

## HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

### FRANÇOIS FURET AND DEMOCRACY IN FRANCE\*

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Recently, François Furet has acclaimed the French revolution of 1789 as marking the invention of ‘democratic culture’ in ‘the torrential birth of democratic politics and ideology’.<sup>1</sup> However, democracy took long to establish itself in France and so Furet’s general history, *La Révolution*, covers the long century from Turgot to Jules Ferry. Defining democracy as, ideally, uniting civil equality and political liberty, it sees that marriage as not being celebrated till the 1870s, with liberty the tardy partner. It would seem to follow that an account of ‘the first century of French democracy’ should direct considerable attention to both civil society and to politics.<sup>2</sup> Social and political history, we would argue, should be closely linked, though quite how, avoiding misleadingly prescriptive generalizations, is not easy to determine.

Some obvious pitfalls must be avoided. As is well known, Furet strongly condemns the practice of deriving ‘the political’ mechanistically from ‘the social’. However, as this terminology itself suggests, he has sometimes, as in *Penser la Révolution française* (1978),<sup>3</sup> veered to the opposite extreme, separating too rigidly the political and the social spheres (a separation only partially justified by what he diagnosed as the tyranny of state over society in the Terror). Perhaps now rather more aware of the need for balance, Furet in *La Révolution* moderates this tendency. But there is no danger that social and political history will here be abusively fused. Certain valid distinctions are made, partly stemming from, but not wholly subservient to, attitudes prevalent in the period discussed. These distinctions are varied and have various implications, not all of them clearly worked out. Furet establishes that nineteenth-century liberals routinely, though not necessarily unthinkingly, separated the social and political levels of the legacy of a revolution which founded an *état social* but not a *pouvoir stable*, the term democracy denoting the acceptance of this society and the search or struggle for a ‘corresponding’ form of government.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Furet cites Marx as considering the state/society distinction a crucial invention of modern European history (with true democracy coming only with the future reabsorption of the state by society, doubtless ‘at a higher level’). And in the nineteenth century, Furet further remarks, the

\* The works which form the basis of our remarks are: F. Furet, *La Révolution. De Turgot à Jules Ferry, 1770–1880* (Paris, 1988; henceforth, *La Révolution*); François Furet and Mona Ozouf, *Dictionnaire critique de la révolution française* (Paris, 1988 – since translated as *Critical dictionary of the French revolution*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1989; henceforward, *Dictionnaire*); F. Furet, *Marx and the French revolution* (Chicago, 1988; henceforward, *Marx*); F. Furet, ‘The French revolution revisited’, *Government and Opposition*, xxiv, 3 (1989), 264–82, henceforward, ‘Revisited’; and F. Furet, *La Gauche et la révolution au milieu du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1986; henceforward, *La Gauche*).

<sup>1</sup> ‘Revisited’, p. 280.

<sup>2</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Translated as *Interpreting the French revolution* (Cambridge, 1981). <sup>4</sup> *La Gauche*, p. 38.

acceptance of the new society was often a pretext for not seeking to establish political freedom, thus consecrating and prolonging a fundamental separation.<sup>5</sup>

Furet's recent works, then, direct our attention fruitfully towards the articulation between the political and social spheres, an articulation problematic both in history and in history-writing. Though he gives little specific attention either to straightforward political history or to in-depth social analysis, he does explore the changing relationships between state and society. He brilliantly reviews the diverse currents of post-revolutionary thought which combated each other throughout the nineteenth century. These found a reasonable synthesis in the third republic's almost definitive democratic settlement, which combined a good measure of both social and political stability.

However, Furet's *œuvre* does have some weaknesses. Indeed the concept of democracy is not made entirely clear. More particularly, problems relating to politics and especially to political liberty are sometimes inadequately addressed. Conversely, what might be termed the social prerequisites of a democratic politics are hardly discussed. Here Edgar Quinet, much praised by Furet, may perhaps have inadvertently provided a pretext. Complaining that if real (that is, socio-economic) equality was made a prerequisite of political freedom, the latter would be postponed indefinitely, Quinet downgraded and devalued history's social dimension and accepted a quasi-permanent *décalage* between the political and the social, except in so far as a formal civil equality is concerned.<sup>6</sup> Certainly Furet sometimes defines political modernity (and normality) in terms of a moderate, democratic (or moderately democratic?) 'republic of the centre', which shuns the extremism of left and right, these two noxious traditions being united in their social, or rather anti-social, distaste for the bourgeoisie and the rule of money, which are therefore made to seem the emblems, or indeed the underpinnings, of democracy at least in its tolerable, liberal form. But, in general, and notably in his long introduction to Marx's texts on the revolution, Furet argues that questions as to the 'social basis' of democracy miss the point or are harmful. They destroy the 'autonomy of politics' and prevent one grasping both the inherent logic and integrity of the democratic universe (seen by Tocqueville as self-contained)<sup>7</sup> and the baffling changes which mark the 'exceptionality' of the political history of modern France. Nevertheless we may note that sometimes Furet sees politics as having been, as in the Terror, so divorced from a primarily social 'reality' as to become 'illusory' rather than merely 'autonomous'. Moreover sometimes Furet himself has recourse to 'social' explanations for political change or stability. If, as he also suggests, it is a matter of the pragmatic analysis of each context, a question of degree, balance, and also of genuine confusions, illusions, complexities and contradictions in a history in which democracy was going through messy processes of definition, some of Furet's more sweeping pronouncements and some of his more damning indictments – notably of Marx and the Marxists – would seem excessive (or, perhaps, would rebound against himself).

Given the forcefulness of his strictures on others, Furet is often infuriatingly imprecise. In a history of ideas relating to democracy, as expressed theoretically,

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. pp. 33–4, see also p. 38 and *Dictionnaire*, pp. 1041–44.

<sup>6</sup> *La Gauche*, pp. 33–4, 38.

<sup>7</sup> This is a point elaborately made in *Marx*, p. 27, for example. However, it is clear that Tocqueville constantly related political democracy to those socio-economic conditions which would either assure its beneficial or pernicious development. In particular, the combination of 'democracy' and self-interested bourgeois society was seen by Tocqueville as particularly obnoxious.

polemically and practically in one country enduring a particularly turbulent history, the historian may be under a particular obligation to clarify his terms, suggesting criteria by which to assess critically the concepts and claims of the historical actors themselves. Furet can hardly consider this too judgemental: he has often stressed the need to escape from the categories (and illusions) of these actors. Most crucially, Furet too generously bestows the term 'democratic' on very different regimes. This produces all sorts of difficulties. Admittedly it is sometimes only certain aspects of such regimes which are designated 'democratic', but Furet too easily accepts lip-service to the sovereignty of the people as democratic, especially when combined (as with Napoleon I, the 'Louis XIV of the democratic state') with a slightly more substantial commitment to civil equality.<sup>8</sup> In turn, civil equality (hardly the *forte* of Louis XIV) is never very clearly defined in relation to other possible – or impossible – forms of equality. Here too, of course, 'democratic equality', centred on the abstract individual, expressing an intersubjective feeling that 'all men are equal', may not, in Furet's view, be measurable against social and economic inequality. For reference to such 'real' inequalities might suggest an inadequacy, a lack of autonomy in political democracy itself. Yet paradoxically, despite affirming the autonomy of politics, Furet only superficially considers democracy as a primarily *political* form.

This may reflect the reality of much modern French history, but this alleged preference for (civil?) equality over political liberty is something which Furet often deplors. But perhaps, since Furet's work is teleological (like that of Marx, whom he criticizes so severely on this account), and is orientated towards an accomplishment, it may reject as anachronistic the application of a full definition of democracy to decades in which some were struggling to establish what degree of democracy they could, with any ideal-type definition lying in their future (and, indeed, in ours). However, and here is our main point, to regard political freedom and political participation as incidental to democracy is to devalue them with potentially dangerous consequences for that democracy or degree of democracy now attained.

Of course, there is no one definition of democracy, not even that *république du centre*, alias the Fifth Republic, which Furet sees as marking the end of the turbulent and basically illiberal legacy of 1789.<sup>9</sup> But we note that one recent analyst, Barry Holden, concludes that 'in order to qualify as a democracy the people must *actually* make as well as be entitled to make, the basic political decisions'.<sup>10</sup> It follows that democratic claims and credentials must be critically examined. And if we are magisterially to grant *dérogations* for shortcomings in democratic theory and shortfalls in democratic practice, we should be fully aware of our reasons. It is too easy for regimes to violate the most basic guarantees on pretexts of security (etc.). But, conversely, anachronistic condemnations of democratic inadequacy need to be avoided. The whole area is a minefield. Clearly, however, the 'battle for democracy', to cite a recent title (derived from Marx<sup>11</sup>), is not over (the eastern front has indeed just been opened).

Furet's work is extremely valuable in showing that there is no easy reconciliation of liberty and equality, or all desirable versions of each. However, somewhat obsessed

<sup>8</sup> Article 'Bonaparte' in *Dictionnaire*, pp. 216–29. Reference to Louis XIV, p. 224. Louis and Bonaparte shared the ethos of 'l'état c'est moi', reinforced in the latter's case by reference to the sovereignty of the people.

<sup>9</sup> François Furet, Jacques Julliard and Pierre Rosanvallon, *La République du centre* (Paris, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Barry Holden, *Understanding liberal democracy* (Oxford, 1988), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Keith Graham, *The battle for democracy* (Brighton, 1986).

with French 'exceptionality', Furet perhaps disguises the fact that it is not only in France that democracy has had a harsh upbringing. But clearly *any* history of democracy must consider seriously the French debates on rights and liberties in the summer of 1789. Recognizing, too, the inevitability of normative discourse, we must try to deepen and develop concepts of democracy via critique rather than deny or devalue them (as J. J. Mounier did, in 1789, with his summary view that 'democracy' and liberty are incompatible).<sup>12</sup>

Above all, it is both desirable and prudent to incorporate a fairly full degree of political liberty and political participation, shared equally among all citizens broadly defined, in any definition of democracy however provisional. It would seem to follow that it is important to establish if there are indeed economic and social factors which nurture or stifle political democracy. Inspired, like Tocqueville, by the spirit of liberty in 1789, but well informed as to its fate, one may be all the more vigilant lest the discourse of democracy be appropriated to deny its substance, to reduce what Robespierre termed its 'plénitude' (which the Jacobins were obviously unable to deliver) to an empty sham.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on the insights of thinkers such as Constant and Tocqueville – and heeding Quinet's protest at the prevailing and, to his mind, abusive nineteenth-century equation of democracy with an *état social* – we might ask if what these writers demanded politically in the way of a free press, the opportunity to found free associations, a general civic education, a responsive electoral system, the protection of individual and collective rights and the respect of minorities (etc.) has yet been adequately achieved.

## II

Though the French revolution's 'newness', a problem which obsesses Furet, is seen to lie mainly in the realm of politics and perhaps in the definition as much as the redefinition of that realm (or term), Furet is not much concerned with 'practical politics'. One of the clearest statements of his intended treatment of democratic politics states that it does not seek to comprehend 'the collection of rules or procedures designed to organize the working of the public authorities starting from the electoral consultation of the citizens'.<sup>14</sup> Though he has provided informative studies of aspects of the elections of 1789, Furet seems little interested in political, including electoral, sociology.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, more generally, the relationship of democracy to society is problematic. Furet notes that Tocqueville provided 'une théorie de la société démocratique'<sup>16</sup> (and some writers, like Philippe Bénéton, even criticize him for having given too little attention to politics or, like Pierre Manent, argue that he saw varieties of government as secondary to – and dependent upon? – types of social formation).<sup>17</sup> Certainly, for

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in W. M. Simon (ed.), *French liberalism 1789–1848* (New York, 1972), p. 16. Of course, Mounier was referring to pure democracy as the rule of the mob, as anarchic 'direct democracy'.

<sup>13</sup> Robespierre, 'Sur les principes de morale politique', speech of 18 pluviôse an II – 5 Feb. 1794, in J. Poperen (ed.), *Textes choisis* (Paris, 1974), III, 110–31. <sup>14</sup> 'Revisited', p. 279.

<sup>15</sup> 'Les élections de 1789 à Paris: le Tiers État et la naissance d'une classe dirigeante', in *Vom Ancien Régime zur Französischen Revolution*, ed. E. Hinrichs et al. (Göttingen, 1978), pp. 188–206.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, F. Furet, 'De la démocratie en Amérique' (under Tocqueville) in *Dictionnaire des œuvres politiques*, ed. F. Chatelet et al. (Paris, 1986), pp. 821–33.

<sup>17</sup> Philippe Bénéton, *Introduction à la politique moderne* (Paris, 1987), p. 133; Pierre Manent, *Tocqueville et la nature de la démocratie* (Paris, 1982), esp. pp. 170 ff.

Tocqueville, democracy was an *état social*, the French revolution a crucial episode in the advent of democratic society, displacing the aristocratic society of the old regime. All aspects of social life – *mœurs*, attitudes, sentiments, *mentalités*, ideology – were altered as the spirit of democracy (or ‘equality’, including ideally a political equality which allowed all men to compete freely for the exercise of political power) permeated or subverted all institutions, from the state to the family, while the very status of the individual was irrevocably transformed, not necessarily in the direction of greater liberty or independence, though concepts of freedom were changed too. Thus as Tocqueville’s work on America shows, nothing was irrelevant to a consideration of democracy. Education was crucial. Questions of land-ownership were important to Tocqueville (as to Constant) so that the socio-economic preconditions (and results?) of democracy were examined, even if these did not include a strict *equality* of wealth. Religion was made less transcendental when subordinated to the democratic ethos, becoming a sphere of sociability.<sup>18</sup>

While not wishing to equate too closely Furet’s purposes with Tocqueville’s – he was explicitly concerned with the possibilities for safeguarding political liberty in this new *état social* – we would argue that, in the absence of real *political* democracy for much of Furet’s period, the French revolution demands analysis in terms of the emergence of a new, or relatively new, social form – and not just to enable us to chart the obstacles delaying the emergence of stable political democracy in France. This approach would explicitly place ‘politics’ in a social context, thereby helping us both to define it and to relate more closely state and society, indeed to define the terms, perhaps to decide whether the problem of distinguishing the prerequisites of democracy from the consequences (debated in the revolution) is meaningful or illuminating.

But, to repeat, the nature of political culture itself needs exploring. Sometimes this is indeed done in ‘social’ terms. For Tocqueville, politics remained ‘aristocratic’ after society was democratized, though after 1830 politics became basely bourgeois, sharing neither the elevated ethos of the nobility nor the basic honesty of the people, primarily the peasantry. In more expressly political terms, one might analyse ideas (or dreams) of democracy in the old regime, all forms of revolutionary democratic discourse (as in Lucien Jaume’s work on Jacobinism), the concepts and practices of ‘direct democracy’ (as in Maurice Genty’s ‘apprenticeship for citizens’).<sup>19</sup> Consideration of the theory and practice of representative and parliamentary government might include the anti-parliamentarianism so strongly present in French history.

Always, however, ‘politics’ refers to realities which cannot be wholly outside, nor wholly within, its sphere. Democracy, for Furet, is ‘a system of beliefs’ by which and in which people try – presumably as actively sovereign – to establish liberty and equality, if necessary by striking down their enemies; it also includes the methods by which these values are imposed.<sup>20</sup> As *Penser la Révolution* has taught us, and some striking quotations in *La Révolution* confirm, ‘the people’ (and their enemies) are as much a construct – of politicians, often – as an empirical or sociological reality, so the people’s

<sup>18</sup> Tocqueville’s letters, especially those of the 1830s, show his concern with the preconditions under which the maximum of political participation might best be attained. Education, elevated moral ideals, a reasonable spread of private property were essential prerequisites. See, for example, letters to Louis de Kergolay, Jan. 1835, pp. 93–4; to Eugène Stoffels, 21 Feb. 1835, pp. 98–9; to same, 5 Oct. 1836, pp. 113–14 etc.; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected letters on politics and society*, ed. R. Boesche (Berkeley, 1985).

<sup>19</sup> Lucien Jaume, *Le Discours jacobin et la démocratie* (Paris, 1989) and Maurice Genty, *L’apprentissage de la citoyenneté, Paris 1789–1795* (Paris, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> ‘Revisited’, p. 279.

identity is hopelessly ambiguous and needs elucidation. Moreover, Furet's 'people' is defined as much by its goals – liberty and equality – as by any less metaphysical characteristics, and this independently of whether the people gave any indication of valuing these goals, generously attributed to them. This makes it all the more necessary to confront the invented or mythic people with the 'real' or social people, not least because this was – and was felt to be – a central problem for the revolutionaries in their confrontation with resistances which, by their definition, could not come from the actual people. Only thus can historians evaluate all factors facilitating or impeding the growth of democracy, using the resources of both social and cultural history. The very myth of the people as heroes or martyrs of democracy, in an epochal struggle, as celebrated in Robespierre's speech of 5 February 1794, may have entered some people's minds, affecting both attitudes and actions.<sup>21</sup>

As Furet recognizes when stating that the revolutionaries were dedicated to founding 'a society through language',<sup>22</sup> semantic problems of defining the people were part of the political struggle. Here too socio-economic, political, moral – or immoral – criteria were prominent, depending on circumstances or viewpoint, which themselves included social determinants. Attitudes to the people need examining: Tocqueville praised British radicals for preparing the people for democratic government while their French counterparts imposed their ideas upon them, their claim to govern for the people legitimizing many brutalities.<sup>23</sup> Moreover the ideas of those who, perhaps including Robespierre, saw the popular cause as requiring a social rather than 'merely' political democracy deserve evaluation. If the concept of an economic democracy is vague, though explored by some revolutionaries and inherent in some concepts of equality, economic questions cannot be ignored: the connexions, and disconnexions, between economic and political liberalism need exploring.

Questions of class intrude also. The relationship between an imprecise and often imaginary people – whether heroic or villainous (*classes dangereuses*) – and the bourgeoisie is central. Tocqueville's claim to speak of classes rather than individuals, and his use of terms such as 'class struggle' and 'class war' of noble-bourgeois conflict in 1788–9, show the centrality of such terms. The relationship between 1789 as a democratic revolution and its status, however challenged by the revisionists, as a 'bourgeois revolution' is posed. Furet's dismissive comment that neither the bourgeoisie nor capitalism needed a revolution to emerge and dominate the history of other European countries can be applied to democracy too.<sup>24</sup> Or, if the French revolutionary experience was so central to the European democratic story, perhaps it was as *delaying* democratic reform and prolonging aristocratic predominance in certain other countries, including the Britain which Furet sometimes simplistically regards as completely bourgeois.

The 'bourgeois revolution' thesis underlines the danger of giving one, apparently simple, label to an event as complex as the French revolution. Perhaps this difficulty is compounded by expanding the revolution to a century. Or perhaps, if dealing in generalities such as the advent of democracy, the *longue durée* allows trends to be more easily discerned and delineated, whereas, for example, proponents of the bourgeois revolution interpretation have difficulty in pinpointing what precisely among the confusing events of the 1790s was crucial to the promotion of this class, often selecting key moments which, under scrutiny, fail to bear the weight of interpretation placed

<sup>21</sup> Robespierre, *Textes choisis*, ed. J. Poperen, III, 110–31.

<sup>22</sup> 'Revisited', p. 279.

<sup>23</sup> Admittedly to J. S. Mill, June 1835. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected letters on politics and society*, p. 101.

<sup>24</sup> 'Revisited', p. 276.

upon them.<sup>25</sup> However, given the variety of regimes from 1770 to 1880, Furet may expose himself to a charge which he levels against Marx: that of seeing one factor – for Furet, democracy; for Marx, the bourgeoisie – as at the root of every one of a series of contradictory regimes, so that Napoleon as a standard-bearer of democracy seems little more convincing than Napoleon as champion of the bourgeoisie. In a virtuoso performance, Furet does indeed attempt the double task of reconciling Bonapartism to both the bourgeoisie and democracy. A bourgeois-minded Napoleon I, enthroned as the ‘Louis XIV of democracy’, ruling in the name of popular sovereignty, is paralleled with the caesarian-democratic Napoleon III, labouring to advance an industrialization which the bourgeoisie was too timid to undertake, while also sympathizing with the workers. It is paradoxically with the so-called bourgeois revolution of 1789 that Furet downgrades such class issues. One recalls that R. R. Palmer’s ‘Democratic Revolution’ was sharply criticized for neglecting the bourgeois socio-economic basis of democracy. Palmer subsequently reinstated the bourgeoisie as a prime mover in the ‘World Revolution of the West’.<sup>26</sup> We also recall (not necessarily to accept) Tocqueville’s words: ‘all men who live in democratic times more or less contract the ways of thinking of the manufacturing and trading classes’.<sup>27</sup> Would Marx have disagreed?

Furet insists that the political ideology of popular sovereignty excluded representation<sup>28</sup> – this despite the existence of representative institutions throughout the 1790s and the fact that the 1870s established a relatively stable system of parliamentary representation, on the smoking ruins of the direct democracy of 1871. Representation is, however, crucial. It often purports to link ‘the social’ and ‘the political’. Whether it is socially unifying or socially divisive no doubt depends on context: representative assemblies often represent, at best, rule for the people by the bourgeoisie. What is represented is also crucial – ‘the people’, localities, or those ‘interests’ which appear so frequently but operate so obscurely in Furet’s work. All forms of mediation between political assemblies and the *pays légal* and *réel* are part of political culture. The political (or democratic) literacy of the populace, or of various component parts of French society, needs its archaeology – an archaeology covering the provinces as well as Paris. In the revolution, Condorcet championed education for democracy, with primary education to ensure the people’s exercise of their full rights, not just as voters but as jurymen or municipal officers, thus contextualizing politics via his acute perception of social reality.<sup>29</sup>

Thus all sorts of problems of relating social to political history are raised by boldly centring modern French history on democracy. For Furet, the new characteristic of the revolution is precisely that it politicized all problems – moral, intellectual, social – with the revolutionaries’ belief that ‘there was no human misfortune that could not be blamed on politics’ (or, more narrowly, on the government).<sup>30</sup> The revolutionaries were victims of the ‘illusion of politics’, thinking all problems amenable to a political solution. Furet’s revolutionaries exaggerated their political power to change society. The revolution was at once politically creative and politically impotent, unless of course political transformation was an end in itself. Furet also stresses the revolution’s ‘total rejection of the past’, with ‘the appearance on the stage

<sup>25</sup> For example, debates on the *Loi Le Chapelier*.

<sup>26</sup> R. R. Palmer, *The age of the democratic revolution* (2 vols., Princeton, 1959 and 1964), and *The world of the French revolution* (London, 1971).

<sup>27</sup> Roger Boesche, *The strange liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca, 1987), p. 236.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Revisited’, pp. 279, 280.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in W. M. Simon, *French liberalism, 1789–1848*, p. 31. <sup>30</sup> ‘Revisited’, p. 272.

of history of a practical and ideological mode of action which differs *entirely* from *everything* which went before' [my italics].<sup>31</sup> However even this new form of politics brings us back to social history. The social 'reality' often invoked by Furet, as if politics itself was frequently (and not just in the Terror) 'illusory', was what resisted the revolutionaries' desire to remodel society. Socially speaking, for Furet – though not for Tocqueville – the revolution was insignificant: 'nothing more resembled French society under Louis XVI than the same society under Louis Philippe'.<sup>32</sup>

Yet Furet has already pronounced the complete collapse of old regime society! The society of hierarchy was replaced almost instantaneously in mid-1789 by one of radical individualism. Moreover, Louis-Philippe's reign is later interpreted by Furet in social, even class terms (certainly no more sophisticated than Marx's), as the rule of the bourgeoisie, with 1830 the second, decisive, instalment of a class-movement *now*, retrospectively, seen as inaugurated in 1789. Impelled by ideas of equality, the revolutionaries of 1789 – sometimes referred to as bourgeois, but denied substance when Furet deals with this year – destroyed the corporatist organization of power (social, economic, political), leaving, one would think, few aspects of society untouched. After 4 August the principle of society, the spirit of the French nation, was inevitably affected as hierarchy gave way to equality, precisely as Tocqueville indicated. Though Tocqueville acclaimed the unique, transcendental – though transient – spirit of liberty which inspired the revolutionaries in 1789, the anti-aristocratic social passion of equality, rather than love of liberty, was to be the true motive force of French democracy.

For Furet, the revolutionaries reconstructed in their minds the whole of society. Yet he is unclear as to how far this illusory vision was translated, via politics, into reality since he adds that 'society as a whole was permanently reformed by the permanent celebration of the democratic contract in the name of the will of the people'.<sup>33</sup> At the height of revolutionary fanaticism, in the Year II, politics (the state) overwhelmed society, politicizing everything but not changing society fundamentally. However, the outset of the revolution had been a movement in the opposite direction since, considering the dialogue between societies and 'their' states as 'one of the most profound threads of history', Furet affirms that in 1789 'everything [sic], because of the Revolution, tilts towards society and away from the state. For the Revolution mobilized society and disarmed the state'.<sup>34</sup> This was an exceptional situation 'which opens up for society a field of action which is nearly always barred to it'. Indeed, as early as 1787, in a prior 'revolution', civil society freed itself from the existing state.

Such formulations are confusing. Furet's habit of personifying fairly abstract entities – state, society, the revolution, even centuries – and giving them a unitary voice, mind and will, is hopelessly misleading when these entities 'act', 'think' or sometimes do not think. If, as Furet maintains, the absolute state collapsed of itself in 1787, becoming a shell, the act of civil society in 'freeing itself' could hardly be very energetic. And by 1789 the state (what state?) would not need to be disarmed nor would a terrific revolution be needed to mobilize a society which had already 'freed itself'. Perhaps for 1789 'the Revolution' and 'society' are synonyms, or the revolution is society-in-action (i.e. that social revolution which Furet is at pains to deny). However, by 1793, society was enslaved once more to the state, indeed a state greatly resembling that which had collapsed. Tocqueville, Marx and Furet for once in agreement, the traditionally heavy French state machine was strengthened by a revolution which, in the name of democracy, drew on profoundly undemocratic and

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 275.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 276.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 280.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p. 279.

certainly illiberal concepts of power and sovereignty stemming partly from the old regime, stifling a liberalism of 1789, a minimal state which becomes not only exceptional but inexplicable. Clearly, what is 'new', as well as what is 'social' and/or 'political', needs careful evaluation. For, rather than hearing a dialogue, we are witnesses to a drama played out by more than just two personages, 'society' and 'the state'. Both characters and scenes change with bewildering rapidity. There is no guarantee that the same character keeps the same costume for long.

### III

Given France's complex history, it is not surprising that some of Furet's more dramatic statements subvert each other, nor that the terms he uses are often internally unstable. Obviously the *ancien régime*, as Furet sometimes recognizes, was incoherent.<sup>35</sup> A false coherence was imposed upon it in 1789, though even this – Furet should note – was ambivalent or even frankly botched.<sup>36</sup> Ideologically, the old regime was riven by tensions between, *inter alia*, the divine right of kings, the semi-feudal attitudes of corporate bodies (often incongruously defending themselves in the language of rights and patriotism), and a rational, equalizing and modernizing ethos, perhaps located in the administration. Furet, drawing on the insights of Tocqueville, explores the ambivalent and unstable relationship of absolutism and aristocracy. Absolutism further entrenched aristocracy by granting privileges and exemptions but undermined the nobility's real power and subverted its traditional ethos by pandering to its increasingly bogus sense of superiority, its *amour-propre*. The parasitism of the nobility gave absolutism itself a power which was, however, empty. For kings could only bestow favours which thwarted their will when it really mattered, when they (or their ministers) attempted decisively to modernize state (*and society*).<sup>37</sup>

Furet's image of the old regime monarchy as a 'chantier permanent de la réforme' is meant as positive and dynamic but it suggests, instead, a building site that remains permanently in chaos. In one sentence, the state – admittedly not easily definable, partly for the very reason that political power was *not* wholly abstracted from 'society' – is portrayed as *not* a 'prisonnier d'intérêts égoïstes' but as a presumably effective agent of change. However, a few lines away, the state becomes the site of interest – struggles between different social groups, whose harmonious progress it fails to orchestrate or conduct. For while the king is expected by Furet, counter-factually, to organize a 'classe dirigeante à l'anglaise' (which, surely, had formed itself, *against* absolutism), he is shown to lack both power and will. He oscillates between despotism and capitulation to just those interests (mainly the nobility's) of which he was not a 'prisoner'. These interests, based on parasitism, privilege and tax inequality, are not incidental but are integral to the society of orders. They are indeed consolidated by the monarch's grant and sale of privileges. This vicious circle could be broken, I would argue, only from 'outside' the *ancien régime* power structure – from the *philosophes* or from the bourgeoisie and its allies.

Moreover, something was surely wrong if the king could not assume his reforming role without being damagingly branded a 'despot' by those closest to him in terms of blood. Perhaps Louis XV and Louis XVI were indeed, as Furet argues, torn between

<sup>35</sup> *La Révolution*, pp. 24, 27, etc.

<sup>36</sup> For the confused birth of a death, Diego Venturino, 'La naissance de l'ancien régime', in C. Lucas (ed.), *The political culture of the French revolution*, vol. 2 of *The French revolution and the creation of modern political culture* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 11–40. <sup>37</sup> *La Révolution*, pp. 26 ff.

the imperatives of the modern administrative state – potentially egalitarian, that is ‘democratic’ but politically despotic (though also financially bankrupt) – and their real solidarity with aristocratic society, a solidarity expressed in 1789 too with disastrous effects, at the *séance royale*. But such tensions gravely weaken some of the rather hyperbolic statements of Furet regarding the old regime’s creation of ‘the modern state’ and, above all, regarding the ‘absolute sovereignty’ of the old regime monarchy, allegedly inherited by the revolutionaries. At the very least, the gap between theory and practice, the gulf between reality and aspiration, or effective and illusory power, needs assessing for the period before, as well as after, 1789. Perhaps not all political illusions were Jacobin.

Not surprisingly, but revealingly, reformers in the old regime are difficult to characterize.<sup>38</sup> To Furet, Turgot’s ‘liberal’ plans for assemblies of landowners seem modern in representing ‘les intérêts de la société’ rather than Rousseau’s ‘volonté politique des associés’. But though Rousseau’s political ideas may have been those of the ancients, his political legacy to modernity has been enormous, whereas Turgot’s still-born schemes of assemblies would perhaps have been more administrative than political. Turgot, says Furet, envisaged a *tabula rasa*, an idea therefore ‘fabricated’ by the old regime and bequeathed by it to the revolution. However, if we take Furet’s image seriously, it was presumably intended to destroy that regime, thus prefiguring 1789. And so, more properly, it was bequeathed by the old regime’s would-be grave-diggers. Generally, the image of a *tabula rasa* is seen negatively by Furet, as a symptom of the ‘illusion of politics’, as the overweening and often usurped assertion of the Rousseauist ‘volonté politique’, whereas the representation of interests is specifically modern, as in 1795, a realistic reaction of society against a dictatorial political utopianism expressed precisely in those schemes of wholesale renewal, bequeathed by Turgot perhaps, but also often blamed on Rousseau.

Moreover, a *tabula rasa* seems antithetical to the creation of institutions designed to represent existing interests, especially those of substantial property owners. But Turgot is also seen as advocating the role of absolute reason, as a discipline external to society since, unlike the British, the French never believed in the hidden-hand harmonization of interests. And Turgot’s reform plans, intended to express social interests, but to destroy privileges which were perhaps the old regime’s form of ‘interests’, were defeated by ‘les résistances de la société civile’. Turgot’s attempted reforms of 1776 alienated the nobility, indeed all the privileged, from the aristocracy down to the petty lawyers, master craftsmen, *marchands* (‘toute une société de monopoles et de privilèges’). However, as well as alienating the key corporatist groups of *ancien régime* society, Turgot’s reforms also failed to rally to the crown ‘des couches importantes de la bourgeoisie’. Given that this latter group appears unannounced, we do not know if *il* had any specific interests in civil society, any antipathy towards privilege, or any degree of political consciousness, or indeed if the bourgeoisie had any unity. Its virtual non-existence in Furet’s analysis perhaps reflects its official unimportance in society, but if Furet expects the king and Turgot to rally ‘les classes éclairées’, the enlightened nobles and bourgeois, to a programme of liberal reform, his hopes (or theirs) are obviously forlorn. Indeed Furet repeatedly states that this was one of the unrealized hopes – or illusions? – of the French eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But splitting both nobility and bourgeoisie, or widening existing splits, is a divisive policy which might not have spared France a revolution. Furet is often guilty of retrospective wishful thinking.

<sup>38</sup> On Turgot, *La Révolution*, pp. 35 ff.

With 1789, a situation of formidable complexity arises. Yet while this complexity needs careful treatment, Furet hyperbolically states that by 1787 the *ancien régime* was dead.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Brienne's provincial assemblies of 1788 amounted to 'une révolution avant la révolution', whereby the monarchy, presumably posthumously, renounced its nature.<sup>40</sup> This is now pronounced unambiguously 'absolutist-centralist', whereas it is elsewhere stated that 'la structure de la société par ordres fait partie même du système monarchique'.<sup>41</sup> This 1788 'revolution' was only very partial since there was a new revolution between the end of 1788 and the spring of 1789, not only an ideological revolution with the birth (in France?) of modern politics, but 'une rupture sociale'. Now the monarchy (or sometimes 'the *ancien régime*') passed on to 'the Revolution', as in a relay race, 'democracy', in the form of the modern aspects of the elections to the estates general. The third estate's deputies were sent as individuals, by individuals, to represent the whole nation, with weight given to size and population of constituencies and with no distinction between those eligible to be electors and those to be deputies. 'Cette naissance de l'égalité politique' is underlined, but Furet does *not* mention a built-in doubling of men of the liberal as opposed to the mechanical professions, already designed to privilege 'capacités': a political inequality based on socio-economic and cultural inequalities.

Radical modernism not only coexisted with archaic, corporatist elements (partly expressive of interests, we would add),<sup>42</sup> and with *censitaire* premonitions: it also uttered the language of 'l'utopie révolutionnaire'.<sup>43</sup> This was the abusive use of the new doctrine of the sovereignty of the people. The formation of parties (surely integral to a modern politics involving 'la compétition électorale publique'<sup>44</sup> and based on interests?) was rejected as negating both individualism and the desired, but sinisterly utopian 'transparency' of the relationship between individuals and the new collective sovereign. All intermediary groupings were condemned à la Rousseau. Absolute sovereignty was proclaimed, transferred from king to people, with the cult of a united *volonté* expressed in laws made by a representative assembly and involving a wide degree of participation based on 'l'égalité des citoyens'. This constituted 'l'esprit de la révolution', underlying all phases or stages which thus, for Furet, become epiphenomenal. Condemning the past without appeal, the revolutionaries unwittingly preserved and exacerbated some of the immediate past's most objectionable features, projecting them into a future open to their utopian follies. 'Dès cette époque, les constituants ont inventé le fond et la forme de la démocratie: une société qu'il faut reconstruire à partir d'individus libres, égaux, et collectivement souverains, sur le mode révolutionnaire de la *tabula rasa*.' An outraged Anglo-Saxon might interject here that this may be French revolutionary democracy but it is far from being a generally accepted definition. More pertinently, Furet's omission here of 'representation', as

<sup>39</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 57.

<sup>41</sup> F. Furet, 'La monarchie et le règlement électoral de 1789', in K. M. Baker (ed.), *The political culture of the old regime*, vol. 1 of *The French revolution and the creation of modern political culture* (Oxford, 1987), pp. 375–86. Quotation, p. 385. Also, *La Révolution*, pp. 72–4. In Keith Baker's volume, see also Ran Halévi, 'La monarchie et les élections', pp. 387–402.

<sup>42</sup> On this complex question, Jean-Philippe Parrot, *La représentation des intérêts dans le mouvement des idées politiques* (Paris, 1974). Note the judgement, at variance with Furet's: 'Les régimes censitaires n'eurent pas d'autre motivation que celle d'une représentation professionnelle des intérêts de la classe des possédants... il s'agissait d'une représentation des intérêts des contribuables et des propriétaires aisés' (p. 5).

<sup>43</sup> F. Furet and Ran Halévi, 'L'Année 1789', *Annales, E.S.C.*, XLIV, 1 (1989), 3–24, quotations in this and next paragraph, pp. 19–20, and *La Révolution*, p. 72.

<sup>44</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 72.

presumably inessential, suggests that the constituents introduced a rather Rousseauist democracy, not easily definable as modern. If they, as seems likely, combined elements which were hardly compatible, in a sort of *bricolage politique*, this pragmatism or confusion negates some of Furet's more extravagant points regarding the pure ideological motivation of the revolutionaries.

The Republic, 'cette forme pure de la démocratique', was not seen as possible in a large country, a pragmatic viewpoint but one representing no compromise with the old regime: the king was a mere figurehead, utterly subordinate to the sovereign people. But the restricted franchise is not here attributed to any realism on the part of the legislators: it is portrayed only as fatally discrediting representation (here given no positive connotation), to the advantage of a utopic 'direct democracy' immediately expressive of the general will. Since 'l'égalité démocratique' was violated, those excluded felt entitled to protest at the violation of their rights and to pressurize the Assembly to right all wrongs. We see here 'la surenchère révolutionnaire au nom des principes de la Révolution'; we have here 'le premier terrain de cette tension constitutive de la démocratie moderne, entre les promesses de l'égalité et la situation réelle des individus'. Yet thus to confront the promises of democracy with the 'reality' of society is to risk exposing them as illusory, precisely what Furet's critique of Marx rules out. It also involves the pejorative use of the word *surenchère*, which is obsessive with Furet, as if those inconvenient extremists and *prolétaires* taking seriously promises of liberty, equality and social improvement were acting illegitimately.

It is illuminating to see democracy as opening up all possibilities, however utopian, with the likelihood of disappointment and disillusionment spawning new forms of tyranny. In the intense drama of 1789, 'normal' democracy, as a system of rules, a tissue of practices helping to interiorize democratic attitudes among the people, had an understandably difficult birth. Furet undoubtedly highlights some of the crucial tensions here. But Furet, as quoted above, rejects the mechanics of modern democracy as his concern. Yet normal democracy is posed as the termination and perhaps the goal of his major survey. For Furet's book is orientated towards a decade, the 1870s, significant for the normalization of democratic practices and the entrenchment of their ground rules, with the neutralization, if not the elimination, of revolutionary extremism. Furet frequently deplores the turbulent, even violent, aspects of modern French political culture, linked with utopianism and the 'illusion of politics' inherited from the revolution, and an absolutist *mentalité* bequeathed by the old regime but later particularly associated with Jacobinism (and hence socialism) and Bonapartism. Furet regards the taming of the violent elements as a sign of maturity, with the model of British and especially American democracy as exemplary (while exhibiting chauvinism regarding France's pre-eminent role in the invention of modern democracy, violent though it was). Moreover, in an even longer *durée*, Furet regards France as reaching normality – 'la fin de l'exceptionnalité française' – only in the 1980s, as if the 1870s were not so crucial and the revolution not so 'finished' then as might appear. The valuable, truly modern aspects of democracy are 'liberal'; 'Jacobin' summarizes French democracy's less acceptable face. Jacobinism was inherent in 1789. Following Furet's custom of pronouncing something dead, only to resurrect it, 'socialist neojacobinism' is cited as appearing 'one last time' in 1871, only to persist as an important, if subordinate, current after 1880, embodied in this century by the P.C.F.<sup>45</sup> This current did more to delay than to advance the cause of modern, liberal

<sup>45</sup> *Dictionnaire*, p. 759. Furet adds to this: 'Et par l'intermédiaire du Bolchévisme, le parti jacobin a eu un beau XX<sup>e</sup> siècle', p. 761.

democracy in France. Furet thus views with disfavour anything to the left of centre, and below the elite, throughout modern French history. This is hardly a very novel perspective.

## IV

The revolution, and many aspects of its legacy, was exceptional, even pathological, yet it contained the seeds of liberalism. Indeed, in 1789, 'l'esprit de la liberté est un bien largement commun à la bourgeoisie et à l'aristocratie'.<sup>46</sup> But Furet hardly emphasizes this liberalism, perhaps because, in truth, it has been more weakly represented in French history than among 'les Anglo-Saxons'. One possible current of liberalism is suggested, however. Necker at least, in his speech of 27 December 1788, escaped from the tyranny of both tradition and an entirely abstract reason.<sup>47</sup> He escaped by invoking history, especially the growth of public opinion since 1614 and the expansion in wealth and enlightenment of the third estate, notably its commercial and industrial sectors, whose resources in knowledge and hard cash were needed to modernize (or save) the monarchy. Here we do find Furet noting the social and political importance of real historical trends which prefigured a possible, if not assured, non-utopian but better future, based on 'le sentiment de la nécessité de l'histoire'.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, in one of his essays, Furet is remarkably explicit in seeing these trends as 'le symbole de la promotion de la classe moyenne, consécutive aux transformations intervenues dans l'économie, la société, et les mentalités'.<sup>49</sup> These trends, Furet correctly notes, underpinned the third estate's demand for its 'doubling'. Further, Furet recognizes as typical of the eighteenth century the view that 'le progrès humain répand ses bienfaits de façon progressivement égale dans toutes les sphères de l'activité humaine, et que le commerce, les mœurs et la liberté marchent d'un même pas'.<sup>50</sup> However, for Furet, as for Quinet, economic advance – when acknowledged at all – is something which happens automatically, as if the economic sphere, as well as being hermetically divorced from politics, was not an area of human activity which gave rise to sometimes violent clashes of values and conflicts of interests.

In both *La Révolution* and the *Critical dictionary*, Furet gives Necker's analysis less significance, that is, social content, than it deserves. Barnave's views on the decline of aristocratic and the rise of commercial society are hailed as radical new departures,<sup>51</sup> whereas not only the Scottish philosophers cited as influencing him, but Montesquieu too, expressed the broad outlines of this view as did, more crucially for our purposes, many pamphleteers (including many *commerçants*) in 1789. Liberal constitutionalism, based on a real preference for a representative and parliamentary system, had wider intellectual and social support than Furet seems willing to concede. But Furet recognizes that the third estate's thrust for full equality of rights and access to public office, for the abolition of seigneurial dues (that is, the 'end of the society of Orders')

<sup>46</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 79.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 67, 72.

<sup>48</sup> Furet, in Baker, *The political culture of the old regime*, p. 380.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p. 378.

<sup>50</sup> *La Gauche*, p. 52. Tocqueville remarked, of eighteenth-century prosperity: 'It may seem that, with life filled with such satisfactions, the mind would turn away from the abstract sciences of man and society to concentrate more on small daily affairs. This is what we shall see all too much of today, but it is the opposite of what then happened.' Although Tocqueville is hardly a historian of the 'bourgeoisie', he was at least less dismissive of even the commercial classes of the eighteenth century than have been some of his successors. Quoted in R. R. Palmer (ed.), *The two Tocquevilles, father and son, on the coming of the French revolution* (Princeton, 1987), p. 155.

<sup>51</sup> For Barnave, *Dictionnaire*, pp. 206–14.

did represent the desires of the bourgeoisie and peasantry. It expressed their common animosity towards 'les privilégiés'. With these demands, similar to the 'catéchisme révolutionnaire' once denounced so scathingly by Furet, a decisive move towards the *état social* of democracy was effected. 'Tout l'ancien régime' collapsed and the society of individuals was born in the summer of '89.<sup>52</sup>

The civil equality thus established endured because, argues Furet quoting Quinet, 1789 merely rubber-stamped the changes already effected in civil society, seen as 'natural', that is, without human agency, whereas political changes were much more problematic. Quinet is praised for understanding that, if the revolution was novel, 'Ce n'est pas parce qu'elle doit changer la société, mais parce qu'elle doit mettre le peuple à la place du roi'.<sup>53</sup> This is presumably a political newness, though one may doubt if it could be accomplished without a profound social revolution. However, Furet even suggests that the 'causes' of the revolution were socio-economic but that 'its entire course took place on another level, as though totally disconnected with its origins'; this being the key level of politics and ideology.<sup>54</sup> Besides this odd, vulgar-Marxist division of history into 'levels', however, Furet also confuses the analysis further: he also maintains, strongly and specifically *against* Quinet, that *all* was to be changed, everything was to be made out of nothing, in that remarkable summer.<sup>55</sup>

If we can agree that the revolutionaries tried to revolutionize both government and society, as Furet argues here (while also having claimed that society has revolutionized itself, though being fairly discreet about the processes involved) the revolutionaries' failure to establish a government of liberty, when liberty was desired by all, and their success in founding a society of civil (but not social) equality, when this was detested by the king and by many nobles,<sup>56</sup> is not very adequately explained, unless society does indeed 'change itself'. To suggest that the fact that the revolutionaries 'remboursent en capital la plupart des possessions attenantes à l'état aristocratique antérieur'<sup>57</sup> reconciled the nobility to the new society is, besides its crude economic reductionism and its dubious accuracy, unpersuasive. (It also insults the nobility and their values.)

More convincing, perhaps, is Furet's more political interpretation: the idea that the revolutionaries' radical individualism, combined with the dogma of a unitary, absolutely sovereign representative assembly, was inherently unstable. As noted above, any moderation of this split between sovereign and individuals – mainly by the restriction of the franchise – played into the hands of the extremists by preserving inequality within the political sphere, thus permitting a democratic *surenchère*, propelled by the general, passionate, abstract commitment to *l'égalité*.<sup>58</sup> However, following Furet's own interpretation, this passion for equality cannot really be contained within a specifically political sphere, given its anti-aristocratic rationale. Moreover Furet now states that it also threatened bourgeois interests and property. So it was not just questions of government and liberty which were not solved: the relationship between 'civil' and 'real' equality grew more, not less problematic and, indeed, impelled the revolution forward: 'En rencontrant la question sociale la Révolution des Droits de l'homme a ouvert la voie à la surenchère des pauvres.' And the passion for equality was, Furet concludes, both the principle and the product of 'la guerre des classes'.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *La Révolution*, pp. 62, 73, 74, 75, 86.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p. 106; *Gauche*, pp. 53, 63.

<sup>54</sup> *Marx*, p. 25.

<sup>55</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 106.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p. 74, 82.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p. 106.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 107.

<sup>59</sup> F. Furet, introduction to *L'héritage de la révolution française* (Paris, 1988), pp. 29, 30. As is recognized in *L'héritage*, 'C'est dans l'écart entre la Déclaration des Droits et la division des classes qu'elle [la Révolution] tire, jusqu'au 9 Thermidor, les secrets de sa fuite en avant'. p. 27.

## V

Perhaps the concept of 'interests', often evoked by Furet, might have moderated the gap between the sovereign and the individual. However, Furet seems rather contradictory on interests, perhaps because these mediate, if often uneasily, between state and society. Indeed, the contradiction is built into a situation where the revolutionaries are torn between the dogma of a unitary sovereignty (so emphasized by Furet) and 'l'individualisme libéral', according to which 'l'élément constituant du pacte social est l'activité libre des hommes à la poursuite de leurs intérêts et de leur bonheur'.<sup>60</sup> At first emphasizing 1789's 'négation des intérêts' and the Constituent's disapproval of horizontal links between individuals – 'toutes les associations entre particuliers' – Furet hardly recognizes that just such associations flourished early in the Revolution<sup>61</sup> – 'sociétés des gens de lettres' founding news-papers, 'sociétés philanthropiques', partnerships to set up schools, new theatres, etc. Thus were new interest groups ('the press') formed – precisely those, we might add, borne by the powerful social forces discerned by Necker and other champions of the third estate. Yet Furet refers to 4 August as a night when 'le prosaïsme des intérêts se drapait dans l'idée d'un passé détestable et d'une société régénérée',<sup>62</sup> as if principles and ideology were a mask for material interests. Interests as the prose of idealism is an image borrowed from Marx, making interests the basis of 'real' history. But the relationships between interests and ideals – as well as ideas – are more complex than Furet's persistent suggestions of mere opposition.

However, Furet notes that the peasants' interests were sufficiently satisfied for their successors, even today, to recall the injustices of old-regime *féodalité*.<sup>63</sup> Moreover the 'bourgeois predominance' of the early revolution was manifested in 'la libération des intérêts' in the new regime of economic freedom. Now the Le Chapelier law, a short while previously seen as designed to prevent the formation of new associations, is portrayed as destroying 'la démocratie des intérêts corporatifs'. But *these* had been seen, with regard to Turgot's reform plans (enforced and quoted by the revolutionaries) as antiquated, privileged and monopolistic.<sup>64</sup> Now Furet seems to make democracy integral to the old regime's corporatist structure (and so hardly needing 'inventing') while 'interests' are hardly distinguished from 'privileges' (and, as such, are hardly modern). This ambivalence runs through Furet's work, and even if justified by the muddle of history, needs elucidation.<sup>65</sup> Certainly it is the radical individualism of the Le Chapelier law which is justifiably highlighted, directed against both corporate privileges and new associations which, it was feared, might resurrect them. But Le Chapelier opposed *all* associations in the name of individualism (and nation). So it is not clear if the Breton deputy's work was part of 'la libération des intérêts' or opposed to this – or if the key distinction is between individual interests (good) and group

<sup>60</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 96. Furet gives quotes which suggest that the question of interests is much more intriguing than we might imagine from his text, especially when entwined with privilege: 'Or le privilège extrait son bénéficiaire de la sphère publique de la Cité pour le définir par des intérêts particuliers qui l'en séparent en le plaçant hors de la citoyenneté.' It makes him an 'aristocrate' in Sieyès's view. *La Révolution*, p. 63. See also Necker's views, p. 67.

<sup>61</sup> *La Révolution*, pp. 86–8.

<sup>62</sup> *Dictionnaire*, p. 729.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* p. 632.

<sup>64</sup> *La Révolution*, pp. 87, 99, 38.

<sup>65</sup> I have attempted a first approach in a paper, 'The pursuit of interests in the French revolution', delivered at the Bicentenary Conference held at Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York, in October 1989.

interests (bad). Moreover, to repeat, modern interest groups *were* being formed. The national assembly was lobbied by merchants, manufacturers and colonists. The space between the absolute, collective sovereign (the assembly) and the isolated individual was being occupied by the offshoots of a vigorous civil society, colonizing the area left by the uprooting of the privileged corps of the old regime. Or, perhaps, the less elevated and more adaptable of these were transforming themselves into modern interest groups. The *tabula rasa* was not a vacuum. Moreover, neither was abstract rationalism so all-powerful: even Furet sees the new *départements* as a successful compromise between rationalism and empiricism. Like Quinet, he even seems to regret that in religious matters the revolutionaries, too influenced by Jansenism and Gallicanism, did not make a clean break, to replace catholicism with a new religion or to separate church and state to produce 'l'Etat démocratique sécularisé' only achieved in 1905. Furet, presumably, would not accept the fifty-year terror deemed necessary by Quinet to effect this break. As it was, the Vendée revealed the depth of the rift between French catholicism and French democracy. Here a *lack* of absolutism created the most deplorable of conflicts (though, of course, the Vendéens were partly driven by disappointed *interests* to rebel).<sup>66</sup>

Yet, if we return to 4 August, we see that Furet acclaims as 'extraordinairement moderne' precisely that absolute belief in the capacity of an assembly to change, by political will, the course of history.<sup>67</sup> This belief he usually describes as illusory. But since the national assembly did make history, its deputies presumably acted realistically in creating [*sic*] a society based on 'l'individu moderne, libre dans tout ce que ne lui défend pas la loi'.<sup>68</sup> This, in Furet's terms, was not illusory so the 'political illusion' of voluntarism was by no means absolute. One other form of political illusion diagnosed by Furet concerns the rhetoric of universal emancipation in 1789, similar to Marx's concept of the political realm of citizenship as illusory, compared to the real egoism of civil society; yet even Marx conceded that, in 1789, the universalism of the bourgeoisie was not wholly illusory; that its leaders did indeed champion the general interests of the subordinate classes against the old regime. The bourgeoisie ended its political exclusion and advanced many of its own socio-economic interests. The third form of political illusion – the anachronistic concepts of liberty and citizenship borrowed from antiquity – belong to 1793 rather than to 1789 (but, for Marx, performed a realistic and progressive function in the 1789 revolution, unlike the parody of 1789 in 1848). Since, for Marx, the class struggle was 'always political', he too would seem to suggest that in 1789 politics was not necessarily 'illusory' and, correspondingly, that the social and political emancipation of the bourgeoisie (and the partial emancipation of other groups) went together and that 'the bourgeoisie' was itself being formed in these political and social struggles.

But returning to the indisputably political realm, Furet surely underlines a lack of modernity when affirming, of the revolution, that 'son répertoire politique n'a jamais ouvert la moindre place à l'expression légale du désaccord, moins encore du conflit'.<sup>69</sup> This is damning for a revolution deemed to inaugurate democracy for most authorities would see a pluralistic right of opposition as essential, as with the *alternance* of power in France or as demanded by democratic movements today in eastern Europe. In fact, by now, it is not clear what is modern and/or democratic in French revolutionary political culture. For another point is that 'la Révolution ne connaît pas d'obstacles, elle n'a que des adversaires; en inventant la politique moderne, elle a peuplé l'univers d'intentions

<sup>66</sup> On the 'religious' element, *Dictionnaire*, pp. 561, 195; *La Révolution*, pp. 92, 95, 101.

<sup>67</sup> *Dictionnaire*, pp. 128–9.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p. 131.

<sup>69</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 147.

et de volontés'.<sup>70</sup> But did not the people blame Turgot's dearth on, in Furet's words, 'la méchanceté des hommes' rather than on 'la nature des choses'?<sup>71</sup> Certainly, voluntarism is a feature of revolutions but is it necessarily a sign of modernity? Perhaps only if it is both 'rational' and moderate. Furet is not content with analysing revolutionary culture in terms of elements which are 'new' combined more or less harmoniously, or even dialectically, with traces of the old. His pronouncements too often affirm the modernity of this culture, whereupon many of his most stimulating insights subvert such immoderate assertions. Moreover, he hardly analyses the reactionary and anti-democratic forces which remained active, as if to demonstrate their importance might seem to justify the illiberalism of even the liberals of 1789.<sup>72</sup> Today, it is rather too easy to forget the bitter opposition to the original rights of man.

Not all aggressiveness came from the proponents of change. Indeed Patrice Higonnet has recently underlined, and perhaps exaggerated, the conciliatory attitudes of many revolutionaries to noblemen; Marcel David has explored the concept of *fraternité* and likewise stresses conciliation. Nor was all opposition outlawed. Till August 1792 the press was free and often 'oppositional'. Both Michael Kennedy, on provincial Jacobin clubs, and C. J. Mitchell, on the Legislative assembly, show that real debates and real dissension flourished, despite obvious and grievous intimidation.<sup>73</sup> Deputies did have a certain autonomy, even if they were often made to regret having used it. Certainly war and terror negated the 'normal' development of democracy and crushed many 'interests' and interested viewpoints. But the intense thinking on the relationship between a new, more 'popular' politics and social problems – for example, Roederer's lectures in spring 1793 to the Lycée at Paris on the effects of universal suffrage on political, social and economic relations between rich and poor – has yet to be evaluated.<sup>74</sup> However, for Furet, the *vérité sociologique* of this primarily ideological period was a vast expansion of bureaucracy, an interest, semi-private in some respects (see Michel Bruguère), and which was to grow yet more strongly in the future. This, of course, undermines Furet's picture of a year II totally dominated by ideology.<sup>75</sup>

Furet also refers to interests newly formed in the terror, that of the purchasers of *biens nationaux* for example. Perhaps, however, thermidor was 'the truth of the revolution'. It inaugurated, Furet states enthusiastically, 'la République des intérêts'. But, surely, this was not created *ab initio*, nor by and for the benefit of some abstract 'society', but by and to the advantage of specific social groups and to the grave disadvantage of others.

It may, however, be more honest to argue that the terror, or the violation of the Convention on 2 June 1793, destroyed or suspended democracy, as for example Philippe Bénéton contends.<sup>76</sup> Robespierre, on 5 February 1794, posed democracy as a goal rather than an achievement, democracy being defined in a representative yet accountable form, as 'un état où le peuple souverain, guidé par des lois qui sont son ouvrage, fait par lui-même tout ce qu'il peut bien faire, et par des délégués tout ce qu'il

<sup>70</sup> *Dictionnaire*, p. 631.

<sup>71</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 38.

<sup>72</sup> Most recently underlined by Timothy Tackett, 'The revolutionary dynamic of the national assembly, 1789–1790', *American Historical Review*, xciv, 2 (1989), 271–301.

<sup>73</sup> P. Higonnet, *Class, ideology and the rights of nobles during the French revolution* (Oxford, 1981); M. David, *Fraternité et Révolution française* (Paris, 1987); Michael Kennedy, *The Jacobin clubs in the French revolution*, vol. 2: *The middle years* (Princeton, 1988); C. J. Mitchell, *The French Legislative Assembly of 1791* (Leiden, 1988).

<sup>74</sup> Archives nationales, 29 AP 90.

<sup>75</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 143, and Michel Bruguère, *Gestionnaires et profiteurs de la Révolution* (Paris, 1986).

<sup>76</sup> P. Bénéton, *Introduction à la politique moderne*, pp. 327 ff.

ne peut faire lui-même'.<sup>77</sup> Certainly the terror's relationship to 'democracy' is equivocal. Furet refers to 'l'idée du pouvoir absolu, héritée des rois de France et mis au service de la démocratie',<sup>78</sup> while Lucien Jaume provides the best analysis, showing that the Jacobins often affirmed the democratic credentials of their regime, rather than its provisional and exceptional nature.<sup>79</sup> But the contradiction between non-democratic means and ostensibly democratic ends was problematic in the extreme. We would need to be convinced of the real extent and genuine nature of political participation to be able to refer to the year II as 'democratic'. But a full evaluation of the political culture of the year II is still in process of elaboration.

## VI

With Napoleon, any idea of political freedom seems to desert Furet's concept of democracy. Quinet, who equated 18 *brumaire* with 2 June, noted that 'Là où le peuple règne, il y a démocratie, mais là où c'est un despote qui règne seul, ne me dites pas qu'il y a démocratie'.<sup>80</sup> According to Furet, Napoleon was a despot who, taking no account of liberty but 'enlightened', ruled absolutely, in accordance with a tradition bequeathed by the *ancien régime* but now made fully effective 'au service de la démocratie', in the name of the sovereign people and the general interest. Fundamentally anti-aristocratic (and therefore representing 'equality'), he pandered to the French appetite for *vanités* in a kitsch-Carolingian court. But he preserved (for a time) equality before the law, consolidating – as Furet and the cliché have it – the material gains of the revolution in a 'dictature révolutionnaire fondée non plus sur la vertu mais sur les intérêts', interests of a more or less 'bourgeois' kind: property, family, marriage, 'la femme à la maison, l'ordre dans la rue, les carrières ouvertes aux talents'. Moreover, here Furet explicitly recognizes that protecting interests does not always protect liberty: quite the reverse, it finds a 'tired acquiescence in servitude'. And, increasingly open to flattery and liable to corruption, yet exalting the abstract authority of the state, Napoleon's France is described in terms which make one wonder uneasily if Furet does not share Chateaubriand's view that the French have no real love of freedom.<sup>81</sup>

In invoking democracy here, Furet dangerously downgrades political freedom. Moreover his emphasis on the 'illusion of politics', by stressing the undoubtedly utopian nature of many revolutionary projects and their illiberal consequences, too easily justifies *obéissance* to authoritarian or autocratic regimes. Providing these pay lip-service to some of the shibboleths (or illusions?) of democracy – a notional sovereignty of the people – they can repress the real people's will. Like Bonaparte (and the Jacobins, whom however he mercilessly denounces), Furet here equates the sovereignty of the people with the sovereignty of the state, whereby all power comes from above. He thus undermines his own criticism of the Jacobins and their nineteenth-century apologists who used the terror (as an essential stage in the formation of the modern French state) to justify 'leur mépris du droit et des procédures formelles de la démocratie'.<sup>82</sup> Marx, too, is criticized for undervaluing 'formal', 'bourgeois', democracy. But Furet gives little attention to rights and declines to discuss the formal and legal conditions of democracy, thus disarming defenders of democratic liberties, a

<sup>77</sup> Robespierre in Poperen (ed.), *Textes choisis*, III, 113.

<sup>78</sup> *Dictionnaire*, p. 220 – on Napoleon, to whom the terror passed on this power inherited from the old regime. <sup>79</sup> L. Jaume, *Le discours jacobin* (Paris, 1989).

<sup>80</sup> *La Gauche*, p. 39.

<sup>81</sup> On Bonaparte, *Dictionnaire*, pp. 216–29.

<sup>82</sup> *Dictionnaire*, p. 583.

blow especially unwelcome to those who recognize how imperfectly such liberties have been enshrined in practice. Also, Furet's too-ready acceptance of Napoleon as ruling over 'des citoyens égaux' deprives citizenship of its actively political dimension, while the emphasis on a vague 'civil liberty' occludes other problems of inequality (social and economic as well as political – unless all were equally unfree), inequalities which are obstacles to a democracy which, to repeat Furet's initial definition, should *combine* civil equality and political liberty. Given the servile adulation of the emperor – which Furet does not hide – Benjamin Constant's championing of that 'intellectual equality' which comes with general (and genuine) political participation, might also have been mentioned.<sup>83</sup> For Constant, of course, it was precisely an excessive attention to private interest which allowed Bonaparte to establish his tyranny.

If, for Furet, political democracy is inherently utopian, this too may seem to justify its suspension or its definite postponement. Political democracy posits, Furet argues, individuals whose rights are enunciated, promising a respect and fulfilment difficult to deliver. Democracy draws political cheques on a society which refuses to honour them, certainly in the immediate future. This being so, Furet is surely obliged to consider carefully the socio-economic prerequisites for political democracy, while recognizing, as he does, that features such as universal suffrage have social *consequences* too. Revolutionaries such as Roederer and Condorcet conscientiously debated these problems but their ideas have not been fully explored or, at least, incorporated into general histories. This exploration would take one deep into areas of cultural history (relating to the press, education, literacy, leisure, sociability) not easily demarcated from the forbidden territory of social and economic history (the distribution of property for example).

In this light, Marxist insistence on probing the social basis – or context – of Jacobinism, Bonapartism or 'bourgeois democracy', though often clumsy, and hardly benevolently intended, is surely pertinent. I am not convinced that Furet's interpretation of the 1830 revolution as a bourgeois revolution, with the people as dupes, is much more sophisticated than Marx's – nor his treatment of the 'bourgeois monarchy' of Louis Philippe, or of 1848. After 1830, 'la liberté retrouvée' [*sic*] was accompanied by the confiscation of political rights by 'les plus riches'.<sup>84</sup> The democratic tradition descended the social scale, to the people, led by illiberal elements, demagogues such as Blanqui, combining Jacobin and Bonapartist traits. However, in Furet's book this French democratic tradition had never been very liberal.

Perhaps, now, it is the bourgeoisie which, parloously, guarantees liberalism. And, indeed, as 1830 approaches, Furet retrospectively emphasizes the bourgeois nature of 1789, even suggesting when writing of Napoleon III's economic achievements that 1789 had some capitalist content.<sup>85</sup> And, at last, with 1830, the bourgeoisie gets some definition, involving money and education – banking, industry, literature, the university and politics – perhaps linked, though this is not made explicit, by common liberal ideas. Moreover, again retrospectively, Furet remarks that the restoration period had given rise to 'une vie parlementaire riche et brillante', continued after 1830.<sup>86</sup> This suggests, but with no details provided, at least a modicum of political liberalism. Whether the period 1815–48 saw Tocqueville's transition from an 'aristocratic' to a 'bourgeois' parliamentary politics is never discussed. Yet the social terms are there; for the 1789 revolution, Furet now alleges, had aggravated the gulf

<sup>83</sup> Stephen Holmes, *Benjamin Constant and the making of modern liberalism* (New Haven, 1984), p. 39.

<sup>84</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 340.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* p. 451.

<sup>86</sup> Bourgeoisie, *La Révolution*, p. 320; political life, p. 325.

between aristocracy and bourgeoisie, contrary to the revisionist view which sees it (and Napoleon) as having consolidated a notability fusing landed and mobile wealth.<sup>87</sup> This *union manquée*, pronounced by Furet France's 'problème politique par excellence',<sup>88</sup> was no doubt linked to the other 'primary' problems which he variously cites – 'la crise de la représentation' and the gap between democratic promises and social reality. All these would seem to combine (somehow) to make liberalism weak in France, threatened from above (the aristocracy) and below (the people). These refused to play the parts allotted to them in Furet's anglophonic script.

The 1830 revolution, like Thermidor, sees the triumph of 'society', whose 'profound movement' has been invoked before (the reference to 'profundity' is a euphemistic way of saying that fundamental social transformations will get no real consideration).<sup>89</sup> Society should indeed have 'moved', called as it was from 1789 onwards to 'un développement irrésistible'<sup>90</sup> (though elsewhere society is declared hardly to have got beyond the stage attained in 1789!). Now, after 1830, we witness one of the many sporadic appearances of 'interests'. Government, actually taking a form similar to Marx's management committee of the bourgeoisie, was now seen by statesmen as secondary or epiphenomenal.<sup>91</sup> For Furet this shedding of the illusion of politics was a sign of maturity and is duly termed 'modern', though Napoleon's overbearing bureaucracy has also merited this epithet and its growing power been noted and deplored. But from 1830 the interests of the rich bourgeoisie prevailed against those of the nobility. These interests were also strongly affirmed against the people, despite money being for Furet 'ce grand égalisateur'.<sup>92</sup> For ideas of class struggle had deepened since the 'first' outburst in the 'red scare' of Babouvism. Strangely enough, these bourgeois interests are now viewed very moralistically by Furet, not perhaps from the perspective of the lower classes, delivered to the devil Blanqui, but from the viewpoint of the excluded middling bourgeoisie, now seen as the true hope of a moderate democracy.

Furet now states that since Rousseau and the revolution 'les intérêts particuliers sont les exclus de la vie publique'.<sup>93</sup> Yet this has been denied by his own statements on 1789–91; by his description of 1795–9 as 'la République des intérêts' and his relief that after the miseries of the terror, 'c'est l'heure des intérêts et des plaisirs'. For Furet, Napoleon replaced the regime of virtue by that of interests, while new interests had, despite everything, been created by the terror. Certainly the politics of the terror repressed many 'interests', but this itself had encouraged Furet to regard the blatant reappearance of interests as a sign of a return to normality, a stage towards modernity. Now, however, Guizot is portrayed as attempting to buy votes in the 'swamp' of private interests. Seemingly the bourgeoisie, or the richest of them, sinned by boasting of being rich. They should have silently pocketed their profits and done their political bribery less blatantly.<sup>94</sup>

Interests, then, is a crucial but undefined concept. It has to do a lot of work, but discreetly, both in France's history and in Furet's. That 'les principes de 1789 fondent toute une démocratie d'intérêts', is all the more intriguing for being totally undemonstrated.<sup>95</sup> Democracy might itself entail a democratization of interests, cutting some down to size, reducing the gap between demagogic promises and delivery, countering both the absolutism of the state and the atomizing individualism of civil society, preparing the soil for the successful growth of associations. Such a

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p. 290.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p. 337.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p. 241.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. p. 307.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p. 326.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p. 341.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p. 348.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. p. 356.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. p. 218.

democratization of interests, demanded in 1848, may have formed the basis of the third republic. Many historians attribute that regime's relative longevity to the relative satisfaction of a multitude of small interests (of school-teachers, government employees, small investors, inefficient peasants, etc.), interests which were not exclusively material, but were attached to status and to feelings of respectability and dignity, as well as involving a real measure of political liberty (of assembly, trades unions, the press). For any such interpretation to be illuminating, however, the concept of 'interests' needs to be clarified, especially in its mediating functions.

## VII

In his contribution to *La République du centre* (published in 1988, 'en cette fin du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, où ils terminent la Révolution...'), Furet remarks: 'La démocratie a tenu ses promesses matérielles: dans la France d'aujourd'hui, la vie est moins dure, le travail mieux payé, la subordination moins grande, les conditions du bonheur des individus meilleures que dans celles du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle ou du premier XX<sup>e</sup>. C'est un progrès que la société a passionnément voulu et qu'elle a gagné.'<sup>96</sup> Without disputing the facts, one may wonder how Furet, who scorns the holism of a Rousseau, who stresses the dangers of a unitary sovereign, and criticizes the Jacobins for invoking a unitary 'people', should refer so frequently to 'society' as 'wishing' something. The simple dualism state/society which underlies so much of Furet's work often serves to obscure the divisions of society. It may also disguise the ways in which certain institutions or spaces, more or less closely connected with, or belonging to, the state are penetrated, occupied or controlled by different social groups or forces, or indeed provide positions which are the target or spoils of social and political struggles. In the above quotation, it is far from clear that all major social forces, at all times, 'wished' the improvements catalogued. They were won in struggles between different social and political groups. Employers, rightly or wrongly, hardly 'wished' to give workers higher wages in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; the aristocracy, the church, or indeed the *patronat*, hardly wished to subvert hierarchy. That Jacobins, socialists, republicans, have often been unjust in struggles for equality and liberty, is evident (though according to whose standards?): they have often been misguided too, and their actions often counter-productive. Yet many of the ideals of the revolutionaries, from 1789 to 1871, though branded as 'godless', 'anarchic', 'licentious', 'unnatural', have since been accepted into 'normal' democracy. The separation of church and state, first proclaimed in 1795, repeated in 1871, and effected in 1905 with brutality, seems normal to Furet (though his extremely scathing and perhaps controversial comments on the French nineteenth-century catholic church, and his condemnation of socialist anticlericalism, as revealed in the 'private school' agitation of the 1980s, show old wounds not fully healed).

Still, even Furet regards the catechismic invocation of the rights of man as no substitute for political action to remedy the injustices and inequalities which remain, while his fellow-contributor Pierre Rosanvallon warns us not to forget the two hundred years of struggle to discover what these rights really mean or entail.<sup>97</sup> But, reacting justifiably against the glorification of revolution, against attributing mythic regenerative power to revolutionary acts which were often vindictive and atrocious, Furet sometimes goes too far in denigrating revolutionary idealism, underestimating revolutionary distress. Certainly we may *now* agree that peaceful change, a life as free

<sup>96</sup> F. Furet et al., *La République du centre* (Paris, 1988), p. 56.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p. 62; P. Rosanvallon, p. 141.

as possible from state interference and intrusive politics, is desirable. Yet we must also add that 'negative freedom', the freedom of the moderns, seems something which, in say 1819, was most readily available to the comfortably off. For them, politics was a noble, distinguished career of service. For the many, private life (as Marx pointed out in the *Manifesto*) was without dignity and, indeed, without privacy. Would it not have been a desirable 'negative freedom' for the lower classes *not* to have had to riot for food, go on strike for a decent wage or protest at their lack of dignity and prospects?

## VIII

It is in this context, perhaps over-rhetorical for some, that, finally, we consider the difficulties of proposing a coherent interpretation of the events of 1848. For 1848 presents a complex play of antagonistic but only partially symmetrical illusions. The piercing of one illusion is sometimes operated via other illusions, rather than by a direct perception of 'reality'. For Furet, the master-illusion, the belief that politics produces society, was held by the revolutionaries and attacked by Marx as the illusion that fraternity could overcome social antagonisms.<sup>98</sup> Marx displaced this with the idea of class-struggle, proved an illusion by modern social history. The right shared the illusion of the all-powerful nature of politics but combined it with the class-conflict illusion. They thought that property was under threat and that this threat could be defeated by strong government.

But Furet is not very clear on the nature of class or class conflict, either real or illusory. Though showing little interest in the history of popular protest, he notes that very strong 'class feelings', inherited from the old regime, were aggravated in the revolution, cutting off the *classe moyenne* from both the upper and lower classes. Since Furet has also noted the alienation between aristocracy and bourgeoisie as intensified by the revolution, class antagonism must, therefore, have been important in that revolution. The Babeuf 'red scare' marked the entry of communism into French public life and meant that henceforth the French bourgeoisie saw the terror, 'le spectre de la dissolution sociale', behind any popular demand.<sup>99</sup> On 1848, referring to 'la menace contre la propriété privée, inséparable du socialisme', and regarding socialism as by now an important component of politics, Furet describes class conflict as 'la vérité cachée' under the illusion of fraternity in February,<sup>100</sup> while the introduction of universal manhood suffrage opened the way to class struggle. However, though the defence of property produced the solidarity of all property-owners, from cottager to *châtelain*, and though this was a real interest, this unity was based on fear and was ephemeral: once property was saved from the red peril, conflicting interests resurfaced.<sup>101</sup>

Such discussions of interests, and references to the peasantry and petty bourgeoisie as having become 'interested' in politics since they had become property-owners (in the first revolution), are hardly different in kind from Marx's celebrated analyses of these complex events. And since Furet argues that from 1789 the promise of equality confronted with 'l'inégalité réelle' was one of the great fault-lines traversing French democracy<sup>102</sup> and, as such, a reality (or a real illusion confronted with a different sort

<sup>98</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 392.

<sup>99</sup> Furet on Babeuf, *Dictionnaire*, pp. 199–205; *La Révolution*, p. 341.

<sup>100</sup> Or the *idea* of class conflict, to be more precise: *Dictionnaire*, p. 398. What, for Furet, is the relationship between ideas and illusions?

<sup>101</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 403.

*Ibid.* p. 152.

of reality), it is difficult to see why those who fought for 'une République de l'égalité véritable', were engaged in pointless combat or deserve Furet's vituperation. Certainly, one may have illusions about one's interests, about their security, or about the best way to protect or advance them; but such points are not discussed by Furet. Also, claims to a 'real equality' can be advanced inappropriately (for example, prematurely: Furet, like Marx at times, insists on the underdeveloped character of the French working class in 1848). Or the 'political illusion' may take the form of a wish to speed up history, whether by a disarming fraternity or a bloody expropriation. Moreover many republicans in 1848 had the illusory belief that 'their' state would and could change society radically in their interests. Analysis can show that it was not their state.

Though Furet maintains that the *fact* that the insurgents of June were of the same sociological composition as their butchers was the 'vérité sociologique' of 1848, there were nevertheless, in his own terms, very real class interests in conflict. While Furet is shocked by Tocqueville reacting as a scared *propriétaire*, baying for blood like a vulgar bourgeois, Tocqueville and Furet agree that the 'right to work' negated the right to private property declared in 1789.<sup>103</sup> This view is shared by Jacques Donzelot, who also argues that universal suffrage, invested with so many unreasonable hopes by the democrats, exposed the huge gap between the equality of citizenship (itself real) and 'real' (that is, socio-economic) inequality, a gap which subsequent ideologies (of a 'solidarity' based on a 'scientific' analysis of society rather than a primarily emotive *fraternité*) tried to bridge, with some success, as is shown by the longevity of the third republic.<sup>104</sup> It should be noted too that Marx discussed the advent of universal suffrage in terms less crude than Furet alleges, recognizing how it could be exploited but also manipulated in an unequal society and how other, complementary rights (which had to be struggled for) were needed if the hitherto excluded classes were to gain full benefit.<sup>105</sup> And indeed Marx provides some brilliant insights into the significance of formally democratic concepts such as 'la liberté des délibérations' when proclaimed by the sovereign parliament of a class-divided society.<sup>106</sup>

If Marx is obsessed with finding 'la vérité sociologique derrière l'illusion politique' but merely repeats myths rather than discovers truths hidden from his contemporaries, Furet too seeks a reality behind the illusions of historical actors, including classes. But Furet's 'sociological truth' can only be a truth for sociology. For, if his strictures on Marx and praise of Tocqueville are to be taken literally, there can be no appeal from democracy (as part of an autonomous politics or even a self-contained 'universe') to sociology. Furet's whole *œuvre*, and certainly his powerful critique of Marx, has been directed against 'the social interpretation'. He has consistently denounced the 'reading off' of politics or ideology from an allegedly more fundamental, and perhaps determinant, economic and social history. But strangely, terms such as 'ideological' and 'illusory' are often used not only virtually interchangeably but also perjoratively. They refer to important forces in history but often imply misreadings of situations, with frequently disastrous results, forcing 'reality' to avenge and reassert itself. Whether this reality is sociological rather than, say, ideological is a difficult question. (We need a social history of illusions as well as a decent social history of ideology.) But the sociological nature of reality is often suggested by Furet as, more evidently, by Marx. Actually, Furet accuses Marx of the inverse sin: of deducing socio-economic groups or

<sup>103</sup> For Marx and Tocqueville, *La Révolution*, pp. 402 ff. Much of *Marx* is devoted to 1848.

<sup>104</sup> Jacques Donzelot, *L'invention du social. Essai sur le déclin des passions françaises* (Paris, 1986).

<sup>105</sup> Christopher Pierson, *Marxist theory and democratic politics* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 21–2.

<sup>106</sup> Marx-Engels, *Ecrits sur la Révolution française*, ed. C. Mainfroy (Paris, 1985), p. 114.

classes from their alleged political manifestations.<sup>107</sup> And, for ‘Marxist’ historians, the political conflict between Girondins and Montagnards impelled a search for those social groups which *had* to underpin this conflict.

If Marx deserves censure for seeing the second republic as only a bourgeois dictatorship – if this was his view – even Furet describes some of its most fundamental aspects (its fiscal policy, a welfare policy which he sees as no advance on 1791, its restriction on the franchise in 1850) as bourgeois. Moreover, Furet’s attempts to see democracy as the *vérité* of the second empire, though ingenious, are no more convincing than Marx’s confused attempts to base this state, seen as having an autonomy which was both illusory and real, on either bourgeois or peasant foundations, or as existing in a gap between a bourgeoisie too exhausted to rule and a proletariat as yet too puny. For Furet, Napoleon III compensated for his confiscation of political liberty by extending economic freedom. The third republic was ‘the political form, finally discovered, of a consensus between the bourgeois, the petit bourgeois and the peasant’<sup>108</sup> (as well as between liberalism, reason, history, material and spiritual progress, science, republicanism and representative government). This left only the clericals, royalists and socialists permanently or provisionally excluded.

Was democracy, then, the ‘reason of history’, of modern French history, the often unintended beneficiary of all struggles and upheavals, the result of some enormous cancelling-out of illusions, with capitalism – ‘l’économie de marché, instrument puissant d’émancipation’<sup>109</sup> – democracy’s equivalent in the economic sphere? If, according to Quinet and Jules Ferry, a form of *social* democracy prevailed since 1789 (though excluding most workers and many peasants), now, in the 1880s, political democracy was added, establishing itself via frequent elections by universal suffrage. This had social consequences (‘la démocratie comme une irrésistible force d’intégration en marche’),<sup>110</sup> as well perhaps as socio-economic preconditions. Though ‘the working class’ was still out in the cold, by the 1980s the P.C.F.’s last-ditch determination to keep them there had obviously failed.

Perhaps the present consensus is itself illusory. Interests may prove only an illusory refuge rather than a reassuring reality. The definition of ‘reality’ may still be the never-definitively won prize of specifically political struggles, yet must surely contrive to contain the maximum of society too. Donzelot’s ‘decline of political passions’, the *bien-être* of most French men and women – these may perhaps be measured objectively by *sondages* and political and sociological surveys. But a history of France such as Furet’s, often proclaiming the death of the revolution only to resuscitate it, pronouncing the demise of many illusions yet perhaps never killing the propensity to resurrect them, or to create anew, does not necessarily prove that French political history is at an end!

## IX

Ironically, it is often those who most favour, and perhaps also those who most benefit from, an *economic* system, namely capitalism, who now most stridently defend ‘political’ democracy. It is they who rejoice when *society* is homogenized according to capitalist values, often perversely increasing the power of the state in order to promote and to impose such values. State and society are to be ‘harmonized’, with the state ultimately condemned to colonization by those forces of civil society endowed with economic muscle (it being inevitable that other forms of power – the media for example – are

<sup>107</sup> *Marx*, pp. 73, 83, etc.

<sup>108</sup> *La République du centre*, p. 63.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.* p. 83.

<sup>110</sup> *La Révolution*, p. 503.

already 'in tune' or are in the process of being subdued).<sup>111</sup> Many modern socialists argue for the maintenance of the distinction between society and the state, with a pluralistic civil society, composed of different groups with varied values, protected and sheltered by an accountable but autonomous state. While rejecting earlier ideas of the withering away of the state as harmful as well as impractical, this new vision is also, perhaps, utopian. It certainly provides no key as to how 'autonomous' the state should be. Nor does it suggest that 'the autonomy of the state' is any clearer than formulae referring to economic 'determination in the last instance'. It is equally unclear as to how, in civil society, the most powerful groups can be prevented from overwhelming the most modest ones.<sup>112</sup> How, moreover, can political apathy be countered so as to prevent an all-too-'modern liberty' allowing the confiscation of political freedom more insidiously but also perhaps more completely than under most previous regimes?

Modern works on democracy often begin by stating that a form of government so generally viewed with favour lends itself to a banal treatment. But at least some of these works belie this pessimism by showing how incomplete our typical understanding of democracy is and how incompletely our hitherto rather inexplicit ideas of democracy are embodied in 'reality'. Furet's *œuvre* enlarges our knowledge of the troubled history of 'democracy', but mainly by showing how often it has been invoked and how partially it has been practised.

<sup>111</sup> Such points are not, of course, original. In *La République du centre*, Furet is clearly concerned at the lack of ideas and principles, the absence of inspiring projects, in modern French politics. Philippe Bénéton asks: 'L'invasion des intérêts privés dans le public n'est-elle pas une forme de corruption du régime démo-libéral? Et la représentation utilitariste de la politique en se mettant en quelque sorte au diapason du réel n'aggrave-t-elle pas cette corruption?' Markets do not guarantee freedom; moral concerns cannot – or should not – be entirely banished from politics, *Introduction à la politique moderne*, p. 190.

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, for these themes, John Keane, *Democracy and civil society* (London, 1988).