

REPUBLICAN REVOLUTION OR ABSOLUTIST REFORM

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“The first links in the long chain of reforms and revolutions, projects and delusions, rebellions and repressions that led in the eighteenth century to the collapse of the old regime, are to be sought not in the great capitals of the West, in Paris and London, or in the heartland of Europe, in Vienna and Berlin, but on the margins of the continent, in the unexpected and peripheral places, on the islands and peninsulas of the Mediterranean, among lords and peasants in Poland and Bohemia, and in Denmark and Sweden to the North. There emerged the passions and hopes, and the revolts and protests of the sixties and seventies, which proved in the end to be incompatible with the political and social realities inherited from traditions of the past. The end of the old regime presented itself at first as a peripheral event in the Europe of the Enlightenment.” (Venturi 1979 p.IX).

Thus, Franco Venturi the unrivaled master of the history of Enlightenment Europe, introduces the English translation of his third volume of “The End of the Old Regime”. In the same spirit I have embarked upon my somewhat more modest rethinking of “Enlightened absolutism” as a political regime and philosophy. Seen from today, the very notion of absolutism seems obsolete and doomed. Yet it has to be remembered that as a political regime it was neither identical with modern totalitarianism nor ancient despotism. The first observation might be obvious as an example of the fallacy of anachronism but the second is less so.

The concept “Enlightened Despotism” was invented by German historians in the 19th century, primarily as a defense of the Second German Empire of Kaiser Wilhelm and Otto von Bismarck in the scholarly battle between German autocracy and British and French democracy. Germany lost the two World Wars and so did “Enlightened Despotism” as a political philosophy even though it held the ground in a rearguard action in the proceedings of the International Committee of Historical Sciences between the wars (see its Bulletin 1928, 1930, 1933, and 1937). But despotism is not absolutism, as absolutism is not totalitarianism. In the light of the present problems for democratic theory and practice as well as the arising doubts of the advantages of revolution over reforms, it might be worth while to return to the old questions of the eighteenth century with a fresh mind and knowledge of other situations than the well known cases of France, England and Prussia.

I. ENLIGHTENED ABSOLUTISM AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Was the ‘ancien regime’ of pre-revolutionary France doomed to disappear in a revolution which for good or bad overthrew the existing order? The answer, of course, depends on what is meant by the old order. If, as is often the case, it is taken to mean the political regime of enlightened absolutism I am not so certain. Historical evidence, when taken from a broader and more comparative context, suggests a more ambiguous verdict than usually pronounced. Denounced by its aristocratic as well by its liberal enemies, absolutism has gone down in history as almost synonymous with unrestrained dictatorship. That never was the truth about this type of political regime. In principle absolutism designated a system of monarchical rule where the king only was responsible to the law of God, *Lex Divina*. Apart from that the monarch was *legibus solutus*, i.e. the law was a product of his sovereign will (Poggi 1978). Yet this does not imply that Absolutism was unrestricted despotism neither in historical reality nor in theory. It is very important to distinguish between modern totalitarianism and absolutism.

As a political system it gradually developed in a number of European states from the middle of the sixteenth to the middle of the eighteenth century. The French historian Roland Mousnier has suggested a development in four phases. In the beginning power was exercised by the royal council dominated by aristocrats and the king in cooperation, while in the end, after a series of internal changes, bureaucratic rule by a royal cabinet without personal participation of the king became the norm in fully developed absolutist regimes (Mousnier 1982). This latter type designated what contemporaries usually understood by enlightened monarchy.

The expression “Enlightened despotism” was never used by the contemporaries; it is an invention of German historians of the 19th century (Soboul 1979 p.519). Modern historians seem to have agreed on the use of “Enlightened Absolutism” for the theory and reality of a number of the absolutist regimes of the 18th century. In these the monarch derived his powers from the people and not from God. Friedrich II of Prussia was thinking in these terms when he in his *Essai sur les formes de gouvernement* (1777) called the sovereign prince “le premier serviteur de l’Etat”. In another context he expressed it in this way: “Il se trouve que le souverain bien loin d’être le maître absolu des peuples qui sont sous sa domination n’en est lui même que le premier domestique” (Oeuvres VIII p.168, quoted after Holm 1883 p.3). This did not imply that the absolute prince was powerless. On the contrary, because of this unity between ruler and ruled he (or she) ought to be to society “what the head is to the body; he has to look out, think, and act in order to acquire the utmost possible for all of the society.” Friedrich II, Catharina II of Russia and a number of other 18th century rulers tried to live up to this autocratic ideal of unrestricted monarchy in the service of a greater common good.

Ultimately the king’s power was absolute; it was, however, understood as ‘legitimate’ power exercised within inherent limits, bureaucratically organized, and never personally exercised. According to the German historian Fritz Hartung it is highly unlikely that even Louis XIV ever should have uttered the famous sentence: “L’Etat c’est moi” (Hartung 1949). Absolutism came into disrepute mainly as a consequence of the revolution in France. Unrestrained absolutism was dismissed as (Oriental) despotism by Enlightenment thinkers in France and Germany from Montesquieu onwards; but the majority did not criticize absolutism as such. On the contrary, apart from England, the Netherlands and Switzerland, Enlightened Absolutism was held in high esteem by enlightenment thinkers all over Europe. Baron d’Holbach (1723-1789) formulated with help from Denis Diderot (1713-1784), Joseph Louis Lagrange (1736-1813) and other of the Encyclopedists a veritable code of enlightened absolutism (Holbach 1770 and 1772). After having done away with the metaphysical bases of morals, politics for him became an art of regulating the passions of man in the interest of society at large, the so-called “bien commun”. The obligations of the social pact on the ruler as well as on the ruled are stressed again and again. The law was conceived as an expression of the *volonté générale* and equally binding for sovereign and people (Trenard 1979 p.629). To these thinkers it was not important who was the agent of these secular reforms as long as they were carried out. Consequently they had no problems in subscribing to the *bon mot* often attached to absolutist rulers of the Enlightenment: “Tout pour le peuple, rien par le peuple” (Linvald 1933 p.715).

This interpretation is not uncontroversial. The specialist of Enlightenment political philosophy, Maurice Cranston, dismisses such an interpretation in the opening paragraph of his recent book on the political philosophy of the Enlightenment:

“It is widely believed that the philosophers of the French Enlightenment were all more or less in agreement in their support of ‘enlightened despotism’ as the form of government that would most readily further their programme of salvation through science....But very few if any of the *philosophes* themselves were champions of ‘enlightened despotism’. On the contrary, the one thing they all had in common was a sincere attachment to freedom.” (Cranston 1986 p.1).

A devastating statement had it not been for the subsequent qualifications. After a brief analysis of the contrasts between two strands of Enlightenment thinking, that of Montesquieu as a repetition with modern arguments of the old *thèse nobiliaire* and that of Voltaire as a repetition of the *thèse royale*, Cranston continues:

“‘Enlightened despotism’ is an unfair name for what Voltaire and his followers had in mind when they called for enlightened absolutism; for they combined with their adherence to the Baconian political design a liberal or Lockian belief in the natural rights of the individual to life, liberty, and property. Montesquieu wrote for the *Encyclopédie*, and he was acknowledged by the younger *philosophes* as Voltaire’s equal as a patriarchal theorist of the Enlightenment; but in the 1750s, when the first volumes of the *Encyclopédie* were published, few of its contributors had any sympathy for the claims of the parliamentary estate which Montesquieu represented. When Louis XV banished the Paris parlement in 1753 to make way for a royal court, the encyclopédistes made no protest. They were more concerned just then to reform the Paris theatre and French music, a revolution in taste being seen as a step towards a revolution in thought.” (Cranston 1986 p.3).

Cranston is right in the sense that they did not call for enlightened despotism. But freedom and absolutism did not seem to exclude each other in the way they came to do after the French revolution. The previous thinking only looks obsolete in the light of the subsequent development of a renewed republican theory inspired by Rousseau and the success of the republican revolution in North America. I therefore suggest to return to the situation before the American and French revolutions in order to gain a real historical understanding of what the concepts meant to contemporaries.

Voltaire (1694-1778) tried to work with Friedrich II and praised the absolutism of Louis XIV in *Le siècle de Louis XIV* (1751) as the best of those four “most perfect periods of human history”, Ancient Greece, Imperial Rome of Caesar and Augustus, the 15th century of Mahomet II and the Medicis of Florence, and the century of Louis XIV. In fact it was the most perfect of them all enriched by the discoveries of the others (Voltaire 1751 I, p.36). Later on in the book when treating the situation of the sciences, Voltaire characterizes the century of Louis XIV as: “Ce siècle heureux, qui vit naître une révolution dans l’esprit humain.” (Voltaire 1751 vol. II p.39). This does not mean that Louis XIV was an enlightened absolutist ruler. He derived his powers from God and exercised “une fonction toute divine” because it was the will of God not because of some sort of contract with his people. Any talk of his ruling in the service of the people would have produced nothing but incomprehension. This kind of thinking was passed on to the successors with disastrous consequences. As late as 1766 Louis XV publicly stated that:

“The sovereign power rests exclusively in my person, the judiciary is derived solely from me, I alone give the laws....My people is only united through me. The rights and interests of the nation are necessarily united with mine and rest solely in my hands.” (my translation from Holm 1883 p.2).

Such thinking, however, was an exception not a rule in 18th century Europe. Most European countries subscribed to the theory of enlightened absolutism. Comparisons tend to fail when they take as their point of departure the French (and for other reasons the English) experience. This holds true for the otherwise laudable and highly interesting international conference on enlightened absolutism which the late Albert Soboul organized in 1978. In the preface of the proceedings he concludes in a way which is actually contradicted by the subsequent analyses of the individual cases:

“Cependant, à prendre une vue globale de l’absolutisme éclairé, on doit bien constater que, comme le réformisme éclairé à la française, il se solda finalement par un échec.” (Soboul 1979 p.533). He

continues: “L’absolutisme éclairé, pour avancé qu’il fût, ne pouvait nier sa nature absolutiste et bouleverser, au nom des Lumières, les fondements et les structures du pouvoir.”(p.530).

All right. But the very reason why these reforms from above failed was the outbreak of the French revolution i.e. a consequence of the very exception he originally had set out to explain. Soboul’s premises are found a little earlier: “Tout autre que celle de l’absolutisme éclairé fut, en effet, la voie de la Révolution française.” (p.531). Soboul could only reach this conclusion because he interpreted the successful case of reforms in Denmark-Norway as “a preuve a contrario”(p.530).

“Par comparaison avec les réformes prussiennes et la tentative de Joseph II d’une part, de l’autre avec la Révolution française, le cas danois prend valeur d’exemple: l’absolutisme éclairé sut ici répondre aux exigences sociales essentielles en prenant l’initiative d’une politique de changement radical des structures, qui affecta profondément la position et les intérêts de l’aristocratie foncière au bénéfice de la paysannerie et la bourgeoisie urbaine.” (Soboul 1979 p.530).

According to Soboul’s analysis of absolutism it was a political system fundamentally based on a feudal order of society and thus incapable of reforming itself. He expresses it like this:

“les monarques éclairés ne pouvaient sans saper les fondements même de leur absolutisme, s’en prendre aux bases de la société d’ancien régime, le privilège aristocratique et les structures féodales. Le cas du Danemark le prouve où la destruction de l’Ancien Régime fut imposée d’en haut, plus encore celui de la France où elle le fut d’en bas.”(Soboul 1979 p.531).

But how do we know that? Soboul’s apparently factual statement reveals itself as a counterfactual statement when investigated somewhat closer. He and most contemporary historians with him assume that Enlightened Absolutism was doomed to failure. But that is exactly what should be proven in the comparative analysis. Had it not been for the French revolution and the subsequent wars of national liberation from Republican and Imperial French rule, there seems to me to be no fundamental reason why Enlightened Absolutism as a political regime should not have been able to transform itself from within in a peaceful way in France as well as in a number of other European absolutist states. I therefore invite You to join me on a different journey of counterfactual speculation based on an investigation of that most truly enlightened absolutist regime, the Danish. Before that, it is, however, necessary to investigate somewhat closer the processes through which the French revolution was let lose.

II. THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: HISTORICAL ACCIDENT OR MANIFEST DESTINY?

All differences in the historiographical interpretations of the causes, the development, and the effects of the French Revolution aside, the overwhelming majority of historians, even after the revisionisms of the bicentennial, seems to agree on the inevitability of the revolution. For very different reasons, I admit. François Furet and his entourage of ‘revisionist’ historians condemn the revolution because it led to verbal and later physical violence. But he also subscribes to Tocqueville’s interpretation of the revolutionary episode as a logical step in the development of a monolithic concept of politics in France beginning under the absolutist rulers and culminating under the republican successor regimes (Furet 1988b). In the opposite camp it seems obvious that, as much as Michel Vovelle and his guardians of the revolutionary heritage disagree with the ‘furetistes’ over practically everything, they also think of the revolution as the only possible result. The difference lies in their positive attitude toward it as a step in the direction of the modernization of France.

I am not suggesting that the revolution never happened, not at all. What I do want to question, however, is the inevitability of the process. Was revolution really the only possible outcome of a series of structural imbalances in the 'ancien regime'? Wouldn't it be more historically correct to understand it as a political event, an 'accident' in the historian's sense of the word, i.e. something which can be explained afterwards but never could have been predicted before the event. Decades of revisionist research point in this direction, as does our recent experiences with the sudden and unexpected democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe.

Admittedly, one of the leading revisionist historians William Doyle, in his precise and detailed analysis of the origins of the French Revolution has written: "The revolution that was to sweep away the political institutions of old France, and shake her society to its foundations, did not begin on 14 July 1789. By that time the old order was already in ruins, beyond reconstruction." (Doyle 1980 p.43). This statement, however, is to be understood in a much less deterministic sense than structuralistically inclined readers are apt to do, as he continues: "This was the result of a chain of events that can be traced as far back as 20 August 1786." (1980 p.43). As far back as August 1786! This hardly qualifies as support of the textbook version of the inevitable coming of the French revolution. August 20 1786 was the time when the financial crisis of the state became irreparable. Other historians have chosen the collapse of the reforms of Maupeou in 1774 or those of Turgot in 1776 as their points of no return. Still, measured against the enormity of the traditional verdict pronounced on the old regime, a difference of ten years does not amount to much.

If we chose to follow the interpretation of Doyle, a procedure which makes sense as his analysis of the political events leading to the outbreak of revolution still is the most detailed and precisely argued on the market, then what happened on August 20 1786? On this day the comptroller-general of the royal finances Charles Alexandre de Calonne (1734-1802) informed Louis XVI that the state was on the brink of financial collapse. In his own words the situation was as follows:

"I shall easily show that it is impossible to tax further, ruinous to be always borrowing and not enough to confine ourselves to economical reforms and that, with matters as they are, ordinary ways being unable to lead us to our goal, the only effective remedy, the only course left to take, the only means of managing finally to put the finances truly in order, must consist in revivifying the entire State by recasting all that is vicious in its constitution." (quoted from Doyle 1980 p.51).

This analysis prompted Calonne to propose something absolutely unprecedented in the history of the French monarchy, namely a total and comprehensive reform of all its institutions in order to create a rational and uniform organization of the economy, the government, and the society. In the eyes of the king the proposals might very well have appeared to be a revolution. We know for sure that the proposals were understood as revolutionary by some of the main benefactors of the "ancien regime". They were, however, only intended as a reform, albeit a radical reform. Compared with the reforms actually carried out in other absolutist countries Calonne's proposals appear less novel and certainly not very 'revolutionary'. First came fiscal and administrative reforms designed to remedy once and for all the structural problems besetting the royal finances. Secondly, Calonne proposed a program of economic stimulation of agrarian production: abolition of the internal customs barriers, substitution of the *corvée*, i.e. forced labour for road building, by a tax. All this was intended further to increase the tax yield already improved by the administrative reforms. Finally, Calonne proposed to relax governmental controls over the grain trade (Doyle 1980 pp.96-97).

These proposed reforms failed utterly when in February 1787 Calonne did not succeed in convincing an Assembly of 144 Notables of the impending crisis and his measures to overcome it. Alfred Cobban, more than thirty years ago, blamed the selfishness of the aristocrats in the parlements for this result (Cobban 1957). William Doyle rather tends to blame the intransigent and autocratic way in which

Calonne handled the Assembly of notables (1980 pp.98-102). Interesting, Patrice Higonnet in his comparative analysis of the American and the French revolution, reaches the opposite conclusion and blames Calonne's overbearing manner (Higonnet 1988 p.220). However, the precise attribution of guilt is of less importance for my argument. What matters is that the necessary administrative and economic reforms were blocked. Calonne was ousted from power in March and on April 30 1787 his rival cardinal Brienne (1727-94) was brought in to try to persuade the Assembly of Notables of the seriousness of the financial situation. He only succeeded in further offending them and in introducing the politically fatal idea of the convening of the Estates General.

Yet, even Brienne might have succeeded had not the finances suddenly collapsed in August 1788. As late as November 1787 the credit of the regime was still sufficient to secure a vast loan from its citizens. But the day-to-day finances did not depend just on public loans. They also depended on "anticipations" that is short-term credits from bankers and financiers with security in the tax revenues of the subsequent years. Like Calonne Brienne hoped in the long run to be able to eliminate the need for such anticipations, but the budget for 1788 was still burdened with 240 millions livres, due from previous years. And suddenly it proved impossible to borrow short-term money from the usual creditors. Whether it was because they no longer saw any interest in supporting a minister who was planning to dispense with their services or because of a deliberate political plot to bring down an offensive minister we don't know for sure (Doyle 1980 pp.113-14).

Brienne tried in vain to fend off the defeat by fixing May 1 1789 as the precise date for the meeting of the Estates, but it did not help restore the confidence in the finances of the state. On August 16 1788 he had to suspend payments from the royal treasury and resign. The Swiss financial wizard Jacques Necker (1732-1804) was brought in to patch up things. And did nothing. He only ran what amounts to a caretaker government which saw its *raison d'être* as supervising things until the convocation of a meeting of the Estates General. To him and many others the situation seemed hopeless. As the American ambassador in France the later president Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) wrote to his friend John Adams (1744-1826) in late 1787:

"I think that in the course of three months the royal authority has lost, and the rights of the nation gained, as much ground, by a revolution of public opinion only, as England in all her civil wars under the Stuarts." (quoted from Higonnet 1988 p.222).

Still the course toward a complete overthrow of all existing institutions was not the only possibility. The determining factor was not the very convocation of the Estates General but how it was to meet, its composition, the methods of election, and whether the vote was to be cast en bloc or in separate groups.

The first governmental act calling the Estates General neither stipulated how they were to be elected and constituted nor which voting procedures they were to follow. Immediately before the collapse of the finances in July 1788 Brienne had declared that the government's mind was open on these matters, and he invited all interested parties to present their ideas. Doyle interprets this lack of detail as an attempt to gain time, while dividing the opponents in the privileged orders on one side and the mass of commoners on the other (1980 p.140). Brienne implied that the government reserved for itself the right to set up the Estates as it saw fit. The former minister Malesherbes (1721-94) had argued that since no precedent existed, the king could simply dictate one. The suspicion that this was the intention of the king's ministers triggered off the financial collapse we have just seen.

Because of the financial collapse the parlement of Paris was able to attach the condition that the Estates General had to meet "according to the forms observed in 1614" when September 25 1788 it registered the government act convening them May 1 the following year. There is no evidence that the magistrates had thought deeply about the implications of this, or even that the members of the parlement were sure what these "forms observed in 1614" were. They simply copied a formulation produced by the

parlement in Vizille in Dauphine three months earlier. Under the leadership of the coming revolutionary leader of the moderate Feuillants, the protestant lawyer Antoine Barnave (1761-1793), they had drawn up the following conditions as to how the estates should be constituted: all deputies were to be elected, rather than sit as of right; they were to vote by head, rather than in their separate orders; the third estate was to have as many deputies as the clergy and the nobility together; and whatever taxes the estates might vote should fall with equal weight on all members of society (Doyle 1980 p.142).

These propositions from a relatively unimportant provincial assembly were to prove ominous for the old order although there was nothing new in the individual demands. The novel feature was the combination of all these points in a single program, formulated at a meeting in which all three orders freely had participated. It was largely due to the activities of one political club, later called "la Société des Trente", that this program became a widespread demand all over France. "Le conspiracy d'honnêtes gens" as Marquis de Mirabeau (the younger, 1749-91) later called it, launched a campaign of pamphleteering and agitation directed at the bourgeoisie which soon developed into a floodtide far beyond the control of anybody. Necker, like everybody else, was taken by surprise by the parlement's insistence on the "forms of 1614". Like Calonne he tried to gain time and presented the reconvened Assembly of Notables with a long list of questions. Nobody doubted, however, that the crucial question was the number of third estate deputies.

The notables were split on the question and time dragged on and on. In this situation petitions calling for double representation began to pour in from provinces, cities, and corporations from all over the country. By December they numbered 800 and were still arriving. The Assembly of Notables still had not made up its mind, but Necker had. December 27 1788 he issued the "Result of the King's Council of State" in which it was formally decreed that the number of third estate deputies in the Estates General should be doubled so as to equal that of the clergy and nobility combined. On the other hand he did not go all the way and let the estates vote in one body. This bastard solution was to satisfy nobody and was more than any other single decision responsible for the provocation of the chain of events from the opening May 5 to June 27 1789 when the king accepted the reformed Estates General as a constituent national assembly. The mood, even among the most radical representatives of the Third Estate when they met in Versailles in May 1789, still was that of reforming rather than of destroying the existing institutions (Doyle 1980 p.156). Yet within half a year an assembly composed of the very same men did destroy these institutions.

It was not the old regime as such but the experiences of the months May, June, and July which turned some liberal reformers into democratic revolutionaries and other liberal reformers into reactionaries. Until then a large variety of different outcomes had been equally possible. The overwhelming majority of informed observers of the day regarded a political modification of the absolutist rule from within leading to some constitutional arrangement or other as the by far most likely outcome. This route was taken by a number of other absolutisms of the day. Patrice Higonnet in his stimulating comparison of the two revolutions in America and France does not believe in the chances for absolutism, not even of a reformed kind. But neither does he subscribe to inevitability of revolution. According to him the notables had little sense that the ancien regime of which they were part was coming to an end. They spoke fair words but stood their privileged ground. Still, in Higonnet's opinion, some sort of agreement ought to have been possible between the crown and the elite. He concludes:

"Louis and Necker might have turned the corner had they revived, in a more flexible context, Turgot's economic and social program of possessive individualism and rationalist reform. Louis could not go on as an absolutist monarch, but he might have survived as a "patriot king." (Higonnet 1988 p.221).

The prime example of such successful reform in an absolutist regime was the double monarchy of Denmark and Norway. There, a liberal set of reforms were carried through without the king

compromising his God-given absolute power. To this apparently paradoxical case of enlightened absolutism I will address myself in the following part of this counterfactual analysis.

III. REFORM FROM ABOVE: ABSOLUTISM IN DENMARK-NORWAY

April 14 1784 the young son of the insane king Christian VII and heir to the throne, Crown Prince Frederik - who in 1808 on the death of his father became king Frederik VI - carried through a peaceful coup d'Etat. At the very first meeting of the royal council which he attended after having reached the age of sixteen he persuaded Christian to dismiss the prior cabinet and grant himself the reins of government. The former ministers were caught completely off guard and put up no resistance. The young prince was not educationally well prepared for this task, but had the good luck of an extremely gifted group of advisers. They were headed by the minister of foreign affairs, count Andreas Peter Bernstorff (1735-97) and the minister of finance, count Ernst Schimmelmann (1747-1831). Both men followed illustrious German born predecessors bearing the same family names, an uncle and a father respectively. They were joined by the Danish born influential aristocrat count Christian Ditlev Reventlow (1748-1827) and the Norwegian lawyer Christian Colbiørnsen (1749-1814).

With the exception of Colbiørnsen these were all noble landowners, among the biggest in the country. Yet they immediately set off to follow up earlier endeavours to reform the agriculture which had been investigated from 1757 onwards. Andreas Peter Bernstorff, together with Christian Ditlev Reventlow, chaired from 1786 the Great Land Commission with Colbiørnsen as secretary. It worked with unprecedented speed and immediately effectuated a series of measures which eventually were to grant the Danish peasant as much personal freedom as his English counterpart but better protection against economic exploitation. The middle and larger peasants that is. First, in 1786 and 1787, landlords were deprived of their right to impose degrading punishments on their tenants such as riding the "wooden horse", and tenants were granted the right to economic compensation for improvements they had made if they were evicted from their plots. In 1788 the Danish equivalent of serfdom, the so-called "Stavnsbånd", was abolished. Literally the "Stavnsbånd" means adscription. It was a peculiar form of servitude enforced by the state on the tenant peasants which had come into existence as late as 1733. Serfdom in the East-Elbian sense had never made it further north than Holstein. The "Stavnsbånd" was to be terminated in stages which would leave all peasants completely free by 1800; but 1788 was from the beginning seen at the point of no return for the agrarian reforms in particular and the whole complex of reforms. Recently, the degree of unfreedom under the "Stavnsbånd" has been questioned by Danish historians, and the social reality seems to have been very different from the harsh words of the law and the popular myths established later on. Nevertheless, its abolition took on a symbolic importance which was to have an enormous political impact.

Labour services remained, but landlords were encouraged to define these in a contract with their tenants, if necessary with the help of state arbitrators and preferably convert them into cash payments. The landlords were not compelled by law to sell off their lands, nor were the peasants bound to buy the land they cultivated. However, both parties were heavily encouraged to do so. Many landlords found it more profitable to sell their estates and rely exclusively on the demesnes which they worked with hired labour. The plight of these landless labourers or very small smallholders called "husmænd" was the reverse side of the Danish agrarian reforms (Kjærgaard 1979). Their numbers had been rising all through the eighteenth century, but the reforms by the end of the century were to deprive this rapidly growing class of all hope of entering the middle strata of society for more than a century.

As in most other cases of successful modernization the poor paid the price by becoming even poorer. Likewise the reforms never threatened the central economic interests of the manorial class (Kjærgaard). Yet, Soboul's harsh judgment of the incapacity of a feudal system to reform itself (1979 p.531) does not hold true. The reforms were meant to create a middle class of entrepreneurial peasant

farmers and that they did. Over the next thirty years more than half of the tenant peasants bought their own middle-sized farmsteads. Together with other reforms this process did away with the old system of communal village farming. In less than a generation, the core lands of the Danish state, though still thoroughly absolutist, for all practical purposes had done away with the feudal agricultural structure and laid the foundations of a new agrarian capitalism dominated by a self-conscious class of capitalist peasant farmers. When the feudal system was formally abolished in 1919 it had long since ceased to exist in social reality.

The Agrarian reforms of 1784 to 1788 were in the years 1793-96 followed by a thorough reform of the legal system in the spirit of Beccaria (1764) bearing the unmistakable imprint of Christian Colbiørnsen. Legal processes were rationalized and prison conditions improved. A regular system of poor relief was instituted, financed by compulsory contributions from the peasants under the supervision of the priests in their capacity as local representatives of the state - the king was head of the church in this Lutheran country since the Reformation in 1536. The system worked relatively well until the middle of the nineteenth century when the peasant farmers as a result of the democratization took over local government themselves. The subsequent period from the 1840s to the 1880s represents a nadir in the relations between the poorer and the wealthier strata of Danish agrarian society.

A more liberal tariff abolishing many import prohibitions was introduced in 1797 and the corn trade was liberalized. In 1792 Ernst Schimmelmann took steps to end the slave trade in the Danish West Indies from 1803 as the first country in the world. However, he failed to abolish slavery itself on these islands because of intransigent resistance among the planters and fear of loss of revenue (Degn 1974). He also presided over a commission which in 1789 proposed the introduction of universal free elementary schooling for all children between seven and fourteen, a measure to be enacted in the so-called Great School Law of 1814 in the midst of military defeat and economic catastrophe. Likewise the Jews were emancipated in 1798 with full rights to marry Christians and enter secondary schools.

The whole reform program was accomplished in an atmosphere of almost unlimited free debate as censorship was banned in the period between 1770 and 1799. September 4 1770 the king had declared.

“Nous sommes profondément convaincu qu’il est aussi nuisible á la recherche de la vérité, qu’un obstacle à la découverte des erreurs et des préjugés héréditaires, que de bons patriotes hésitent à écrire librement d’après leur esprit et leur conviction, et à attaquer les abus et les préjugés.” (quoted after Linvald 1933 p.723).

In the wake of the coup of 1784 the freedom had become even more extended and the abolishment of censorship was put into law in 1790. The agents of these reforms were some of the most influential nobles in the double monarchy. They did not act on an impulse of pure idealism although Reventlow for one like the American republican Thomas Jefferson left office poorer than he entered. They were sufficiently far-sighted to give up untenable political prerogatives of their class and gamble on future economic gains. The majority of the owners of large estates were to profit from this policy in the 19th century. The initiators were sufficiently well off to be able to risk the gamble. This was not the case for many of the smaller estate holders especially in the peninsula of Jutland. In the summer of 1790, 103 of the greatest proprietors organized a so-called “Address of Confidence” to the Crown Prince at the occasion of his betrothal to a German Princess. They protested against the newly proposed civil reforms and drew attention to the rising “insubordination of the peasants encouraged by the French example”. The latter was the real meat. Noble anxiety over the rising expectations among the liberated peasants triggered off a reaction which has gone down in history under the name of the “Revolt of the Proprietors of Jutland” (“Den jyske Proprietærfejde”, Bjørn 1979a). The outcome, however, was to contrast completely with the noble protest in France two years earlier.

The reform ministry reacted swiftly and with determination on the challenge. Christian Colbjørnsen, besides serving as secretary of the Great Agrarian Commission, 1788 had also been appointed Procurator General and legal Porte-Parole of the regime. In this capacity October 1790 he published the address and a detailed refutation (Colbjørnsen 1790). He stressed the privileges of the grand holders of estates and denounced the signatories and their motives publicly. This offence forced the main instigator of the protest, a German noble by the name of Lüttichau to sue Colbjørnsen privately in order to protect his honour. Thus, the ministry cleverly succeeded in maneuvering the revolt into the courtroom while mobilizing the predominantly non-noble “public opinion” of the capital to support its cause. Lüttichau was completely isolated as the signatories in the following months one by one withdrew their signatures or even denied that they ever signed. When the verdict in Colbjørnsen’s favour was pronounced April 7 1791, Lüttichau was finished as was the Danish revolt of the nobles. He sold his manors and moved to Brunswick in Germany while the reform of the Danish absolutist state continued as planned.

It is hard to imagine a more striking contrast to the development in France. The Danish case certainly confirms the opinion of many modern historians that had the French ministers and the king agreed on their policy - or just agreed on any one coherent policy - it would have been impossible to organize a force to oust them from power (Doyle 1980 p.113). Little wonder then that Danish reformers of noble descent in their letters and diaries when commenting upon the events in France, somewhat condescending could note: “Finally France is catching up with the rest of enlightened Europe”. They kept thinking along these lines until the dethroning of Louis XVI in September 1792 and his subsequent execution in January 1793. Then everything changed. But until 1791-92 they had been all for the revolution as the French monarchy in their eyes had failed to do its duty toward the society it was supposed to serve.

IV. THE DANISH IDEOLOGY OF ENLIGHTENED ABSOLUTISM

The revolt of the nobles marked the epitome of a very peculiar Danish ideology of “absolutism guided by public opinion” as it somewhat paradoxically has been termed by a modern Norwegian historian (Seip 1958). A less clumsy rendering into English could be “absolutism by consent” if consent is understood as openly expressed opinion. A key thinker in this tradition was Jens Schelderup Sneedorf (1724-64). In a book called *Om den borgerlige Regiering* (On Civil Government) he combined the notions of “justice” and “common good” from the tradition of the German-Swedish author Samuel von Pufendorf (1632-94, see Tamm 1986) with Montesquieu’s concepts of “honour” and “civic virtue” (Horstbøll 1988 p.17). Sneedorf followed Montesquieu in claiming these two sets of “mentalities” to be typical of monarchical and republican regimes respectively, but added that “civic virtue which is all too easily corrupted under the unstable republican form of government” also could blossom under monarchy if the “exercise of government aimed at the common weal”. According to Horstbøll’s analysis, “civic virtue” was expressed in the “patriotism” and “public spirit” of the citizens while concerns about the “common weal” originated in the public debate over the proper “advice” to give to those in power (Horstbøll 1988 p.17).

Apart from the title which is copied from John Locke (1690) this is a highly original ideological construction developed in the second half of the eighteenth century by Danish and Norwegian historians and lawyers. As Sneedorf said in his speech at the commemoration of the centennial of Danish absolutism in 1760: “We are the only people who have given ourselves unrestricted monarchs.” (Sneedorf vol. 7 p. 504). As they were of non-noble descent they feared more than anything else the selfishness and egoism of the aristocracy. The only instrument capable of policing this class and its excessive and inappropriate privileges was a king with absolute powers. Only he was able to rule in the interest of the whole people and not just one class. Thinking of this kind had a long and honourable tradition in Denmark. The proponents of the theory referred to the circumstances in 1660 when king Frederik III had assumed

absolute power dismissing the aristocratic Council of the Realm (Rigsrådet) with the support of the Estates General. They called this a contract between the ruler and the ruled. This was definitely not the opinion Frederik III who ordered his prime minister Peder Schumacher (1635-99), later ennobled as Griffenfeld and even later condemned to prison for life for high treason, to render the new absolutist system in writing. This he did 1665 in the so-called Lex Regia, (King's Law), a document heavily inspired by the writings of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645, see Fabricius 1920 pp.1-21 and 270 ff., Latin transl. in Jørgensen 1886 pp.38-67). It confirmed the king's divine right to rule relying on the kind of advice he found best. However, even if this absolutist 'constitution' was not published until 1709, the very existence of it lent some credibility and legitimacy to the theory of the king's "absolute rule by law" even if the absolute rulers never openly accepted it (Horstbøll 1988 pp.6ff.).

In absolutist France after the December 1788 decision to convene the Estates General and before the proclamation of the "Constituante" in June 1789 the king's absolute power turned out only to be absolute as long as it was exercised according to "the law" or a constitution. The problem only was that nobody agreed upon what was "the law". Here we find the fundamental difference between the apparently so similar absolutisms Danish and French style. The Danish absolute monarchy had from its very beginning taken on the task of formulating a comprehensive system of coherent laws. Under the names "Danske Lov" and "Norske Lov" respectively they were finished in 1683 and 1687 (Horstbøll, Løfting and Østergård 1989). Obviously these laws did not amount to a bourgeois Code Napoléon but they were much more than a simple codification of feudalism. The relation between these laws and Lex Regia was ambiguous (Jørgensen 1886 and Ekman 1957), but the Danish absolutist state had a modern reasonably coherent and comprehensive set of laws to refer to when it reformed the society from the top down. This is a striking contrast to absolutist France. Louis XIV had never bothered to modernize and rationalize the structure of his state apparatus and thus left his successors without references outside their own persons when their governments ran into economic troubles.

This does not suggest that the alliance between the tenant farmers and their 'liberators' could have endured stresses as those put on the French agrarian society during the revolution. The fundamental precondition for the success of the reforms was the economic boom of the so-called "flourishing epoch of commerce". Under less fortunate circumstances, as Thorkild Kjærgaard has pointed out in a recent article, the alliance of peasants and landlords of the Vendée against revolutionary Paris might easily have been repeated in Denmark. And here the outcome would have been very different (Kjærgaard 1989 p.229). The agrarian reforms of Denmark were never seriously challenged and thus had the time to ripen and stabilize so that they became a matter of course.

V. THE ABSOLUTIST STATUE OF LIBERTY

The concept of the central position of the public opinion in the political process was more than mere ideology or wishful thinking on behalf of a few intellectuals. The leading journals and newspapers were widely distributed and read, as demonstrated convincingly by Thorkild Kjærgaard in an analysis of their lists of subscription. The total readership may have amounted to as much as 10% of the adult population (Kjærgaard 1989 p.224). This figure lends credibility to the assumption of the importance of the written press shared by most contemporaries. A typical example concerning the public attitudes toward the rebellion in North America is found in a private letter from the minister of foreign affairs, Count A.P. Bernstorff to Detlev Reventlou (1712-1783) in Holstein October 22 1776:

"Le public d'ici est extrêmement porté pour les rebelles [de l'Amérique], non par connoissance de cause, mais parce que la manie de l'indépendance a réellement infecté tous les esprits, et que ce poison se répand imperceptiblement des ouvrages des philosophes jusques dans les écoles des villages." (Friis 1913 p.498 cf. Kjærgard 1989 p.227).

The “public opinion” was expressed and believed to be influential by the majority of the contemporaries. The opinions expressed were relatively cautious as the writers did not want to provoke the monarch nor his servants (the classic analysis of the content of the public opinion is Holm 1883, 1888 a, and 1888 b). But the necessary prerequisite for the formation of a public opinion was established September 4 1770 when all censorship was abolished as we have already seen (Holm 1885). Restrictions on the press were only reintroduced in 1799 when Russian political pressure forced the Danish government to silence some republican critics. Censorship of the newspapers before printing was reinstated in 1810 because of the pressures of war (Linvald 1933 p.724 and Jørgensen 1844). The abolition of censorship in the crucial period from 1770 to 1799 did not mean that everything was allowed in print; on the contrary, the authors had to face trial and verdict after the publication, but the verdicts had to accommodate to written codes of law. Such verdicts could bankrupt offenders and contributed to the ruining of several promising careers. Nevertheless, the whole process was given a legalistic form and thus allowed writers to discuss even matters of the state in a serious way and to disagree openly with the absolutist king and his administration. A good example of that is the debate following the drafting of Rewentlow’s report on the abolition of servitude 1788 (Kjærgaard 1980).

The ideology of “absolutism by consent” was given physical form during the revolt of the nobles. In order to support the reform ministry and keep the Crown Prince on the track of reforms, a group of influential citizens in Copenhagen decided to raise funds for a monument to commemorate the liberation of the peasants. The explicitly expressed intention was “in clear and unambiguous symbols to depict the regime’s official ideology of liberty”. Accordingly it was to be executed in the language of neoclassical iconography. The elaboration of the details was put in the hands of the painter and architect Nikolai Abildgaard (1743-1809) in collaboration with three sculptors Nikolai Dajon (1748-1823), Andreas Weidenhaupt (1738-1803), and Johannes Wiedewelt (1731-1802). Abildgaard had been trained in Rome at the same time as Jacques-Louis David and was an ardent republican. This, however, did not prevent him from being a success as professor at the Royal Academy of Arts, that is the official artist of the regime. He mainly demonstrated his political opinion in highly sophisticated allegories inaccessible to most spectators or in private satires (Sass 1986).

Abildgaard chose the form of an obelisque for the monument because this traditionally was used to remind spectators of power and eternity. Thus Abildgaard and the group behind him in the disguise of an unconditional support of his policy hoped to convey to the Crown Prince the idea that the Law was unflexible and equal for all. The artists decided to erect four female statues, one at each corner of the base, embodying Fidelity, Bravery, Labour, and Civic Virtue. Two bas reliefs representing Justice balancing the two extremes on a scale, and a female Denmark liberating serfs and slaves alike respectively were placed on the base. Officially the monument was called the “Monument in Honour of the Generous Acts of his Majesty toward the Noble Class of Peasants”. However, according to the neoclassical taste of the day, not a single peasant was to be found on the entire column. From today’s point of view the most important expression of ideology are the two inscriptions on the base between the reliefs. They run like an official declaration of the anti-aristocratic ideology of absolutism by consent:

“THE KING DECIDED THAT FREEDOM OF THE CITIZENS GUARANTEED BY JUST LAWS PRODUCES PATRIOTISM, COURAGE TO DEFEND THE FATHERLAND, LOVE OF KNOWLEDGE, INDUSTRY, AND PROGRESS” (East side)

“THE KING ORDERED TO END THE SERVITUDE OF THE PEASANTS, TO ENACT THE AGRICULTURAL LAWS IN ORDER THAT FREE PEASANTS IN HAPPINESS MAY LIVE A DECENT AND INDUSTRIOUS, AN HONEST AND ENLIGHTENED LIFE” (West side)

The fund raising drive took place in 1791 in an atmosphere full of hope and glory, and the first stone was laid outside the main western entrance to Copenhagen on July 31 1792 at the wedding of the young crown prince Frederik. Nevertheless, when the monument was finally dedicated in 1797, the silence was thundering. What had happened in the meantime? The excesses and the violence of the French revolution had chocked most of the well intended reformers and the very notion of republican ideals had become dangerous. Thus was rendered obsolete all thought of republican virtues being defended by an absolutist monarchy. The idea of the differences between people and aristocracy arbitred by an absolutist king guided by the reason of the well educated public opinion seemed ludicrous after the introduction of the modern political cleavage between left and right.

This, however, should not make us overlook the existence of real alternatives to full scale revolution in the years before the unleashing of the French revolution. Until the events in the summer of 1789 everybody even in France was in favour of reforms in order to improve the existing institutions of advising the king. What turned benign reformers into radical revolutionaries was not the experience of the deficiencies of the old regime as such, but the revolutionary logic and self-radicalization of the political language the months of May, June, and July 1789 (Furet 1978, Hunt 1984 and Østergård 1985). The events of those months represent one of those unpredicted and unpredictable turns of history which, when it first happened, cannot be undone and subsequently changes all the rules of the game. It would, however, be utterly unhistorical to evaluate all prior experiences and strategies from this vantage point. Had the reformers succeeded in France as they did in other absolutist European countries, history would have taken a somewhat different turn.

VI. THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The agrarian reforms of the Danish monarchy were to revolutionize the countryside fundamentally over the next couple of generations. A thorough agrarian revolution created a system of middle-sized capitalist peasant farmers who later in the century succeeded in setting up cooperatives to process and market their agricultural products on the world market (for details see Østergård 1990). What happened to the agriculture in France? According to one of the leading historians of the Annales school, Marc Bloch, nothing. As he put it in his history of rural France:

“The Revolution was to leave the large estate relatively unimpaired. The picture presented by the rural France of our own day - which is not, as it is sometimes said, a land of petty proprietors but rather a land where large and small proprietors co-exist in proportions which vary considerably from province to province - is to be explained by its evolution between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries.” (Bloch 1931/1966 p.149).

The much hailed “abolition of feudalism” August 4 1789 was not an agrarian revolution as so often assumed. The hero of Italian Marxism, Antonio Gramsci, for one coined the phrase “rivoluzione agraria mancata” to denominate the differences between revolutionary capitalist ‘normal’ France and underdeveloped Italy. This interpretation has been repeated so often that it hardly needs need any proof. Yet it seems only to be based upon a reading of the parliamentary debates. A good example of such orthodoxy is Herbert 1921 but it has recently been repeated by nobody else but Furet himself. Normally an ardent revisionist he repeats the intentions of the deputies in the Constituante of August 4 and 11 lock, stock, and barrel. He distances himself much less than usually from the proclamations in his subtle analyses of revolutionary rethorics:

“By suppressing from top to bottom the “feudal” structure of the old society, the decree of August 11, 1789, gave the French Revolution a radical individualist character, which was seen as an indispensable prerequisite of democratic equality. “Feudalism”, like aristocracy, became the negative of this new world....By decreeing an end to the principles of organization of the old society, the Revolution, even though it compensated the victims of its bold move with money, added to its banners a victory as radical as the reconquest of sovereignty in June and July - as radical, but easier, quicker, and more durable: for with the inception of popular sovereignty the French embarked upon a long journey marked by abrupt changes of direction and many setbacks, while on the grave of “feodalité” they laid the foundations of modern, individualistic society for centuries to come.” (Furet 1988a pp.692-93).

This may hold true at the level of discourse. As to social reality, however, it has become commonplace among agrarian historians to interpret the effects of the revolution as a process of freezing the existing unequal distribution of land among the peasants and substitution of non-noble proprietors (“notables”) for noble proprietors. They vary somewhat as to whether the subsequent losses of efficiency were compensated by the relative protection of the poorer peasants. Very recently this debate has been reopened by the historian Peter McPhee (1989). He questions the revisionist orthodoxy of seeing the small peasants protected by the revolution as a necessarily retarding the process of modernization. He draws upon an impressive range of comparative research into agrarian development in different areas of the world. As yet, however, it only amounts to a program for further research and I for one am not all convinced. His approach contradicts all the major results of the comparative historical sociology from Barrington Moore to Immanuel Wallerstein.

The grand old man of the agrarian history of the revolution Georges Lefebvre has formulated the effects of the revolution as follows: “by increasing the scope of small property and small-scale farming, it probably slowed down the innovations it had legally authorized.” (1929 p.44). Lefebvre was positive toward the long term effects of this policy because of his general political inclinations. In his opinion the revolution “accentuated the characteristic features of the agrarian physiognomy of France, created a better climate for social equilibrium, and saved some people from the suffering that technological progress brings to the poor.” (1929 p.44). That may very well be true in the short run, but the majority of specialists of 19th and 20th century France have tended to underscore the disastrous results of this protection of the small farmers in terms of contributing to the creation of a “société bloquée” (Hoffmann 1976 and 1963). The prevailing theme of French social and economic history of the period before the 1950s was the society’s inability to unleash its inherent energies. The main social basis of Republican France after 1870 was a class of relatively small peasants unable to compete on the world market (Østergård a.o. 1986).

What strikes the modern comparative historian is not that the revolutionaries wanted to carry the agrarian reforms of the old monarchy to a successful conclusion. On the contrary, it is their relative failure which is noteworthy, the radical nature of the revolutionary rhetoric taken into account. Faced with massive popular resistance, the revolutionaries eschewed prescriptive legislation (Jones 1988 p.XIII). Despite the initial commitment to individualism and to private property, legislation was never issued to abolish communal control over agriculture. The Revolutionary government did not suppress the communities’ rights to common pasture and, as a result, the arable land of the villages was still open to the communal herd after the harvest. Even though the Revolutionary government recognized that enclosure was a prerequisite of agricultural improvement, legislation to facilitate village-wide enclosures was never issued. Similarly, it was ruled that only debt-free villages were allowed to partition common fields. Since only few villages were free of all debts, this effectively prevented the majority of villages from partitioning their common lands. A rural code that would abolish gleaning rights or impose mandatory enclosure was not produced. By 1796, the Revolutionary government decisively turned its back on agrarian individualism when it annulled the code for partitions. A law of May 21 1797 divested

communities of the right to alienate or exchange their communally-owned properties. With this law the Revolution, just like the monarchy before it, had become the protector of village properties and rights (Root 1989). That is the reason why Georges Lefebvre, in his massive study on the conditions of the peasants in northern France, concludes on a favourable note:

“Telle apparait la revolution agraire: non seulement conservatrice, mais aussi moderée dans ses effets, en depit des apparences, et comme une transaction entre la bourgeoisie et la démocratie rurale.” (Lefebvre 1924 p.882).

The political evaluations aside, Lefebvre admits that the revolution halted the great agrarian transformation it had legally authorized with the consequence that an “unbridgeable gap between the old France and the new” did not occur (1929 p.44). Again one might be for or against this continuity with the ancien regime and relative protection of the weaker; the effects in terms of slowing down the modernization of France seem obvious. Whether the Revolution accorded the concessions to the peasants because of fear of violence in the countryside, “la Grande Peur” as it was called (Lefebvre 1932), or because of traditional fiscal interests as claimed by some modern scholars (Root 1989) needs not concern us here. The important thing is that the concessions were given and that they stifled the structures of rural France for more than 150 years. Maybe, after all, a total political revolution was not the most efficient way to revolutionize society. This is not meant to deny the desirability of democracy but it has to be admitted that democracy and efficiency are very different things. And that does not always come through in pro-revolutionary and pro-democratic writings.

VII. REPUBLICAN REVOLUTION OR ABSOLUTIST REFORM IN POLITICAL THEORY

The French revolution was nourished by one powerful idea, that foundation comes only from initiation (Ozouf 1988 p.809). That meant everything had to be invented all over (again) if it was to have any authority in the brand new revolutionary society. And yet nobody had foreseen this coming of events. According to Doyle the old monarchy collapsed by itself in 1788. It was not overthrown by opposition to its policies, much less by revolutionaries dedicated to its destruction. It fell because of its inner contradictions (1980 p.115). These ideas of invention and revolution as the mother and father of a totally new society brought about by words spoken in a political assembly was as much a surprise for the coming revolutionaries as it was for the representatives of the old order (Østergård 1989 pp.51-62).

In the light of subsequent events it is often forgotten that there is no evidence in France of major hostility to the principle of nobility and its pretensions among eighteenth-century thinkers (Doyle 1980 pp.120-121). Indeed, it is often forgotten that several of the enlightenment philosophers produced arguments in favour of the nobility. The elder Mirabeau (1715-89) argued that “noble landowners who tended their estates and resisted the temptation to squander their money in Paris were among the most valuable members of society.” (Mirabeau 1756). One of course has to keep in mind that he himself was an aristocrat, as was Montesquieu (1689-1755) who expressed equally benign attitudes toward the potentials of this group. In *De l’Esprit des Lois* (1748) he suggested that, although the honour so beloved of nobles was really nothing more than a prejudice, nobles performed an essential public service in the intermediary bodies which prevented monarchs from becoming despots. Nobility, he declared, “enters in some way into the essence of monarchy, whose fundamental maxim is: no monarch, no nobility; no nobility, no monarch. But a despot.” (1748 Book II, ch.IV). This positive attitude toward nobility prevailed until the very outbreak of the revolution. Not a single of the 60.000 cahiers de doléances suggested that France might do without a nobility, and everyone agreed to its desirability when taken as an honorary order (Higonnet p.221).

This kind of pre-revolutionary thinking was precisely what distinguished Danish and Norwegian political thinking from French in the eighteenth century. In France the nobles were allowed to think of themselves and their institutions such as the parlements as carriers of the old liberties. With the growing financial crisis of the monarchy they considered a return to aristocratic rule as a progressive step forward. And was not impeded in doing so by the Enlightenment thinkers. Montesquieu who had served president in the parlement in Bordeaux explicitly assigned a role of intermediary bodies between the ruler and his subjects to the aristocratic courts and the nobility. By their power to resist the king they prevented him from degenerating into a despot. Monarchy, said Montesquieu, was the government of one man according to law. Despotism, the worst of all possible governments, was the government of one man according to no law but his own caprices. This fear of despotism as arbitrary rule permeated *De l'Esprit des Lois* and influenced subsequent opinion in such a way that very few thinkers dared dispute it.

One, however, did dare, the Danish playwright, historian, philosopher, and professor at the university of Copenhagen Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754). In a book published in French in 1753 he launched a direct attack on Montesquieu's critique of enlightened despotism. He based his refutations of Montesquieu on an earlier treatise on natural jurisprudence (Holberg 1716 cf. Holm 1879 and Tvarnø 1989). Holberg developed a political theory of the so-called double social contract. According to this theory (and here I follow Horstbøll 1988 pp.13ff.) the first social contract which led mankind out of "the historical state of nature", in Denmark, resulted in monarchy. The second social contract determined the delimitations of sovereignty. In Denmark it took the form of a transfer of absolute power from the Estates General to the king in 1660 and the subsequent limitations of royal sovereignty in the King's Law.

Henrik Tvarnø in his detailed analysis of Holberg's thinking does not accept the validity of this position. He accuses Holberg of misreading Montesquieu at a number of crucial points and points out the basic parallels in their thinking:

"Montesquieu ne refusait pas l'existence de la vertu par exemple sous une monarchie, mais pour lui, la vertu n'était pas le pilier de la monarchie, c'est-à-dire qu'elle n'était pas essentielle pour l'assurer. Par conséquent, l'objection d'Holberg ne met pas en cause le fondement de la théorie de Montesquieu quand il dit qu'un sujet peut aimer et sa patrie et son roi." (Tvarnø 1989 p.175).

According to his analysis Holberg accepted the risk of despotism. The greater interest was the existence of a monarchical power strong enough to establish an equilibrium between nobles and bourgeois. This leads Tvarnø to the following comparison:

"Encore une fois le parallélisme entre l'argumentation de Holberg et celle de Montesquieu saute aux yeux. Le régime doit garantir la paix intérieure du pays. Au Danemark la paix pouvait être assurée, entre autres, par la monarchie absolue parce que celle-ci avait modifié un état de chose très important: »Les rois n'excluaient plus, comme avant, les bourgeois de mérite des postes importants.« And he concludes: "Ainsi, Montesquieu et Holberg étaient d'accord pour faire appel à un souverain, mais leurs souhaits étaient différents. Le premier voulait établir un équilibre entre le souverain et la noblesse, le deuxième entre la noblesse et la bourgeoisie." (Tvarnø 1989 p.176).

Be that as it may, Holberg was to influence a whole school of thinkers in Denmark. As they saw it, it was only the uninhibited power of the king that would be able to check the greedy and selfish aristocracy and thus guarantee "justice" for the whole people. The non-noble Holberg and his colleagues could think along these lines because Denmark-Norway at the middle of the eighteenth century according to the well-informed opinion of a contemporary English writer John Andrews had recovered from the effects of the in his eyes "impardonable" monarchical restoration of 1660. John Andrews published in 1774 *The History of the revolutions of Denmark*, with an account of the present state of that kingdom and people.

This book reflects the tension between republican tradition and the attempts at reform in the absolutist regimes better than any other publication of the time.

Just like his compatriot Robert Molesworth who in 1694 had published a defamation of the absolutist despotism in Denmark, Andrews detested the apparent lack of liberties. Nevertheless, the country had revived, and had within “the course of not so many years” reached a relatively “flourishing state”. What were the reasons for such an incredible fact? According to Andrews the merit had to be attributed to the government. “The wise management of individuals in power” had “counterbalanced the defects of an evil constitution.” Grudgingly he admitted that it might happen even in an absolute monarchy. There were rare cases of good administration in absolutist states. Only “liberty, like an open high road, leads more directly to the term proposed.... Despotism is, at best but an oblique path, subject to numberless errors and perplexities.”(Andrews 1774 pp.74ff.). On principle he did not like the kind of rule he found in a situation where “few of the Danish peasants are free and independent possessors of land.” (p.359). If this problem was resolved, however, “no nation in Europe could boast a better system of internal polity, and Denmark would afford the singular example of a people subject to absolute monarchy enjoying the most equitable laws and living under most moderate government in Christendom.”(pp.441ff.).

It was this state of affairs which Danish thinkers, as we have already noticed, tried to develop into an alternative political theory of “absolute rule by law”; the same reality modern historians have labelled “absolutism guided by public opinion” (Seip 1958). The physiocratic thinkers and the Encyclopedists in France had advocated an absolutism supplemented by a critical opinion, whereas Rousseau (1712-78) advocated democracy without public discussion (Habermas 1962 p.112). They never succeeded, mainly because the French monarchy was never absolutist nor enlightened (Trenard 1979 p.632). In Denmark the somewhat parallel theory of guided absolutism lost out as a political regime mainly because of the political and military repercussions of a more democratic revolution than the aristocratic one it had tried to forestall. Events that took place in a country over which the reformers exercised no influence. The Danish social reality, however, did not lose out as the Danish ‘ancien régime’ developed rather smoothly into capitalist modernity whereas Republican France took a much more cumbersome path. But maybe the ‘ancien régime’ was not so old after all.

That the Danish thinkers did not forecast the events in France was no particular weakness of theirs. Nobody foresaw the revolution, least of all the coming revolutionaries. The revolution in France was certainly never planned as would later be the case in Russia. Maximilien Robespierre (1758-1794), for one, was, according to the memoirs of his sister Charlotte, an ordinary provincial lawyer who played cards in the evenings, participated in musical gatherings and courted his benefactor the archbishop in the provincial town of Arras in the predominantly Flemish region of Artois. He was interested in the ideas of the Enlightenment as were most other young men and some women who had been to school. But he certainly did not sit in secret dark rooms planning the overthrow of the government. Before the events of 1788-89 neither Robespierre nor the majority of his generation were overtly disaffected from society (Schama 1989). In Robespierre’s case there was no recorded crisis of alienation, no outward rebellion before 1788. Later, in revolutionary oratory and journalism, he would talk much about himself, but he never revealed details of his life before the revolution (Jordan 1985 and Furet 1989).

It was the coming of the revolution which released new political possibilities, a new political discourse unimaginable under the ancien regime. Just as the English Revolution discovered in Oliver Cromwell, an otherwise obscure and undistinguished landowner and parliamentary back-bencher, a political and military genius equal to the great events of his century, so too did the Revolution reveal Robespierre (Jordan 1985 pp.27-29). Only a tiny minority could envisage any other form of government than monarchy. The idea of republic was synonymous with the direct democracy of antiquity. It was only after the king’s flight to Varennes June 21 1791 that it became conceivable to think in terms of a republic. As late as in the summer of 1791 Robespierre expressed outrage at the very notion of republicanism:

“Accuse me if you will of republicanism. I declare that I abhor any kind of government in which the factious reign.” (Nora 1988 p.794).

It turns out then, that the ideology of classic republicanism so often invoked by critiques of enlightened despotism as the only guarantee of civic liberty, when it came to social reality, was heavily tinged by aristocratic values, whereas the detested absolute monarchy when it functioned, was more democratic in the modern social and egalitarian sense of the word. This is obvious to the modern observer but it also came through in some of the theoretical treatises of the time. Only, they have gone into oblivion, because a new version of revolutionary republicanism came to dominate the world through the success of the French and the American revolutions. Those who thought in terms of reforms of absolutism from within were the more reasonable and well-informed of their day. The problem is, alas, that history does not reward those who are right but those who behold right.

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