agriculture and industry had been severely damaged in the past by exclusion from British-controlled markets. Now they were deprived of any political means of protecting themselves, while the Anglo-Irish landowners extracted huge rents and consumed them in unproductive idleness in England. The British government believed it had solved the 'Irish question'—a belief that was to recur every 30 or 40 years right through to the present.

Haiti's black Jacobins

Counter-revolution did not succeed everywhere. On an island 3,000 miles away across the Atlantic, in Haiti, the outcome was very different to that in Ireland. But it took a decade of bitter uprisings, wars and civil wars to attain.

Saint Domingue, the western part of the island of Hispaniola, had been the richest prize in the French monarchy's colonial empire. Its plantations produced more sugar than all of Europe's other Caribbean

and American colonies put together, and poured wealth into the pockets both of plantation owners and the commercial capitalists of French ports like Nantes and Bordeaux.

The source of this wealth lay in the relentless labour of 500,000 black slaves, whose work so destroyed their lives that only continual imports from Africa maintained their numbers. Lording it over them were 30,000 whites—a much smaller proportion of the population than in any of the North American states—and alongside these lived a similar number of free mixed race 'mulattos', some of whom had become quite wealthy and might even be slave-owners.

The relatively small numbers of the white population did not prevent it having great pretensions. It felt the wealth of the colony was a result of its own efforts and resented the rules imposed on its trade by the *exclusive*—France's version of the mercantile system. Accordingly, it felt impelled to advance its own demands for 'liberty' as part of the agitation of the well-to-do middle class of the 'home country' in the spring and summer of 1789. News of the storming of the Bastille was followed by armed defiance of the royal governor—although the colonial insurgents had no intention of applying the revolution's slogans of 'liberty' and 'equality' to the black slaves or even the free mulattos.

Although only 7 percent of the population, the whites were very much divided. The 'small whites', owning perhaps three or four slaves each, could feel as bitter at the humiliation they endured at the hands of the 'big white' plantation owner as the French middle class at the aristocracy. The planters, keen to have a free hand to decide with whom they traded, were not going to let the 'small whites' exercise political control. And both groups were outraged when the French assembly, in its revolutionary exuberance, decreed equal rights for all free men, including the mulattos and free blacks—although it carefully avoided any mention of slavery. Soon there was near civil war between shifting alliances of the four groups which made up the free population—the supporters of the governor, the big whites, the small whites and the mulattos.

All of them expected the black slaves to continue working, suffering, receiving punishment and dying as if nothing had changed. They were sorely mistaken. The slaves seized the chance to rebel—setting fire to plantations, killing slave-owners, forming armed bands to fight off the white militia and spread the revolt, and throwing up leaders of their own. The most prominent, the former livestock steward Toussaint

L'Ouverture, was soon skilfully manoeuvring between the rival white groups, the mulattos, an invading Spanish army from the other half of the island, and successive representatives from the Girondins in France. Then, just as the *sans-culottes* were sweeping the Jacobins to power in France, a British military force landed in Saint Domingue.

What happened next had much wider implications than just the future of Saint Domingue. Important sections of the British ruling class, influenced by the arguments of Adam Smith, had been coming to the conclusion that slavery's time was past. After all, they had already lost the sugar plantations of North America and their West Indian sugar plantations were much less important than those of France. The government of William Pitt had given some encouragement to the anti-slavery campaign of William Wilberforce. But the prospect of taking over Saint Domingue, the most important of all the slave economies, changed its mind and it prepared to embrace slavery enthusiastically. Victory in this attempt would have given a new impetus to slavery throughout the world.

The upward surge of the revolution in France which brought the Jacobins to power had equally important implications for the slave rebellion. Many of the Girondin leaders had, personally, been committed opponents of slavery and members of the Society of the Friends of the Blacks formed in 1788. They were mainly journalists or lawyers inspired by Enlightenment ideas. But their most important political base lay with the commercial bourgeoisie of the western French ports, and these were vehemently against any measures which would hit their profits. Having propagandised the anti-slavery argument, the Girondins were not prepared to put it into practice. By contrast the popular forces which swept the Jacobins forward had no material interest in slavery and readily identified the suffering of the slaves with their own suffering. At the same time, the middle class Jacobin leaders, terrified of military defeat at the hands of a coalition including Britain, could see the advantage of encouraging slave revolts on the British islands of the Caribbean.

On 4 February 1794 the Jacobin-dominated convention decreed the abolition of slavery in all French lands, as its president gave a fraternal kiss to black and mulatto emissaries from Saint Domingue. An alliance had been formed between two revolutions that was to shatter Pitt's hopes of enlarging British capitalism's stake in slavery. The British expeditionary force of 60,000 troops suffered greater casualties than

Wellington's peninsular army a decade later. The balance of material calculation in the British parliament shifted again. It gave the opponents of the slave trade a new hearing and voted to ban the trade in 1807.

Unfortunately this was not the end of the matter for the ex-slaves of Saint Domingue. The shift to the right in France after Thermidor gave new influence to the old slave-owners and their mercantile allies. As Napoleon prepared to crown himself emperor, he also schemed to reimpose slavery in the colonial empire. He sent a fleet with 12,000 troops to seize control of Saint Domingue from Toussaint L'Ouverture's forces. The war which followed was easily as bitter as the war against the British. At one point the French army seemed to have won after Toussaint, mistakenly trying to conciliate with the enemy, was kidnapped and died in a French prison. It was left to one of his former lieutenants, Dessalines, to rally black resistance and defeat Napoleon's army just as Toussaint had defeated the British army.

Saint Domingue became the independent black state of Haiti. It was a poor state—15 years of almost continual warfare had done enormous damage. The sugar economy which had produced so much wealth for a few could not be restored without near slavery—and although Dessalines's successor, Christophe, tried to impose this, the people would not have it. They might be poor, but they were freer than their fellow blacks in Jamaica, Cuba, Brazil or North America.

Latin America's first revolutions

It was the freedom of Haiti that attracted a visit in 1815 from the Venezuelan who had argued so vociferously for the principles of the revolution at the age of 16—Bolívar. Now he was one of the leaders of a revolt which was challenging Spanish rule across Latin America.

The revolt, like that of Haiti, was detonated by events in Europe. In 1808 Napoleon had installed his brother Joseph as king of Spain after the abdication of the feeble Bourbon king, Charles IV. This provoked a revolt marked by uprisings in Madrid and massive guerilla activity in the countryside as well as setpiece battles waged by remnants of the Spanish army with British support. Much of the dynamism of the revolt came from deeply religious peasants led by priests horrified at any challenge to the feudal practices of the nobility and church and

determined to reimpose an absolute monarchy under Charles's son Ferdinand—complete with the Inquisition. But for a period, a *junta* (council) of the liberal bourgeoisie of Cádiz was able to pose as the national focus for the revolt, even though its ideas were anathema to the forces involved in the fighting in most parts of the country.

The result was that not just Spain but its whole empire was without a coherent government for six years. In the Americas there was a sudden power vacuum all the way from California to Cape Horn. A variety of political forces set about trying to fill this and, inevitably, ended up in bitter wars with one another.

Over the previous 300 years the original Spanish settlers had, like the British in North America and the French in Saint Domingue, begun to develop interests of their own which clashed with those of the empire's rulers. The political crisis in Spain seemed to provide the opportunity to assert those interests.

The colonial viceroys, pledged to the cause of the Spanish monarchy, were determined to resist such demands, had troops at their disposal, and could rely on the church for further backing. The viceroys also had something else going for them—the splits within colonial society were even greater than they had been in North America. Vast areas of Latin America were dominated by great landowners, who had established essentially feudal forms of control over the indigenous peoples. Meanwhile, in the cities there were merchants whose fortunes came from trade with Spain rather than other parts of Latin America, a middle class which believed the crown and the landowners alike were cramping economic advance, and a mass of artisans, workers, and, in some regions, black slaves.

Such was the situation when Bolivar, himself from a family of large landowners, took part in the first insurrection in Venezuela against Spanish rule in 1810—just as 2,000 miles away the revolutionary priest Hidalgo was leading a rising in the Mexican town of Guadalajara. The risings enjoyed initial success and then were crushed. Hidalgo was executed and Bolivar forced to flee for his life. The pattern was repeated as Bolivar staged another rising in Caracas, only to be defeated again (and to seek support in Haiti), while Morelos took up the banner of Hidalgo and was executed in turn. Bolivar was successful at his third attempt—marching from Venezuela, through Nueva Granada (now Colombia) into Bolivia and meeting with the 'liberator' of Argentina, San Martin, before going on to join with

the Chilean 'liberator' O'Higgins to drive the Spanish crown from Peru. Meanwhile, a third revolt in Mexico finally forced the Spanish to concede independence. Yet the victories were sour for those driven by the ideals of Bolivar and Hidalgo. They had embraced the values of the French Revolution and aimed not merely at getting rid of the crown, but at ending feudalism, freeing the slaves and establishing a full bourgeois republic. Hidalgo had even gone so far as to rouse peasants to revolt with talk of dividing the land, while Bolivar followed his victories by calling a 'Continental Congress' in Panama to establish a 'United States' of Latin America.

The great landowners who dominated the continent were not interested. It had been their opposition to such radical talk that led to Bolivar's initial defeats and Hidalgo's execution. Although they eventually hailed Bolivar and Hidalgo's successors as 'liberators', they also ensured that independence was on their own terms. Land reform never came, power remained in the hands of regional oligarchies, and schemes to establish a single Latin American republic to rival the United States were stillborn. Despite his successes and the statues of him which adorn every town in Venezuela, Bolivar died a disappointed man.

Latin America remained very much as it had been before independence—a continent of a few outstanding colonial cities with a 17th and 18th century splendour to rival many in Europe, surrounded by vast hinterlands of great *latifundia* estates worked by near-serfs. Its 'nations' were freed from Spanish rule but still dependent to a greater or lesser degree on foreign powers. Mexico was to be invaded by the US and France in the course of the 19th century, while Britain was to exercise a dominating influence over countries like Argentina and Chile. In each Latin American country oligarchic cliques plotted against one another, staged coups, ran rival 'Liberal' and 'Conservative' parties, and preserved social structures characterised by extreme privilege on the one hand and vast, stagnating pools of poverty on the other.