**The Execution of Louis XVI and the End of the French Monarchy**

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William Doyle discusses traditional and revisionist interpretations of the downfall of the Kings of France, arguing that notions of a 'desacralised monarchy' are inadequate to explain what happened.

The morning of 21 January 1793 was raw and foggy in Paris. Although there was no traffic on the streets, it took a solitary coach one and a half hours to trundle the two miles from the medieval keep of the Temple, in the working east end of the city, to the newest and largest of its squares, in the spacious west end, beyond the Tuileries gardens. In the centre of the square stood a huge empty pedestal, which until the previous August had supported a proud equestrian statue of Louis XV. The square had been named after him. But on 11 August 1792 this statue had been torn down, and in the weeks that followed a systematic attempt had been made to destroy every visible or legible reminder of kings. This was the aftermath of the Revolution of 10 August, the Republican Revolution, in which Louis XV's grandson, and the throne he occupied, had been overthrown. It was that grandson who rode in the slow-moving carriage on that bleak morning five months later, murmuring prayers. Louis XVI, condemned after a trial before the elected representatives of the French Nation, was going to his execution. A guillotine now stood next to the vandalised pedestal in what was now called the Place de la Revolution. It was here, watched by 20,000 of his former subjects, that Louis XVI met his end.

Nobody was unaware of how momentous this was. What to do with the former king had been the first great political issue confronting the Convention which had ruled France since 21 September 1792. When it was decided to try 'Louis Capet' for crimes against the Nation the deputies spent days agonising over whether they had the authority to kill him, and whether they should use it. In subjecting the Lord's Anointed to the supreme penalty, they thought they would be ending monarchy in France forever. In the event, it was to be only eleven years before Napoleon would crown himself; and subsequently both Louis XVI's brothers and then one of his cousins would be kings after him. But none of them sat on the same throne. Only Charles X among them believed that he ruled by divine right, and after six years his subjects brusquely undeceived him. Nineteenth century French monarchs ruled on sufferance. They owed their thrones either to brute force or the consent of their compatriots. In this sense the regicides of 1793 really had destroyed something forever. When the guillotine blade fell at 10.22 that morning a mystique was destroyed. Monarchy had been desecrated, desacralised.

But how had this come about? The question began to be asked almost before Louis XVI's headless corpse was cold. How could the French, the most monarchical of people, have turned so suddenly against a ruler whom they had proclaimed, as recently as 1789, the 'Restorer of French Liberty'? Royalists in general chose to believe that they had not turned against him at all. The whole Revolution, they believed, had not been the work of the true and loyal people of France, but a conspiracy of malign and nihilistic intellectuals dedicated to the destruction of religion, monarchy, and the social order itself. By 1797 various versions of this conspiracy theory had crystallised into the claims of a best-selling book now forgotten but tremendously influential throughout the nineteenth century: the Abbe Barruel's Memoirs to Serve for the History of Jacobinism. A foe of the Enlightenment for many years before 1789, Barruel now had something concrete to blame it for – the Revolution. A wicked clutch of godless writers had worked over the eighteenth century to subvert first Christianity and then monarchy. Their followers had plotted in the secrecy of masonic lodges to achieve the same end, and in 1789 they had transmuted themselves into Jacobin clubs. These clubs had consistently attacked the monarchy and its powers, and stirred up the Parisian rabble to do the same throughout the early revolutionary years, eventually forcing the king into the ill-fated flight to Varennes. In the manifesto he unwisely left behind on that occasion, and which he wrote himself, the king explicitly blamed the Jacobins for what had gone wrong in France. Barruel had no doubt about it either. In his view, the overthrow of the monarchy only 14 months after the dismal return from Varennes was the culmination of a long-laid plot.

**Enlightenment and Revolution**

It was not necessary to believe in this full conspiracy theory to accept that the downfall of the monarchy was the result of the Enlightenment. Right from the start, the revolutionaries openly proclaimed their allegiance to the values of this great eighteenth-century movement of ideas. When in 1791 they established the Pantheon, a temple for the burial of the nation's great men, the first body to be deposited there was that of Voltaire; and Rousseau followed him in 1794. The writers of the Enlightenment had accepted as an article of faith that nothing should be beyond rational criticism; and although they expressed little direct hostility to either Louis XV or Louis XVI (and Voltaire, in fact, was a vocal supporter of monarchical authority) they could be said to have undermined it in other ways. By their elaboration of a distinction between monarchy (government by one, according to law) and despotism (arbitrary government by one, according to no law) they steadily discredited the absolute monarchy perfected by Louis XIV. And by constantly attacking the Church and established religion, they inexorably eroded the divine right justification for monarchical authority. The only criterion for accepting or rejecting monarchy, they seemed to imply, was simply whether it was useful or not to its subjects.

And for Jacobins, as well as for historians who wrote in the Jacobin tradition down to the middle of our own century, this was the real reason why Louis XVI lost his bead. He had ceased to be useful to his compatriots. The Nation, not the king, was now the sovereign authority. That was the very essence of the Revolution in constitutional terms. But, reduced to the status of paid servant of his former subjects, the king .had seemed bent from the start on resisting or obstructing the reforms brought in by the National Assembly. The indictment brought against him at his trial listed counter-revolutionary acts going back to June 1789. Such an incorrigible record seemed to show that no king could reconcile himself to the regeneration of the country which the revolutionaries were attempting; or as Saint-Just put it, no king could reign innocently. Free people were better off without them. The pity was that the French had taken so long, tolerating three years of royal obstinacy and intrigue, before recognising the truth.

**Modern Interpretations**

Forming part as it did of the 'classic' interpretation of the Revolution which was reduced to rubble by the 'revisionist' criticism of the 1960s and 70s, it was inevitable that this version of' the monarchy's downfall should have failed to satisfy more recent historians. In a sense, they have gone back to interpreting the Revolution, and the downfall of the monarchy that came with it, as the product of longer-term developments in the outlook of the French. But instead of focusing on the relatively narrow intellectual perspectives of the Enlightenment, recent historiography has widened its view to take in the whole cultural world of the eighteenth century. In that context, the eventual downfall of the monarchy is explained by a loss of reverence for the crown and those who wore it; or, to return to a term used at the beginning of this article, the monarchy became desacralised (losing its sacred associations).

The most christian king of France, the argument goes, had traditionally been a semi-divine figure. With saintly blood (that of St. Louis – King Louis IX) in his veins, anointed with the Holy Oil of Clovis, he was God's image and representative on earth. He was responsible for the exercise of his power to nobody on earth; and reputedly he enjoyed the miraculous power of being able by the touch of his hand to cure the disfiguring disease Scrofula. All these powers and attributes continued to be claimed for both Louis XV and Louis XVI throughout the eighteenth century; but (so runs the argument) fewer and fewer people any longer believed in them. Otherwise, how could the French have come so readily to accept the overthrow and execution of Louis XVI?

**The Role of Jansenism**

Apart from this final act of desacralisation itself, what evidence is offered for the existence of such a longer-term process? There are three broad types. First comes the general bruising which royal authority experienced during the constitutional conflicts of the eighteenth century. There is nothing new in the argument that, after the uncontested rule of Louis XIV, the reigns of his two successors were marked by increasingly vocal defiance of royal authority on the part of the magistrates of the sovereign law courts, the parlements. But unprecedented emphasis is now being placed on the role of Jansenism in these conflicts. Determined to resist the imposition of the bull Unigenitus (a general condemnation of Jansenist religious beliefs issued by the Pope at Louis XIV's request in 1713) as a. law of church and state, a determined minority of Jansenists worked to involve the parlement of Paris in their quarrel. Not only did they succeed in doing so, thus provoking increasingly acrimonious jurisdictional and constitutional clashes; they also elaborated a range of arguments critical of royal authority which the parlement echoed and diffused in its remonstrances. Hence by the time the king and his chancellor, Maupeou, attempted to reassert royal authority in 1771 by crushing and remodelling the parlements, they found themselves denounced as despots and enemies of French liberties. While the writers of the Enlightenment (Voltaire excepted) wavered uncertainly in the face of Maupeou's onslaught, Jansenists deployed a language (or 'discourse', as many historians now prefer to say) of subjects' rights against the crown which would resurface only a few years later in the crisis which precipitated the Revolution. And so religious zealots, men who hated the Enlightenment and all it stood for, had far more to do with under- mining respect for divine-right monarchy than anti-clerical philosophers.

**Subversive Talk**

As further evidence of the dwindling respect of the king's subjects for his authority, a second type of evidence is cited – mauvais discours, or subversive talk. When, after a half-crazed domestic servant, Robert-Francois Damiens, stabbed Louis XV with a penknife in 1757 (evidence in itself, surely, of scant respect for the royal person), the police mounted a campaign to find any accomplices or other suspicious characters. They found no accomplices, but plenty of reports of loose and disrespectful talk about the king, the scandal of his private life, and his oppression of God-fearing subjects like Jansenists, denied the last rites of the Church because they rejected Unigenitus. People were now seemingly unafraid to voice critical opinions of royal and ministerial conduct, or rather what they saw as misconduct. Their grumblings were never silenced again.

It has to be said that, in terms of his private life at least, Louis XV gave them plenty to grumble about. Mad about hunting and pleasure, he worked through a lifelong series of mistresses, some of whom he appeared to allow to dominate policy-making and the appointment and dismissal of ministers. As early as 1739 he stopped touching for Scrofula because he believed that to do so in the sinful state in which he lived would be sacrilegious. And this was the monarch who allowed his bishops to deny absolution to saintly Jansenists!

**Subversive Writings**

But how did ordinary people learn so much about their monarch's private life? This brings us to the third body of evidence for desacralisation, the libelles. Close in meaning to the English word libel, the word libelle meant scandal-sheet. The importance of this form of sensation-pedalling has been brought to light over the past 30 years by the work of Robert Darnton. His studies of the 'Literary Underground' have revealed a seething world of gossip, scandal, pornography and what would pass in any language as libel, all peddled by professional gutter-journalists determined to spread any scrap of titillating gossip, true or false, about low goings-on in high places. Louis XV and his increasingly depraved tastes, certainly gave them enough material. But by the time he died, the appetite for such reporting, and the channels for diffusing it, had expanded so much that even his grandson and successor, whose personal life was blameless, was routinely lampooned. His foreign queen, Marie Antoinette, guilty of nothing more than silly talk and extravagant spending, was treated far worse and accused of every sort of sexual depravity. Some of these tales were brought up at her trial in October 1793, when many were obviously prepared to believe them. In other words, the reputation of the monarchy (a familiar enough story in our own times) had been ruined by the equivalent of a malevolent press, less interested in the truth than in giving readers titillating gossip. Discredited both politically and personally, the rulers of France should scarcely have been surprised that their subjects spoke of them so disrespectfully. Nor should Louis XVI and his queen have found unexpected the personal tragedy that engulfed them both in 1793.

**Desacralising desacralisation**

All these arguments have been persuasively advanced on the basis of a wealth of archival scholarship. That does not mean that we should accept them uncritically, or indeed at all, unless the 'desacralists' can convincingly answer a number of questions that ought to occur to anyone with some knowledge of French history.

First, how 'sacralised' had the monarchy ever been in the minds of ordinary French people? How many knew anything of the learned arguments and legal definitions which latter-day scholars find so impressive? It sometimes seems as if historians brought up in republics (whether American or French) expect too much of those born as subjects of monarchs, who can accept a status quo while knowing nothing of how learned men justify it. Subjects can also tolerate, join in, and even welcome a level of discussion of the royal family's private life which poses no necessary threat to the institution of monarchy. There is plenty of evidence, in fact, of both mauvais discours and libelles detailing the private depravities of French kings in previous centuries. And if Henry III's preference for young men brought censure in the 1570s and '80s, his successor's exploits with women, every bit as spectacular as Louis XV's, seem to have moved many of his subjects to admiration. Even under Louis XIV, malcontents grumbled openly about royal extravagance, warmongering, religious persecution, and the king's subjection to the women in his life. Nor was assassination anything new in French history. It cost Henry III his life, and Henry IV too, after a number of failed attempts. It is not, indeed, obvious that assassination should be regarded as any evidence at all of disenchantment with a monarchy. Leaving as idle the fact that assassins are often lone obsessives, those who try to kill kings normally do so not because they have lost faith in monarchy. Quite the reverse: in their eyes the king must die because he has not lived up to what his office demands. He is perceived as having broken in some way the rules of the institution – which is more important, and much more durable, than the transient individuals who happen to embody it.

None of this is to say, on the other hand, that the subjects of Louis XV and Louis XVI had no reverence for or belief in their sovereigns. When Louis XV fell dangerously ill at Metz in 1744 there were kingdom-wide prayers for his recovery. The fact that he had by then stopped touching for Scrofula had clearly not damaged him. In a curious way it showed respect for religious values. And if a string of military defeats, religious misjudgements and finally his all-out attack on the parlernents discredited Louis XV, the accession of his grandson in 1774 was greeted with rapture, and at his coronation the next year he touched 2,400 Scrofula sufferers. The personal popularity of Louis XVI, libelles notwithstanding, lasted until at least September 1789. Most of what went wrong until then was blamed upon his wicked, despotic, deceiving ministers – or, later, upon his Austrian wife. Indeed, as his blood streamed through the floorboards of the scaffold on 21 January 1793 people rushed forward to dip their handkerchiefs in the mystical fluid while others reproached them for sacrilege. Clearly, Louis XVI still had the capacity to inspire a reverence that was at least semi-religious, right to the end.

**Contingencies, not culture**

In the light of these doubts, perhaps we should ask in conclusion whether we even need the idea of desacralisation of the monarchy to explain the execution of Louis XVI? There were three and a half very eventful years between the National Assembly's proclaiming him Restorer of French Liberty in 1789 and his execution at the hands of the Convention. Nobody in 1789 foresaw, much less intended, that the Revolution should lead to this. The initial aim of the revolutionaries was to replace an absolute monarchy with a constitutional one. Nor is there much convincing evidence that the king sought to resist this process until his conscience was challenged by the split over the organisation of the Church in the winter of 1790-1. It was what Louis XVI saw as the Revolution's attack on religion which led to the flight to Varennes – and that in turn which triggered a logic which brought war and the downfall of a monarch seen to be in league with the enemy. This conventionally pious king could not accept what he saw as the desacralisation not of his own monarchy, but of the Church. But the origins of that are a rather different historical problem.

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