

Francois Furet: Finding ‘Revolution’ within the French Revolution

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Francois Furet’s writings on the French Revolution radically changed the way the Revolution is interpreted. His work represented an important break with the traditional historiography of the Revolution, earning him a place in the *Academie Francaise* in 1997, the year of his death. Beginning with *Interpreting the French Revolution* (translated from the French *Penser la Révolution française*)¹ he questioned traditional, Marxist-based interpretations and instead sought out the political in an effort to provide a conceptualisation of the French Revolution. In doing this he examined the role of opinion, language and power in propelling the Revolution and drew attention to the importance of revolutionary discourse. Furet found models for this approach in the famous liberal Alexis de Tocqueville and a little-regarded Catholic historian, Augustin Cochin (1876-1916) both of whom he regarded as “the only historians who have proposed a rigorous conceptualisation of the French Revolution”.² His later works, including *La Revolution francaise* and the *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*³ (co-edited with Mona Ozouf), fulfilled the promise of the seminal *Interpreting the French Revolution* and provided solid historical evidence for Furet’s broad conceptualisation.

Furet set out to demolish the “orthodox” interpretation of the Revolution and in doing so created a new orthodoxy which has had an enormous historiographical impact. This essay will examine Furet’s rejection of traditional historiography and the methods of historical understanding he applied in its place in order to demonstrate how Furet’s understanding of the French Revolution differed so dramatically from that found in its traditional historiography.

A brief examination of the historiography of the French Revolution elucidates the significance of Furet’s contribution. The “Marxist” interpretation has long been the dominant paradigm in French Revolution historiography. This interpretation sees the Revolution as a moment in which the conflagration of class forces produced a dramatic transformation, encompassing changes in economics, politics, ideology and culture. Set in an analytical framework known as “social interpretation” it works from concepts related to Marxist theories of the conditions and consequences of class struggle and transitions between modes of production.⁴ From the early 1900s to the 1960s this approach dominated the interpretation and explanation of the French Revolution, seen most clearly this century in the works of Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvre, Albert Soboul and George Rude. New strands of research in the 1950s began to show inconsistencies in this interpretation yet despite much criticism no satisfactory alternative emerged. Under the influence of the *Annales* school the Marxist historians of the 1970s and 1980s moved towards cultural history, displayed

¹ Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Throughout this article page numbers will refer to the English translation, published three years later. Furet (who collaborated with the translator) considered it ‘fuller’ than the French original.

² Furet, *Interpreting*, ix.

³ Francois Furet, *La Revolution francaise*, 2 vols. (Paris: Histoire de France Hachette, 1988). Francois Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds.), *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁴ Jack Amariglio and Bruce Norton, “Marxist historians and the question of class in the French Revolution”, *History and Theory*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (1991), 37.

for example in Michel Vovelle's investigation of *mentalites*, but such interpretations still worked within the general framework of social interpretation and were not able to appease the criticism that the Marxist approach continued to attract.⁵

In the 1960s and 1970s, "revisionists" such as Alfred Cobban and Furet himself had begun to challenge this analytical framework. Criticism increased as research began to show that no discernible "bourgeoisie" confronted and defeated a fundamentally feudal ruling class in 1789. A former communist himself, Furet's disillusionment with the "bankruptcy" of communism eventually led him to pronounce his now famous adage: "The French Revolution Has Ended".⁶ In this article, he argued that the time for polemics had passed. He pointed to the parting of ways between the social interpreters' emphasis on class and their implied approval of revolutionary action (including perhaps the Terror) and the more recent non-ideological, historically accurate interpretations of Revolutionary events.⁷ Furet did not believe that further research would lead to an improved explanation of the revolution, nor solve its current divergences.⁸ Instead, a new interpretation based on a new conceptual framework was needed. It was these convictions which led him to refute the "revolutionary catechism", that of the traditional Marxist-based interpretation of the French Revolution.

This rejection was most notably put forward in the first of Furet's three historiographical essays in *Interpreting the French Revolution: "The Revolutionary Catechism"*.⁹ Furet's objective here was to demonstrate why the Marxist explanation could not support a broad understanding of the Revolution. He found the traditional Marxist-based interpretations to be fundamentally flawed due to the fact that Marx and Engels left several, contradictory analyses of the Revolution, including insights which their followers never took up.¹⁰ He declared that he was not criticising Marxism, rather the kind of Marxism that penetrated the historiography of the French Revolution with Jean Jaures.¹¹ His principal opposition was to the idea of a "bourgeois revolution",¹² a notion that represented an oversimplification inherent to the tendency of modern Marxism to shape complex and contradictory events so that the Revolution stood as the great "beginning" for subsequent movements. In this way, the idea of a revolutionary break evolved around economic life and the fabric of society, resulting in the myth which declared: "before the revolution, feudalism; after, capitalism; before, the nobility; after, the bourgeoisie".¹³ Marxist interpretations therefore tended to present a "kind of simple, linear schema of history, in which the bourgeois revolution, uniting the peasantry and urban masses behind it, achieves the breakthrough from the feudal to the capitalist mode of production".¹⁴

For Furet, this "Marxist vulgate" was epitomised in such histories as Albert Soboul's *Precis de la Revolution francaise*. Soboul substituted broad sociological

⁵ Jack R. Censer, "Commencing the Third Century of Debate", *American Historical Review*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (1989), 1312.

⁶ Furet, *Interpreting*, 1-79.

⁷ Amariglio and Norton, "Marxist historians", 38.

⁸ Claude Langlois, "Furet's Revolution", trans. Timothy Tackett, *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Fall 1990), 775.

⁹ This article first appeared in 1971 as a response to Marxist criticism of the history of the revolution (*La Revolution francaise*) that Furet had written with Denis Richet. One of Furet's loudest critics was Albert Soboul whose work is criticised in the article.

¹⁰ Furet, *Interpreting*, 87. Donald Sutherland, "An Assessment of the Writings of Francois Furet", *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Fall 1990), 785.

¹¹ Furet, *Interpreting*, 13.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

categories for detailed historical analysis, dividing pre-Revolutionary France into nobility, bourgeois, peasants and urban lower classes. While Furet did not challenge this on the terrain of Marxist theory, he did point to the inconsistency of the many fragmentations within each of these “classes”, thereby turning these notions against Soboul and others who ascribed to them.¹⁵

Furet’s second main objection was based on his belief that Marxist historians had adopted the “Jacobin” ideology of key figures of the Revolution. Here he pointed to the obsession of the Bolsheviks with the Jacobin “precedent”,¹⁶ believing that Marxist historiography had long searched within the French Revolution for precedents to justify the revolution and post-revolutionary period in Russia. In many Marxist interpretations, the French Revolution became a mechanism to justify the present by the past. Accounts of the French Revolution were accompanied by discourse on the 1917 Revolution which according to Furet “proliferated like a cancer” inside the historical analysis of the French Revolution to the point where its significance was all but destroyed.¹⁷ For its teleological traits, Furet found this approach fundamentally flawed.

Furet extended his criticism of certain Marxist historians to all histories written in the narrative tradition and in the mode of personal identification.¹⁸ Furet viewed narrative histories as an obstruction to conceptual or problem-oriented history. He asserted that because such histories reconstruct experience on a temporal basis, conceptualisation is never made explicit, thereby obstructing historians from looking at the whole. Furthermore, narrative history was misleading for its tendency to record the recollections of individuals and communities, keeping alive only a small section of the past.¹⁹

Furet also demanded that the mode of identification be explicitly rejected. Historians such as Jules Michelet sought to relive past events, seeing them essentially as contemporaries saw them. Furet called for a history that escaped this mode, imploring historians to “try and break the vicious circle of ... commemorative historiography”. This could only be achieved by establishing a critical distance from the subject, a “cooling off” of the type proposed by Levi-Strauss.²⁰ Accordingly, any new interpretation of the Revolution had to begin with a critique of the idea of revolution “as experienced and perceived by its actors, and transmitted by their heirs, namely the idea that it was a radical change and the origin of a new era”.²¹ Again, this was an area where Furet perceived Marxist histories to fail. Only by setting a critical distance and moving away from the confines of narrative history could the past be effectively reconstructed.

This was the starting point for Furet’s own understanding of the French Revolution. Furet’s major contribution to the study of the French Revolution was to redirect history towards a path from which it has often strayed: the path by which it is linked to a reflection of politics.²² An explanation of his schema first appeared in *Interpreting the French Revolution*. He believed that in order to approach the Revolution in its true historical reality:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 89-116.

¹⁶ Francois Furet, “The Future of the Left”, trans. H.J. Kaplan, *Partisan Review*, Vol. 58 (Summer 1991), 432.

¹⁷ Furet, *Interpreting*, 87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁹ Francois Furet, *In the Workshop of History*, trans. Jonathon Mandelbaum (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 55-56.

²⁰ Furet, *Interpreting*, 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²² Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 90.

... we must give up a conception of history that sees human beings of the past as immersed in an opacity to which only the historian...can subsequently provide the key. We must return to a history of the explicit, which in the case of the French Revolution, happens to be a history of politics".²³

Furet's aim was to uncover a plan of actions and representations which governed both the shaping (*mise en forme*) and staging (*mise en scene*) of revolutionary society and at the same time determine its dynamic.²⁴ By establishing politics as an independent object of research he contributed to the creation of a metahistory possessed of meaning as opposed to a traditional history fragmented into small areas of specialised scholarship. Only in this way could the Revolution be presented as an understandable whole, a task at which Marxist interpretations had failed.

Furet believed that the first task of the historiography of the French Revolution was to rediscover its political dimension. He began by searching for signs of ideology in pre-revolutionary society and found that the beginning of the Revolution witnessed the collapse of one world and the birth of a new one, a moment where people thought themselves capable of recasting society in the image of their ideals and aspirations.²⁵ Society had to reconstitute itself, and to do this, it had to first agree on principles. According to Furet, it did this by recomposing itself through ideology. This was the beginning of "politics", defined by Furet as "a common yet contradictory language of debate and action around the central issue of power".²⁶ His analysis therefore rested on the importance of language, power and discourse, a point that will be returned to later.

For Furet, the moment of the Revolution could only begin to be understood if one acknowledged the autonomy of ideas. The Revolution represented not just a leap from one society to another, but a "mode of change".²⁷ Furet believed that such principles overrode or preceded institutions and social transformations proposed by Marxist interpretations. The reintroduction of ideology at the centre of the Revolution represents Furet's first major contribution to the historiography of this area.

This insertion of ideology and politics at the centre of the Revolution led Furet to expand its traditional chronology (usually 1789-1794). While others before him, such as Vovelle, had taken this approach, Furet did so in an effort to move beyond the idea of 1789 as a "beginning". By examining ideology and taking the *longue duree* approach, Furet was able to locate the source of French radicalism in what preceded it. In this sense, he demanded that the historian consider the Revolution as a product of absolutism, even though it saw itself as its very antithesis. This provides an important example of Furet's approach to a conceptualisation of the Revolution.

For this approach, Furet found a model in Alexis de Tocqueville whom he considered the first historian to look behind the illusion of rupture in 1789 and reveal the historical continuity of the Revolution. In *L'Ancien Regime et la Revolution francaise* Tocqueville asked the question: how can we explain the non-historical character of the Revolution, its rejection of the past and its abstract constructionism,

²³ Francois Furet, "A Commentary", trans. Elborg Forster, *French Historical Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Fall 1990), 797-798.

²⁴ Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 91.

²⁵ Robert D. Zaretsky, "Defining 'this sublime sunrise'", *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Winter 1991), 182.

²⁶ Furet, *Interpreting*, 26.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

by the history of what preceded it?²⁸ The answer he found was that through centralisation, the monarchy led the way in undermining corporative privileges. More importantly, he discovered that the egalitarianism of the Revolution originated under the *Ancien Regime*.²⁹ Tocqueville's ideas were astounding for his time: rather than registering an obvious break, he attempted to detect traces of a continuous process, to discern the revolution in terms of precedent and as a conceptualised course of action. In this way he distinguished between revolution as a mode of historical action and what Furet described as "revolution as process".³⁰ Inspired by these ideas, Furet also looked for continuities between the *Ancien Regime* and the Revolution and from this was able to derive his conceptualisation of a Revolution propelled by ideas and discourse. This comparison has in turn inspired a new realm of research into the end of the *Ancien Regime* seen for example in Furet's own research into the procedures for the elections of 1789 and in Mona Ozouf's examination of "public opinion" at the end of the *Ancien Regime*.³¹

Augustin Cochin's interest was the exact opposite to that of Tocqueville but in his work Furet also found a model for his approach. Rather than examine the continuity between the *Ancien Regime* and the Revolution, Cochin's major historical insight was found in his interest in the revolutionary break. Unlike the Marxist historians, Cochin was concerned with formulating a political theory of the revolutionary event itself. Cochin's principal interest was with "the rending of the political fabric, the vacuum of power" and how this "vacuum" was "replaced by the reign of democratic rhetoric and domination by the *societes de pensee* (philosophical societies).³² Thus both Cochin and Tocqueville demonstrated elements of a conceptualisation of the Revolution and in doing so moved beyond the idea of 1789 as a beginning, providing the impetus for Furet's interpretation.

Furet's second, and perhaps more original contribution, was his analysis of the Revolution as an ever-accelerating event whose dynamic energy could only be explained in "political, ideological or cultural terms". Here he developed a type of "revolutionary imaginary". His chief concern was to bring out the logic of this imaginary by examining the actions and discourses of its actors, the sequence of struggles between groups, and the events which historians regard as "accidents" because they disrupt the course of the Revolution.³³ This led him to write:

*Every history of the Revolution must therefore deal not only with the impact of "circumstances" on the successive political crises but also, and above all, with the manner in which those circumstances were planned for, prepared, arranged and used in the symbolic universe of the Revolution and in the various power struggles.*³⁴

The relationship between language and power was therefore central to Furet's interpretation of revolution.

²⁸ Furet, *A Commentary*, 799.

²⁹ Michel Pertue, "La Revolution Francaise est-elle terminee?" *Annales Historiques de La Revolution Francaise*, Vol. 54, No. 3 (1982), 331.

³⁰ Furet, *Interpreting*, 102.

³¹ Francois Furet, "The Monarchy and the Procedures for the Elections of 1789", *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 60, supplement (September 1988), S58-S74. Mona Ozouf, "'Public Opinion' at the End of the Old Regime", *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 60, supplement (September 1988), S1-S21.

³² Furet, *Interpreting*, 28.

³³ Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, 106.

³⁴ Furet, *Interpreting*, 63.

In the French Revolution, the people became the location of power (replacing the king), yet as historian Lynn Hunt notes, “the people and their will” represented a constantly shifting reference point without any fixed institutional expression.³⁵ As a result, revolutionary politics soon turned into a struggle for the appropriation of public opinion: to have power was to speak in the name of the people and to have the support of public opinion. The Revolution was not so much an action as a language.³⁶ In the midst of the Revolution, “language was substituted for power, for it was the sole guarantee that power would belong only to the people, that is, to nobody”.³⁷ With politics reduced to a linguistic struggle the revolutionary actors could no longer exercise power in the traditional sense, forced instead to compete in the arena of discourse.

Here lies Furet’s interpretation of the impelling force of the Revolution. It was not class struggle that drove the Revolution, but the attempt by each successive political group “to radicalise the Revolution, by making it consistent with its discourse” so that through this struggle, “the purest form of that discourse could be brought to power”.³⁸ Furet saw Jacobinism as the clearest expression of such a political group. He again acknowledged his debt to Cochin who in his examination of Jacobinism showed an understanding of the constraints of language, and “how political discourse turns the political speaker into a mere mouthpiece for the ideology he is conveying”.³⁹

Much of *Interpreting the French Revolution* is devoted to the operation of this revolutionary discourse. In this, Furet discerned two significant instances. The first was the general will of the people and nation as a source of legitimacy. The second was conspiracy, the adversary of the Revolution which tried to divert it to benefit the particular interests of individuals.⁴⁰ These two dynamics are described by Furet as two sides of “an imaginary discourse on power”.⁴¹ Furet believed that within this discourse, power was fundamentally displaced. Rather than being found in society or institutions, power was located in and appropriated by discourse about equality. However this raised problems of representation.

Here Furet turned to Rousseau and his work on the problem of representation. Transparency in politics and language represented an almost unattainable ideal due to the corruptive principle of representation. Rousseau believed that the people could be sovereign only if individual wills were transparent to the general will, and language could only be authentic if it was transparent.⁴² For Furet, Rousseau represented the theoretical precursor of revolutionary language.

Furet found that Rousseau’s plea for transparency held the key to the failure of the Revolution, stating:

[i]t is an ironic twist of history that at the very moment when the Revolution believed it was implementing Jean-Jacques’ ideas, it demonstrated, on the contrary, the validity of Rousseau’s pessimism, that is to say the infinite

³⁵ Lynn Hunt, review of *Penser la Révolution française*, by Francois Furet. In *History and Theory*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1981), 317.

³⁶ Furet, *Interpreting*, 178.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁰ Hunt, review of *Penser*, 317.

⁴¹ Furet, *Interpreting*, 54.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 30-31.

*distance between the rule of law and the rule of force, democracy's inability to follow its own theory in practice.*⁴³

Power could not be transparent to the people and language failed to be a translucent medium through which power could be transmitted due to the intervention of particular interests. The effort of the Jacobins to deny this breach resulted in an imaginary discourse about the people which ultimately produced the old absolutism. All forms of resistance came to be seen as obstacles which had to be destroyed, rather than transcended or absorbed.⁴⁴ Soon every representative of the people came to be under suspicion by virtue of their very particularity. Seen in this light, the Terror seemed inevitable, making the Jacobin phase of the Revolution the revelatory moment that marked the potential incoherencies of democratic political culture.⁴⁵

An important conclusion can be drawn here. By drawing on Cochin and examining language, power and societies, Furet discovered the nature of the image of power. His essential argument was that power becomes excessive when invested with the might of the Revolution and the power of the people, but it proves fragile when, by taking on a visible shape, it revealed itself as external to the people. It was this recognition that allowed Furet to explain both the Terror and the failure of the Revolution to establish its ideals.

This led Furet to extend the dates of the Revolution from 1770 to 1880. In this period he discerned two cycles, making the interesting suggestion that the second cycle was almost a repeat of the first but for its end with the Third Republic.⁴⁶ While this distinction of two cycles has been criticised, this interpretation is important as it draws attention to the theoretical incompatibility of the ideals of the Revolution and the extraordinarily long time it took for democracy to become established. Moreover, these two cycles formed the foundation of Furet's own history of the Revolution.

In *Interpreting the French Revolution* Furet had constructed an interpretation independently of the historical scholarship that would usually serve as its foundation. For this reason the work attracted some criticism. However two important works published in 1988 and 1989 provided the historical evidence to support Furet's re-interpretation. Furet's *La Revolution francaise* formed the realisation of the proposals of *Interpreting the French Revolution*. Again Furet's principal concern was the legacy of a revolution that was unable to reconcile popular sovereignty or direct, transparent democracy with parliamentary representation until the Third Republic. Where *Interpreting the French Revolution* was criticised for separating the political and social spheres too rigidly, *La Revolution* moderated this tendency, resulting in what has become a definitive history.⁴⁷ Furet's contribution has also led to a re-evaluation of the categories in which the Revolution is usually discussed. This is exemplified in the *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*. Through its very categories and selection of topics, it questioned and supported the ideas raised by Furet in his former work, examining the contradictions of the revolution and emphasising its dual promise of liberation and constraint. Ideas and the language of the actors were again

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

⁴⁴ Patrice Higonnet, "Orphans of the Enlightenment, or, in the Wake of Francois Furet", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 52 (October/December 1991), 686.

⁴⁵ Michael Mosher, "On the Originality of Francois Furet: A Commemorative Note", *Political Theory*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (June 1998), 393.

⁴⁶ Francois Furet, "From 1789 to 1917 & 1989: Looking back at Revolutionary Traditions", *Encounter*, Vol. 75, No. 2 (September 1990), 6.

⁴⁷ William Scott, "Historiographical Review: Francois Furet and democracy in France", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (1991), 147.

restored to a central place. Such works provide the solid historical evidence which justify Furet's rejection of previous explanations of the force of the French Revolution and support his contribution to its historiography.

Faced with the inadequacies of traditional interpretations in the historiography of the French Revolution, Francois Furet set himself the goal of conceptualising the causes and course of the Revolution. In doing this he read into the French Revolution a revolution that begun before the Revolution began and ended after it had finished. In his reading of the French Revolution, the force of the Revolution came not from the material existence of class struggle, but from a powerful ideology. This manifested itself in discourses which were used to manipulate public opinion and therefore power. By his own account, Furet attempted to replace the traditional historiography of the French Revolution, "not with a new 'canonical' version of that history, but with an inventory of new questions".⁴⁸ However recent writings suggest that in addition to providing questions which have set research of the Revolution on a new trajectory, Furet's interpretation has indeed become canonical. In setting out to demolish the "orthodox" interpretation of the Revolution, Francois Furet created a new orthodoxy himself which has changed not only the way in which the French Revolution is interpreted and explained, but also the way in which we think about history.

⁴⁸ Furet, *A Commentary*, 792.

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