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# “DOES DEMOCRACY END IN TERROR?” TRANSFORMATIONS OF ANTITOTALITARIANISM IN POSTWAR FRANCE\*

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*Does democracy end in terror? This essay examines how this question acquired urgency in postwar French political thought by evaluating the critique of totalitarianism after the 1970s, its antecedents, and the shifting conceptual idioms that connected them. It argues that beginning in the 1970s, the critique of totalitarianism was reorganized around notions of “the political” and “the social” to bring into view totalitarianism’s democratic provenance. This conceptual mutation displaced earlier denunciations of the bureaucratic nature of totalitarianism by foregrounding anxieties over its voluntarist, democratic sources. Moreover, it projected totalitarianism’s origins back to the Jacobin discourse of political will to implicate its postwar inheritors like French communism and May 1968. In so doing, antitotalitarian thinkers stoked a reassessment of liberalism and a reassertion of “the social” as a barrier against excessive democratic voluntarism, the latter embodied no longer by Bolshevism but by a totalitarian Jacobin political tradition haunting modern French history.*

On 10 July 1947, the *New York Times* published a foreboding announcement from Charles de Gaulle: “we see appear on the horizon a new menace.” If left uncontested, “Europe, as by a physical law, must sooner or later be absorbed by a hegemony under which its genius and its light would disappear.” That

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new menace was the Soviet Union's "totalitarian ideology."<sup>1</sup> De Gaulle was not alone in this clarion call. Writers everywhere intensified their attention on "totalitarianism" in the wake of World War II. These years saw the publication of landmark texts that examined the concept, including Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945), George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951). Social critics as diverse as Robert Nisbet, Jacob Talmon, and Friedrich Hayek now found the category to be indispensable. In France, Jean-Paul Sartre clashed with Albert Camus and Claude Lefort over Soviet totalitarianism. Raymond Aron dedicated much of his 1955–8 Sorbonne lectures to its study. Social scientists, too, embarked on comparative studies to distinguish totalitarianism from authoritarianism or fascism. "Totalitarianism," Carl J. Friedrich concluded after a 1953 conference on the topic, had come to present "the most perplexing problem of our time."<sup>2</sup>

Yet despite all their attention to the concept, few thinkers could agree on its meaning. As the postwar era unfolded, totalitarianism was made to name the welfare state, unchecked executive power, "social engineering," the fruits of historicism, the rule of "ideology," and the "totalitarian materialism" of consumer culture.<sup>3</sup> Appeals to interwar precedents could not settle the matter either. These earlier invocations circulated "totalitarianism" in public discourse, but the nebulous analogies they drew between Nazism and the Soviet Union failed to secure a consensus on the term's parameters. Exasperated with its conceptual promiscuity, one political theorist finally conceded that it was an intractable problem: totalitarianism was "a conceptual harlot of uncertain parentage, belonging to no one but at the service of all."<sup>4</sup>

In fact, authors hitched the concept to shifting reference points, because capturing its archetype posed a problem as political as it was scientific. This was especially true in France. The intersections of its domestic political disputes

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<sup>1</sup> Special to the *New York Times*, "Russian Menace Like German, May Mean War, De Gaulle Says: Communists' Targets Are Liberties and Rights Just Saved from Nazis, He Adds— Urges U.S. to Lead Western Alliance," 10 July 1947.

<sup>2</sup> Carl J. Friedrich, "The Problem of Totalitarianism: An Introduction," in Friedrich, ed., *Totalitarianism: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, March 1953* (Cambridge, 1954), 1–14, at 1.

<sup>3</sup> David Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, 2006); Karl Popper, *The Open Society & Its Enemies* (Princeton, 2013; first published 1945); Hannah Arendt, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," *Review of Politics*, 15/3 (1953), 303–27; Seth D. Armus, "The Eternal Enemy: Emmanuel Mounier's *Esprit* and French Anti-Americanism," *French Historical Studies*, 24/2 (2001), 271–304, at 292.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin R. Barber, "Conceptual Foundations of Totalitarianism," in Carl J. Friedrich, Michael Curtis, and Benjamin R. Barber, *Totalitarianism in Perspective: Three Views* (New York, 1969), 3–52, at 19.

and totalitarianism theory set the latter on an idiosyncratic itinerary. Almost from its origins, for example, French "antitotalitarianism" found itself eclipsed by communism's prestige. In the 1950s, its proponents, like Aron, Lefort, François Bondy and Jacques Maritain, occupied the margins of French intellectual life, prophets without honor at home even as they were winning esteem abroad. It was a striking situation given antitotalitarianism's preeminence in other national contexts; it was even more so in light of the formative role that French Catholics played in forging totalitarianism theory during the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the critique of totalitarianism only took on special urgency in France after the credibility of the French Communist Party (PCF) disintegrated, which gradually occurred after its dissatisfying response to the 1956 Hungarian revolution. By the close of the 1970s, the critique of totalitarianism successfully moved to the center of French intellectual life, winning institutional support and public attention. The renaissance spurred what observers have subsequently called France's "antitotalitarian moment," and it formed a crucible for subsequent, often conflicting, reorientations of its postwar political culture: the reassertion of familialism and republican humanism, the "turn to ethics" in French thought, the "breakthrough for human rights," and a broader "moral displacement of politics."<sup>6</sup>

Considering how its political and intellectual trajectories intertwined, it is surprising that scholars have recently assessed French antitotalitarianism, especially its 1970s moment, by shifting our attention away from the conceptual arguments its thinkers made. Totalitarianism's flexible boundaries and self-serving denunciations have encouraged them to turn elsewhere to identify its stakes. Michael Scott Christofferson, for example, has foregrounded the surrounding electoral context. French critiques of totalitarianism, he argues, flourished in the 1970s because, at bottom, they reflected the PCF's eroding influence and shifting electoral prospects in the wake of third worldism's collapse, the conduct of the Algerian War, and Eastern European dissidence.<sup>7</sup> Anson Rabinbach, in turn, has looked to totalitarianism's function as a "rhetorical

<sup>5</sup> James Chappel, "The Catholic Origins of Totalitarianism Theory in Interwar Europe," *Modern Intellectual History*, 8/3 (2011), 561–90.

<sup>6</sup> Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca, NY, 2013); Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, "How to Think about Rights" in Mark Lilla, ed., *New French Thought: Political Philosophy* (Princeton, 1994), 148–54; Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal, 2007); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, 2010), 220, 43; Emile Chabal calls this humanism a "neo-republicanism" in "Writing the French National Narrative in the Twenty-First Century," *Historical Journal*, 53/2 (2010), 495–516.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left: The Antitotalitarian Moment of the 1970s* (New York, 2004).

trope” in moral discourse. The “striking return” of antitotalitarianism in 1970s France exposes how its fickle significations accommodated the rearrangement of existing social cleavages into morally simplified dichotomies. “This is not wholly to dismiss the validity of the concept,” Rabinbach claims, but to attribute totalitarianism’s postwar persistence to “the rhetorical work performed by invoking the word.”<sup>8</sup>

But the politics of France’s antitotalitarian moment are not adequately grasped as a symptom of its context, a retrieval of a preexisting moral rhetoric, or a repetition of theoretical precedents. Rather, the antitotalitarian moment posed new challenges to French democracy. These challenges were not contained in its postwar antecedents, and they remain obscured when scholars neglect to link its context and rhetorical function to its philosophical content, however strategic the latter may have been. This essay brings those challenges back into view. It does so by examining one particular conceptual mutation that antitotalitarianism underwent as a postwar credo and which adapted it to the new contexts of the 1970s–1980s: having first pointed to bureaucracy, French intellectuals after the 1970s “discovered” the democratic origins of totalitarianism.

Specifically, the essay compares the 1950s discourse of antitotalitarianism with that of the 1970s–1980s, especially as it developed at the Institut Raymond Aron of the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS). Through that comparison, it elaborates two claims. First, beginning in the 1970s, thinkers at the EHESS refashioned totalitarianism into a specifically democratic pathology. In so doing, they revised two features of the preceding postwar consensus: that totalitarianism was a product of objective, law-like forces exemplified by bureaucratic rationality, and that it was therefore distinct from, even antithetical to, democracy. Second, by discovering totalitarianism’s democratic provenance, antitotalitarianism at once motivated French intellectuals to rediscover their own liberal tradition and redescribed the danger that totalitarianism was meant to name. Thus, as the reference point of totalitarianism shifted from the Soviet Union to the French Communist Party and the *soixante-huitards*, French intellectuals worked to canonize liberal thinkers like Benjamin Constant, François Guizot, and, above all, Alexis de Tocqueville.

To be sure, other political theorists and historians have described how French antitotalitarianism quickened the liberal revival of the past decades, some with more sympathy than others.<sup>9</sup> But left out of this picture is the related

<sup>8</sup> Anson Rabinbach, “Moments of Totalitarianism,” *History and Theory*, 45/1 (2006), 72–100, at 96, 88.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas L. Pangle, “Political Theory in Contemporary France: Towards a Renaissance of Liberal Political Philosophy?” *PS*, 20/4 (1987), 999–1004; Mark Lilla, “The Other Velvet Revolution: Continental Liberalism and Its Discontents,” *Daedalus*, 123/2 (1994), 129–57;

reconceptualization of the threat that totalitarianism posed. As intellectuals reconceived the terms of debate so that French liberalism promised the most viable stance for counteracting democracy's intrinsic totalitarian threat, they frequently relocated the danger to "the political." In contrast to the corporate or mediating bonds of "the social," "the political" overlaid what François Furet called an "imaginary social cohesion in the name and on the basis of individual wills."<sup>10</sup> Above and beyond communist party politics, it was this discourse of political will that many antitotalitarians portrayed as the true danger. Concretely, this reconceptualization positioned antitotalitarianism as a third way between the PCF and May 1968, with the latter two now condemned for having founded "the political" through a voluntaristic remaking of "the social." Historiographically, it was by probing democracy's relation to terror that antitotalitarian thinkers hoped to forge a liberal democratic counterpart to the violence entailed in communism and radical democracy. Together, antitotalitarian thinkers stoked a reassessment of liberalism and a reassertion of "the social" as a barrier against excessive democratic voluntarism, the latter embodied no longer by Bolshevism but by a totalitarian Jacobin political tradition haunting modern French history.

More than a political or rhetorical cover for anticommunism, then, antitotalitarianism's shifting content reveals how it became a struggle over the meaning and limits of democratic politics in France. Writers redefined totalitarianism after the 1970s as a problem of "political" voluntarism to pinpoint democracy's limits in reshaping society; in reality, they were also insisting on those limits. In so doing, they altered the concept's patrimony: no longer the unprecedented product of the bureaucratic society and mass politics, it became an outgrowth of democracy itself. Its defining example would be thrown backwards to the Jacobin terror rendering Stalinism a subsequent case of compulsive repetition. Totalitarianism would thereby become French in its essence.

## THE 1950S CRITIQUE OF BUREAUCRACY IN FRANCE

Beginning in the 1950s, antitotalitarianism took on an idiosyncratic political valence in France: rather than the prerogative of conservatives, it was the noncommunist left that weaponized it. Invocations of totalitarianism by the

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Lilla, ed., *New French Thought: Political Philosophy* (Princeton, 1994); Sam Moyn, "Savage and Modern Liberty: Marcel Gauchet and the Origins of New French Thought," *European Journal of Political Theory*, 4/2 (2005), 164–87; Iain Stewart, "France's Anti-68 Liberal Revival," in Emile Chabal, ed., *France since the 1970s: History, Politics, and Memory in an Age of Uncertainty* (London, 2015), 199–224.

<sup>10</sup> François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, 1981; first published 1978), 27.

former, like de Gaulle or the Mouvement républicain populaire, rarely amounted to anything more than drive-by references. Yet for the noncommunist left, theories of totalitarianism underpinned an internal critique of the French left, a demand for “the abandonment of the ‘Defense of the USSR’ line.”<sup>11</sup> It was a striking arrangement.<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly, prominent segments of the anti-Stalinist left criticized totalitarianism in the United States, like *Partisan Review* or the Americans for Democratic Action. But antitotalitarianism was overwhelmingly deployed there as a conservative credo and idiom of national exceptionalism. Political leaders invoked it to justify military interventions abroad and to undermine New Deal “totalitarianism” at home.<sup>13</sup> The same was true in West Germany, where antitotalitarianism shed its references to Nazism and fascism to become exclusively identified with resistance to Soviet communism.<sup>14</sup> It did not help that, as Samuel Moyn has argued, until the 1970s Christian conservatives were antitotalitarianism’s most enthusiastic champions in Europe: they believed that the salvation of Western Christendom hinged on the success of human rights internationalism to fight off amoral, hedonistic communist totalitarianism.<sup>15</sup>

French antitotalitarianism’s idiosyncrasies were also reflected in its idiomatic emphases. Political thinkers in America, especially European émigrés, often decried totalitarianism as the terror of historicism—what Karl Popper called “the metaphysics of history and destiny.”<sup>16</sup> Many would have been confused to learn that critiques of historicism in France often reasserted Marxism’s theoretical resources and defended communism. Yet staying true to communism, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others argued, demanded a critique of the Bolshevik substitution of “the scientific rationalism of the last generation”

<sup>11</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, “On the Regime and against the Defense of the USSR” (1946), in Castoriadis, *Political and Social Writings*, vol. 1, 1946–1955: *From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism*, trans. David Ames Curtis (Minneapolis, 1988), 37–43, at 41.

<sup>12</sup> The idiosyncrasy of French antitotalitarianism was noted even then. See, for example, Roy C. Macridis and Bernard E. Brown, “The Study of Politics in France since the Liberation: A Critical Bibliography,” *American Political Science Review*, 51/3 (1957), 812: “The great debate in France is not between liberals and conservatives, or liberals and socialists, but between those who accept democratic values and those who subordinate these values to some ‘higher’ goal. The challenge of totalitarianism, of course, has led to a general re-examination of concepts of freedom and constitutionalism in the West. But in France, the internal menace of fascism and communism has stimulated a literature of soul-searching rather than of re-examination.”

<sup>13</sup> Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism*.

<sup>14</sup> Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York, 1995), 11; Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left*, 12–13.

<sup>15</sup> Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, 73–8.

<sup>16</sup> Popper, *The Open Society*, xliii.

for a dialectical conception of history.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, when French intellectuals critiqued totalitarianism, historicism was not their direct target—bureaucratic totalitarianism was.<sup>18</sup>

Cornelius Castoriadis’s *Socialisme ou Barbarie* spearheaded this idiom’s elaboration. The group’s members included Lefort, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Laplanche, and many others, and together they attacked Stalinism and Soviet bureaucracy at a time when French communism still exercised a powerful gravitational pull. From its origins in the late 1940s, the group studied the bureaucracy as a new class whose rule, therefore, became the defining characteristic of Soviet totalitarian society. It vouched for the USSR’s historical novelty. In Castoriadis’s early writings, for instance, he interprets the “totalitarian character” of bureaucratic society as one of two possible solutions to a capitalist order in terminal crisis, the other being socialism.<sup>19</sup> “Neither capitalist nor socialist, nor even moving toward either of these two forms,” the Soviet bureaucratized economy “presents us with a new historical type.” It includes a new class structure wherein the bureaucracy “has nothing in common with the working class or with the capitalist class”; indeed “it constitutes a new historical formation.”<sup>20</sup>

The pressing need to grasp bureaucratic totalitarianism’s unfamiliar technologies of rule motivated this critical idiom. That imperative underwrote, for example, Lefort and Sartre’s debate over Soviet bureaucracy and communism in the pages of *Les temps modernes* (at times mediated by or directly involving Merleau-Ponty).<sup>21</sup> Sartre was no defender of bureaucracy. It expressed the painful “seriality” that his philosophy aimed to undo. But he nevertheless believed it was possible to use centralized bureaucracy to smash bureaucracy itself, that there were alternative possibilities for bureaucratic centralization than for it to simply restage in different form the exploitation of the working class.<sup>22</sup> Lefort disagreed. He was unwilling to accept any role for bureaucracy or centralized party politics,

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<sup>17</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, trans. John O’Neill (Boston, 1969; first published 1947), xx.

<sup>18</sup> Warren Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic: Post-Marxism and Radical Democracy* (New York, 2013), 139–82; Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 143–66.

<sup>19</sup> Castoriadis, “On the Regime and against the Defense of the USSR,” 39; Castoriadis, “The Problem of the USSR and the Possibility of a Third Historical Solution” (1947), in Castoriadis, *From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Positive Content of Socialism*, 49–52.

<sup>20</sup> Castoriadis, “On the Regime and against the Defense of the USSR,” 38, 40–41.

<sup>21</sup> Jon Stewart, “Philosophy and Political Engagement: Letters from the Quarrel between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty,” in Stewart, ed., *The Debate between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston, 1988), 327–54.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Communists and Peace, with a Reply to Claude Lefort*, trans. Martha Fletcher and Philip Berk (New York, 1968), 287.

because it reproduced the morphology of the bureaucratic society it was meant to undermine.

What needs to be emphasized is how this idiom of antitotalitarianism entailed no proxy critique of democracy. In fact, antitotalitarianism seemed relatively uninterested in democracy at this time. This might be surprising, given Lefort's subsequent legacy as a democratic theorist. But neither he nor his mentor, Merleau-Ponty, made democracy central to their interpretations of Soviet totalitarianism. Before North Korea's 1950 invasion of its southern neighbor, Merleau-Ponty preferred to interpret Soviet communism's challenge as involving, rather, the dialectical conflict between man and the historical process, i.e. man and "himself."<sup>23</sup> And Lefort's early programmatic essays employed the term "democracy" only infrequently, never in ways decisive for the syntax of his arguments. After all, totalitarianism was puzzling because it was seen to be typologically distinct from democracy. Investigations into the former yielded philosophical insight into bureaucratic rationality. Except by negative juxtaposition, they said little about popular sovereignty.

That critiques of totalitarianism were not yet critiques of democracy is, however, the crux of the matter. It accounts for why 1950s analyses of totalitarianism yielded no systematic reflections on democratic politics. The few thinkers who considered it were mostly ambivalent: most scholars simply assumed or implied that democracy (the West) and totalitarianism (the USSR) were antipodes, even if closer investigation occasionally revealed them to intersect in fraught ways. It was an ambivalence already woven into the Catholic world view of 1930s antitotalitarianism, which James Chappel describes as a fight to save democracy "that [was], nonetheless, fearful of democracy and the masses."<sup>24</sup> Little had changed by the 1950s, a fact evident, for example, in Aron's 1957–8 Sorbonne lectures. Despite their eventual title of *Démocratie et totalitarisme*, these lectures avoided establishing any intrinsic link between democracy and totalitarianism even as they suggested proximity ("The two . . . are simultaneously drawn closer together and contrasted"). For Aron, totalitarianism was more closely associated with classical notions of despotism familiar to us from the history of political thought. What was unique about it, as Montesquieu suggested, was how the principle of fear animated its administration. And although his analysis concerned itself with monopolistic party rule, in the end it could only establish an accidental, and not essential, relationship between the two political forms. The specific claim was that totalitarianism and constitutionalist–pluralist regimes represented two

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<sup>23</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror*, 66.

<sup>24</sup> Chappel, "The Catholic Origins of Totalitarianism Theory in Interwar Europe," 589.



competing interpretations of popular sovereignty, a “different interpretation of the democratic idea.”<sup>25</sup>

Otherwise, analyses of totalitarianism neglected democracy altogether. The absence was striking in an exemplary essay of the period, Lefort’s “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” published soon after Khrushchev’s 1956 “Secret Speech.” Like Aron, the essay established no intrinsic relation between democracy and totalitarianism. As Castoriadis was wont to do, it directed its attention towards the autonomy of the bureaucratic class instead.<sup>26</sup> In the essay, Lefort aimed to decipher the “historical function of Stalinism.”<sup>27</sup> He targeted the thesis that Soviet totalitarianism depended on the insidious personage of Stalin, a view that implied that Stalin’s death marked totalitarianism’s wane. The problem with this thesis was that it failed wholly to be critical. It condemned the cult of personality while clinging to that cultish attachment in negative, inverted form by attributing totalitarianism’s essence to a singular personality. What was needed, rather, was a structural analysis of Stalin’s function that transcended explanations dependent on fictions of heroic or dictatorial agency. To provide this structural analysis, the essay worked out—silently following Marx—how an antinomy between reality and appearance dialectically animated bureaucratic totalitarianism.

Essentially, Lefort argued that in its appearance (its self-understanding and self-presentation), the bureaucracy’s task was to unify heterogeneous social strata—mainly civil society and the state—that were otherwise economically incompatible, through the creation of a new administrative class independent of the productive system.<sup>28</sup> That class, the bureaucracy, embodied the universal, abstract dimension of social life, governing supposedly in the interest of all. In reality, however, the divisions that the bureaucracy purported to unify could not be abolished because that unification only ever occurred one-sidedly and from the standpoint of the party. Divisions thus reappeared within the bureaucracy itself as the division between the individual, particular bureaucrat and the objectified standards of the bureaucracy as social structure. Each bureaucrat who subjectively viewed himself as free and universal also felt himself powerless before an impersonal entity in which he himself participated—“the bureaucracy.”

<sup>25</sup> Raymond Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, trans. Valence Ionescu (New York, 1969; first published 1965), 179.

<sup>26</sup> Claude Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline: L’U.R.S.S. dans une nouvelle phase,” *Socialisme ou barbarie*, 19 (1956), 1–72, at 17–19; the text has been published as “Totalitarianism without Stalin,” trans. Alan Sheridan, in Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, 1986), 52–88. Subsequent quotations are from this translation.

<sup>27</sup> Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” 12–13; Lefort, “Totalitarianism without Stalin,” 60.

<sup>28</sup> Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” 17; Lefort, “Totalitarianism without Stalin,” 64.

More than the sum of its individual members, bureaucracy now designated an alienated social structure: “The bureaucratic mind hovers over bureaucrats, a divinity indifferent to particularity.”<sup>29</sup>

This contradiction between the bureaucrat’s self-understanding (free, universal) and his experience of confronting the bureaucracy’s objectivity (impotent, determined) led Lefort to identify *terror* as the practical consequence.<sup>30</sup> The more the bureaucracy insisted it was society’s centerpiece, the more it stood apart from society to represent itself as its universal dimension, thus the more excluded it became from society in fact, aggravating the party’s terroristic tendencies. With this sweeping analysis of the essence of Soviet bureaucracy, Lefort concluded damningly,

In bureaucratic society ... the state has become civil society. Capital expelled the capitalists. The integration of every sphere of activity has been carried out, but society has undergone an unanticipated metamorphosis: it has produced a monster at which it gazes without recognizing its own image, a dictatorship.

This monster is called Stalin. They are trying to persuade us that he is dead. Perhaps they will leave his embalmed corpse in the mausoleum as evidence of a past that is now over. But the bureaucracy cannot hope to escape its own essence. It may bury its dead skin in the Kremlin crypt and cover its new body with alluring finery, but totalitarian it was and totalitarian it remains.<sup>31</sup>

For Lefort, there is no question that totalitarianism exceeded Stalin’s person. Stalin was totalitarianism’s symptom, not its essence. There was, equally, no doubt that terror received its patrimony from bureaucracy.

What is striking is that Lefort appears to have achieved a theory of totalitarianism prior to possessing his mature democratic theory. Yet this makes sense, for in late 1950s France it was totalitarianism, and not democracy, that was at issue. World War II had foreclosed the possibility of substantive criticism of Soviet communism because European antifascism simply could not do without the latter’s support. To insist on a common denominator between German and Soviet absolutism after 1941 would have been counterproductive and nonsensical; it would have robbed antifascists of their most powerful ally.<sup>32</sup> But the onset of the Cold War opened up space for antitotalitarianism to identify a common denominator between Hitler and Stalin in the name of defending the free world—

<sup>29</sup> Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” 26–8; Lefort, “Totalitarianism without Stalin,” 73–4.

<sup>30</sup> Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” 34–5; Lefort, “Totalitarianism without Stalin,” 82.

<sup>31</sup> Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” 28; Lefort, “Totalitarianism without Stalin,” 75.

<sup>32</sup> Enzo Traverso, “Intellectuals and Anti-fascism: For a Critical Historicization,” *New Politics*, 9/4 (2004), 91–103

the democratic West and its allies. It was thus totalitarianism, and not democracy, that called for theoretical explanation.

In endeavoring to grasp the essence of Stalinism, Lefort nevertheless made one powerful maneuver that his subsequent followers would exploit to carve more space for democracy in future critiques of totalitarianism. When Lefort argued that the bureaucracy was a class, he did not mean—as Castoriadis did—that it was an economic class.<sup>33</sup> He meant it was a political one. After all, its independence from the productive system was what justified its claim to universality. Observing that the bureaucracy was “a group whose true speciality [was] to have no speciality,” Lefort explained,

This class is of a different nature from the bourgeoisie . . . The bourgeois class . . . is underpinned by an economic determinism which provides the basis for its existence . . . On the other hand, the bureaucrats form a class only because their functions and their statuses differentiate them collectively from the exploited classes, only because these features bind them to a central administration that determines production and freely disposes of labour power.<sup>34</sup>

If bureaucrats were a political class, then the historical novelty of totalitarianism stemmed from a “monstrous autonomy of the political.”<sup>35</sup> As is well known, Lefort will come to see that all societies show a “political” dimension insofar as all societies must negotiate the organization and institution of power. However, here he argued that bureaucracy’s unprecedented accomplishment lay in how it transformed the function of the political: rather than existing as an independent sphere, the political becomes cancerous, transgressing its original function and dissolving all reference points into an “effective totality.” When the political abolishes the gap between itself and society, it naturally abolishes its own conditions of existence and thus, too, disappears: totalitarianism “is not, therefore, so much a monstrous growth of political power in society as a metamorphosis of society itself in which the political ceases to exist as a separate sphere.”<sup>36</sup> Never before, Lefort argued, had a historical mutation of this type occurred. Contemporary historians are trained to leap to the French Revolution, but Lefort did not even throw it a glance. Like others of his generation, he denied Stalinism any precedents. He only paused on—and then dismissed immediately—the previous case of Islamic empires.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Castoriadis, “On the Regime and against the Defense of the USSR,” 51, 53.

<sup>34</sup> Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” 34, 25; Lefort, “Totalitarianism Without Stalin,” 81, 72.

<sup>35</sup> Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” 36; Lefort, “Totalitarianism without Stalin,” 83.

<sup>36</sup> Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” 33; Lefort, “Totalitarianism without Stalin,” 79–80.

<sup>37</sup> Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” 31–2; Lefort, “Totalitarianism without Stalin,” 78.

Thus, although Lefort would later find democracy indispensable for grasping totalitarianism's specificity, it was not in focus in this moment. Neither was the French Revolution. Despite invoking terror repeatedly, Lefort continued to associate totalitarianism with the development of the administered society in response to the pressures of industrialization and mass politics. In this belief he aligned himself with Aron, to whom he would eventually submit a doctoral thesis on Machiavelli in 1972. Aron had already been using the term "totalitarianism" since the 1930s. He was prompted to do so by his concern that democracies might need to employ totalitarian methods at home to counteract it abroad.<sup>38</sup> The despotic potential of democracy was never something Aron denied. Even so, he continued to find totalitarianism's conceptual paternity elsewhere. Publishing under the pseudonym René Avord during the war, he channeled Elie Halévy in attributing modern totalitarian dictatorship to transformations in nineteenth-century and *fin de siècle* French thought: the rise of "the administration of things" and "a degraded romanticism."<sup>39</sup>

The fact remained that, by and large, antitotalitarianism in postwar France found no reason to go after democracy. Its attention was focused elsewhere. It was a discourse situated at the intersection of contexts like the aftermath of two world wars and long-standing debates concerning industrial "mass" society's pathologies—debates which had been renewed in the postwar years as the study of mass parties, consumer culture, and welfare-statism.<sup>40</sup> Bureaucratic totalitarianism named the cumulative product of mass society in the nineteenth century and the progressive rationalism meant to administer it. It was why Christian personalists could insist that consumerism and the "American way of life" might also be totalitarian. Similar anxieties led thinkers as divergent as Henri Bergson, Emmanuel Mounier, and Simone Weil to critique "closed"

<sup>38</sup> Raymond Aron, "Etats démocratiques et états totalitaires," *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, 40 (1946), 41–92.

<sup>39</sup> Elie Halévy, "The Age of Tyrannies" (1938), *Economica*, 8/29 (1941), 77–83; Raymond Aron, "L'ère des tyrannes d'Elie Halévy," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 46/2 (1939), 283–307. For Aron's critique of the "degradation of romanticism" see his undated and pseudonymously published pamphlet, René Avord, "Les dictateurs et la mystique de la violence" (New Delhi, undated), 13–14. Aron published as René Avord during Vichy until his family arrived in London in July 1943; see Muriel Pichon, *Les Français juifs, 1914–1950: récit d'un désenchantement* (Toulouse, 2009), 156.

<sup>40</sup> On the relationship between theories of mass society in the nineteenth century and its twentieth-century iteration see William Kornhauser, *Politics of Mass Society* (New York, 2010; first published 1959). As Lefort later clarified, it found its origins in the conjunction of technological development, the rise of the social welfare state, mass culture, and its corresponding individualism; see Claude Lefort, "Reflections on the Present," in Lefort, *Writing: The Political Test*, trans. David Ames Curtis (Durham, NC, 2000; first published 1991), 252–79, at 264.

societies for abandoning the “spontaneous” human personality, the “concrete” individual, all those qualities that an administered society was thought to erase by imposing a unitary social pattern.<sup>41</sup> As Aron put it, when the nineteenth-century administration of “things” coincided with that of “persons,” self-government actually meant self-domination.<sup>42</sup> From the viewpoint of postwar French antitotalitarianism, then, the true danger was the modern disregard for concrete human personalities by bureaucratic rationality, its impersonal “ideology.” Rather than grounding complex modern societies, as Durkheim had hoped, the development of rationalism threatened their abolition. In turn, when “totalitarianism” was invoked in France, it did not draw attention to the logic of popular sovereignty. Instead, it brought into view the conflicting relationships between bureaucratic rationalism, progressive universalism, and the traumatic depersonalization that modern mass politics perfected. In the search for a common denominator between Nazi Germany and Bolshevism, totalitarianism’s critics construed it to be an unprecedented modern form, what Lefort called “an absolutely *new* type.”<sup>43</sup>

It would take new contexts to encourage Aron and Lefort’s admirers to reverse engineer from their analyses a democratic theory that genetically linked democracy to totalitarianism. Until then, and despite “all their achievement,” Abbott Gleason notes, postwar French antitotalitarian writers “were in crucial ways outsiders.”<sup>44</sup> This was especially true of Aron. Despite interest in the concept, totalitarianism simply never enthralled the French intellectual imagination in the ways that it did in 1930s–1950s America. The section of Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism* on totalitarianism would not be translated into French until 1972.<sup>45</sup> Lefort and Castoriadis would only become intellectual celebrities after 1968, and so taken up in a context different from the one in which they did their formative writing.<sup>46</sup> Unlike its virtual irrelevance across the Atlantic, in France the communist left presented a formidable force; its defenders were keen to avoid a term that linked, however obscurely, German Nazism to

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<sup>41</sup> Armus, “The Eternal Enemy”; Jeremy Jennings, *Revolution and the Republic: A History of Political Thought in France since the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2011), 478–87.

<sup>42</sup> Avord (Aron), “Les dictateurs et la mystique de la violence.”

<sup>43</sup> Lefort, “Le totalitarisme sans Staline,” 33, original emphasis; Lefort, “Totalitarianism without Stalin,” 80.

<sup>44</sup> Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 144.

<sup>45</sup> It was published as *Le système totalitaire*; the other parts of *Origins* would be published in the following years as *L’antisémitisme* (1973) and *L’impérialisme* (1982).

<sup>46</sup> Lilla calls Castoriadis “an anomaly on the French scene: an anarcho-syndicalist equally critical of communism and liberalism,” in Lilla, *New French Thought*, 29 n. 19. See also Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic*, 139–82.

Soviet communism.<sup>47</sup> And when “totalitarianism” did successfully exert a pull on intellectual debate, it did so to criticize bureaucracy, situated as it was among larger concerns regarding mass politics inherited from nineteenth-century Europe. Totalitarianism’s troubling character was grounded in the view that it pointed to a new and historically unprecedented political form: monistic, closed, dogmatic, and essentially antidemocratic.

#### MUTATIONS OF A DISCOURSE: THE INSTITUT RAYMOND ARON AND THE 1970S ANTITOTALITARIAN MOMENT

After the 1950s peak, interest in the concept of totalitarianism receded for almost two decades. Many social scientists abandoned it, frustrated with its conceptual imprecision and limited descriptive power for a reforming Soviet Union.<sup>48</sup> Its original architects in the US, like Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski, forfeited the term. At the same time, new work by political scientists turned away from typological approaches to regime types and towards the study of comparative developmental trajectories instead.<sup>49</sup> Already marginal in France, even thinkers like Castoriadis eventually exchanged the analysis of totalitarianism for that of “stratocracy.”<sup>50</sup>

However, unlike postwar national contexts elsewhere, antitotalitarianism enjoyed a startling renaissance in France by the end of the 1970s. Indeed, this resurgence is often studied as France’s real “antitotalitarian moment.” Unlike its marginalized antecedent sprawled out during the 1940s–1950s, this moment enjoyed recognizable institutional expressions. Christofferson has shown how this crystallization exploited the already eroded credibility of French parties on the left, damaged by their failure to criticize the Algerian War, the aftershocks of May 1968, and earlier direct democratic critiques of the electoral left. What Julian Bourg has called the “antinomian” spirit of May 1968—an ethos skeptical of norms and authority—amplified suspicions of the electoral left. Understanding how these events kindled an antitotalitarian moment in France is a present priority for historians and political theorists.<sup>51</sup> What is clear is that this moment penetrated

<sup>47</sup> Gleason, *Totalitarianism*, 144.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Curtis, “Retreat from Totalitarianism,” in Carl J. Friedrich, Michael Curtis, and Benjamin R. Barber, *Totalitarianism in Perspective: Three Views* (New York, 1969), 53–122; Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left*, 27–88, 113–55.

<sup>49</sup> Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1967); Guillermo O’Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic Authoritarianism: Studies in South American Politics* (Berkeley, 1973).

<sup>50</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, “The Destinies of Totalitarianism,” *Salmagundi*, 60 (1983), 107–22.

<sup>51</sup> Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left*, 18–55; Rabinbach, “Moments of Totalitarianism”; Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics*, 247–75; Samuel Moyn, “Of Savagery

French political culture more deeply than had its predecessor. It involved media personalities like the New Philosophers and extensive editorialization by Jean-Marie Domenach and then Paul Thibaud's *Esprit*, Aron's *Commentaire*, and Marcel Gauchet's *Le débat*.

No simple return to earlier idioms of antitotalitarianism, the moment came to frame the problem in new ways. *Esprit's* special 1976 double issue on "The Return of the Political" was prescient in this respect. If the earlier totalitarianism theory hinged on analyzing bureaucracy, by the 1980s it turned on the proper relationship between "the political" and "the social." These latter terms possessed a complex pedigree. Paul Ricoeur had already invoked the notion of "the political" in his 1956 response to the crushing of the Hungarian revolution.<sup>52</sup> And far from being Ricoeur's invention, the terms captured a distinction already present in early Enlightenment thought.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, they would also inspire a number of permutations in Germany and France, from Carl Schmitt to structuralism.<sup>54</sup> Depending on context, the terms often analogized to those of state and civil society. To complicate matters, after the 1970s they were frequently deployed as Lefortian terms of art: as the distinction between society and its mediated self-institution through a "political" or "symbolic" relationship with itself.<sup>55</sup>

Yet however polysemic it might have been, this idiom drew real distinctions. It alluded to the classic division in modern political thought between the spheres in which individuals related to one another as citizens and as socially marked particulars. It connoted, therefore, the modern dissociation of "politics" from "society," a separation canonically formulated in thinkers from Hegel and Marx to Paine and Rousseau. Whereas "the social" contained durable relations sustained by habits, institutions, and corporate associations that secured social cohesion and the possibility of a common good within,

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and Civil Society: Pierre Clastres and the Transformation of French Political Thought," *Modern Intellectual History*, 1/1 (2004), 55–80; Pangle, "Political Theory in Contemporary France"; Michael Halberstam, *Totalitarianism and the Modern Conception of Politics* (New Haven, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Political Paradox," in Ricoeur, *History and Truth* (Evanston, 1965; first published 1956), 247–70.

<sup>53</sup> David Bates, *States of War: Enlightenment Origins of the Political* (New York, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> See David Ames Curtis's "Introduction" to Lefort, *Writing*, vii–xxxvii; Samuel Moyn, "Concepts of the Political in Twentieth-Century European Thought," in Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt* (forthcoming).

<sup>55</sup> Wim Weyman, "Freedom through Political Representation: Lefort, Gauchet and Rosanvallon on the Relationship between State and Society," *European Journal of Political Theory*, 4/3 (2005), 263–82. Lefort drew his usage of the symbolic partly from structuralism; see Breckman, *Adventures of the Symbolic*, 152–8; Moyn, "Of Savagery and Civil Society."

“the political” overlaid abstract relations of equality deliberately constructed by individuals constituting themselves as citizens. Reaching into the history of both political theory and postwar French thought, this plural set of references endowed the new antitotalitarian idiom with a genealogy and protean force.

In drawing attention to this idiomatic shift, I do not mean to exaggerate the discontinuities from years prior. Intellectuals still identified totalitarianism as something that urgently needed explanation in the postwar context. Cold War political thought, whether after World War II or after May 1968, continued to be anxious over centralization, bureaucracy, rationalism, and historical determinism. Moreover, the two moments sometimes shared major figures; the new generation particularly admired Aron and Lefort, both of whom now moved to the center of French intellectual life.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the shift towards analyzing totalitarianism in terms of “the political/social” marked a qualitative transformation in how totalitarianism was understood, and thus also in its content. The idiom’s rise would help secure a fundamental reassessment of French liberalism by drawing attention to the importance of “the social” in modern democracies. It was a concern as central to French liberals like Montesquieu and Tocqueville as it was absent in a Locke or Jefferson. Even more, the idiom drew attention to it at a time in which the role of “the social” in postwar France was at issue. The destabilizing libertarianism and individualist voluntarism of May 1968, new demographic trends from immigration, the *droit à la différence*, and de Gaulle’s departure as head of state: each raised anew the problem of social cohesion and national integration, of how individualism related to statism. Together, these transformations trained intellectual attention on the limits of democratic politics and popular will, a fact dramatized in the new historiographic concern with the question “does democracy end in terror?”

Lefort’s own trajectory reflected these shifts. During these years, he reprised his older formulations to better articulate totalitarianism’s genetic relationship with democracy.<sup>57</sup> By the 1980s, he understood totalitarianism as a reaction formation to democracy’s empty representation of power, its “dissolution of the markers of certainty.” Specifically, totalitarianism sought to overcome that dissolution

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<sup>56</sup> For an account of Aron’s legacy and role in the rediscovery of the French liberal tradition see Emile Chabal, *A Divided Nation: Nation, State, and Citizenship in Contemporary France* (Cambridge, 2015), 135–85.

<sup>57</sup> The claim that modern totalitarianism “arises from a political mutation, from a mutation of the symbolic order,” now belongs to Lefort’s *democratic* theory; see Claude Lefort, “The Question of Democracy,” in Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge, 1988; first published 1983), 9–20, at 13.



by reconstituting the body politic at the symbolic level as “one.” Since social divisions were irreducible for Lefort, this symbolic holism amounted to a form of misrecognition, a subjective form of self-deception in response to democracy’s anti-foundationalism.<sup>58</sup>

Beyond Lefort, however, French antitotalitarianism’s idiomatic shift was in key ways the achievement of an intellectual program housed at the *Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales*, which Lefort joined in 1976. Furet’s political theory reading group there, which included Pierre Rosanvallon, Gauchet, and Castoriadis, provided one venue for its elaboration. So did the Institut Raymond Aron, later rechristened the Centre de recherches politiques Raymond Aron, which Furet and Rosanvallon directed in sequence.<sup>59</sup> Though less flashy than their New Philosophers counterparts, this program has proven to be a more durable and philosophically robust strand of antitotalitarianism.<sup>60</sup> Under Furet’s leadership, historians and political theorists like Gauchet, Rosanvallon, Pierre Manent, and Philippe Raynaud produced studies that simultaneously canonized French liberalism and established a far deeper, constitutive connection between democracy and totalitarianism than their earlier 1950s predecessors.

What was the specific idiomatic content being institutionalized in places like the Institut Raymond Aron? Why did it make the question of totalitarianism turn on its link to democracy? Here we can examine Furet, Gauchet, and Rosanvallon, the triptych aptly described by Christofferson as “the leading figures in the rediscovery of the French liberal tradition in the 1980s” who were “in the forefront of the antitotalitarian current of the 1970s.”<sup>61</sup> What characterized their collective outlook was how they tested the limits of democratic politics by investigating whether democracy could unite “the political” and “the social” without descending into terror. Influenced by Lefort’s work—interpreted idiosyncratically, to be sure—their approach came to set the agenda for inquiry into “total” societies.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 19; Claude Lefort, “The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism” (1979), in Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, 1986), 292–306, at 304; Lefort, “Reflections on the Present,” 259–60.

<sup>59</sup> Christophe Prochasson, *François Furet: Les chemins de la mélancolie* (Paris, 2013), 251–304; Samuel Moyn, “On the Intellectual Origins of François Furet’s Masterpiece,” *Tocqueville Review*, 29/2 (2008), 58–78.

<sup>60</sup> Tamara Chaplin, *Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers on Television* (Chicago, 2007), 130–78; Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left*, 184–228.

<sup>61</sup> Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left*, 271.

<sup>62</sup> Moyn, “On the Intellectual Origins of François Furet’s Masterpiece,” 72–4.

Furet's 1978 revisionist history of the French Revolution, *Penser la révolution française*, is perhaps the most famous attempt to shift the ground of antitotalitarian discourse. Putatively a book on the French Revolution, Furet's text mounted an assault on the Jacobin revolutionary tradition, quietly mobilizing Lefort's thought to accuse it of containing the seeds of totalitarianism past and present. Furet's argument that democracy does indeed end in terror, and necessarily so, was so polemical and insistent that Andrew Jainchill and Moyn have characterized it as fatally "ambivalent about the democratic project itself."<sup>63</sup> The text lambasted the cliché among Marxist historians that the French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution that introduced an economic break between a premodern and a modern France. Against this view, Furet insisted that Marxists could not grasp the unique character of the revolution as an event wherein a historically new mode of political action was invented. The revolution introduced a mutation in the symbolic order of the political—namely revolution—which could not be derived from the social conditions motivating the revolution. This mutation could be clarified only with reference to the internal dynamics of the Revolutionary events themselves.

This claim is a familiar one now: it insists that Marxists fail to adequately appreciate the political.<sup>64</sup> Furet's main point, however, was not only that the Revolution was a political rather than a social phenomenon. Its distinguishing characteristic, rather, was the process whereby "the political" became autonomous from "the social" and thereby dominated it. Liberated from the claims of society, "the political" acquired free reign to reshape the world as it saw fit. The consequence was that the revolution authorized full discretion to "the will of the people" as the sole support for political order and cohesion. It needed to both provide the principle of the new world from within itself, immanently, and to continuously assert that principle, lest the political community lose its animating will and thus fall back into disarray. The result is terror, where democratic ideology calls for permanent citizen vigilance and the atomization of the people into individuals who identify completely with the state to ceaselessly express their will. Terror is, in other words, when "the political" breaks free from society altogether to assert its

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<sup>63</sup> Andrew Jainchill and Samuel Moyn, "French Democracy between Totalitarianism and Solidarity: Pierre Rosanvallon and Revisionist Historiography," *Journal of Modern History*, 76/1 (2004), 107–54, at 107.

<sup>64</sup> Post-Marxism sought to address this failure, though it has been contentious; Ernesto Laclau with Chantal Mouffe, "Post-Marxism without Apologies," in Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (New York, 1990), 97–132; Peter Osborne, "Radicalism without Limit? Discourse, Democracy and the Politics of Identity," in Osborne, ed., *Socialism and the Limits of Liberalism* (New York, 1991), 201–25.

independence. Bereft of foundations except for itself, it converts itself into its own foundation and in the image of absolute power. In his stunning conclusion, then, Furet argued that the Revolution simply adopted, and inverted, the image of power in the absolute monarchy, namely absolute power to the will of the people.<sup>65</sup>

Furet may have wanted to resuscitate the study of "the political," but he did so to condemn an "illusion of politics" for remaking society in accordance with the sovereign will of the people; that is, through terror. He condemned historical analyses of "the social" by adopting a staggeringly reductive reading of social history, but he did so to rescue society from its demolition and absorption by unchecked democratic politics. Frustrated with that social history, Furet wanted historians to attend to democratic politics, but not necessarily because he wanted to save that politics. "The political was what mattered to Furet," Steven Kaplan observed, "in part because it was through it that the social became an issue and a peril."<sup>66</sup> Historical revisionism provided Furet a means to establish a genetic, constitutive link between democracy and totalitarianism, undoing the 1930s–1950s assumption that the two were essentially independent of one another. For him, the idea of popular sovereignty cannot help but transform itself into terror. Furet's efforts were hugely successful thanks to their congruence with the existing antitotalitarian climate.<sup>67</sup> *Penser la révolution française* both energized, and became an ur-text of, antitotalitarian French liberalism. His revisionist program catapulted him to the status of one of France's most esteemed historians, and with his newfound fame he founded the Institut Raymond Aron in 1984. He would in the coming years convince other leading antitotalitarian thinkers to join him there.

Marcel Gauchet would join the institute officially in 1989, but he was already involved with its nascent agenda before doing so. A participant of Furet's political theory reading group at the EHESS in the mid-1970s, he had also been Lefort's student at the University of Caen. Two years before Furet published *Penser la révolution française*, Gauchet was already wielding this emergent investigative framework. "Totalitarianism is not even in a sense the return of a *repressed politics*," he announced in his 1976 *Esprit* essay. "Reborn in it and with it is the

<sup>65</sup> Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 38–9.

<sup>66</sup> Steven Laurence Kaplan, *Farewell, Revolution: The Historians' Feud, France, 1789/1989* (Ithaca, NY, 1995), 105.

<sup>67</sup> Prochasson has argued that Furet's relation to antitotalitarianism has been overblown, although both Moyn and Christofferson have made a case otherwise; Christofferson, *French Intellectuals against the Left*, 229–66; Christofferson, "A Mind of the Left?", *New Left Review*, 88 (2014), 131–7; Moyn, "On the Intellectual Origins of François Furet's Masterpiece."

question of the nature of politics and of its place in the social.”<sup>68</sup> Confronted with the totalitarian phenomenon, Gauchet believed we were compelled to learn its secret lesson: totalitarianism reveals fundamental principles of socialization and cohesion precisely because it dispenses with them, concealing such principles as its own hidden foundation instead.<sup>69</sup> Ideology was the instrument of such concealment, and following Lefort he saw the suturing of social division to be its premier function.

This choice—to investigate totalitarianism as a perversion of the proper relation between “the political” and “the social”—would soon lead Gauchet to ground totalitarianism in European modernity at large. He came to view European democracies as examples of political communities bootstrapping themselves into subjectivity, capable of self-reflexively grounding themselves and possessed of a faculty of willing. As he wrote in *Libre* in 1980, the consequence was that “the European model of democracy inseparably carries with it the totalitarian menace.” It was something Tocqueville could not fully grasp, because he did not adequately appreciate how equalization was “only one of the many possible faces of democracy,” indeed “one of its least predictable and most singular developments.” The rare achievement of democratic equalization requires the act of political founding to precede society’s formation, something only America enjoyed in the age of revolutions. Hence Gauchet claimed that democracy in America was but “a political system,” whereas in Europe it must inevitably become “a mode of social being” because Europe indeed possessed a preexisting, corporate *société* that democratic politics had to remold and absorb. That is why Tocqueville, looking as he did to America to craft his democratic theory, could not foresee the dangers posed by the providential movement towards democracy in Europe, that he possessed “a certain systematic blindness to appearances that have for us become essential to the democratic phenomenon,” namely “the totalitarian menace.”<sup>70</sup>

Gauchet’s arguments culminated in *Disenchantment of the World* (1985). In that text, he speculated that popular sovereignty was grounded in the modern “exit from religion.” When the holism of older religious societies crumbled and the

<sup>68</sup> Marcel Gauchet, “L’expérience totalitaire et la pensée de la politique,” *Esprit*, 44/459 (1976), 3–28, at 4, original emphasis.

<sup>69</sup> Gauchet, “L’expérience totalitaire,” 4: “It draws attention to the unthought of its foundation. It is constrained to consider the laws of social functioning hitherto invisible, an unknown aspect of the deep structure of society, and perhaps even beyond to a principle of coherence undetected from all social space.”

<sup>70</sup> Marcel Gauchet, “Tocqueville, l’Amérique et nous,” *Libre*, 7 (1980), 43–76; I have quoted here from the English version, reprinted as “Tocqueville,” in Mark Lilla, ed., *New French Thought: Political Philosophy* (Princeton, 1994), 91–111, at 91–2.

mundane world fractured into a world of individuals, humans turned inwards to discover a "will" because they now had a "self." They thus discovered sovereignty where a subject can subjugate it to itself.<sup>71</sup> Echoing Furet and Lefort, Gauchet identified this rise of a "democratic ideal" of sovereignty with a "demand for the total union of power and society." In other words, by grounding political power in society, democracy made immanent and disembodied a sovereign power that had hitherto been externalized and objectified in the monarch's person. "This demand," he went on to argue, "was imposed to the point where power and society ultimately became indistinguishable, forming the horizon of modern politics."<sup>72</sup> Finally, because a society cannot in practice contain the principle of its own organization immanently—as Lefort insisted, social divisions were irreducible—it must create the illusion of this internal principle ("the will of the people") and reexternalize it, thereby founding a power that dominates it. Popular sovereignty's internal contradictions thus lead to "society organized by the other," the alienation of its autonomy. This self-alienation is inevitable, yet dangerously disavowed by totalitarian dreams of societies of immanence.<sup>73</sup>

A colleague of Gauchet at the EHESS and the Institut Raymond Aron, Rosanvallon also studied under Lefort as a doctoral student. But rather than turning to a philosophical anthropology of modern man to explain totalitarianism, Rosanvallon looked to French history. Earlier in his career he was an economic researcher for the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT). Although involved in left politics, he never had a straightforward identification with May 1968 *gauchisme* despite belonging to that generation. Editor of *La CFDT aujourd'hui*, he became well known as a preeminent theorist of *autogestion*, the program of worker self-management associated with the *deuxième gauche*. However, his increasing skepticism of radical democratic commitments and the PCF's epistemic authoritarianism encouraged him, instead, to pursue a third way between radical democracy and totalitarianism. Rosanvallon would go on to succeed Furet as director of the Institut Raymond Aron in 1992, reorganized with Lefort's support as the Centre Raymond Aron. He presently enjoys what one observer describes as "a position at the institutional apex of intellectual life" in France: a chaired professorship at the Collège de France and widespread public visibility.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, trans. Oscar Burge (Princeton, 2007; first published 1985), 172–3.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>74</sup> Samuel Moyn, "Introduction: Antitotalitarianism and After," in Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, ed. Samuel Moyn (New York, 2006), 1–28, at 5.

For his part, Rosanvallon grounded democracy's totalitarian potential in the French Revolutionary transition to popular sovereignty. That transition jeopardized the representation of authority: no longer incarnate in the person of the monarch, it also could not be transferred to "the people" since they remained indeterminate. Sovereignty was instead transferred to the abstract representation of "the people," thus fracturing the people's existence into a representational and real existence—a modern, democratic iteration of the king's two bodies.<sup>75</sup> This "tension between the order of the symbolic and the real" plagued the French political tradition in particular, inspiring its "culture of generality."<sup>76</sup> It also suggested that constitutive to the sovereignty of "the people" was the wedge between their social existence as bearers of particularity and their political existence as free and equal co-participants in sovereignty; that is, as citizens.

These arguments paraphrase Lefort (and Marx).<sup>77</sup> On this view, the challenges of representing democratic political authority transformed the meaning of citizenship by defining it in terms of its abstraction from civil society. It also altered the function of representation, shifting the emphasis from delegation to figuration.<sup>78</sup> Thus the French Revolutionaries lavished attention on the Revolution's proper representational apparatus in the hopes that it could produce by figuration a society of equals. Yet, because the Revolutionaries found in representation a solution—without appreciating how it was also in crisis—they did not foresee the dangers of disincorporating society to grant the political its newfound independence. In figuring the people as sovereign, they happily sublimated the bonds of social cohesion into relations of citizenship.<sup>79</sup> The resulting unity was illusory. Though effective during the temporary "event" of the Revolution, it had no durable grounds except for the continuous exercise of the rational collective will, having constituted itself by disavowing the social. The Revolutionaries thus founded the political on the basis of pure, continuous

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<sup>75</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, "Revolutionary Democracy" (1998), in Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, 79–97, at 82–3.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 85; elsewhere he explains this "political culture of generality" as having three dimensions: "a social form (the celebration of the 'great nation'), a political quality (faith in the virtues of immediacy), and a proceduralism (the cult of the law)," in Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le modèle politiques français: La société civile contre le jacobinisme de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris, 2004), 13.

<sup>77</sup> "It is at the very moment when popular sovereignty is assumed to manifest itself, when the people is assumed to actualized itself by expressing its will, that social interdependence breaks down and that the citizen is abstracted from all the networks in which his social life develops and becomes a mere statistic." In Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," 18–19.

<sup>78</sup> Rosanvallon, "Revolutionary Democracy," 88.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

voluntarism: “In this framework, political life found itself emancipated from all constraint and all form. It became pure action, unmediated expression of a directly palpable will.”<sup>80</sup>

Thus, like his colleagues, Rosanvallon specified the autonomy of the political as the terror of unrestrained direct democratic politics, teetering between a cult of reason and of will.<sup>81</sup> Voluntarism, not bureaucracy, became the culprit that imposed unity onto irreducible social division. What is incredible here is both the continuity and the discontinuity with the idioms of the 1950s. The argument follows the pattern set out by Lefort regarding the “monstrous autonomy of the political.” Yet the latter’s instantiation is no longer bureaucracy—that impersonal power whose operation usurps the will for the higher laws of reason or history—but the emancipated will itself. The totalitarian fusion of the people with their representation is not the achievement of the bureaucratic apparatus’s totalizing mediation, but rather of its opposite: an unmediated will of the people construed as rationally self-grounding and unlimited in its discretion. Much of the form and syntax of the 1950s arguments remains intact, but the contents have been transformed.

French antitotalitarians saturated the academic landscape with intellectual histories of liberalism. Their work paralleled Furet’s seminars at the EHESS on nineteenth-century interpretations of the French Revolution and Tocqueville specifically.<sup>82</sup> Major studies on Benjamin Constant and François Guizot accompanied Tocqueville’s beatification.<sup>83</sup> Antitotalitarians published extensively in France’s leading intellectual magazines like *Esprit*, *Commentaire*, the short-lived *Libre*, and *Le débat*. Controversially, Furet also founded the Fondation Saint-Simon in 1982 with Rosanvallon, Gallimard editor Pierre Nora, and business leaders like Alain Minc and Roger Fauroux. The *fondation* was a think tank where scholars met with business leaders, technocrats, and journalists to discuss public policy issues—like those of multiculturalism and civil society’s relation to the state—over luncheons and invited talks.<sup>84</sup> These complemented the Institut Raymond Aron, which provided an enduring epicenter for this liberal coming-

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>81</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, “Political Rationalism and Democracy in France” (1994), in Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, 127–43.

<sup>82</sup> Prochasson, *François Furet*, 257–8.

<sup>83</sup> Pierre Manent, *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. Rebecca Balinski (Princeton, 1995; first published 1987); Marcel Gauchet, “Préface: Benjamin Constant: L’illusion lucide du libéralisme,” in Benjamin Constant, *De la liberté chez les modernes* (Paris, 1980), 11–91; Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot* (Paris, 1985); Serge Audier, *Tocqueville retrouvé: Genèse et enjeux du renouveau toquevillien français* (Paris, 2004).

<sup>84</sup> Prochasson, *François Furet*, 400–5; Camille Robcis, “Republicanism and the Critique of Rights,” in Chabal, *France since the 1970s*, 225–44.

to-conscience by gathering together disparate strands of noncommunist left thinking.

For these thinkers affiliated with Centre Raymond Aron, particularly Furet, if democracy ends in terror because it emancipates politics from society, the solution will naturally entail reinstating the claims of society on politics. The reconstitution of the social is thus necessary to check the totalitarian inclinations of popular sovereignty. The grounds for collective belonging must be carefully renewed; they can no longer be willed into existence voluntaristically as the accomplishment of revolutionary democratic politics. This does not imply, as Lefort argued, that we are “doomed to fall back on a cramped position, limiting ourselves to Isaiah Berlin’s notion of ‘negative liberties.’”<sup>85</sup> In fact, Rosanvallon even suggested, this sort of liberal individualism could be guilty of the “protototalitarian desire for monistic homogeneity and harmonious transparency.”<sup>86</sup> If it allows market mediation “to deepen modern individualism,” if it creates an “immediate and transparent society” constituted by nothing but voluntary commercial transactions, then “the last word” of liberal individualism is also “totalitarianism.”<sup>87</sup> The goal is not to shield the individual from the collective. Rather, as the newly appraised French liberal tradition revealed, it is to construe them as mutually constitutive, the better to chasten the wild direct democracy found in, say, July 1789, October 1917, and perhaps especially that of May 1968, with its antinomian philosophy of desire, sexual libertarianism, *marxisant* anticapitalism and anarchist anti-institutionalism, all calling for a revolution of everyday life by leveraging the “will” against the “law.” For liberal antitotalitarians, that political orientation was too unpalatable, too laced with Jacobin disregard for the grounds of social—rather than political—cohesion.

French liberalism’s repositioning as a prophylactic against democracy’s darker half also repositioned totalitarianism as a genetic feature of democracy, its unique pathology founded by its promise of popular sovereignty. Terror described those cases in which democracy, in insisting on the independence of the political from the social, actually threatened to abolish the latter. That was the danger presented by the electoral left and incipiently contained in May 1968 radical democracy, which for all their fundamental differences sought to undo or overcome the claims of the social. Whether they did so through a bureaucratic machine, the politics of difference, or Maoist militancy mattered less than their inability to escape the hidden parameters of Jacobinism past and present. It was not bureaucratic despotism, nor the “iron laws of history” from which totalitarianism received its

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<sup>85</sup> Lefort, “Reflections on the Present,” 266.

<sup>86</sup> Jainchill and Moyn, “French Democracy,” 120.

<sup>87</sup> Pierre Rosanvallon, “Marx and Civil Society” (1978), in Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, 160–86, at 168, 185–6.



essence. It was instead the revolutionary will of the people instituting the political independently of, unrestrained by, and ultimately destructive of the grounds of association we call society.

## CONCLUSION: FROM 1917 TO 1789

Like its precedents, the antitotalitarian moment of the late 1970s–1980s brought into constellation distinct contexts. It linked reorientations in revolutionary historiography and intellectual politics to French communism’s crisis, intellectually crippled despite being electorally bolstered by the Common Program. Yet its significance also outstripped those contexts. French liberalism’s reappraisal and its entanglement with totalitarianism theory pointed to more than a contextual shift wherein the PCF displaced the Soviet Union as totalitarianism’s reference point; it also involved a dialogical conceptual transformation in what totalitarianism *was*. Under examination was no longer the shared historical essence of Stalinism and Nazism, but the extent to which—if at all—democratic politics could redefine the terms of civil, familial, and social relations. Can the popular will reconstitute society? Are there limits to that will, or must it lead always to terror? On one hand, these questions were specific to France. On the other, because Jacobinism was (and is) often seen as European political modernity’s unconscious, the antitotalitarian moment also took on broad, almost world-historical, significance. Revolution and democracy themselves were at stake. If totalitarianism was a democratic pathology, then antitotalitarian discourse could not help but elect democracy as its special object of inquiry. Not bureaucracy, historicism, the disappearance of the “concrete” human personality, or progressive technological transformations of a mass society, but French *democracy* would be the site from which the viability of political modernity was tested, its structures unfolded, and its legacy judged.

To construe French antitotalitarianism in terms of narrow party politics or a persistent antipolitical moralism among Cold War intellectuals is thus to miss something essential to those years. Tied though it was to that context, totalitarianism’s conceptual redefinition as something growing from voluntarism was not determined by that context. French intellectuals did not need an elaborate critique of popular will to voice disappointment with the PCF’s lackluster responses to contemporary events, to its sluggish disavowal of Stalinism, and to its possible 1978 legislative revival. That they displaced antecedent critiques of bureaucracy with critiques of democracy suggests that present emphases on the vicissitudes of party politics such as Christofferson’s are overstated. Antitotalitarianism’s conceptual transformation into a prescription for (to reprise Furet’s own formula) the revenge of society on democratic ideology reveals

how its sources of anxiety stemmed from places deeper than transient quarrels within left party politics or the methodological inadequacies of social history. These thinkers sought to reframe the meaning of the “totalitarian” dangers facing France’s postwar order. That those dangers came from directions as divergent as French communism, the antisocial tactics of May 1968, the politics of difference, or flirtations with Maoism does not make antitotalitarianism an empty rhetorical phenomenon either. Instead, it underscores how disputes over the proper relationship between “the political” and “the social” articulated real cleavages regarding the normative bases of France’s postwar democratic political culture.

Both the novelty of the Centre Raymond Aron’s efforts and the philosophical specificity of its postwar French liberalism come into focus when juxtaposed against their overseas analogues and domestic intellectual inspirations. The postwar liberalism that emerged from American antitotalitarianism portrayed itself as amoral and individualistic. Repudiating the “totalitarian” nature of “social engineering,” American social scientists and philosophers valorized the “fact of value pluralism” and the individual’s normative priority by, for instance, retrofitting John Locke as a founding liberal.<sup>88</sup> That trajectory stands in contrast to the Tocquevillean aspiration to reassert the “the social” in postwar French liberalism, which along with an invigorated moralism might curb the totalitarian excesses of individual and collective voluntarism.

On the domestic front, Lefort never fully conflated democracy with totalitarianism. He was careful to specify the former as an enabler—but not the origin—of the latter, and he always held sympathetic but critical views of Furet’s revisionist history.<sup>89</sup> Unlike many of his admirers, Lefort extracted from his critique of totalitarianism a democratic theory to protect the latter and to insist on the differences. And although Aron had now become an intellectual icon, his original analyses actually mismatched the prevailing idiom of totalitarianism theory: until the late 1950s, totalitarianism named for Aron the disappearance of politics, its usurpation by the twinned dangers of bureaucracy and oligarchic planning. He diagnosed totalitarianism as a case of power’s “democratic centralization” in one man or party, a process to which mass societies were vulnerable; it certainly did not entail a political sphere running roughshod

<sup>88</sup> Duncan Bell, “What Is Liberalism?” *Political Theory*, 42/66 (2014), 682–715; Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism*.

<sup>89</sup> Lefort, “Reflections on the Present,” 269–73; Lefort, “La question de la révolution,” *Esprit*, 44/460 (1976), 206–12; Lefort, “Penser la révolution dans la Révolution française,” *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 35/2 (1980), 334–52; Lefort, “Author’s Introduction,” in Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy*, trans. Julian Bourg (New York, 2007; first published 1999), 21–8.

over society.<sup>90</sup> And so for his part, Aron revised his original analytic after the 1970s in the opposite direction of Lefort: hostile to the new social movements, Aron and his admirers at *Contrepoint* and then *Commentaire* drew on French liberalism to extend their totalitarianism theories in ways that condemned egalitarianism and voluntarism's excesses: the latter were analogized to the unrestricted "license" which preceded and enabled the French Revolution.<sup>91</sup>

The new antitotalitarians opted for something closer to Arendt on the French Revolution, an affinity acknowledged with Furet's receipt of the prix Hannah Arendt in 1996 and Lefort's in 1998. For Arendt, enthroning the will of the people provides the decisive catastrophe:

It was of greater relevance that the word "consent," with its overtones of deliberate choice and considered opinion, was replaced by the word "will," which essentially excludes all processes of exchange of opinions and an eventual agreement between them. The will, if it is to function at all, must indeed be one and indivisible, "a divided will would be inconceivable"; there is no possible mediation between wills as there is between opinions. The shift from the republic to the people meant that the enduring unity of the future political body was guaranteed not in the worldly institutions which this people had in common, but in the will of the people themselves.<sup>92</sup>

By the close of the 1980s, this specific way of investigating totalitarianism came to preeminence. It made unintelligible Castoriadis's claim in the 1940s that Soviet totalitarianism was so unique that "we can now comprehend the phenomenon in its present-day functioning 'independently,' so to speak, of its provenance."<sup>93</sup> The leading thinkers at the Centre Raymond Aron concluded, rather, that democracy possessed an internal link to Jacobin terror, and that totalitarianism could be grasped only by probing that link. The belief provided a shared critical orientation, one that underwrote erstwhile disagreements over the proper antidote. Insofar as democracy attached special privileges to "the political," totalitarianism named its offspring. One cannot help but view "democracy as a pathology waiting to happen."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, 200.

<sup>91</sup> Stewart, "France's Anti-68 Liberal Revival."

<sup>92</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1963), 76.

<sup>93</sup> Castoriadis, "On the Regime and against the Defense of the USSR," 40.

<sup>94</sup> Jainchill and Moyn, "French Democracy," 110.