Liberalism and republicanism in the French Revolution


On 27 July 1794, Maximilien Robespierre stood up to address the National Convention. But before he was able to finish his speech, he was shouted down by angry deputies, who had come to fear that he was planning another purge after his attacks on the Dantonists and the Hébertists. A struggle for power ensued, which was won by the Convention, and Robespierre and his followers were arrested. The next day, 9 Thermidor, he was summarily executed. Robespierre's death signaled the end of the reign of Terror, which had started with the expulsion of the Girondins. The ensuing power-vacuum was quickly filled by a close-knit group of politicians and intellectuals, who went on to rule France during the Directory and the early years of the Consulate. These new power-brokers remained influential until 1804, when Napoleon Bonaparte, whose rise they had made possible, stamped out all opposition. In that brief period of time, the Thermidorians valiantly attempted to establish a middle ground between the despotism of the Old Regime and Jacobin anarchy.¹

Andrew Jainchill's important new book, Reimagining Politics After the Terror, focuses on the particular political culture created by the 'republican center', as he describes the group of politicians and intellectuals in power between 1794 and 1804. Spurred by a common determination to re-found politics and to turn the Republic away from the Terror, the Thermidorians set out to create a property-based political system and to re-educate the citizenry, while overseeing the military conquest of Europe. They were supported by famous intellectuals such as Benjamin Constant and Germaine de Staël as well as by now forgotten but fascinating thinkers like Charles Théremin. While the republican center had its hey-day from 1794 to 1799, it fractured, as Jainchill shows, after the coup of 18 Brumaire in 1799. Some of its members, like Sieyès and Pierre-Louis Roederer, became propagators of Napoleon's authoritarianism, while others, such as Benjamin Constant or Charles de Villers, created, in response, a liberal opposition which would form the basis of French Liberalism in the nineteenth century.

The result is a book destined to become staple reading for any student of modern political thought. The conclusions proposed by Jainchill far surpass his seemingly narrow focus on the Directory and the Consulate. Instead, his book must be seen as a contribution to the long-ranging debate about the relationship between Old Regime republicanism and modern-age liberalism. Jainchill uses his research on political culture between 1794 and 1804 to make a case for 'the republican origins of French liberalism', as he puts it in the subtitle to his book. The post-Terror period, he argues, was a 'watershed,' during which the classical republicanism of Old Regime Europe was transformed into a mode of thinking which still had many of the familiar tenets of classical republicanism, such as an emphasis on active political participation, but which combined these with a recognizably modern or liberal emphasis on civil liberty.² Jainchill argues that this merger of republicanism and liberalism had a profound impact on nineteenth-century French Liberalism, which remained long characterized by the liberal-republican tenets of the post-Terror period.

In making this argument, Jainchill draws upon a growing body of research, mostly by Anglophone scholars, which points to the influence of classical republicanism on the political debate in revolutionary and post-revolutionary France.³ In his seminal book Inventing the French Revolution, and more recently in an article on the 'Transformations of Classical


Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France, Keith Baker has argued that the language of classical republicanism played a
key role in the French Revolution. Classical republicanism, Baker argues, was widely used in eighteenth century France as an
oppositional discourse, drawing both on English sources and on the writings of indigenous republicans such as Mably and
Rousseau. It is therefore hardly surprising that it became a dominant language of the French Revolution. However, according
to Baker, during the Revolution classical republicanism was transformed in ways that made it from an oppositional into a
truly revolutionary language. This transformation ultimately allowed for the Jacobin Terror and created an important
backlash against republicanism during the Directory.

While subscribing to Baker’s overall analysis, Jainchill qualifies it in an important way. Unlike Baker, Jainchill does not
believe that classical republicanism reached its apogee in the political discourse of the Terror to disappear thereafter. If the
Jacobin emphasis on virtue had classical-republican overtones, their ideals were more deeply influenced by traditions
foreign to classical republicanism, such as a messianic chiliasm. As a result, post-Terror politicians saw classical
republicanism, with its emphasis on political elitism and its historicist overtones, as a natural antidote to the populist and
messianic ideals of the Jacobins. So instead of creating a new political language, the Thermidorians reached back to a
traditional, classical-republican ideology as the intellectual foundation of their rule. The subsequent transition to a more
‘modern’ republicanism was triggered, not by the Terror, but by the coup d’état of Brumaire. The increasingly dictatorial
tendencies of the First Consul led members of the republican center to a stronger emphasis on civil liberties, while at the
same time encouraging them in the conviction that political participation was a necessary prerequisite for that civil liberty.

Jainchill develops this complex argument with considerable skill. He starts by explaining, in Chapter 1, how the
republican center reached back to classical republican tropes to underpin their new Constitution. The evidence he provides
to support this claim is overwhelming. During the debates on the Constitution of the Year III, for instance, classical-
republican themes were paramount, replacing the more democratic ideals of the Year II. There was a lot of talk about the
need to create a balanced constitution, although the framers of the constitution ended up diving power along functional lines
rather than creating checks and balances. The framers also agreed that the citizenry should be property-based and should be
able to prove that they could read and write, which was seen as a sign of independence. For this reason, public instruction
was given a pedestal; the state would teach children ‘republican morality.’ This preoccupation with morality also led to the
proclamation of duties as well as rights, which sought to orient the population’s disposition towards the public good.

In Chapter 2, Jainchill further explores the post-Terror preoccupation with public morality, highlighting its reliance on the
language of classical republicanism. He shows that an educational program fostering republican moeurs was seen as crucial
to the maintenance of the republic. In best republican tradition, the Directory constantly worried that, if moeurs were
allowed to become corrupt, the decline and fall of the French Republic would become as inevitable as that of its Roman
predecessor. As a result, they undertook some of the most aggressive state-sponsored didactic projects of the entire
Revolution. They subsidized books and journals on a massive scale, and at the same time they established a strict censorship.
In 1797, for instance, no less than seventy-four journals were closed down in a crackdown. Even more important than control
over the press was public instruction. A complete overhaul of the national system for public education was the result. The
goal of the overhaul was to create an intellectual elite through the founding of the National Institute, an elite which would in
turn embark on reforming the nation’s moeurs. To inculcate republican moeurs among the population at large, the republican
center turned towards a civil religion. Although there was an official division between Church and state, the center promoted
public festivals and théophilianthropie, a theistic religion emphasizing morality, simplicity, and the public good.

In Chapter 3, Jainchill turns to two key players of the Directory who modernized these tropes and blended them into their
own unique ‘modern’ republicanism. Charles-Guillaume Théremin, an original but now forgotten thinker who it is to
Jainchill’s credit to have rediscovered, blended his republicanism with a Kantian emphasis on women’s rights to participate
in the polity, thus creating a distinctive form of modern republicanism. More conventional perhaps was Germaine de Stael’s
reworking of the republican tradition. She came up with an ‘aristocratic’ liberal republicanism, which put great emphasis on
the necessity of a ‘conserving power’, which Stael herself explicitly described as an ‘aristocratic institution’. It is worth
emphasizing that, according to Jainchill, these post-Terror, ‘modernized’ versions of republicanism put a greater emphasis on
political liberty than did previous attempts to re-think the republican tradition, such as those of the Girondins.

Chapter 4 turns to post-Terror debates about foreign policy between 1794 and 1799, which, as Jainchill reminds us, were
as much determined by the transition from a classical to a modern republicanism as the debates about domestic policy. In
this period, republican France was emerging as the Continent’s hegemonic power. In typical classical-republican vein, the
Directory worried that this foreign expansion might herald the transition from Republic to Empire and hence the demise of
the Republic. But in response, modern republicans, led by Théremin, argued that the novel invention of representative
government allowed the Republic to expand without posing a danger to its survival. Despite this opposition, the classical
republicans won the day, which led to the creation of a bewildering number of sister-republics. Outright annexation was
reserved for territories seen as the natural frontiers of France, such as Belgium and the Rhineland.

4 Note that Jainchill’s take on Thermidor and its aftermath differs substantially from James Livesey’s description of the Directory in the latter’s Making
Democracy, as a regime during which a ‘democratic culture’ exemplifying a new kind of modern republicanism was created, ‘democratic of necessity, committed to the defense of equality and the idea that the labor of every person qualified him or her for participation in political life.’ Livesey, Making
Democracy, 148.
In Chapter 5, Jainchill turns his attention to what he describes as the emerging 'liberal authoritarianism' (a term borrowed from Howard Brown⁵) introduced after the coup of 18 Brumaire. The overthrow of the Directorial regime attempted to end political instability by the creation of a new political order and, France being France, the proclamation of a new constitution. The Constitution of the Year VIII was the brainchild of Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès and Pierre-Louis Roederer, both of which had been marked intellectual opponents of classical republicanism from the beginning of the French Revolution. They started from the idea that personal liberty was best preserved by the creation of a strong central authority, thus breaking with the intellectual and political suppositions of classical republicanism. The new constitution famously restricted political liberty by establishing a complex electoral process designed to generate an elite of notables from among the population and by assigning an overarching power to the First Consul. As a result, it was both 'antidemocratic and antipolitical'.⁶

Where did that leave more liberal-leaning members of the republican center? Jainchill answers that question in Chapter 6, which can be seen as the most important of his book. He makes clear that, while most members of the republican center initially supported the coup of Brumaire, the growing authoritarianism quickly led to a fissure between Bonaparte and his collaborators and more liberal-leaning Brumarians such as P.C.F. Daunou and Marie-Joseph Chénier, who made the defense of civil liberty the cornerstone of their opposition against Napoleon. In the ensuing debate, key elements of classical republicanism ceded place to these more liberal concerns. But at the same time, Napoleon's opponents remained convinced that liberty could only be preserved in a republic with an active political life. The resulting amalgam, a 'liberal' or 'modern' republicanism – terms which Jainchill uses interchangeably – was not a coherent philosophy. The liberty defended by Napoleon's opponents tended to be a somewhat vague principle that took definite form only in relation to specific issues, Nevertheless, it was recognizably 'modern', and this modern liberty – the liberal Brumarians agreed – was best preserved by republican constitutional forms, more specifically, by an active political life, with a substantial degree of political liberty, albeit confined to virtuous political elites.

Jainchill shows how the liberal-republican opposition was first voiced indirectly through historical writings such as an essay on Lutheranism written by Charles de Villers which was a historical legitimation of republicanism as a form of government and thus an implicit criticism of Napoleon’s dictatorship. But it is really Benjamin Constant who emerges in Jainchill’s book as the hero of the new, emerging liberal/modern republicanism. Constant’s 1803 manuscript On the Possibility of a Republican Constitution in a Large Country, his first attempt at a systematic political treatise, is described by Jainchill as the ‘single most important articulation of the nascent liberal-republican kernel of French Liberalism.’⁷ In this treatise, Constant started from the classical-republican argument that liberty was only possible in a republic, in which citizens ruled themselves. Monarchies were by nature violent and oppressive. He emphasized that experiences of the Revolution should not be allowed to discredit popular political participation, although he proposed to restrict the vote to property-holders. But the major goal of this constitutional architecture was unabashedly liberal: to preserve individual liberties.

For those who are familiar with the more recent work on Benjamin Constant, Jainchill’s depiction of this thinker as a liberal-republican, rather than a staunch defender of ‘negative’ liberty, will not come as a surprise. Helena Rosenblatt, for instance, made the case for Constant’s ‘republicanism’ in an important article on his writings of the Restoration period.⁸ But by focusing on Constant’s long-neglected manuscript, which was published for the first time in 1991, Jainchill allows us to see that the former’s emphasis on the value of political liberty was not simply a response to the authoritarianism of the Restoration monarchy. Instead, we can now understand that his republicanism was far more central to his thought and by extension, to the French liberal tradition of which Constant was one of the most important founding fathers. French liberalism, as Jainchill makes clear, was formed just as much by the experience of Napoleon’s dictatorship as it was by the experience of the Terror, and this prevented it from ever abandoning political liberty completely for civil liberty. Indeed, according to Jainchill, Constant’s manuscript ‘anticipated the key traits of French Liberalism’ as it would ‘flower in France the first half of nineteenth century.’⁹

This point is further developed by Jainchill in his Epilogue. In Jainchill’s view, the liberal republicanism first formulated under the Directory and the Consulate came into its own in the first half of the nineteenth century. During the Restoration period, it was further elaborated in the writings of liberal political journalists and thinkers such as P.C.F. Danou, Jean-Denis Lanjuinais, and, of course, Benjamin Constant himself. But its culmination, in Jainchill’s view, was achieved in Alexis de Tocqueville’s Democracy in America. Tocqueville’s trepidations about privatization and citizen abandonment of public affairs, as well as his concern about the corrosive effects of luxury and his overarching concern that freedom and independence were intrinsically fragile and constantly at risk of being subsumed by encroaching despotism echoed trademark classical-republican anxieties. But while his thinking was clearly rooted in the early modern tradition, at the same time his concern about liberal and other more modern sentiments make clear that he was a transitional figure. In other words, Tocqueville was neither liberal nor republican, but stood with ‘one foot in each tradition’, representing ‘both the culmination and the concluding act of French liberal republicanism.’¹⁰

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⁵ Howard Brown, Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon (University of Virginia Press, 2006).

⁶ Jainchill, Reimagining Politics, 241.

⁷ See footnote 6, 275.


⁹ Jainchill, Reimagining Politics, 244 and 285.

¹⁰ See footnote 9, 305–6.
By casting Tocqueville as the ultimate heir to the liberal-republican tradition, Reimagining Politics After the Terror ends on an ambitious note. However, I would argue that Jainchill’s efforts to depict Tocqueville exclusively as Benjamin Constant’s successor also bring home the limits of his analysis. There is no doubt that Tocqueville’s ‘strange’ liberalism (to use Roger Boesche’s term)\(^{11}\) drew heavily on the language of classical republicanism. Nevertheless, Tocqueville, in contradistinction to Constant, cannot be pegged simply as a liberal-republican. Tocqueville’s obsession with the rise of social democracy, his growing fears that the disappearance of an aristocracy had permanently disabled France’s capacity for liberty, especially in his later work, all point to his indebtedness to a different tradition in political thought, a tradition more tributary to Montesquieu’s defense of the limited monarchy as the most suitable guarantee for liberty, than to classical republicanism. In turn, this helps to remind us that modern political thought cannot simply be seen as a debate between republicans, classical or otherwise.\(^{12}\)

But that reflection does not detract in any way from the overall value of Jainchill’s book. Reimagining Politics After the Terror is a remarkable achievement in many ways, developing a strong central thesis with great cogency and elegance. Liberalism might never have gained the political or intellectual ascendency in France that it did in the Anglophone world. But, as Jainchill points out, if liberalism’s history in France is characterized by failure, this failure was punctuated by ‘towering intellectual achievement’.\(^{13}\) Reimagining Politics After the Terror manages to capture one of the most important moments in that fascinating history.

Annelien de Dijn  
U.C. Berkeley, Berkeley, United States  
E-mail address: adedijn@berkeley.edu

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\(^{12}\) For the late-eighteenth-century response to Montesquieu’s provocative defense of the limited monarchy and its influence on revolutionary thinkers such as Pierre-Louis Roederer, see Michael Sonenscher’s fascinating study *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton University Press, 2008). For Montesquieu’s continuing influence in the post-revolutionary period, see my recent book: Annelien de Dijn, *French Political Thought From Montesquieu to Tocqueville: Liberty in a Levelled Society* (Cambridge University Press, 2008). Note that Tocqueville’s interest in the growth of social democracy was also inspired by his reading of the Doctrinaires, as has been shown by Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lexington Books, 2003).

\(^{13}\) Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics*, 287.