



The Deaths of Louis XVI: Regicide and the French Political Imagination by Susan Dunn

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BOOK REVIEW

The Deaths of Louis XVI; Regicide and the French Political Imagination. By Susan Dunn. Foreword by Conor Cruise O'Brien. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1994. 178 pp. \$29.95.

This book has greater ambitions than its title suggests. The execution of Louis XVI on 21 January 1793, its specific treatment (his various "deaths") in the works of such writers as Michelet, Victor Hugo, and Albert Camus, serves mainly as a point of departure for discussion of such large issues as revolutionary justice, politics and ethics, idealistic ends and violent means. Throughout is the underlying assumption that the regicide, charged with multiple layers of meaning and woven into French historical narratives and political mythologies, has occupied a critical place in French intellectual history and has shaped France's political and social realities ever since. Both in the Foreword by O'Brien and in Dunn's text, we find references to such metaphorical entities as the "French national psyche," the "collective memory," and "self-inflicted psychic injury," suggesting the nature and mechanisms of those realities.

Louis XVI, it is generally agreed, was not a "great" king; that is, he was not an effective leader. Too liberal for royalists, too retrograde for republicans, too indecisive overall, he could, in fact, have been the most popular and most powerful of his dynasty had he managed to place himself effectively at the head of a regime so providentially renewed by the enlightened principles of 1789.

Dunn's subject matter, however, begins later, with the king's beheading in the presence of a huge crowd gathered at what was then the Place de la Révolution and what has since been transformed (with predictable symbolic overtones) into the Place de la Concorde. Having botched his life, Louis was at least careful to make something of his death. Indeed, in the poet's words, "nothing in his life became him like the leaving it," Louis died a martyr, forgiving his enemies. Like his ancestors, he had ruled by Divine Right. However much disguised by a trumped-up judicial process, his political murder was seen by many as an audacious sacrilege, a repudiation of divinely sanctioned authority, a prelude, moreover, to the Terror. The organizing principle of an entire society was destroyed, leaving in the debris political chaos, moral confusion, and historical discontinuity. For the extreme revolutionaries that, of course, had been all to the good. French society could get

on with progress, make a proper start in a new life now that the Old Regime was killed off at the root. Regicide was the condition of that renewal. In the words of Robespierre, the “monster” Louis (demonized, of course, for the occasion) had to die if the *patrie* was to live. Regicide would safeguard the Revolution and make it forever irreversible. Moreover, it was not simply a matter of getting rid of a king as the English had done nearly a century and a half before; France had abolished kingship itself and had cleansed with the blood of Louis Capet centuries of criminal tyranny. Kingship was desacralized and demystified. In its place was substituted the sacred republic.

But then came the Terror, perceived as a logical as much as chronological sequel of regicide. It generated reaction, revulsion, and, in due course, a mitigated restoration of the monarchy. Louis XVI’s “good” death, the image of the sacrificial and redeeming martyr, was ideally suited to the needs of royalist commentators but it posed an enormously awkward problem for the liberal nineteenth-century historians who, at the same time as they voiced reservations about the Jacobins, sought to defend the Revolution and dissociate it from the Terror. How best then to endorse progress and reform, the Rights of Man and the ideals of 1789?

Dunn’s exposition of the different solutions proposed by various French writers of various political hues is uneven and, inevitably perhaps, sometimes becomes repetitious as it traces in turn the many evolving ideological nuances that fit her analytical grid. In most instances, her starting point of Louis XVI’s death fades rather quickly into the background. Michelet, for example, preferring the less troubling redemption mythology that surrounds the execution of Joan of Arc, manages to subvert Louis’s royalist martyr myth by co-opting her sanctity and martyrdom for the Revolution. Joan had the advantage (opinions do differ on this point!) of being a martyr who had died for the kingdom, not for the king. She had sacrificed for the nation whose general will she incarnated. But in the ethos of that sacred nationhood lurk the perils of the totalitarian collectivity, of mystic brotherhood, the cult of the fatherland that denigrates the individual and prefers mystical communion over rational communication, and instinct over reason. Here too will be found the plagues of emotional indoctrination, uneducated patriotism, contempt for outsiders, along with civically valorized fear and envy of the inevitable enemy within. We renew acquaintance with Karl Popper’s hesitations regarding the societal valorization of collective emotion: “He who teaches that not reason but love should rule opens the way for those who rule by hate.” By the end of the 19th century, Michelet’s Joan had, in fact, become much less palatable as she moved from the left to the right in an age that witnessed the Dreyfus affair and the emergence of the profascist, anti-Semitic Action Française.

The full force of the dilemmas posed by the issues of political murder, amnesty, and reconciliation is brought to contemporary visibility and relevance in the writings of Albert Camus, a self-styled modern “Girondin” who came, finally, to reject the politics of expediency, power, and pragmatism, thereby provoking the ire and scorn of the equally modern “Jacobin,” Jean-Paul Sartre. Shrugging off

Sartre's accusation that to refuse militant *engagement* (including violence in struggles for national liberation) was to be on the side of the oppressors, Camus sought rather to infuse politics with morality—not always easy or even possible (witness his personal difficulties with his native Algeria's situation: "I will defend my mother before justice"). Camus finally withdrew from that scene, leaving it to others "to make history." Dunn underlines, in this respect, Camus's belief that the "assassination" of Louis XVI was "the most significant and tragic event in French history, a turning point that marked the irrevocable destruction of a world that, for a thousand years, had embraced a sacred order." With Louis's death, desecularized history and reason triumphed. Morality was displaced by expediency. Camus, as Dunn points out, belongs to a generation of antitotalitarian writers, such as Jacob Talmon, Karl Popper, Arthur Koestler, and Hannah Arendt, who trace a straight path from Rousseau's *Social Contract* to the 1793 regicide to the Terror, through to the 19th century's ideologies of historical necessity (Hegel and Marx) and, finally, to 20th-century totalitarianism. Throughout the debate, the essential questions remain unresolved: How to reconcile justice and mercy, ethics and politics? How to be neither a victim nor an executioner? It is in this Camus chapter, the last of the book and the one that is least directly connected to her title, that Dunn hits her best stride and sets up the most sustained narrative line. But it is here too, and in her Conclusion, that she introduces perhaps the most controversial argument of her study (notwithstanding the contrary assurances of O'Brien in the Foreword, Dunn does in fact allow herself to "push an argument"). Expounding on the necessity of what might be described as "creative conflict" in a manner that comes perilously close to equating change with progress and social consensus with moral stagnation or worse, she notes that there is an undesirable side to what some see as the familiarly warm and cuddly humanitarian credo of fraternity, sacrifice, and compassion. Certain aspects of that credo, she warns, have contributed little to fostering freedom and democracy. It is a credo that harbors potentially retrograde elements that subvert the ethos of individual identity, the individual's critical rational faculties and, especially, the individual's inviolability. When we dream of political harmony and stability, when we prize above all else national unity and seek to curb conflict and dissent, "without which," Dunn assures us, "there can be no meaningful political activity," we court grave dangers! Those who preach reconciliation, those who refuse to judge and punish, who choose to dispel anxiety, who advocate fraternity as they design conflict-free politics in warless realms, may be suffering from a "flawed understanding" of legitimate and peaceful change. In a democracy, progress will not result from unity and consensus. Progressive and innovative legislation, "significant change," will not arise from consensus located in the all-inclusive center. It arises, rather, from controversial ideological positions on the left and on the right.

Are we to believe that Yeats's celebrated center should not "hold" after all? Dunn directs her final thoughts on the matter toward today's United States, voicing suspicion concerning slogans that preach "family values" (the Jacobin concept of

virtue?), JFK's "Ask not what your country can do for you . . ." (the coercion of anti-individualism? the mystical nationalism implicit in Romantic exhortations to self-sacrifice?), and, not surprisingly, "America, love it or leave it" (reminiscent of the antidemocratic nature of political consensus?). Here, surely, are "pushed arguments," for while it must be admitted that sacrifice, unity, and consensus can sometimes amount to a plague, we cannot help thinking that there are still many places in this troubled world that would benefit enormously from catching a huge dose of them!

The Deaths of Louis XVI, though not always an exciting read, is a solid, well-informed piece of scholarship. (Dunn's many translations from the French, by the way, are well done and, in the case of some lines from Hugo's poetry, positively inspired!) Perhaps in the end too much of a historical watershed is made of Louis XVI's execution. Other such "watersheds" turn up in the chronicles of Western civilization before 1793. Louis's judges in the Convention, for example, frequently brought up the parallel of Charles I of England (not to mention the Tarquin kings and the early Brutus) and Louis himself in the last days of his life meditated long and hard on what he viewed as the close similarity of his situation with that of his unfortunate Stuart brother. In this regard, perhaps one last cavil is in order: Both O'Brien and Dunn make a point of insisting that the execution of Charles I left no "significant traces in the English national psyche," and that the 1649 regicide "has never been considered an event fraught with meaning." The point is debatable. Is it, for example, a "significant" trace that every year to this day, on January 30th, the Church of England officially celebrates the memory of "King Charles the Martyr"? And, for that matter, is there not perhaps some important residual significance in the plain fact that the British monarchy has survived, one of the few still reigning triumphant and without apology, and that the next British king will in all probability be crowned with the name of *Charles*?

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