Before the great majority of texts and stances occasioned by the bicentenary of the French Revolution, it is Clemenceau who has the most right to rejoice. With a few notable exceptions—François Furet and those working close to the outlook he has promoted, or, in another direction, Ferenc Fehér in a recent article—"friends" and "enemies" of the Revolution alike seem to be in accord on one point: the Revolution is a bloc, dark and sinister for some, radiant and resplendent for others. True, in reading these authors one wonders sometimes whether they are all talking about the same object, so much do the events sampled from the immense mass of facts, the way these events are highlighted, cast into perspective, and, whatever one claims, morally evaluated, differ from and stand in opposition to one another. And yet, the approach to the object, the "method" and, inseparable therefrom, the implicit philosophy, is the same. The Revolution is a take-it-or-leave-it proposition; the point is to show that it must be condemned or approved, save for some secondary reservations. In both cases, the underlying philosophy of history is almost or downright theological: the Revolution cannot but be the incarnation of Good or of Evil.

Before examining, at the end of this article, what under the pen of Solzhenitsyn this sort of philosophy offers, I want to broach discussion of a few more general presuppositions and then try to contribute a few elements for a critical/political reflection on the Revolution.

The Relevance of History

The lucid citizen and the political thinker cannot but reject outright the demonology, or angelology, of the Revolution. Not so as to adopt a
benevolent eclecticism, to issue balanced judgments, to declare oneself somewhat in favor of everyone, but rather so as to develop a critical and political attitude. Critical, from *krino*, a verb that, before signifying "judging," means "separating," "distinguishing"—*auseinandersetzen*, as one would say in German. Before a process that, even if it dates back two centuries, retains for us an eminent political significance—as is shown not only by the quarrels that have once again arisen over the Revolution but also by less ephemeral aspects to which I shall return—such a critical attitude, the effort to distinguish and to separate, becomes imperative.

A historian who, qua "pure" historian (if such a thing can exist), studies and describes the reign of Cambyses, the Merovingian age, or the Time of Troubles does not have to *krinein*, to distinguish/separate/judge. "Differences in appreciation" of these periods, authors, and acts can have bearing only upon the real chain of events (what would have happened if Cambyses had behaved differently in Egypt?) and are of interest only to specialists.

Things are altogether different with events, processes, or social-historical forms that, though irremediably swallowed up into the past, remain *quodammodo* alive for us today since they are not mere antecedents of what we are, some de facto necessary conditions for the present, but rather are relevant and, so to speak, still active components for our interrogations and our will. What makes them relevant? It is that the significations created at that time, and the institutions in which they were embodied, retain a meaning for us, and that this meaning does not go without saying (as, let us suppose, the existence of writing or a certain validity of mathematics goes without saying). This signifies that the questions we pose to ourselves regarding what is and is not to be done, regarding the way we organize ourselves collectively, regarding the orientations of social life inasmuch as such orientations depend on our lucid and deliberate activity, these questions—which therefore remain unresolved for us—have been created as questions during these periods; this signifies, as well, that the responses furnished, whether we find them acceptable or unacceptable, continue to enter into the terms of discussion.

Here a clarification is necessary. The questions of how society is to be organized and of what role individuals are to play therein have, naturally, been "posed" and "resolved" in all places and at all times; without that, there would be no society. They have been resolved by the Navahos as well as by the Balinese, by the Aztecs as well as by the Pharaohs, during the era of the Tangs as well as during that of Ivan the Terrible. But they have been "resolved" without having been posed.
Now, we pose these questions explicitly, and we cannot not do so without ceasing to be what we are. Perhaps, to proffer a highly improbable and in any case vain speculation, we would ask them in any event. The fact is that if we do pose them, it is that we exist in and through a history that is the only one to have posed them and that is defined essentially by this very fact. This history is defined by the emergence of explicit questions raised by real people: What ought we to think? What ought we to do? How ought we to organize our community? These questions are raised by people and have to find a response in and through people's thought and action and outside all Revelation and all instituted authority. This history commences with Greece, recommences after a long eclipse with the first Renaissance (which precedes by three or four centuries the conventional "Renaissance" of history textbooks), continues with seventeenth-century England, the Enlightenment, and the revolutions of the eighteenth century (in America and France), and then with the workers' movement.

Other histories—the Chinese or the Aztec, for example—are of philosophical importance to us. In them unfold before our eyes certain of the possibilities of human being; these histories concretize the ontology of humanity. It is not true that "industry is the open book of human faculties" (Marx), but it is true that history in general is the scroll on which is inscribed human creation as it occurs. Yet this history, ours, also is of political interest to us. It retains its relevance for us—and it acquires relevance, too, for the other inhabitants of the planet—because it is the history of freedom, of our effective social-historical freedom, freedom to make and do things, freedom of thought, in part already realized, in part stuttering, in part still to be accomplished—and always in danger.

We may illustrate this difference in interests by considering the reasons why the history of Russia, properly speaking (i.e., before the country fell under the political influence of the West and until the time band extending from the Decembrists to 1905), holds absolutely no interest for us in terms of a political history. Nothing can be done about this, for in it there is nothing to reflect upon politically. At the very most, Russian history can be of negative use through its juxtaposition with and opposition to that of Western Europe. Indeed, it offers a magnificent and massive counterexample to the idea that Christianity might have been an important element in the process of emancipation initiated in Western Europe starting in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It shows to what extent Christianity can be combined organically and harmoniously with Oriental despotism so as
to produce a theocratic absolutism—as had already occurred for one thousand years in the Byzantine Empire. It also shows that, if Western Europe therefore has found itself capable of opening another path, the effective conditions for this opening are to be sought elsewhere. The Athenians, the Florentines, and even the Romans can make us reflect politically. Until the nineteenth century, however, Russia had no place in the history of freedom (whereas it obviously has a very important one—as does, moreover, Byzantium—in the history of painting, architecture, music, etc.). It enters into this history only starting from the moment when it attempts, after its own fashion, to become naturalized into the history of the West—a painful process of naturalization that has also given birth to the monster of Leninism-Stalinism and that remains problematic, as is shown by the events now unfolding before our very eyes.³

To reflect upon historical eras and processes critically, to separate/distinguish/judge, is to strive to find therein some germs of importance to us, as well as also limits and failures which, to begin with, put a halt to our thinking since they had served within reality itself as actual stopping blocks. (This is also the way one reads—or, rather, the way one ought to read—a great philosophical text, if one wants to make something of it for oneself.) It is certainly not to look in them for models, or for foils. Nor is it to look in them for lessons. Contrary to what some are now claiming once again, history is not a learning process. And yet, within this segment of history that concerns us, there exists a specific steadfast continuity, one that makes it possible for significations previously created to remain politically relevant for us. In this, there is no contingency at all. If reflection on this history is possible, it is because this history itself is, to an important degree, reflective. It is this history itself that creates reflectiveness, reflectiveness implying and requiring, among other things, that one turn back upon the past in order to elucidate it. This is also why it is here that we encounter Thucydides, Michelet, Tocqueville, or Pirenne—whereas everywhere else we find royal chroniclers and archivists.

It would be just as absurd to “condemn” the Athenians (because of slavery, the status of women, or even their religion) as it would be to claim that we have to imitate them (even with “modifications”). And as Aristotle’s texts are truly relevant only if they are taken as the point of departure for our thought, not as an object of commentary or interpretation, so the significations created by the Athenians acquire their full relevance only if we are willing and able to create new ones.
A Self-Institution

In the case of the Athenians, we are reflecting upon the first form of self-government people have given themselves in history and the first society in which individuals in the full sense of the term have been created. In the case of the French Revolution, we are reflecting first of all upon the fact that a people (with the dimensions of a modern nation, and no longer those of a city) was willing, and able, to self-institute itself [sauto-instituer] explicitly; that it challenged and brought back into question an institution of society that had denied it freedom; that, out of this freedom, it formulated and reformulated some of the principles without which, as insufficient as they might be, we can no longer even conceive simply of a civilized society. We are reflecting upon the immense instituting work [œuvre] that was accomplished in so many domains in so little time. We are reflecting upon the break that was established vis-à-vis “reforms” and “improvements” granted by one’s masters (for example, Alexander II or Mikhail Gorbachev, passing by way of Stolypin). We are reflecting upon the testimony the Revolution has provided concerning the possibility and the capacity of a collectivity to take its own destiny into its hands. We are reflecting, above all, upon the abyssal question the Revolution has reopened and rendered infinitely more acute than was done by any previous movement (to take a conspicuous example, the American Revolution): Insofar as the institution of society depends on deliberate and explicit activity, how ought society to be instituted and who ought to respond to this “how ought”? In responding to this “Who?” with “the people,” and in positing this “how” as “in a de jure unlimited fashion,” the Revolution has redefined for our age both democracy and the project of human autonomy.

Despite all its vicissitudes, the Revolution has anchored this project in historical reality (quite far beyond the borders of France): it has not, however, brought it to a successful conclusion. Hence its relevance for us. Certainly, the French Revolution is “over.” “Over” not only trivially, chronologically, but in the sense François Furet had in mind when he advanced this formula: both as abstract principles and as institutions (universal suffrage and electiveness, separation of powers, rights of man, etc.), the “gains” of the Revolution no longer are, as such, brought back into question by any segment of the population, even one of tiny signifi-
cance; moreover (or for this reason), we no longer can conduct our political struggles under the banners of '89 (or of '93). And yet when one considers the emancipatory potential of the questions to which it has given rise, a potential far from fully realized, as well as the immense gaps between its principles and reality, the Revolution is not "over," or rather, it is to be resumed and to be carried beyond.

We are left with questions and gaps. Sovereignty, the Revolution says, belongs to the nation. But does sovereignty truly belong to the nation when power is in fact in the hands of an economic-political oligarchy, as is everywhere the case in the "democratic" countries—to the nation, which exercises its sovereignty directly or by means of its representatives? Do these representatives always represent the nation, or something else? This vague (certainly not disjunctive) "or" covers over and masks the opposition between direct democracy and "representative democracy." If, however, "representative democracy" evolves fatally toward oligarchy (as Rousseau already knew), is not the question of direct democracy posed with renewed vigor? And what does a genuine direct democracy on the scale of modern political collectivities mean? How can one achieve direct democracy on that scale? "Liberty, equality, fraternity," the Revolution says. Yet it is in the name of economic "liberty" (which bestows its benefits basically upon those who are already "economically free") that considerable political inequality reigns. And how can "liberty" exist (other than in a limited and defensive sense) if the entire nation, save for an infinitesimal minority, is excluded from participation in power? To be one's own master and to have imposed a few limits on the power of your masters are two radically different things.

The Revolution saw some of the social conditions for democracy and realized them (through its destruction of the Ancien Régime). It did not see many others, notably economic ones. The insistence with which successive National Assemblies voted to forbid proposals for "agrarian laws" (that is, those affecting property) is remarkable, as is its "ignorance" of the woman question. Indeed, these examples point to some of the Revolution's most decisive limitations. There are undoubtedly many others. I mention them only to combat the confusion and forgetfulness that are characteristic of our age.

None of this—save for those who consider liberal capitalism the finally found form of human society, and who, whether Hegelians or not, are
dreaming the end of history—stops the questions the Revolution has explicitly or implicitly raised, as well as those it has killed, from remaining with us still.

The Cunning of Unreason

We are also reflecting upon the failures of the Revolution and its drift. This presupposes that they are separable, in thought, within the unfolding of this great historical process; that the aspects and the moments of this process are not, were not at that time, held together by bonds of steel, chained by an irrefragable fatality. History cannot be, prospectively, the domain of the possible while ceasing to have been so retrospectively. I wrote a long time ago that we cannot, even retrospectively, think history without the category of the possible. And for a number of years, Hugh Trevor-Roper has insisted on the importance of the imaginative reconstruction of other trajectories, other issues to past forks in the road, if we truly want to comprehend what has happened. To say that is not to want to remake the history of the Revolution or to show that an “ideal” (or idyllic) evolution was equally possible. It is to want to test the solidity of the “internal logic” of the process, the very idea, at the limit, of an exhaustive internal logic, to refuse to come out on the cheap and with dry feet from the torrents of historical contingency, and above all to understand the possible logic, or nonlogic, of our own actions.

This attitude is obviously unacceptable to the absolute determinist or to the Hegelian (which boils down to nearly the same thing), who will say that, in thought, such separation is impossible: ’89 is the Vendée, the Declaration of the Rights of Man already is the Terror. It is amusing to see Christians like Solzhenitsyn, or “philosophers” who denounce the origins of totalitarianism in Hegel, wedding the view of history as fatality and affirming, If you want the Revolution, you want, you are obliged to want, the Terror (or the Gulag). This rhetoric, which has nourished the journalistic vulgate of the past decade, is possible only as a function of a magical conception of history: the sortileges of the Revolution fatally end in horror.

I have discussed this paralogism elsewhere. Counterexamples to this pseudoequation, revolution = totalitarianism, abound. That does not dispense us from the task of discussing and of criticizing the drift of the French Revolution—the drift toward the Terror, the drift toward war—the
two being closely connected, as we know. Nor does it dispense us from taking stock of the fact that, in these regards too, the Revolution has been a failure—a failure that gives us to reflection, a failure whose conditions we try to elucidate.

These questions do not pose themselves naturally for Solzhenitsyn. The evil spell immanent to the Revolution, to every revolution, cements together the tiniest pieces of the catastrophic process, giving them all an equally demonic character. The chain of events occur fatally once the "Red Wheel" is set in motion, and no one can do anything about it. As so often in Solzhenitsyn, Tolstoy (the Tolstoy of *War and Peace*) is standing right behind him. And the cunning of unreason supplies itself with the tools that it requires and that it merits. When one leaves behind the thoughts on "the profundity of being," one glimpses the fact that under the pen of Solzhenitsyn, like so many others before him, not only the Terror but the Revolution in its entirety is resolved into the activities of a handful of crazed ideologues and bands of criminals who have risen from the dregs of society. By what miracle has the conjunction of these two marginal minorities led to the overthrow of a society that (as opposed to the Russia of 1917) was in no way in a state of decomposition and to the creation of new institutions, most of which remain standing at the base of the present edifice; and how were these tiny groups able to hold their own against the European coalition and to defeat it utterly, to spread their message, and to ensure that, two centuries later, people are still disputing over the meaning and value of their acts? A demonological mystery, upon which only a staretz would be able to shed any light.  

The Terror is the failure, par excellence, of the Revolution. Perhaps we cannot eliminate all violence from political life—and logic and experience combine to tell us that it is extremely improbable that a ruling group not in a state of decomposition would be willing to abandon power peacefully. There is no doubt, however, that a politics that proclaims itself to be revolutionary and democratic but that can impose itself only through Terror has already lost the game before it has begun, has ceased to be what it claimed. Humanity cannot be saved in spite of itself, and still less against itself. A democratic regime, whose sole foundation is the free activity of people and their participation in public affairs, cannot be instaurated by making these affairs the private reserve of a Committee of Public Safety, of a Jacobin Club, or of a "revolutionary" party, and by freezing (the word is Saint-Just's) these same people through application of the Terror.
sundry "No liberty for the enemies of liberty" and "We shall force them to be free," Rosa Luxemburg had already responded in her critique of Bolshevism: freedom is above all freedom for those who think otherwise. Rosa knew Russian, but it is nevertheless strange to see her anticipating with this phrase the expression that, fifty years later, was to be used to designate, in Russian, that country's dissidents ("those who think otherwise").

Stating these things, however, is not enough. The French Revolution was not a putsch of a small party (like October 1917 was). It was carried forward, from 1789 until 1792, by the movement of a great proportion of society. Now, this movement came to a halt toward the end of 1792. The people withdrew from the stage, abandoning it to the leaders, to the clubs, and to the activists. And it is from that moment onward that the Terror settled in. The failure of the Revolution is not only the failure (or the crime) of revolutionaries or Jacobins. It is the failure of the people in its entirety.

It is strange to have to remind Solzhenitsyn—a writer who, in the finest pages of The Gulag Archipelago, emphasized with insistence that the Stalinist Terror was also conditioned by the general attitude of the Russian people—of this. In a first phase of the French Revolution, the revolutionaries would have been nothing if the people had not been there. In a second phase, the revolutionaries would have been nothing if the people had been there. This is not to exculpate the artisans of the Terror; it is to note that the condition for the Terror was the withdrawal of the people. And that, too, gives us to reflection. We can say, of course, that such a withdrawal must fatally supervene in every revolution, that the political activity of the population in modern societies is highly cyclothymic. But we can also see in this cyclothymic character one of the principal obstacles, and even, all things considered, the obstacle to the instauration of a democratic society. Thenceforth, this fact becomes the formulation of a problem: What is to be done and how does one go about doing it so that each stage of an emancipatory process, through its very results, renders easier rather than more difficult at the following stage people's political participation? (I will remark in passing that the spirit of this formulation is also valid for the pedagogic process as well as for the psychoanalytic process.)

That, of course, is far from what was done during the Revolution. I cannot discuss here why (I have done so, in summary fashion, in my
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interview, “The Idea of Revolution”). I shall simply add that no one, or almost no one, at the time thought and, without doubt, could think, the question in these terms. It is the Revolution itself, and its failure, that allows us to do so. And the conclusions we draw therefrom are massively reinforced by the monstrous consequences of the Bolshevik putsch of October 1917 and by the rapid instauration of the world’s first totalitarian power that followed.

February and October

It is here that we find the sole point of contact between the French Revolution and what, wrongly, is called the Russian Revolution when what one intends thereby is the seizure of power by Lenin and his party. There was a Russian Revolution in February; there was no Revolution in October, only the coup d’état of a party, already germinally totalitarian in its structure and in its spirit, that seized power, set everything in motion in order to dominate and to domesticate the popular movement, and quickly succeeded in doing so (the final act taking place at Kronstadt in 1921).

Solzhenitsyn revives, without further ado, the old topos at the heart of the Bolshevik-Communist view, according to which a profound kinship exists between—or an identical essence (“common nature,” he writes) is shared by—the events in France and in Russia. François Furet has already said what one should think of this “revolutionary catechism,” which can serve just as well, we see, as a reactionary catechism. It is this catechism that Solzhenitsyn repeats, simply by inverting the algebraic signs. (Let us note in passing that the parallel between Louis XVI and Nicholas II was developed at length by Trotsky.) He also is evidently repeating the underlying metaphysics, for the fatality of the “Red Wheel” bears a striking resemblance to the determinism of the “internal dynamic of the revolutionary process” dear to Lenin and Trotsky. Lenin’s obsession with the French “precedent” (whose image he has obviously fabricated in tailor-made fashion and which is false from beginning to end), the explicit self-identification with the Jacobins, the haunting memory of “Thermidor,” are all known. When one really reflects upon it, his statement that “This is Thermidor. But we shan’t let ourselves be guillotined. We shall make a Thermidor ourselves,” says it all: retain power, come what may and little matter why one does so. But this grotesque and sinister imitation of a caricatured past is far from capable of creating a “common nature.”
The obsession with an essence of the Revolution as such, one that would be common to the French and Russian processes (angelic essence for the communist ideology, diabolic for Solzhenitsyn), makes Solzhenitsyn lose sight of the essential. Under his pen, peoples disappear as active (lucid or not, it matters little here) agents of their history. The decisive differences between the French events and those of Russia are also made to disappear. In the end, it is the differences in the results that disappear.

Indeed, the movement of societies and the complex activities of men and women are dissolved into a series of exactions and crimes committed by madmen and bandits, on the one hand, and, on the other, the “whirlwind that seizes hold” of almost everything, the “Red Wheel.” Hardly ever does he name, save sporadically, a few social groups, and these seem to act only by reflex, or else to take advantage of situations in order to give themselves over to crimes and pillaging, these being, as is well known, the province of “crowds.” The “popular awakening,” the “exceptional activity of the popular masses,” to take up François Furet’s expressions, do not exist for him—or else are treated as pure anarchy and disorder. In this way, Solzhenitsyn excises from the history of his country what is, to this day, its sole title of entry into the history of freedom: the creation, in 1905 as well as in 1917, of soviets, followed by the creation of factory committees. New forms of collective democratic power (factory councils, as is known, were to be revived by the Hungarian Revolution of 1956), the soviets and factory committees in no way coincided with the Bolshevik power, which tried to appropriate them, often encountered resistance from them, and succeeded in emasculating them and domesticating them completely only at the end of a four-year period.

Now, this very fact reveals one of the essential (not descriptive) differences between what happened in France and what happened in Russia. Schematizing to an enormous degree certainly, it can be said that in France there was not, at the outset and for a long time, any genuine cleavage between the social strata that made the Revolution and its political “representatives.” As has already been said, it was starting at the end of 1792 that the people withdrew. From then on, there remained on the stage only the activists of the sections, especially the Parisian ones, which the Robespierrean power repressed in the Autumn of 1793 and then again in the Spring of 1794. In Russia, however, there was an enormous gap that Solzhenitsyn covers over [occulte], in exactly the same way Bolshevik historiography does. February is not Bolshevik—and October is not popular. There are
two vectors in the Russian events. The collapse of Czarism was the effect of an immense movement on the part of workers and soldiers, which extended immediately to the peasantry. This movement, as one knows, took the Bolsheviks by surprise once again, and it endowed itself immediately with autonomous forms of organization, the soviets. The logic of this movement is certainly not the totalitarian power of a single "leading" party. On the other hand, there is Lenin and his party, very weak at the outset, which aimed at absolute power and organized itself for the purpose of seizing it. This party was already a mini-State and a mini-army. If it succeeded in acquiring a high degree of influence within the Petrograd Soviet and within the workers' soviets, it was greatly in the minority when, in October, it seized power.

Thenceforth, the totalitarianism whose seed it was germinating quickly blossomed: it became in fact a Party/State/Army and "resolved" all problems by means of the Terror. One will search in vain among these activities for one institutional creation that retains any interest or meaning. Or rather, its sole creation is precisely totalitarianism itself, accompanied by the reconstruction of a statist and military Apparatus and, fifteen years later, by the construction of a national industry on top of millions of corpses. Even that accomplishment could not have taken place, however, without destroying the soviets in fact (while at the same time shamelessly appropriating the name), without eliminating all their power and all their autonomy, without succeeding in transforming them, in the face of significant resistance, for some time into transmission belts and then, rapidly, into screens for its power. This cleavage, this potential and often real conflict in Russia from 1917 to 1921 between the Bolshevik power and the organs created by the masses starting in February cannot be neglected by those who want to reflect on this period. Yet Solzhenitsyn does not seem to see any problem in the fact that the Bolsheviks were only able to arrive at power by crying "All Power to the Soviets" and were only able to remain in power by making of this slogan the first phrase of Orwellian Newspeak in the twentieth century.

A New Social Imaginary

Nothing analogous occurred in France. The Jacobins were not a totalitarian party, not even a true party: if they had been, there probably would have been no Thermidor. To speak, however, as does Solzhenitsyn, of
post-1917 Russia without speaking of the Bolshevik party and of its role of
capital importance, is to serve the garlic mayonnaise without the garlic, to
mount a production of *Hamlet* without the Prince. Second, both the
theology of the Revolution as essentially demonological and the trivial,
journalistic description of “parallels” plunge one into darkness as to the
everous and essential difference in their respective outcomes. It is simply
absurd to insinuate that liberty might have been established in France in
spite of the Revolution and that “if liberty has finally been achieved in
France, it is really thanks to these U-turns” (by which Solzhenitsyn means
the Restoration, the Second Empire, etc.).

Of the Bolshevik enterprise, there remains and there will remain noth-
ing but an immense accumulation of corpses, the inaugural creation of
totalitarianism, the perversion of the international workers’ movement,
the destruction of language—and the proliferation, over the surface of the
planet, of a number of bloody regimes of slavery. Beyond lies a subject for
reflection upon this sinister counterexample of what a Revolution *is not.*
Of the French Revolution, there remains, beyond the message of liberty
that has been received as such everywhere in the world and that has
nowhere—except, precisely, in Russia—given rebirth to the Terror, a host
of insistent and fecund questions, as well as a social-historical base without
which it is unclear how we could proceed any further along the path of
human emancipation.

Finally, there is Burke’s tune, which Solzhenitsyn reprises in turn.
Russia, Solzhenitsyn says, was on the path toward progress and reform;
1917 (and here, as everywhere in his text, February and October are not
distinguished) brought only an interruption and an end to this process.
For my part, I am convinced that, without the Bolshevik putsch and
supposing that the movement begun in February had failed as radical
democratic movement, a liberal regime would have ended up being estab-
lished in Russia and that the continued development of capitalism would
have raised the Russian economy nearly to the American level, perhaps as
early as the 1930s. What Solzhenitsyn fails to ask himself, however, is the
following: And why, then, did those reforms undertaken by the last Czars
take place at all? Was it by divine inspiration? Did 1905 play no part? As for
the preceding period, did European influences play no role at all? If one
considers these influences at the political level, was the French Revolution
there for nothing? After 1789 and 1848, could Alexander II have confined
himself to repeating Catherine the Great or Peter the Great?
Certainly, we can re-discuss the French Revolution; this is the discussion with Burke. However, the reforms undertaken during the final decades of the Ancien Régime (reforms that were, in fact, negligible as far as liberties were concerned) did not themselves stem from the good will of the monarch, either. As weak as they were in reality, they gave expression to the enormous pressure that was coming from the social body as a whole—and that finally burst forth in the form of Revolution. This pressure did not result from any form of economic determinism. It expressed an immense sea change in ideas, a new social imaginary, the emergence of such significations as political liberty, equality, popular sovereignty. These significations were already at work in the American Revolution of 1776. Behind the latter, as well as, in a more indirect fashion, behind the French Revolution, stands seventeenth-century England, the two revolutions and the civil war that occurred there, Charles’s severed head. The history of freedom in Europe is not a history of reforms granted. It is a history of struggles, in which revolutions play a part.

One can love the people as popes and czars did: on the condition that the people bow its head, accept despotism with gratitude, and, with still more gratitude, a few concessions in the way of “liberties.” Such is not our tradition. A liberty granted is as little liberty as a system of thought accepted as dogma is a personal form of thought. Revolution is the effort of a people to give itself freedom, and to trace for itself the limits thereof.