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Anarchy, People and Terror: Alessandro Manzoni on the French Revolution

Mario Tesini¹ and Lorenzo Zambernardi²

Abstract: Alessandro Manzoni is chiefly known for *The Betrothed*. What is less well-known is Manzoni's interest in writing history which in later life would bend his literary talent to reconstructing and analysing the French Revolution. Incomplete and published posthumously in 1889, Manzoni's last text appeared as *The French Revolution of 1789 and the Italian Revolution of 1859. Comparative Observations*. While Manzoni's literary and poetic works won him the reputation of being among the greatest writers of the nineteenth century, the posthumous book on the French Revolution sank rapidly into oblivion. This article, while pointing out certain shortcomings in Manzoni's interpretation, argues that his analysis is to be taken seriously by all scholars interested in the thorny history of the French Revolution. In particular, Manzoni's narration concentrates on unveiling the political *mechanics* that link delegitimization of the old monarchical order with the ensuing power vacuum and, eventually, with anarchy and the Terror. In his opinion the latter was no accident of history, but the outcome of previous events, especially the political void created by destroying the government without managing to set up a new political order. Finally, the article presents Manzoni's analysis of the relationship between the people and the Terror, focusing on mass society with its collective delirium, and how it fared under a new dread form of despotism.

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Alessandro Manzoni, Italy's most famous nineteenth century author, is chiefly known for his *Promessi Sposi* (or *Betrothed*).³ Some of the most impressive pages in that work are the two chapters describing the great seventeenth century plague that had its epicentre at Milan and was brought by the Lansquenets crossing the Alps during the Thirty Years' War. Such scenes, together with the prior famine and associated popular uprising, form a masterpiece of historical psychology and have met with renewed attention recently.⁴ What is less well-known is Manzoni's interest in writing history which in later life would bend his literary talent to reconstructing and analysing the French Revolution.⁵ Incomplete and published posthumously in 1889, year of the first centenary of the Revolution, Manzoni's last text flowed seamlessly from a lifelong pondering of the link between history and politics. It began with the years he spent in Paris between the Napoleonic era and the

³ *The Betrothed*, the only novel authored by Manzoni, prefigured the Risorgimento and had a decisive influence on the Italian language. The importance of the book is nicely captured in the introduction to the Penguin edition: '*I Promessi Sposi* is in fact a national institution — a splendid situation, but one which inevitably entails some disadvantages. But the English reader need not to be discouraged by the fact that some Italians have heard so much about the book at school that has been spoilt for them; nor by the fact than others have felt impelled to include it in a revolt against national institutions in general', cf. B. Penman, 'Introduction', in A. Manzoni, *The Betrothed* (London, 1982), p.12.

⁴ See, for example, O. Pamuk, 'What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us', *New York Times*, 23 April 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-orhan-pamuk.html>.

⁵ Manzoni would actually achieve an extraordinary feat of historical compression in the form of a poem summing up on Napoleon at the very moment of his death: the ode called *Cinque maggio* (5th May). Acclaim from all over Europe could hardly have been greater. Stendhal called *Cinque maggio* 'immortal as the man whose woes it describes' and 'among the loftiest pinnacles of Italian poetry', in G. Gaspari, 'Manzoni e il mito della Francia', in *Manzonis Europa - Europas Manzoni; L'Europa di Manzoni - Il Manzoni dell'Europa*, ed. A. Oster, F. Broggi and B. Vinken (Munich, 2017), p. 62; Goethe would go so far as to translate it personally.

Restoration, in close touch with a late French enlightenment milieu, in particular the *idéologues* meeting at Auteuil in the salon of Madame de Condorcet.⁶

The work relates the events immediately following the meeting of the Estates-General convened by the King at Versailles, decisive months in the summer of 1789. The book appeared as *The French Revolution of 1789 and the Italian Revolution of 1859. Comparative Observations*.⁷ Manzoni's original idea was to compare the French Revolution with the Italian Risorgimento, in particular with the Second War of Independence from 1859 to 1861 which would lead to unification of the state. Hence the title normally used, *Osservazioni comparative* [Comparative Observations]. Apart from the Introduction, however, Italy drops out of sight altogether, amounting in practice to a proposal to deal with it as a second part, and the idea sketched in the Introduction that, unlike the French Revolution which was flawed from the outset in terms of moral and political legitimacy, the forcible ousting of a miscellany of governments down the Italian peninsula was to be seen as historically justified, fully legitimate from a political angle. The idea of a comparison was not to come to anything. And fortunately so, one might add. Had he followed this original plan, Manzoni would have got trapped in a mistaken idea. Although the French Revolution was more than a source of

⁶ With the Italian writer's relationship with the French intelligentsia in the post-Revolutionary era we shall be dealing briefly in what follows. Manzoni himself represented the high season of Lombard Enlightenment with which he also had a family connection, being grandson to the famous author of *On Crime and Punishment*, Cesare Beccaria, on his mother's side.

⁷ All quotations from this work are taken from the following edition: A. Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789 e la rivoluzione italiana del 1859. Osservazioni comparative*, ed. Luigi Weber (Ravenna, 2015). But see also A. Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789 e la rivoluzione italiana del 1859. Dell'indipendenza dell'Italia*, ed. L. Danzi, with Introduction, chronology and regesto by G. Bognetti (Milan, 2000) and A. Manzoni, *Opere. Scritti storici e politici*, ed. L. Badini Confalonieri, Vol. I (Torino, 2012). For further information, philological documentation, and bibliographical references see *Manzoni online*: <http://www.alessandromanzoni.org/> and <http://www.alessandromanzoni.org/opere/82>.

inspiration for many protagonists of the Italian Risorgimento,⁸ as a result partly of the historical experience of the Napoleonic republics during the so-called Jacobin Triennium (1796-99), the two historical phenomena are hardly comparable, still less so under the common label of “revolution”: Italy’s forming a unified state was more of a diplomatic and military process, and only marginally brought about by insurrection.

While Manzoni’s other works, *The Betrothed* in particular, won him the reputation of being among the greatest writers of the nineteenth century,⁹ the posthumous, incomplete book on the French Revolution sank rapidly into oblivion: witness the fact that it would never be translated. It also met with an unfavourable reception and some authoritative critics were distinctly dismissive, beginning with the philosopher Benedetto Croce who judged Manzoni’s thinking ‘a-historical and anti-historical’, flawed by his Jansenist and Enlightenment leanings: factors that would make his attempt no more than ‘a sophistical arraignment of the French Revolution’.¹⁰ Although it has received closer

⁸ A.M. Banti, *Il Risorgimento italiano* (Roma-Bari, 2004), pp. vii, xii, 6-15; L. Riall, *Risorgimento: The History of Italy from Napoleon to Nation State* (Basingstoke, 2009), p. 6.

⁹ On the importance of Manzoni’s literary output see for example I. Calvino, ‘Manzoni’s *The Betrothed*: The Novel of Ratios of Power’, in *Ibid.*, *The Uses of Literature* (San Diego, 1986), pp. 196-212; I. Berlin, ‘The Apotheosis of the Romantic Wing: The Revolt against the Myth of an Ideal World’, in *Ibid.*, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapter in the History of Ideas*, ed. H. Hardy, (New York, 1991), p. 236. Lastly, we should remember Jacob Burckhardt’s description of Manzoni’s novel as a ‘fragment of universal history’, in E. Raimondi, *Il romanzo senza idillio. Saggio sui “Promessi Sposi”* (Torino, 1983), pp. 309-18.

¹⁰ B. Croce, *Storia della storiografia italiana nel XIX secolo* (Roma-Bari, 1947), pp. 190-98. We find a still more dismissive judgement in a classic summary of Italian political thinking across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his *Italian Political Thinking from 1700 to 1870* Luigi Salvatorelli devoted no more than three lines to Manzoni’s book, which he wrote off as ‘senile writing presenting no thought of any interest, and boiling down to a legalistic summing up of the case against the French Revolution, i.e. against a fact whose very nature was bound to be illegal’. L. Salvatorelli, *Il pensiero politico italiano dal 1700 al 1870* (Torino, 1975), p. 163. Again in 1989, the historian Furio Diaz, rated one of the chief experts on Italy’s eighteenth century, branded Manzoni’s text as an

critical attention in Italy at a more recent date as well as an unexpected publishing revival, the *Osservazioni* is still chiefly of interest only to the Manzoni specialist.

So what point is there in devoting time and attention to a book held to add nothing to the author's literary glory or indeed to our understanding of the French Revolution? Is this not undue attention to a late effort falling short of the previous standard and due more to obstinacy than real literary inspiration, still less to a proper grasp of history and politics? Clearly the present authors disagree, or this essay would not exist. But let us admit straightaway, we are not exactly sticking our necks out or going against the stream. The critical literature is nowadays more inclined to acknowledge the many different merits of Manzoni's appraisal of the Revolution,¹¹ in distinct contrast with the neglect and hostility the work met with in the century between its publication in 1889 and the chorus of ruminations on the nature and legacy of the Revolution that marked the Bi-centenary

'unfortunate summing up against'. Diaz went so far as to claim that 'Manzoni's failure to grasp the essence of the French Revolution, namely political rupture, hovers between the bias of bad faith and obtuseness'. Cf. F. Diaz, *L'incomprensione italiana della Rivoluzione francese. Dagli inizi ai primi del Novecento* (Torino, 1989), p. 64.

¹¹ We should particularly remember L. Guerci, 'Alessandro Manzoni e il 1789', *Studi settecenteschi*, X (1988), pp. 229-53; L. Mannori, 'Manzoni e il fenomeno rivoluzionario. Miti e modelli della storiografia ottocentesca a confronto', *Quaderni fiorentini per la storia del pensiero giuridico moderno*, XV (1986), pp. 7-106; S. Romano, 'Il realismo di un conservatore liberale', in A. Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789 e la rivoluzione italiana del 1859. Dell'indipendenza dell'Italia*, pp. XIII-XXIV; M. Tesini, 'Manzoni et Rosmini. Les catholiques libéraux italiens et la Révolution française in L'image de la Révolution française', in *Communications présentées lors du Congrès Mondial pour le Bicentenaire de la Révolution*, Vol. II, ed. M. Vovelle (Paris and Oxford, 1989), pp. 805-21; M. D'Addio, *Manzoni politico* (Lungro, 2005), pp. 189-234, 235-52; D. Quagliani, 'Alessandro Manzoni et la Révolution Française', *Laboratoire Italien*, IX (2009), pp. 211-32, <https://journals.openedition.org/laboratoireitalien/556>; L. Weber, 'Il sogno orgiastico delle peste: Manzoni e la Rivoluzione francese', in A. Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, pp. vii-xxxvii.

thirty years ago. A turning-point, be it said, in the public perception of the whole revolutionary chapter and its historical consequences.¹²

Our present article, while pointing out certain shortcomings in Manzoni's interpretation, argues that his analysis is to be taken seriously by all scholars interested in the thorny history of the French Revolution. It divides as follows. The first part briefly reconstructs how Manzoni came to write it and the importance the French Revolution had in his political and intellectual position. The second outlines his argument that there is continuity between '89 and '93, that no distinction is possible between a liberal phase and some liberticidal change of course. In his opinion the Terror was no accident of history, but the outcome of previous events, especially the political void created by destroying the government without managing to set up a new political order – the void being occupied by the most extreme fringes of the Revolution. In the third part we present Manzoni's interpretation of the role played by Louis XVI, whose lack of resolution, combining with the role of the Nobility and the Third Estate, would help plunge the country into anarchy and violence. The final section analyses the relationship between the people and the Terror, focusing on mass society with its collective delirium, and how it fared under a new dread form of despotism.

Manzoni and the French Revolution

Manzoni put at least ten years' hard work into researching and drafting the *Osservazioni comparative*. From the movements of books at the Brera Library it would seem that he got to grips with this work in the years 1862-64. Reading up and then composing the book was by no means a pastime for his

¹² The benchmark here is S.L. Kaplan's analytical reconstruction *Adieu 89* (Paris, 1993). For an assessment on the literature on the French Revolution after the *Bicentenaire*, see the special issue of *French Historical Studies*, XXXII (2009), especially B. Shank 'Is It Really Over? The French Revolution Twenty Years after the Bicentennial', *French Historical Studies*, XXXII (2009), pp. 527-30. For further critical considerations on the recent scholarship see F. Benigno, 'Never the Same Again: On Some Recent Interpretations of the French Revolution', *Annales* (English Ed.), LXXI (2016), pp. 189-216.

declining years. On 7 March 1873 he put in an order to the Royal Brera Library for eleven books on the French Revolution. That day was his 80th birthday; he had only two months to go before he died.¹³ Shortly before, on 28 February, the last datable letter he wrote notified the librarian that he would be holding onto two of the collection of *Moniteur* volumes he had borrowed for a further day or so: the ultimate poignant proof of a lifetime of tenacious historical research from which none of his writings is exempt.¹⁴

It is no exaggeration to say the French Revolution was the great intellectual passion of Manzoni's entire life. One might even claim it formed the historical and psychological backdrop to his whole literary output. Over and above the page in the *Promessi sposi* where he calls that epoch 'the most sensational and remarkable in modern history',¹⁵ there is a fund of known anecdote depicting his constant absorption in the story of that revolution. His permanent consuming interest in the subject is borne out by the circle of close friends and relatives who recorded their memories. In the opinion of Ruggiero Bonghi, an eminent intellectual and political figure in post-unitarian Italy, 'no-one knew the minute details of the Revolution in France better than he'. By Manzoni's stepson Stefano Stampa's account 'there was perhaps no work or pamphlet on the French Revolution that he hadn't pondered, to the point where he knew by heart the names of all the members of the Convention'.¹⁶

It was, moreover, the Jacobin infatuation of his youth¹⁷ that prompted the lines of *The Triumph of Liberty*, penned in 1801 at the age of fifteen.¹⁸ Manzoni then lived in the intellectual family circle of Sophie de Grouchy. Nor should we forget that his bosom friend, Claude Fauriel, was sentimentally

¹³ Letter dated 7 March 1873, in A. Manzoni, *Tutte le lettere*, Vol. III (Milan, 1986), p. 553.

¹⁴ Letter dated 23 February 1873, in *Ibid.*, p. xx.

¹⁵ Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, ch. XXVIII.

¹⁶ In A. Manzoni, *Saggi storici e politici*, in *Tutte le opere di Alessandro Manzoni*, ed. A. Chiari and F. Ghisalberti, Vol. IV (Milan, 1963), p. 764.

¹⁷ Obviously meaning the Jacobin Triennium in Italy.

¹⁸ D'Addio, *Manzoni politico*, pp. 12-14.

attached to Madame de Condorcet at the time they attended her in Paris. Fauriel was a Jacobin in his youth, an activist in the armed movement and in the revolutionary municipalities; from 1799 on he acted as secretary to Joseph Fouché who would become a minister under Napoleon and again during the years of the Restoration.¹⁹

When in Paris, Manzoni met and became a devotee of a major protagonist in the revolutionary saga: the Abbé Grégoire, the only French churchman to whom he dedicated a copy of his *Osservazioni sulla morale cattolica* (1819), a philosophical-religious work published in 1819 and written in opposition to the monumental *Histoire des républiques italiennes du Moyen-Âge* by Sismondi (sixteen volumes that appeared between 1807 and 1818), in which the Swiss historian and economist, in the wake of Machiavelli's famous judgment, denounced the responsibilities of the Catholic Church for having hindered the development of any solid civil ethics in Italy.²⁰ In the journal *Chronique*

¹⁹ See J.-J. Tatin-Gourier, 'La condamnation de la destruction des institutions républicaines au lendemain du Dix-huit Brumaire: la critique de Claude Fauriel entre l'engagement politique jacobin et l'élaboration de la critique littéraire comparatiste', in *Entre deux eaux. Les secondes Lumières et leurs ambiguïtés* (1789-1815), ed. A. Vasak (Paris, 2012), p. 193.

²⁰ Note that in his detailed analysis of events in 1789, Manzoni never mentions by name the man who was the leading actor at that stage, not even when he was the uncontested protagonist of the episode Manzoni relates, including when part of the clergy responded to the appeal by the Third Estate *redoublé*, a symbolically and numerically decisive gesture upon which the Assemblée could proclaim itself representative of the whole nation. That silence is hard to explain, except as an act of extreme devotion (Manzoni refusing to bracket a name he revered with events that turned so sour). Manzoni again fails to mention Grégoire when using sources of the time that highlight his fundamental role throughout the Revolution: e.g., Bailly's *Mémoires* quoted with reference to the first response by members of the clergy to the appeal by the Third Estate (a movement that started on 13 June with the first three curates, whom Grégoire is known to have encouraged). Note that in the passage translated and quoted by Manzoni, Bailly praises their names as 'worthy of being handed down to posterity'. Cf. Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 52. Manzoni's comment sounds like mockery: 'I will not here transcribe the three [names] cited by Bailly, certain as I am that the reader would not remember them'. But it was evidently on purpose that he skipped what Bailly wrote on the following day, 14 June: '[...] dans la séance du soir, l'accession de six curés [...] Parmi ces ecclésiastiques était

religieuse [31 January 1820] – the review of the residual Jansenist cenacle in France of which Grégoire was the acknowledged leader – one is not surprised to find a glowing review of Manzoni's book, written by one who, at the Estates-General and later the Convention, was the living symbol of the attempt to reconcile Christian values with those of the Revolution. Even at the dawn of the Risorgimento, in the influential historical-literary journal *Il Conciliatore*, close to the positions of Manzoni and liberal Catholics, admiration was expressed for Grégoire, who was depicted as an 'honest man and a true philosopher'.²¹ In the same pages one may also find Silvio Pellico's reservations on the harshly anti-revolutionary tones used by La Mennais in the first two volumes of the *Essai*, a work where 'some chapters [...] exude an intolerance that is quite contrary to the peaceful spirit of the Gospel'.²²

Lastly, let us not forget Manzoni's attention to the Revolution in his short philosophical work, *Dell'invenzione* (1850), which contains pages dedicated to Mirabeau, Vergniaud and an impartial reference to the figure of Robespierre who is portrayed neither as an incorruptible hero nor as a bloodthirsty monster.²³ However, by the time Italy unified his view seems to have changed

l'abbé Grégoire, devenu célèbre dans l'Assemblée nationale constituante'. Cf. J.S. Bailly, *Mémoires* (Paris, 1821), p. 144. On the role of the Abbé Grégoire during the Revolution, see R. Hermon-Belot, *L'abbé Grégoire. La politique et la vérité* (Paris, 2000) and M. Tesini, '«Je suis comme le granit», o della coerenza in politica. Perché non fu ghigliottinato l'abate Grégoire?', *Storia del pensiero politico*, III (2016), pp. 363-84.

²¹ In F. Ruffini, *La vita religiosa di Alessandro Manzoni*, Vol. II (Roma-Bari, 1931), p. 311

²² In *Ibid.*, p. 310. The reference is to La Mennais's *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion*, a multi-volume work published as early as 1817, which met with extraordinary success. Although he would later radically change his convictions, the *Essai* made La Mennais one of the greatest champions in Europe of the counter-revolutionary cause. Silvio Pellico is the author of the famous *My Prisons* [*Le mie prigioni*, 1832], a book that mainly recounts the author's imprisonment in the Piombi (Venice) and in the Spielberg fortress (Brno).

²³ A. Manzoni, *Dell'invenzione*. Dialogo, ed. P. Prini (Morcelliana, 1986), p. 149.

altogether.²⁴ Not that the *Osservazioni comparative* underrates the historic importance of the French Revolution as the foundation of modern society, but the emphasis has become distinctly critical, or even condemnatory.

Anarchy: the Destruction of Political Order in France

In its structure the book follows the typical nineteenth century pattern of a linear narrative. Part storytelling, part critical reflection, it traces the three or four core months of 1789 in which episodes crucial to the entire Revolution took place: constitution of the Third Estate at the National Assembly on 17 June at Sieyès' proposal; the Tennis Court Oath three days later; the royal session on 23 June (to which Manzoni attached special value, as we shall soon see); Bastille Day and, a few days afterwards, the brief visit to Paris by a king who had become prisoner to events beyond his comprehension; the night of 4 August when the feudal regime was formally and enthusiastically suppressed,²⁵ the content of which Manzoni applauds while deploring the circumstances that precipitated it (the unleashing of great violence throughout the countryside following the so-called Great Fear)²⁶; the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, on which Manzoni dwells very little except to make a parallel with the American Declaration and hymn that 'virtuous, sensible, no less than heroic' Revolution across the water;²⁷ down to the 5-6 October when the royal family was

²⁴ As we said before, Manzoni seems to have begun working on his *Osservazioni comparative* in the years 1862-64.

²⁵ On the destruction of the old regime in August 1789 see M.P. Fitzsimmons, *The Night the Old Regime Ended: August 4, 1789, and the French Revolution* (University Park, 2003).

²⁶ On the Great Fear see the classic by G. Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* [1932], trans. J. White (Princeton, 1982) and T. Tackett, 'Collective Panics in the Early French Revolution, 1789–1791: A Comparative Perspective', *French History*, XVII (2003), pp. 149-71.

²⁷ Manzoni's judgement is hence the complete opposite of that reached by Jonathan Israel recently. To Israel the Declaration of Rights is the philosophical and political essence of the French Revolution, whereas the Terror is a Jacobin perversion of its true nature. The latter, as Israel put it, was a 'bloody

forcibly removed to Paris, at the same time as the Assembly was installed there.

The October *journées* stray slightly beyond the chronological bounds of the story which breaks off at the point when the Assembly debates the issue of the royal veto, but evidently to Manzoni they are the moment of truth, of both '89 and the rest. In a happy narrative flash-forward he devotes a page of trenchant description to those October events. After so much talk of bayonets, quipped Manzoni, they ended up penetrating the *enceinte* of the Assembly.²⁸ One notes how jumping forward, with special reference to Vico's idea of the 'heterogenesis of ends,' will be a constant refrain of the book which, though centring chronologically on 1789, ends by covering the whole span down to Brumaire.

Clashing head-on with the chorus of historians who contrast and distinguish '89 from '93, Manzoni accuses the Revolution of stifling at birth the attempt to reform the monarchy, thus plunging the nation into anarchy and civil war. In his view, not only could the caesura of revolution have been avoided, but it actually ushered in a new and worse form of tyranny. Manzoni's reading of '89 starts from an assumption: that the whole later unfolding of events is encapsulated in that first phase of the Revolution, down to the veto issue and the October Days. Impossible, therefore, to distinguish between a liberal phase and a liberticidal change of course:

The French revolution is seen by so many as split into two quite different stages: the first,

aberration'. See J. Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton, 2014), p. 28. To Manzoni what counted for more was the huge difference between issuing the Declaration and the violent oppression, what Dominique-Joseph Garat in his *Mémoires* [1795] called 'the incredible contrast between our principles and our follies', quoted in T. Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2015), p. 2.

²⁸ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 76. Manzoni is referring to Mirabeau's famous allusion to 'bayonets' after the royal session on 23 June.

one of wise, benevolent intent and generous endeavour; the second of delirium and villainy. Certainly, the two stages differed greatly and gravely in their facts and in their persons; and it would be an insult to the evidence and to justice were one to bundle together most of the men at the *Jeu de Paume* and the Royal Session on 23 June, with those that earned execrable renown at the darkest period of the Revolution [...]. But the difference in events does not blind us to the connection and sequence.²⁹

To Manzoni the thread of history cannot be broken, not even when it is spun within the rupture that is revolution. Clearly one cannot blame the leaders of the early revolution for the Terror, but Manzoni points out how, involuntarily, they were laying the groundwork for one who, in summer 1789, was still ‘the obscure’ lawyer from Arras: Robespierre’s time ‘had not yet come’, writes Manzoni, ‘but on both sides they were setting it up for him’.³⁰ Hence the Terror was neither fate nor accident, but the outcome of prior events, especially the destruction of a government when there was no other to take its place. On this Manzoni writes that ‘the King was no longer the government, the Assembly could not be it’.³¹ A government was being sought, but could not be found.

On the one hand, Manzoni believed that the old society of orders and privileges needed to be superseded: they were ‘burdensome or humiliating, and often burdensome as well as humiliating’, as

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110. As mentioned above, Manzoni’s *Osservazioni comparative* has never been translated into English. Translations from this book are by Ralph Nisbet.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193. In his recent book, Marcel Gauchet – Robespierre. L’homme qui nous divise le plus (Paris, 2018) – provides a portrayal of Robespierre that reminds the one offered by Manzoni in Dell’Invenzione, pp. 149-53. The image of the ‘incorruptible’ is a continuing source of historical study. See, for example, P. McPhee, Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life (New Haven, 2012), H. Leuwers, Robespierre (Paris, 2016), and J.-C. Martin, Robespierre, la fabrication d’un monstre (Paris, 2018).

³¹ Manzoni, La rivoluzione francese del 1789, p. 182.

he learned from reading Tocqueville.³² He went on: ‘That the great majority of Frenchmen towards 1789 wanted reforms in their Government, and had more than good reason for so wishing, are two truths that no-one now denies, I think, and that could only be denied by blind preoccupation or by self-interest’.³³ On the other hand, the just abolition of feudal privileges and exemptions was not followed up by the forming of a new government: into the vacuum would step the lunatic fringe of the revolutionaries. The unleashing of street violence was first and foremost a *political* error, anarchy caused by the deputies of the Third Estate/Assembly deciding to delegitimize the existing authority and triggering an institutional process they themselves were unable to direct or control. Quite apart from the reasons for, and justice of, the political reforms demanded, it was revolution in itself, argues Manzoni, that produced new dynamics having nothing to do with the legitimate claims of the Third Estate.

Manzoni chiefly blames the Assembly leaders that summer 1789 for letting their actions contradict their aims and, still worse, their words contradict their will at decisive moments when, having assumed power, the Assembly should have taken a united position on popular uprising but in fact remained inert. In other words, Manzoni highlights the gap between the (good) intentions of some political principals and the (bad) consequences that their acts and decisions would have on the political development of France, or ‘the singular contrast between what was conceived, prepared, expected, predicted, and what happened’.³⁴ Ironizing over the supporters of the old order as much as the revolutionaries, Manzoni writes that ‘the former failed to foresee defeat, the latter were far from

³² *Ibid.*, p. 17. See A. Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (Paris, 2004), especially Book II, ch. I, where Tocqueville contends that ‘les droits féodaux étaient devenus plus odieux au peuple en France que partout ailleurs’, p. 71. For a critique of Tocqueville’s interpretation of the French Revolution see W. Doyle, ‘Reflections on the Classic Interpretation of the French Revolution’, *French Historical Studies* XVI (1990), pp. 743-48.

³³ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 39.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

foreseeing the consequences of victory'.³⁵

Understandably, one central figure in Manzoni's narration is Jean-Sylvain Bailly, *malheureux* in his individual destiny quite as much as the King; Bailly who, along with many others, 'unintentionally but inexcusably' opened the door to 'the raving and villainous'.³⁶ The doyen of the Third Estate, whom Manzoni describes as 'a good and learned man', was not just an 'authoritative witness to events in the assembly', but 'interpreted and participated in its spirit'.³⁷ Full of generous delusions, but above all ambitions and irresolvable contradictions, Bailly would be one of the many victims of that tragic cause-and-effect relationship which in Manzoni's view linked the Versailles beginning to the days of bloodshed in Paris. Of Bailly and the other leaders of the first months of revolution (like Antoine Barnave in his turn) Manzoni would write: 'They imagined they might have to perish in the struggle against royal despotism, but never under the axe of another despotism for which, beyond their imaginings, they were paving the way'.³⁸

Responsibility for destroying the government did not fall purely on the Revolution's shoulders, however. It was the nobles who actually set in motion delegitimization of the monarchical order. Everything started in August 1787 when, after the King introduced two new taxes by which to

³⁵ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 101.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33. As is known, Bailly would become mayor of Paris three days after the storming of the Bastille, but would end under the guillotine on 12 November 1793, after tramping in the rain from Place de la Concorde to the Champs de Mars. That site was chosen as symbolic revenge for those who died under fire by the National Guard commanded by Lafayette and by Bailly. In a passage quoting Bailly's strictures on Joseph Martin-Dauch, the *opposant*, Manzoni again points out the heterogenesis of ends: 'Poor Bailly! That he who had seemed the true hero of the day [of the Jeu de Paume] should meet with such a dire and unmerited fate, prepared for him by the Revolution he had served with such faith, such disinterested zeal; that he should have to justify himself in vain before such as they, and be reviled by mouths such as theirs', *Ibid.*, p. 68.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89. Barnave was guillotined on 28 November 1793 after his correspondence with Queen Marie Antoinette was found in the same metal chest containing Mirabeau's letters.

make good the hole in the finances,³⁹ the Parisian Parliament and Assembly of Notables called for the Estates-General to be convened, justifying the measure by a double denial: the monarch had no right to impose new taxes, while Parliament had no right to legitimize them.⁴⁰ On which Manzoni says: ‘And this, not as the means to a just and well-meaning reform against which that body [aristocracy] set their minds to the last, but in order to put a spanner in the works of a government they could not control, or else – as some writers have conjectured, not without foundation – under the mad delusion that, once the king’s absolute power was curbed by a great but transitory authority, they would be left as the regulators of government, and fathers of the homeland’.⁴¹

That was the demand that triggered the Revolution, thought Manzoni; but not for the simple and obvious fact that convening the Estates-General would set in motion mechanisms that would destroy the *ancien régime*. The real reason lay in delegitimizing royal authority under the naïve assumption that so doing would not jeopardise the whole French political system.⁴² The act of restraint enforced in the years 1787-88 by the Assembly of Notables and the Parliament of Paris – both

³⁹ On the financial origins of the Revolution see, for example, G. Bossenga, ‘Financial Origins of the French Revolution’, in T.E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley, eds., *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution* (Stanford, 2011), pp. 37–66.

⁴⁰ On the power of the nobility before the Revolution see T. Tackett, ‘The Nobility and the Long-Term Origins of the French Revolution’, *American Historical Review*, CXXIV (2019), pp. 938-41.

⁴¹ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 245. On the importance of 1787 as the beginning of the French Revolution see F. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 158.

⁴² On this point Timothy Tackett has recently argued that far from being weakened, it was ‘the parlements and the first Assembly of Notables, bodies dominated by the nobles, that first compelled Louis XVI to convoke the Estates General—an assembly that they assumed they would be able to control. One could even argue that the nobility was more politically powerful and influential during the “pre-revolutionary” period than at any point since the death of Louis XIV at the beginning of the eighteenth century’. Cf. Tackett, ‘The Nobility and the Long-Term Origins of the French Revolution’, p. 940.

composed of privileged classes – would end by delegitimizing political authority:

What else but a first revolutionary fact was that hitherto unprecedented resolution by which they declared illegal, null, non-binding that most solemn act of the King's supreme authority, namely an edict personally proclaimed by him in a *Lit de justice*, and in so doing destroyed the authority insofar as they could? What more did the deputies of the Third Estate do by their first act of open revolt against that authority, that is, when they defied [...] Louis's command at the royal session on 23 June that the three Orders separate immediately, and reconvene [...] in three different rooms.⁴³

This last act did indeed destroy government in France since, lacking the actual means of government that it had removed from the King, the Assembly proved unable to govern the country. Differing in their timing and their purpose, the gowned magistrates and then the Third Estate thus destroyed royal power and replaced it by a 'sovereignty of prevention',⁴⁴ without realizing that the preservation of civil society rests on a sovereignty of positive command. Manzoni's comment on this point is worth quoting in full:

It is a necessary condition of every political society that it contain one supreme power, whether it belong to a single person as in absolute monarchy, or form by a pre-ordained concert of various persons as in republics and constitutional monarchies. Without that supreme power one does not have government but conflict which, by its very nature, is unable to take a stable form. Now before the act in question that power [...] resided de facto (whether a good or bad, old or new 'facto' is not here at issue...) in the person of

⁴³ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 246.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 246-47.

the king. In successfully resisting the king's solemn decision, the Assembly of the Commons wrested that power from his hand and thus destroyed government in France; while at the same time by not positively and formally claiming that power, entire and definitive, for itself, nor bestowing it on others [...] it left France without a government.⁴⁵

Croce was therefore wrong in saying Manzoni's was 'a legalistic summing up of the case'. The revolution was not merely illegal, thought Manzoni (as any revolutionary act obviously is). For he was not chiefly concerned with legal or moral issues, but rather with the political consequences of those actions and decisions. He was well aware that such a complex, far-reaching event can only be judged 'by the effects that remain when they are over'.⁴⁶ And the main result achieved by the Revolution was not freedom from tyranny but the opposite: 'oppression of the country in the name of liberty'.⁴⁷

It is the implicit comparison between the Italian process of unification and the tyrannical outcome of the French Revolution that sharpens Manzoni's judgment on the latter. In Italy, in fact,

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93. These pages of Manzoni's may be felt to anticipate what would be a central tenet of Hannah Arendt's interpretation of revolution: lack of preparation on the part of revolutionary leaders, inability to control the effects of the ensuing power vacuum, absence of tools to stem the bottom-up revolutionary violence at a point when sections of the Commune would have had a crucial role to play. See H. Arendt, *On Revolution* (London, 1990), pp. 256-57.

⁴⁶ But that argument did not cause him to abandon the idea that politics must also be judged by the sufferings inflicted in the name of future benefits. Among 'men', writes Manzoni, 'one must also count those that live', cf. Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 27. He would go on to observe, quoting a passage from Voltaire's *Henriade* and targeting whole schools of revolutionary historians: 'Was not necessity always "l'excuse des tyrans?"', *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3. One detects a clear echo of Burke's interpretation of the French Revolution, cf. E. Burke 'Reflections on the Revolution in France', in *Revolutionary Writings: Reflections on the Revolution in France and the First Letter on a Regicide Peace*, ed. I. Hampsher-Monk (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 3-250. But even when we might naturally expect to see him quoted, Burke's name does not appear in Manzoni's text.

‘freedom, far from being oppressed by the Revolution, was born from the Revolution itself’.⁴⁸ In this sense, the question of political legitimacy is summed up in Manzoni’s work as the ability to ensure transition to a stable new regime without the unleashing of destructive anarchy. Here lies the importance of the comparison between the Italian ‘revolution’ and the French one, which runs through Manzoni’s pages even when – after the Introduction – Italy completely leaves the scene in the unfolding of the historical account. Here too seems to lie a profound difference between Manzoni’s *Osservazioni* and Edmund Burke’s *Reflections*. Although both authors were moved by a common desire to distinguish the French Revolution from ‘their’ revolutions (i.e., the Glorious Revolution [1688] and the unification of Italy [1861], respectively), Manzoni’s critical narrative targets neither the ideological abstractions behind the French Revolution nor the rupture of the trans-historical ‘partnership’ between the living, the dead, ‘and those who are to be born’.⁴⁹ As illustrated above and further explained below, Manzoni’s narration concentrates on unveiling the political *mechanics* that link delegitimization of the old monarchical order with the ensuing power vacuum and, eventually, with anarchy and the Terror.

The Weakness of Louis XVI

In charting those months in which the lines of all subsequent developments of the Revolution were laid down, Manzoni was particularly drawn to one personage whom he placed at the centre of the story: King Louis XVI. By Manzoni’s account the French king was not just an upright man whose gentle nature and private virtues would be a recurring theme in certain post-revolutionary hagiographies centring on the *roi martyre*.⁵⁰ From the *Osservazioni comparative* the King appears as

⁴⁸ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 5.

⁴⁹ Burke, ‘Reflections on the Revolution in France’, p. 101.

⁵⁰ Though one should not forget what Albert Camus wrote: ‘c’est un répugnant scandale d’avoir présenté, comme un grand moment de notre histoire, l’assassinat public d’un homme faible et bon’, A. Camus, *L’homme révolté* (Paris, 2011), p. 156.

possessing a reasonable and well meaning plan for political reform, but utterly incapable of putting it into practice. Believing that the season of absolutism was definitively on the wane and that much-needed reforms required support from all the active forces of the realm, most of which were obviously represented in the Third Estate, the King had proceeded to summon the Estates-General and consented to an extraordinary collective *prise de parole* that would find expression in the *cahiers*. That no country in the world was so free to express itself as was France during those months, invited and urged to do so even, is an idea that is likewise central to Tocqueville. Manzoni knew the work in question and, departing from his habit, quoted it directly in fulsome terms on a major political issue.⁵¹

The key moment for actuating that political programme (namely, self-reform by the monarchical regime with cooperation by the Estates-General) was the speech on 23 June 1789. The sting in the tail of that day (Mirabeau's celebrated retort on the subject of 'bayonets') contained, thought Manzoni, the germ of all dire future consequences.⁵² In rejecting the King's proposal that it separate and forfeit its claims as an Assembly, that body annulled the only possible alliance that might have prevented the disasters that ensued: instability of governments, anarchy, the Terror and wars.⁵³

⁵¹ 'The author [Tocqueville, in reference to ch. XVII of *L'Ancien régime*] quotes some highly significant passages from certain minutes and other documents of those assemblies [the provincial assemblies set up by Louis XVI], by way of a sample of the many he had viewed, upon which he bases the general proposition "in France the upper classes began to concern themselves with the poor man's lot before the latter caused them any fear"'. Cf. Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 265.

⁵² The sentence had immensely wide circulation in a variety of versions, one being: 'We are here by the will of the people and will need bayonets to make us leave'. Manzoni quotes Bailly: 'Go and tell those who sent you that force of bayonets is of no avail against the will of the nation'. Cf. Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 76.

⁵³ Manzoni thought the King made his proposal without reservation and in good faith. In interpreting Louis XVI's actions in May and June 1789 Manzoni did not adopt the viewpoint of the 'flight to Varennes', unlike the most widely circulating Revolution historians even in his day. On 'Varennes' and the interpretation of it, see for example T. Tackett, *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge, MA, 2003) and M. Ozouf, *Varennes: la mort de la royauté* (21 juin 1791) (Paris, 2011).

In Manzoni's view Louis XVI single-handed might have reformed the French socio-political system 'without heads being brandished on pikes, without men being butchered in droves for days on end, without prisons centuplicating, without executions by the thousand, without provinces laid waste, without villages being burned and pieces of towns torn apart'.⁵⁴

Manzoni advances a series of arguments in support of the claim that the King honestly intended what he solemnly declared at the Séance Royale on 23 June. The opposite view, that the monarch was in bad faith throughout the Revolution, believing in his own right/duty to wield power absolutely, is mentioned merely to rebut it:

It may have been [...] that the king, despite his first intentions and recent solemn commitment, had a change of heart when poised to forgo part of his power; and, bent on remaining absolute master, decided to use what means he had and any excuse to hand, dissolving the Estates-General, that is, a subterfuge to elude the reforms he had promised, thus provoking just resistance by the Estates-General and uprising by a country foiled of its dearest and most legitimate hopes. That may have been, I say, speaking as a possibility and not a likelihood; though many have believed one version or the other [...].⁵⁵

We cannot tell how deeply Manzoni was convinced that the King's proposed programme on 23 June was a politically viable way out of what was – Revolution or no Revolution – a regime in crisis, literally *ancien*, a spent force. In many respects the proposal was certainly long overdue; it was also couched in a form and tone that were quite unacceptable to that audience. Manzoni himself makes this point implicitly: it was addressed to an Assembly whose existence was unacknowledged – illegitimate from the moment it was born; and not to the Nation – that pure abstraction sprung from

⁵⁴ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 85.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

the mind of Sieyès and the opportunist designs of Mirabeau; but to representatives of Estates (especially the Third Estate) that had in fact been non-existent for several days. It must be admitted: this is an objective weakness in Manzoni's logical and historical reconstruction.

Evidence of some hesitation is found in the next passage where the King's inability to reform the *ancien régime* is plain to see: 'Another point strongly bearing on the sincerity of Louis XVI's sentiments expressed on that occasion, and in his name by his ministers, is the fifteen years of absolute sovereignty during which he made many reforms but others, unfortunately some of the most important, were embarked on and dropped, promulgated and rescinded, through an unfortunate combination of unwitting or interested resistance and his own well-known indecision'.⁵⁶

Manzoni would revert elsewhere to that pliant, hesitant nature at odds with the King's good intentions. For Louis was not free from blame. Manzoni describes him as torn and irresolute in the years prior to the Revolution and unable to act or use command of the army which he still possessed in summer 1789. As evidence of the King's irresoluteness Manzoni relates the ease with which the nobles blocked an edict proposed by minister Turgot and approved by the King on 6 February 1776: the intention was to replace the hateful *corvées* by a land tax levied throughout the realm. Parliament not only stopped the edict from being implemented, but managed to get Turgot removed from office. As Manzoni wrote, citing the *Life of Hannibal* by Cornelius Nepos, on that occasion – and it would not be the last – 'the murmuring of many overbore the virtue of one'.⁵⁷ Though Manzoni does call Louis XVI virtuous, the episode and many others afterwards showed his lack of resolution, and more generally the weakness of the whole monarchical system. When strength and prompt action were called for, we have 'a king who gives in and hopes'. 'Neither of which is governing', quips Manzoni.⁵⁸

Again in the decisive months of summer 1789, and indeed just before the Revolution, Louis yielded to the demands of his opponents, proving anxiously unsure of himself, incapable of steering

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

the country through a situation that would turn out exceptionally important. That weakness was patent at the royal session on 23 June, at the end of which the King enjoined the three estates to separate. Here Manzoni finds an apt quotation from Machiavelli (*Discourses* XXX.22): the King failed to think at that moment how ‘when commanding strong things it behoves one to be strong’ and ‘whoever lacks strength of character must abstain from extraordinary commands’.⁵⁹ In Manzoni’s eyes the nobility were a reactionary force that failed to grasp the need and inevitability of reforms, ‘averse from all fair or healthy reform’⁶⁰; for his part, the King lacked the firmness to see the latter through. A king of good intentions, but too weak to act politically whenever faced with organized resistance: first by the nobility, then by the Third Estate.

People and Terror

Another issue central to the *Osservazioni* and strictly bound up with that of the power void created by the revolutionary dynamics, was the emergence of a new arbitrary, more dread power masquerading as legality. For there had sprung into being ‘a factious, haphazard force’ which, without any real government, ‘could not be compressed’ and by its nature was not prepared of its own free will to abdicate its role.⁶¹

On this point Manzoni not only goes against the historiographic stream, but above all takes a different moral stand from the prevailing line adopted by nineteenth century historians of the Revolution, from Mignet to Thiers, Louis Blanc to Michelet. The last named seems implicitly to be Manzoni’s interlocutor, though he never quotes him directly for the simple reason that Michelet is

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76. See N. Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. H.C. Mansfield and N. Tarcov (Chicago, 1996). Mansfield and Tarcov’s translation reads as follows: ‘to command strong things one must be strong’ and ‘whoever is not of this strength of spirit ought to guard himself from extraordinary commands’, *Ibid.*, p. 266.

⁶⁰ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 245.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

present as his greatest antagonist on every page of the book. Michelet's *Histoire de la Révolution française* appeared in seven volumes between 1847 and 1853. Right from the start, and partly due to the revolutionary events of the year following publication of the first two volumes, it had become a cornerstone in the interpretation and image of the revolutionary epic. From Manzoni's silence on Michelet, deducible also from the lack of textual references to Burke, it is possible to discern an example of Manzoni's elliptical style: where too obvious, it pays to remain silent.

In terms of content, central to both Michelet's and Manzoni's view of the revolution is the notion of 'the people'. But whereas Michelet sees it as a personification for the collective emergence of the nation, to Manzoni the people means only 'a rhetorical figure, what you get when you take a part for the whole: applied to the word "people", that figure was one of the most widely adopted and valid tools of the Revolution, serving successfully in many cases of prime importance to extend all the potency of that great name to tiny and often the least worthy parts of the people'.⁶²

In the course of the Revolution, Manzoni points out, the word 'people' would come to replace 'nation': 'it served some to authorise their deeds and many to justify submitting [to them]'.⁶³ Understandably, Manzoni prefers to use the word 'multitude' to describe popular uprisings.⁶⁴ He notes how that multitude was exploited by the unbridled violent section of the Assembly as a tool by which to dominate that body whose members, he adds, were 'few, but had already begun to be much'.⁶⁵

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 198-99.

⁶⁴ A word [*moltitudine*] frequently appearing in descriptions of popular uprisings and rioting in the pages of the *Promessi sposi*.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 183. A similar recent view of the relationship between minority parties at the Assemblée and armed popular mobilization occurs in Benigno, 'Never the Same Again', pp. 211-12. However, Benigno is careful to specify that the masses were far from being simply manipulated by sections of the Assembly. According to the Italian historian, the phenomenon was more complex and produced a variety of unpredictable results. See also T. Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of*

Without awaiting Taine's work (Manzoni died in 1873 and the four volumes of *Les origines de la France contemporaine* would be published from 1875 to 1883)⁶⁶, Manzoni trained his acumen as a political analyst and historical novelist on the mechanisms of popular credulity which, by imperceptible degrees, may transform into the most implacable violence. This is Manzoni resuming on another register what he had shown he was capable of in certain celebrated passages of the *Promessi Sposi*, especially the storming of the Grucce bakery and the house of the superintendent of provisions [*vicario di provvisione*].⁶⁷ On this analysis of crowd psychology *avant la lettre*, Luca Mannori has aptly written that in this book there emerges 'in extreme form the same kind of neurotic horror of mass behaviour and searing critique of the contents of collective consciousness that form the background to the *Promessi sposi*, the upshot of which is a profoundly pessimistic judgement on man's ability to govern his own conduct'.⁶⁸ It is thus no exaggerated claim to describe Manzoni as a subtle analyst of collective crowd mentality.

The people, now the new political pillar of revolutionary France, thus turn into the root cause of the country's protracted instability. Essentially, the charge against the leaders of the Third Estate and their supporters among the clergy and nobility was that they 'broke the king's power' without knowing how to take possession of the vacuum, which was thus filled by an emerging new force that could easily be manipulated by cynics or fanatics – or both. This would be seen in the ensuing years

the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture, 1789–1790 (Princeton, 1996).

⁶⁶ No doubt Manzoni's minute description of violence and crime may be seen as anticipating the writings of Taine, though with the sensitivity of a Christian brought up on Pascal, rather than the positivist rigour of the French historian.

⁶⁷ On the similarities in Manzoni's view between the Terror and the summary executions during the Great Plague of Milan, see A. Prosperi, 'Manzoni, la peste, il terrore. Il complotto e la storia nel capitolo XXXI dei Promessi sposi', in *Studi storici*, I (2018), pp. 23-46.

⁶⁸ Mannori, *Manzoni e il fenomeno rivoluzionario*, p. 14. For an analysis of the revolutionary masses, see G. Lefebvre's 'Revolutionary Crowds', in *New Perspectives on the French Revolution: Readings in Historical Sociology*, ed. J. Kaplow (New York, 1965), pp. 173–190.

when France found herself ‘under the proud and abject despotism of two minorities: a minority of those assemblies [*Legislative* and *Convention*] supported by a minority of the people; assuming that under the great and sacrosanct name of people one can include elements who are the negation of it’.⁶⁹

If, with the events of the Revolution, one focused essentially on the conflict of forces, one was bound to reject any lyrical or mystical sense of the people as having claims to some higher, progressive morality, after the manner of Michelet. This disenchanted vision of reality picks up the whole realist tradition of Italian political thought. Antonio Rosmini had referred to the ‘salutary effectiveness of Machiavelli and Vico’⁷⁰ while Manzoni claimed as ‘[his] first master in politics’ Vincenzo Cuoco, author of the *Historical Essay on the Neapolitan Revolution of 1799* with its resounding echoes of Machiavelli.⁷¹ Anticipating certain arguments typical of Italian elitists as to the ascendancy organized minorities gain over confused majorities that lack organization,⁷² Manzoni points out that the revolutionaries themselves divided in two: ‘a population and a faction; on the one hand the great mass of citizens, dispersed however except at rare moments even in that revolution so prone to the faking of general movements; on the other, a much smaller number, but united under leaders, ever ready on all occasions’. Hence formally the Revolution proclaimed equal rights for all; in reality it gave ‘arbitrary power’ to a mere few.⁷³

⁶⁹ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 184.

⁷⁰ Quoted in M. D’Addio, ‘Il problema della storia nel pensiero politico di A. Rosmini’, in *Rosmini e la storia*, ed. P. Pellegrino (Stresa-Milazzo, 1987), p. 106.

⁷¹ In D’Addio, *Manzoni politico*, p. 14. On Vincenzo Cuoco’s *Saggio storico* see B. Haddock, ‘Between Revolution and Reaction: Vincenzo Cuoco’s *Saggio storico*’, *European Journal of Political Theory*, V (2006), pp. 22-33.

⁷² With particular reference to the ideas of authors like Gaetano Mosca, Vilfredo Pareto and Robert Michels, who argued that power, whatever the political formula (e.g., monarchy, aristocracy, democracy), is always in the hands of a ruling elite.

⁷³ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, pp. 188, 190.

Manzoni is also keen to point out – what Patrice Gueniffey recently claimed, for example⁷⁴ - how from the outset the Revolution was marred by innumerable ‘bloody and unpunished acts of aggression’. Likewise the end of the season of Terror would not mean an end to that ‘pressure’ and its ‘evil reign’, but a continuation ‘on a lower scale’ and in various forms, yet for a longer lapse of time.⁷⁵

What pervades Manzoni’s thoughts on the French Revolution is the new fact of revolutionary power, how ideological control culminated in the legal oppression of the Terror. Long before, in his dialogue *Dell’invenzione* (1850) which set out to spread Rosmini’s philosophy, Manzoni had described the gradual progression of revolutionary morals: in Mirabeau’s famous dictum, *la petite morale tue la grande*; in Vergniaud’s decision to vote for the King’s death in the name of the Fatherland’s salvation – though believing him innocent as he eloquently argued until seconds before entering the Convention; and in Robespierre’s incorruptible personality, a man disinterested and honest, yet author of direct oppression over the whole nation.⁷⁶ In all these instances Manzoni saw a looming threat, repugnant to his liberal Christian sensibility: the state becoming an end in itself. For he viewed the Terror not just as a repressive measure that would stain France in blood, but ‘the keenest and most extensive oppression one can imagine’ since it ‘also hung over those it did not materially strike’, draining people’s ‘spirits of courage and the thought of resisting’.⁷⁷ Sceptical in the face of

⁷⁴ P. Gueniffey, *La politique de la Terreur. Essai sur la violence révolutionnaire (1789-1794)* (Paris, 2000).

⁷⁵ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 4. On the Terror persisting even after Robespierre, see B. Bacsko, *Ending the Terror: Revolution after Robespierre* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁷⁶ On Mirabeau’s famous maxim – *la petite morale tue la grande* – Manzoni writes that in order ‘to deceive the mind, what more effective than a maxim that not only removes evil from evil but turns it into good, which makes transgression into wise action and violation of the law into a good deed’. Cf. Manzoni, *Dell’invenzione*, p. 155.

⁷⁷ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 109. Another Italian author linked to him by a singular spiritual friendship, Antonio Rosmini, defined depotism as ‘proteiform’, able to adapt to new political and legal systems and orders. Cf. A. Rosmini, *Progetti di Costituzione. Saggi editi e inediti*

patriots and liberals hymning the revolution, Manzoni argued that in ‘modern times and a large State the *raison d’être* of tyranny lies not in a compound flanked with towers and circled by moats’ (i.e. coercion *tout court*) ‘but in circumstances that incline the mind to accept it, and sometimes desire it’.⁷⁸ Hence the extraordinary value of deputy Joseph Martin-Dauch’s gesture when, on Jeu de Paume Day, he had (and Manzoni cites Bailly) ‘the temerity to write *opposant* after his signature’.⁷⁹

Here lies one of the chief differences between the Terror and tyranny under the *ancien régime*:

However absolute or perverse a king may be, still, with all the means of a modern age – soldiers turned police thugs, shameless servile lawcourts, narks and spies – he could not spread and so to speak distribute uniformly across a large State a dread that fills all spirits, suspicion governing all deeds, or keep the image of the scaffold permanently in men’s minds. A gang rising to power and possessing in every city, town and village a clientele that would stick at nothing, bosses of the town hall and endowed with the broadest summary authority, resolute and vigilant in maintaining the general state of tyranny as a means of wielding their own petty power; such a gang, I say, could do so, and did. And (what helped them enormously and eludes the tyrant prince), did so speaking of liberty the while.⁸⁰

sullo Stato, ed. C. Gray (Milano, 1952), p. 276. On the Terror see some opposite viewpoints in M. Biard (ed.) *Les politiques de la Terreur, 1793–1794* (Rennes, 2008) and S. Wahnich, *In Defence of the Terror: Liberty or Death in the French Revolution* [2003], trans. D. Fernbach (London, 2012). The provocative title covers not just certain schools of history-writing, but also a common sentiment found, and maybe even prevailing, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

⁷⁸ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 152.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66. Manzoni commented: ‘Certainly no-one at the present time needs to be told what other name is appropriate to a feeling – be it even a prejudice – that leads a man to stand up to many in obedience to his own conscience’.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 165-66.

In this sense, Manzoni's analysis seems to anticipate a number of ideas put forward by Augustin Cochin, one of the two interpreters of the French Revolution (with Tocqueville) whom François Furet's *Penser la Révolution française* sees as heralding a new reading of the Revolution.⁸¹ Thus we can sense Manzoni's awareness of the capillary social control by the Parisian clubs, ramifying throughout France; and, connected with that phenomenon, his attention to the unifying yet also subversive power of language: themes which Cochin highlighted, the first being the role played by the *Sociétés de pensée* throughout provincial France.⁸² Politics, Manzoni grasped, had become ideological.

Conclusion

Manzoni's *Osservazioni* takes a different standpoint from most of the copious literature on the French Revolution. In some ways one is reminded of Tocqueville, though the narrative focus is on the relationship between the individual and collective movements in history. Thus, in the narration and *judgement* of the French Revolution, Manzoni's *événementiel* style is profoundly different from Tocqueville's intention to write a history of 'classes' and not of individuals.⁸³ Moreover, instead of

⁸¹ See Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, Ch. 3.

⁸² A single-volume edition has recently appeared of A. Cochin's works: *La machine révolutionnaire: Œuvres* (Paris, 2018). It must count as a missed opportunity that the book on the revolution by Italy's greatest nineteenth century writer has not interacted with debates on the French Revolution, especially during the years around the bi-centenary when the Revolution was the centre of all attention, down to the final celebrations which culminated in two figures entering the Pantheon, chosen as symbolizing positive values of the Revolution, and both as we have seen linked to Manzoni in their different ways: Condorcet and the Abbé Grégoire.

⁸³ '[...] je parle des classes, elles seules doivent occuper l'histoire', cf. Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, livre II, *Œuvres III* (Paris, 2004), p. 155. By no means coincidentally, Marxist-oriented historians paid tribute to Tocqueville as a central source of inspiration for their work on the French Revolution. See, for example, G. Lefebvre, 'Introduction', in A. Tocqueville, *L'Ancien*

the historicizing apologia found in some of the literature, Manzoni paints a concrete historical portrait without reducing human beings to symbolic collective abstractions. The characters are shown and interpreted exclusively via their public utterances and political acts. Heir to the great tradition of Lombard Enlightenment, he takes a sharp analytical razor to the facts of revolutionary history – something he learnt to use at the school of Parisian *idéologues* gravitating around Madame de Condorcet's salon.

His analysis does not adopt a moralistic stance: there is nothing of the apocalyptic vision found in that first of counter-revolutionary authors, Joseph de Maistre. What interests our Italian writer is to demystify and deflate ideological revolutionary bombast to the bare essentials of fact, passions, power ratios.⁸⁴ To paraphrase Furet on Tocqueville, one might say that Manzoni did not write a more conservative history of the Revolution than Michelet, but *another* history,⁸⁵ based on the fate of the individuals offended, of the oppressed and also oppressors who in turn became victims through a radical turning of the tables and chain of unforeseen circumstances.⁸⁶ Thus, there is nothing legalistic or even moralistic about this, Manzoni's last work – unless it be moralistic to look into the origins of that long and 'horrendous feast' where it was the 'done thing' to greet the toppling of heads with

Régime et la Révolution, in *Œuvres complètes*, Tome II (Paris, 1952), p. 23. However, it must be noted, as Lamberti rightly points out, that Tocqueville's 'use [of the term class] is an intermediate notion between the orders of the Old Regime and the classes of industrial societies'. Cf. J.-C. Lamberti 'Introduction', in A. Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la révolution* (Paris, 1986), p. 902.

⁸⁴ The subject of force and conflict is central not just to this book on the French Revolution but to all his output. Here Italo Calvino's definition of the *Promessi sposi* is enlightening: 'the novel of power ratios', cf. Calvino, 'Manzoni's *The Betrothed*', p. 196.

⁸⁵ The reference is to the passage in which Furet comments that Tocqueville 'did not write a more "right-wing" history of the Revolution than Michelet. He wrote a different history of the Revolution, basing it upon a critique of revolutionary ideology and of what he saw as the French Revolution's illusion about itself'. Cf. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, p. 14.

⁸⁶ For an anthropological approach to studying the revolutionaries, see H. Burstin, *Révolutionnaires. Pour une anthropologie politique de la Révolution française* (Paris, 2013).

‘fierce applause’.⁸⁷

Manzoni was well aware that he was going against the grain of the historiography of his time. It is not by chance that in the ‘Introduction’, with his distinctive irony, he stated that he had written the book ‘to put disturbing doubts in place of quiet certainty’.⁸⁸ Manzoni’s words remind us of the famous conclusion to Burke’s *Reflections*: ‘I have little to recommend my opinions, but long observation and much impartiality. They come [...] from one who wishes to preserve consistency; but who would preserve consistency by varying his means to secure unity of his end; and, when the equipoise of the vessel in which he sails, may be endangered by overloading it upon one side, is desirous of carrying the small weight of his reasons to that which may preserve its equipoise’.⁸⁹ Manzoni’s analysis may not convince many of his readers; but, as he himself put it at the end of the Introduction to the *Osservazioni*, he was not out to convince the world of his ideas, but ‘to persuade people to ponder them’.⁹⁰ And all in all, that too is the main purpose of this article. For which reason it is definitely to be hoped that Manzoni’s pages may in future be linked up with the broader debate among Revolution historians.

⁸⁷ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 158.

⁸⁸ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, pp. 15-16.

⁸⁹ Burke, ‘Reflections on the Revolution in France’, pp. 249-50.

⁹⁰ Manzoni, *La rivoluzione francese del 1789*, p. 16.