

# Bonaparte, the liberator

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IN THE BEGINNING of 1792, when the most dramatic changes of the Revolution had not yet been produced, and, however, the European powers considered the hypothesis of performing a military intervention in France in order to grant again to Louis XVI (who had been discredited before his people due to the escape from Varennes) his full power, in Paris the “party of the war” was represented by the Girondists, particularly by Brissot and Dumouriez. In April 20, with the so-called “Girondist cabinet”, the declaration of war was issued. As the emperor of Austria had not responded to the French ultimatum, Maximilien Robespierre lined up, as of the first moment, against the choice of war. He was not, then, a member of the new parliament, the legislative assembly, but performed his battle in the club of the Jacobins, an important “pressure” group, but which was not yet a force of government. As of January the 2nd, Robespierre vigorously declared himself against the war, that is, especially against the Girondist pretense, or illusion, that “liberty” could be “exported”. “The most extravagant idea” said Robespierre,

that can be born in the mind of a political man is to believe that, for a people, it suffices to invade the territory of a foreign people at gunpoint to make them adopt their laws and their constitution. Nobody loves the armed missionaries; the first advice that nature and prudence offer is to repel them as enemies.

And further: “Wanting to grant freedom to other nations before having achieved it ourselves means to ensure, at the same time, our servitude and the servitude of the whole world.”

His speech shines due to its historical and political solidity. Robespierre (2000, t.VIII, p.81-2) reminds the Jacobins that the Revolution had been launched by the upper classes:

The parliaments, the noblemen, the clergy, the wealthy people were the ones that drove the Revolution forward; the people appeared only afterwards. They changed their minds or wanted, at least, to stop the Revolution when they realized that the people could recover their sovereignty; but they were the ones that started it. Without their resistance and their mistaken calculations, the nation would still be under the domination of the despotism.

And he continues:

For that reason, in order to successfully ‘export’ liberty (that is, the Revolution) it would be required to count on the support from the upper classes in the

countries on which we intend to focus our action. But now those classes, well warned of how the situation in France evolved, will avoid repeating the ‘mistake’ performed in France by their homologues! Even in Brabant” – he observes -, “where the Revolution had been initiated before starting in France, but had been stopped afterwards, we will not find, not even there, the success and the reception imagined by those that put pressure so that freedom is exported.

Against the venom that is present in every war adventure, Robespierre had fought even before, in his speech of December 18, 1791, addressed, as a pamphlet, not to the club anymore, but directly to the legislative assembly:

The war is always the major desire of a powerful government, which wishes to become more powerful still. It goes without saying that it is during the war that [...] the government enshrouds, under an impenetrable veil, its robberies and its mistakes. On the contrary, I will talk to you about what is directly closer to our interests. It is precisely during the war that the executive power expands its terrible energy and exercises a kind of dictatorship, which buries freedom. It is during the war that the people forget about the deliberations concerning to their civil and political rights.

History proceeded in another direction. The Girondists led France towards the war. At the beginning, the war was marked by failures that determined the psychosis of treason and of the “inner enemy” (which effectively existed). The king responded to the emergency measures propounded by the Girondist ministers by banishing them from the government. The people’s rebellion against this irresponsible gesture led to the insurrection of August 10, 1792, to the imprisonment of the king, to the killings of September, to the unexpected victory of Valmy, to the trial and death sentence of the former sovereign by the new assembly, the Convention. In face of such gesture of complete rupture with the past, the “first coalition” was born, and the responsibility of taking the war up to the end got to the hands of the new Jacobin government “of public rescue”. Thus, those men were forced to engage into the politics of war and permanent emergency to which, led by Robespierre, they were opposed.

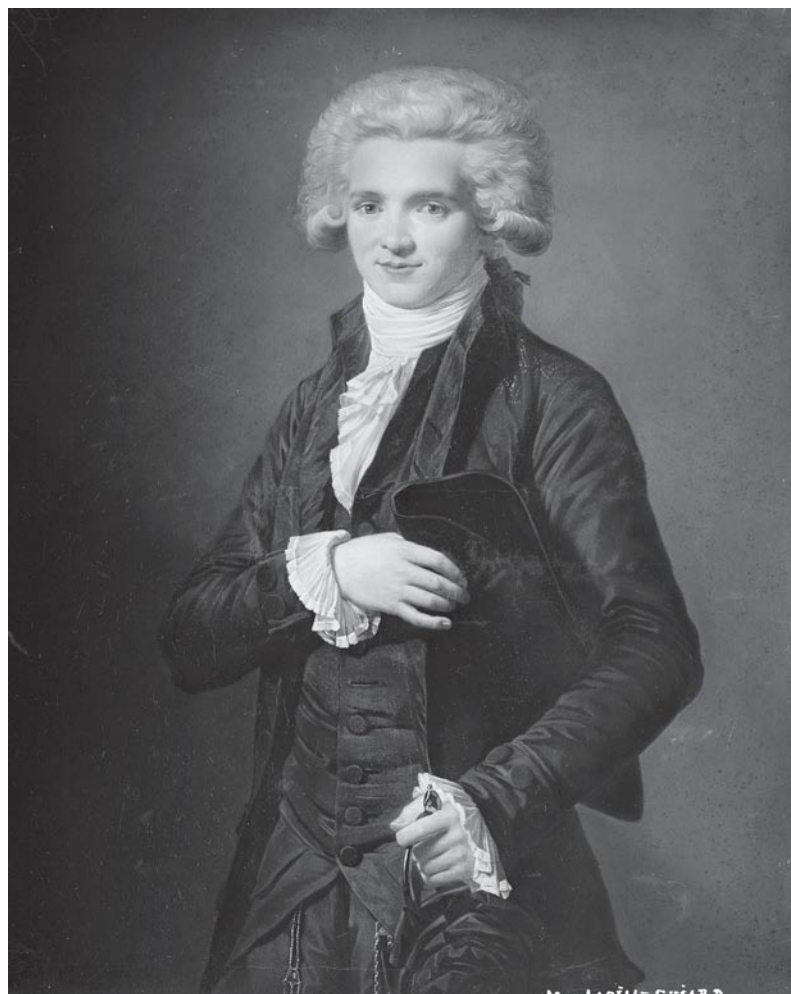
However, by becoming offensive, the war originated a double process: the claim, which was very strong in the Convention, of the “natural boundaries” of France (therefore, a potential politics of annexation), and the firm persuasion that the war expenses should be faced by extracting resources from the “liberated” countries.

The decree of December 15, 1792 was promulgated, eliminating any hope of “gradualism” supported by the European Jacobins, mainly Italians and Belgians. A single policy was applied for all “liberated” countries: the imposition of the assignat (the currency that was causing inflation in France, a situation which was worsened by the treacherous and systematic issue, into the market, of false assignats by the English); the confiscation of the properties of the clergy, of the overthrown government and its adherents; the implementation of the

democratic (elective) system, but excluding the political rights of all “suspects”. Thus, a dictatorship of local Jacobin minorities, propped on the French forces, was created. Nevertheless, the annexations caused those minorities’ reputation to become worse still: Savoy, Nice, Oneglia, Belgium, Rhineland, Basel.

Concurrently to the internal evolution of France - from Robespierre’s fall, to the Thermidor, the Directory, the Consulate -, an evolution that had its summit in the personal power and the Empire, the war that “brought freedom” and democracy to the remainder of Europe became a war of conquest, concealed by an ideological screen that was always less reliable. Bonaparte’s role in this inversion is central. He tried, as much as possible, to profit from the prestige capital that the Revolution had acquired with the progressionist and revolutionary elites of the whole Europe. As much as possible, he played the role of “sword of the Revolution”, a role in which he himself, cynically, did not believe, while pursuing a politics of power in the newborn “French Empire”.

Hence, it is not a reason for awe that, to the alignment of the Jacobin and, anyway, pro-French elites in the “liberated” countries, more and more



*Maximilien  
de Robespierre  
(1758 – 1794).*

Photo: Agence France Presse

subaltern and, therefore, destined to the political defeat, corresponded a public discontentment against the French, the Empire and the Revolution that had been, even in an unpredictable fashion, its matrix. And it is equally easy to understand how this “people” has found in the traditional symbols of the Ancient Regime its point of reference and its guide. From the Naples of 1799 to the Spain of 1807, to the Russia of 1812, to the Germany of 1813.

Obviously, verifying this inversion and this failure of the “export of liberty” (lucidly intuited by Robespierre when the Revolution had not yet become the external war) does not mean to imply that that tormented period, of nearly fifteen years, has not produced anything new, or that it has not left deep traces in the end. In this contradiction, in this transformation of Europe by means of a system of power that represents the complete reversal of the liberating revolution, the Jacobinism crisis was consumed, in primis European, almost never able to be at a distance from the French Empire and its charismatic leader: a crisis that ran the risk, for a rather long period, of restituting the populations to the Ancient Regime.

In order to overcome such a significant defeat, decades and several factors were required: radically new ideas, the new protagonism of social classes that

Photo: Agence France Presse



*Napoleon Bonaparte*  
(1769 – 1821)

had just emerged, the crisis of the moderate liberal solution, pale and alternative, destined to defeat in face of the vigorous sternness, even if counterproductive, of the coryphaei of the “Holy Alliance”. However, a thread subsists that links – in the individual biography of some and in the reconsideration of the starting points that the Bonapartist Caesarism had caused, little by little, to vanish – the “old” survivors to the “new” revolutionaries. Those that study these events can usefully resort to the literature, in addition to the historic, legal and economic documentation.

The Oration to Bonaparte for the congress of Lyon (1802), by Ugo Foscolo, is a pathetic and sad testimony, emblematic of the *forma mentis* of a man that, in spite of the disappointments, remained as a Jacobin until the end. On the other hand, Napoleon’s brutal Realpolitik choice of returning Venice (a democratic republic by then!) to Austria due to the Campofornio peace (April, 1797) froze the young Foscolo, who had imprudently exalted Bonaparte the liberator in verse. But afterwards, as often occurred subsequently also with other “liberators”, the certainty that, “in spite of everything”, and even if restrained within the clamps of the required “realism”, Bonaparte remained a “liberator” prevailed in Foscolo like in so many other militants.<sup>1</sup> (The fact should not be excluded that Napoleon continued to regard himself as such. But when the selfishness of a great power is persuaded that its own interest is also the general interest, and does not realize that, in the meantime, it is irremediably losing bits, even from vital pieces, this means, as a matter of fact, that the game was lost; it does not matter for how long.)

The unfortunate Foscolo, in 1802, writes seriously: “I will name you, therefore, Bonaparte, with the unheard-of title of LIBERATOR OF PEOPLES AND FOUNDER OF REPUBLICS. Thus the tall, unique, immortal you will dominate eternity”. We could well say that, here, there is nothing missing of what, in another time and for another charismatic personality, was defined as “cult of the personality”. But Foscolo goes on: “redeemer of France, terror of the tyrants and demagogues, Mars of Marengo, lord of victory and fortune, friend of the sacred Muses, cultivator of sciences, extremely profound expert in human beings”, and, further on, “invincible captain, legislator, philosopher”.

Only after a couple of years, the assumption to the imperial title by the one that was still perceived by his own as the first general of the Republic will lead Beethoven to call off the dedication of his *Eroica*, initially offered to Napoleon.

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The first book of *War and peace* begins with a memorable scene. It is about a conversation between the noblemen in the inviting residence of the earls Rostov, the chaotic, nice and hospitable family that makes the center of the whole novel. There, Tolstoy places on the stage the embarrassing apology of Napoleon – we are at the eve of Austerlitz -, pronounced by the real protagonist of the whole novel, Pierre Besuchoff, destined, afterwards, by the author’s will, to a very different ideal and religious evolution. The pretext for the vivacious



dialectic confrontation, rigorously in French, the second language of the Russian aristocracy back then, is always the execution by a fire-squad of the earl d'Enghien (March 21, 1804): battle-horse of the anti-Napoleonic propaganda. The shooting was desired by Napoleon and decreed by an extraordinary court martial, for the reatus of conspiracy against the first consul.

Tolstoy, who is identified at a great extent with his character along its whole evolution, offers, through Pierre, a whole anthology of pro-Napoleonic argumentations, which represent very well the authentic feeling of the Russian Jacobins: ultra-minority in their country, but stubbornly dedicated to provide meaning and logic to the long and certainly non-linear event of the Revolution; and, moreover, decided to offer to themselves, above all others, a justification for their own choices. "Napoleon is great" – Pierre says - "because he has placed himself above the Revolution, repressed its abuses, retaining what it possessed of good – the equality of the citizens, the freedom of speech and press – and for that reason he conquered power". And he adds: "The execution of the earl d'Enghien was a political necessity, and it is precisely in this that I see Napoleon's greatness of spirit: he did not fear to take on upon himself, and himself alone, the responsibility for that act!" "Dieu, mon Dieu! (Lord, o my Lord!) - Anna Pavlovna whispered, terrified -; Comment, M. Pierre, vous trouvez que l'assassinat est grandeur d'âme?! (You mean, Mr. Pierre, that you regard murder as greatness of spirit?!)" – said the little princess, smiling and resuming her needlework. Several voices rose. Capital! - said, in English, the prince Hippolyte, and started to slap his own knees".

I say so - proceeded Pierre passionately, looking over his spectacles – because the Bourbons fled in face of the Revolution, leaving the people in anarchy; only Napoleon knew how to understand the Revolution, how to overmaster it; and, for this reason, he could not, for the general good, be detained in face of the life of one man.

"Wouldn't you like to move to this other table?" said Anna Pavlovna. "No". And Pierre went on with his speech. Next, it will be up to the prince Andrei, the defeated protagonist of the great novel, to conclude, with aristocratic coldness. "In the actions of a man of State – he said – it is necessary to distinguish those of the private man from those of the leader or emperor. That is what it seems to me". And also for him, who would shortly be in Austerlitz, Napoleon remains always, so far, as for his friend Pierre, "the one that understood the Revolution, the one that succeeded in overmastering it".

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Those men had warned about the change that had been produced, and, yet, justified the historical and most immediately political reasons for such change: they sought to put especially themselves in order.

The mutation, however, had begun way before the meteoric ascension of the first consul. One document appears, on this regard, quite enlightening. It

was published for the first time in the *Mémoires* of Louis-Marie La Révellière-Lépeaux (1743-1824), member of the pro-Girondist Convention, then member of the Directory.<sup>2</sup>

In it we can read the guideline, at the same time political and military, promulgated by the Directory and addressed to the command that was responsible for the operations in Italy. It concerns to how the allies should be treated. The date is important: the embryonic 18 of the year V – April 7, 1797, ten days previous to Campoformio.

A couple of passages follow:

The executive Directory has considered the situation of Italy following your victories and your wise politics. This situation is such that leads us, reasonably, to conceive the hope of establishing a powerful barrier between the French Republic and the House of Austria, and, at the same time, to be able to reap an equally rewarding and glorious fruit from your success, that is, the freedom of a great portion of Italy.

However, the Directory felt that it should not cling to a party that was so immutable to the extent of making impossible, or, at least, distancing too much the salutary work of peace, unless the honor and salvation of the citizens of those places would not be endangered by a premature indulgence on what concerned to their repeated requests for independence or by letting them act in consequence.

Two powerful reasons should then and should still cause us to constantly resist to the granting of those wishes. The first one is the great inconvenience of exposing them to the cruelest revenges, as we have already said; and the other is the huge risk of driving to the revolution a people whose territory we militarily occupy, which could disorganize the army and exhaust the resources that we should exploit in order to support it and ensure its subsistence.

On the other hand, it would be extremely important not leaving Lombardy in the turmoil it is in. It is indispensable to do something to appease the restlessness that the uncertain conditions of the country cause to its own inhabitants, and it is also mandatory that you withdraw from the uncomfortable position in which you are in its confrontations. Such position could, sooner or later, cause you great embarrassments [...] If they do not possess a stable and solid form of government already, they will devour each other by themselves without affirming their freedom, while the neighboring kings and the neighboring oligarchies will certainly keep them in an anarchic chaos that is so particularly unfortunate for the interests of the French Republic as for those of the representative system in general.

The conclusion is lapidary: “The Government should be in action everywhere, but the legislative will, while we remain here, should be manifested only by you”.

A relevant text, since it places under our eyes the issue that occupies the center of the whole drama, destined to be replicated in history. That is, that already in the mind of your leaders, the guardianship of the selfish interest of the country that launched, with immense sacrifices, an epochal mutation, is inextricable from the certainty that it coincides with everybody's interest: also of those that, for using the language of the time, did not wish to "be liberated". A diagnosis that becomes, with time, more and more indigestible. Among the Neapolitan Jacobin deportees in France, for instance, it will not be difficult to find those that will consider physically eliminating the main responsible (in their opinion) for the degeneration of the French foreign policy into a power politics: that is, the first consul. In this picture the conspiracy associated to the so-called "attempt Ceracchi" (October 1800) ripens, sternly repressed by the first consul with proscriptions and capital punishments. The sternness and even the spirit of conquest belong to human "nature". And certainly we, protected by the wisdom of the coming generations, will not be the ones to marvel at it. The revolutions will still be the "locomotives of history"; but, unavoidably, and maybe imperceptibly, the time comes in which those "locomotives" find themselves terribly belated on what concerns to a history that continues to proceed, and which, within this period, crushed men, lives, ideas, under its weight.

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In face of the concrete execution of the conquest politics of the "liberators", the European Jacobinism was put to a test from which it came out irrevocably marked. Nevertheless, it has set apart for us a heritage of ideas and of criticism, at the very moment in which it was forced, by the sternness of history, to overcome itself, to transcend its own originary dimension and its own starting horizon.

Such overcoming happened in the cross fire of both experiences that occurred within this period of years. On one hand, those are the deterioration of the relationship with the "liberators"; on the other hand, the terrible (and, for the Neapolitan Republic, lethal) welding between "public" response and Ancien Régime. A welding that imposes on every Jacobin (and, it could be said, on the Jacobins of all times) the question that is self-critical par excellence, and remains always open: Where have we been mistaken?

## Notes

- 1 Moreover, Gramsci will not talk in the Quaderni, about the first Bonaparte, of "positive Caesarism"?
- 2 The Mémoires were published fifty years after his death. This document is kept in the National Archives of Paris, under the indication A.F., III, 442, N.2. Its transcription can be found in the "Private record of the secret decrees and deliberations", no. 306.



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*ABSTRACT* - This essay aims to analyze the ambiguities in the liberation war conducted by the French revolutionaries in several European countries. It follows the limits, which are not always so clear, between the attempts of “exporting the revolution” and the realization of a “war of conquest”. The different positions taken by the Jacobins and the Girondists regarding this matter and the reaction to the French presence of the populations that were “freed” or “dominated” by Napoleon are also considered.

*KEYWORDS* - Revolution, War, Freedom, Robespierre, Napoleon Bonaparte.

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