The Power of the Masses

by Arthur Ghins

French liberalism, which first emerged during the Restoration, focused not only on individual rights: it also shaped the history of the mass as a subjugated political entity.

Reviewed: Florence Hulak, *L'histoire libérale de la modernité. Race, nation, classe*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2023, 336 pp., €18.

In recent years, books supporting or opposing liberalism have proliferated on both sides of the Atlantic. In her rich and dense book (The Liberal History of Modernity. Race, Nation, Class), Florence Hulak rejects binary interpretations and simplistic approaches to a question that is rarely asked: what vision of history underpinned political liberalism at its inception, and what has been its legacy?

The subjects of history: from mass to class

The hero of Florence Hulak's book is the liberal historian Augustin Thierry, author of studies that are now largely forgotten, such as *Lettres sur l'histoire de France* (Letters on the History of France), published in 1827, two years after Charles X revived the tradition of coronation. The ultra-royalists sought to restore a social order whose origins they traced back to a romanticized vision of the Middle Ages. For them, freedom was an abstract pipe dream born of the historical aberration that was the Revolution. Thierry thus set himself the challenge of revisiting the history of the medieval communes of the eleventh and twelfth centuries to identify the premises of

a history of freedom that would culminate in 1789. Should he succeed, the ultra-royalist argument would run out of steam.

In Thierry's early writings (1817 to 1827), the medieval commune became the setting for a struggle for independence from ecclesiastical and royal domination. To that end, Thierry revisited and subverted the discourse developed in the 18th century on the "war of races." The term "race," which may surprise contemporary readers, refers in Antoine Thierry's work not to biological essentialism, but to the idea of a "collective defined by the genealogy of its struggles" (p. 39). In his writings, the commoners' race must emancipate itself from the economic and political domination exercised by the feudal race. The author explains that Thierry also describes this dominated race as a 'mass.' Through his writings, he seeks to establish a political subject of history, with its own identity and capacity for action: the defeated mass, made up of individuals without privileged titles, who defend an original right to freedom against the dominant classes, and whose struggle, although historically waged by a particular group, has universal appeal. This is a *liberal* history of modernity, in that it makes the destruction of obstacles to freedom its primary objective.

As well as a subject of history, the mass was also an *object* of history. The author gives a compelling account of how Thierry, through his critical work on the archives, revealed that the struggles for freedom were missing from the official annals, which were, however, full of information on the deeds and actions of the ecclesiastical and seigneurial authorities. Political domination thus went hand in hand with "epistemic domination" (p. 42), and the historian's job was to restore historical truth *from the point of view of the silenced losers*. Thierry's readers in 1820s France could then see themselves as constituting a genuine political subject, and feel called upon to resume the earlier struggles for freedom. In this way, Thierry "endowed political liberalism with a theory of history that it had lacked" (p. 40).

The book is divided into three chapters. The first one shows the historical role that Thierry gave to the mass. The second chapter takes a closer look at Guizot and Michelet, who replaced the mass with the idea of the "nation" as a subject of history. While in Thierry's early writings the emancipation of the communes paved the way for establishing a subject of history that was independent of the state, for Guizot the emancipation of municipalities marked the coming alliance between the bourgeoisie and the royal power, which facilitated the advent of the modern nation. Within this national union, the mass lost its status as autonomous actor of history. The meritocratic

bourgeoisie separated itself from the mass to become the driving force of civil society, while historical knowledge was used to serve the meritocratic system. Michelet, for his part, sought to free the nation from its bourgeois nature by anchoring it in the peasantry, who inhabited the same territory.

Although they reconstructed the idea of the subject-object of history through the idea of the nation, Hulak considers that Guizot and Michelet failed to achieve its unity. In Guizot's nation, Thierry's original mass is torn between the bourgeoisie and the people. In Michelet's work, the peasants oppose the workers. The second failure is that, in both Guizot and Thierry, the critical function of the history of the mass is obscured by narratives that seek to legitimize the state as the figurehead of national unity.

Marx, who is the subject of the third and final chapter, offers a temporary solution to these impasses, by returning to the earlier Thierry, whom he describes as the "father of the 'class struggle'." Behind the mass as Thierry understands it, Marx uncovers the bourgeoisie, before replacing it with the proletariat as the political subject of history. Like Thierry's liberal counter-history, Marxist counter-history formulates its critique from the point of view of the oppressed. For Hulak, this is "Marx's major debt to bourgeois historians of the class struggle" (p. 258). The universality of the struggle of the mass was now associated with the proletariat, which, if it must impose a transitional phase of dictatorship, is ultimately destined to abolish itself as a class. The national reconciliation of the liberals was thus transformed by Marx into the abolition of all classes.

The book succeeds in avoiding the common pitfall of treating the history of political doctrines in isolation. We are once again reminded of Marx's debt to the conceptual frameworks established by French liberals. The study of liberal visions of history also reveals the extent to which these were initially permeable to ideas that were a priori exogenous, such as those of Saint-Simon, who would later be associated with socialism and with whom Thierry collaborated in the 1810s.

The author skilfully demonstrates how, after 1848, Marx proceeded to critique his own earlier historical work, which argued that the bourgeois revolution of 1789 had paved the way for the proletarian revolution. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), Marx observes by contrast how the workers' uprising of June 1848 led to the establishment of a bourgeois state under Napoleon III. According to Hulak, however, this text continued to uphold the possibility of a political subject of history constructed through criticism. It was to this end that Marx reinvested the concept of

"mass," contrasting it with that of "class." The mass henceforth referred to the peasantry and the *lumpenproletariat*, both deprived of collective demands by a bureaucratic state that sought to convert these into individual requests. To enable this mass to re-emerge as a class in the true sense of the word, endowed with the capacity for emancipation, Marx called on urban workers *and* peasants, who were not part of the proletariat in its early history, to recognize their common social interest. Understanding the process that led to their collective alienation then serves as a prelude to the "formation of internal solidarity," which was to be the driving force behind the rebuilding of the state.

An absence: the emergence of representative government

We might wonder whether the book should have been called "Liberal Histories of Modernity" rather than "The Liberal History of Modernity". The author is keen to present the earlier Thierry (1817–1827) as the primary source of a liberal narrative, the subject of which was then reconfigured, first by Guizot and Michelet under the July Monarchy, and then by Marx around the events of 1848. Mass, nation, and class are thus conceptually linked, but is the sequence also chronological? We know that Thierry was anxious to present himself as a pioneer. Nevertheless, Guizot developed his vision of history from 1820, following his dismissal from the Council of State by the ultra-royalists[1]. At the end of that year, Thierry published ten letters on the history of France in the *Courrier Français* weekly newspaper. The original, expanded edition of the *Lettres* was not published until 1827.

Furthermore, in 1818 another liberal account of modernity was published posthumously: *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution* by Madame de Staël, who is conspicuously absent from this book. Granted, there is no historical method as such to be found in Staël's work. Although she had limited interest in the role of medieval communes, her intention was similar to that of Thierry and Guizot. In Madame de Staël's view, it was the enlightened class of the nation—the one that flourished alongside freedom of thought in the wake of the reform—that assumed the role of the subject of history. It was the movement of ideas, not armed struggle within the communes, that led to the Revolution. Just as certain analysts of French liberalism

[1] Guizot gave his lectures on the *History of the Origins of Representative Government in Europe* between 1820 and 1822.

have identified several doctrinal currents at its heart, it is thus possible to argue that there have been, since the Second Restoration, competing visions of the liberal history of modernity, which overlap while contradicting each other, and whose multiple ramifications deserve to be explored.

If these histories had been linked, they may have revealed a striking aspect of Thierry's historical reflections in the 1820s: his hostility towards the emergence of representative government, which Guizot and Madame de Staël celebrated. For the latter, the fight for freedom was a struggle for the right to express one's opinion in the face of absolutism. The representative system reconciled monarchy with the principle of discussion embodied in a parliament elected by the nation. Guizot drew similar conclusions, depicting representative government as a synthesis of the principle of free examination inherited from the Reformation and the movement towards state centralization, with an emphasis on the latter.

In 1829, in a revised second edition of *Letters on the History of France*, Thierry took the opposite view to these accounts in a new, scathing letter "on the history of national assemblies." He urged his readers to guard themselves against the "prestige" enjoyed by the "constitutional regime" of the Restoration.[2] This was followed by a reinterpretation of the Estates General as the culmination point of a process initiated by the central authority to strengthen its rule under the pretext of introducing consultative methods. Political representation based on elections was thus introduced as a deplorable substitute for what Thierry described as the original form of political power, namely "active participation in municipal sovereignty."[3] This explains why libertarian communist theorists took an interest in Thierry. In Kropotkin's view, Thierry cast a light on the confiscation of municipal independence by a central power under the pretext of establishing "representative government."[4]

Bearing this point in mind, it is possible to argue that Thierry's liberal view of history had several socialist posterities. Whereas Marx drew on it to develop the role of class and, later, of the mass, always with a centralized state as a backdrop (as Hulak shows), Kropotkin used it to chart a trajectory leading from the medieval commune to

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[2] Augustin Thierry, *Lettres sur l'histoire de France*, 2nd edition (Paris, 1829), p. 507: "The fact that this large section of the population, now referred to as the middle class, greatly valued the right to participate in government through national representation does not mean that it had always thought, hoped, or felt this way. In centuries past, there could have been, and indeed there was, a completely different way for it to exercise its rights and obtain political guarantees."

[3] *Ibid*., p. 532.

[4] See the articles « La Commune » and « Le gouvernement représentatif » in Peter Kropotkin, *Paroles d'un révolté*, ed. Élisée Reclus (Paris, 1885), pp. 105-118 and 169-212.

the Paris Commune. At the same time, liberals, first under the Second Empire and then under the Third Republic, continued to make the defense of "representative government," sometimes referred to as "liberal democracy," the core of their political program, against all forms of authoritarian democracy (Caesarism, Boulangism) or socialist democracy. The administrative decentralization they were calling for was then only a faint echo of the communal autonomy theorized by Thierry.

Neoliberalism versus social critique

Florence Hulak's book actually presents two liberal histories of modernity. The first began with Thierry, before being reworked by Guizot, Michelet, and Marx. But the author also refers to a "second liberal history of modernity," which began with Tocqueville and led to "neoliberalism." Guizot viewed the centralizing state as an agent promoting synthesis between different social groups throughout history. For Tocqueville, centralization was the sole expression of state coercion, whose overarching rationality ultimately grinds society down to a dust of conflicting interests. It is regrettable that this interpretation does not take into account the differences between the view of history developed in *Democracy in America* (1835-1840) and that presented in *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856). The former stands as a critique of the capacity-based order of the July Monarchy. The latter sought to understand the underlying reasons for the advent of the Second Empire. Between the two, the political context changed.

However, the key point lies elsewhere. The author believes that this second liberal view of history, expounded by Hayek in the twentieth century, has obscured the first, retaining only the idea of an obstacle to progress while discarding that of a collective subject of history fighting for freedom. This erasure of the first liberal history has led to a clash between neoliberalism and social critique, with striking consequences. This opposition means that social critique unconsciously reproduces the first liberal vision of history in a new form. The problem is not that, in doing so, critical the continues to adopt the perspective of the oppressed (which takes on new forms beyond the proletariat, such as that of the "subaltern" in subaltern studies) as the basis for criticism. What rightly worries Hulak is that this critique does not seem to have dissociated itself from the idea—which inspired the first liberal history—that the oppressed enjoy direct and privileged access to the truth. What was lost during the twentieth century was the idea of a self-critical view of history. This is the idea that

Marx developed in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, and which the author calls on social critique to reclaim.

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