

# BOOKS

## POLITICS AS THEATER AND A BATTLE WITH TIME<sup>1</sup>

BY JAN TOKARSKI

### I

The French Revolution is a matrix of modern politics. It is like a dressing room in which – even before we enter the political scene – we can stock up on all the necessary props, masks, and costumes. Both the Revolution's supporters and its most ardent opponents come out onto the stage – all changed and formed according to its style; both those who attempt with all their might to break with the past and create a new Arcadian tomorrow, and those whose deepest passion is to cut themselves off from the Revolution, and erase its meaning. However, both remain within the sphere of the imaginaries and symbols created by the Revolution. Because, as Bronisław Baczko noted in the final work published before his death last year, revolution is 'the period when the symbolic tissue of social life violently expands when in collective life the symbolic dimension takes on crucial importance.'<sup>2</sup> Revolution is 'the time of matrices', which distinguishes itself through an 'intensive production of insignia, performances, and discourses of political practices. During a revolution, the way in which the events are being portrayed, oftentimes means more than the events themselves. Symbols and the symbolic significance take precedence over motivations and mobilize massive energies.'<sup>3</sup> Politics – like every place in which people perform in front of other people – is, more than anything, a stage.

### II

What kinds of figures, what kinds of characters can we see on this stage? Who appears reflected in the revolutionary mirror? In the first place, the one who is the beneficiary of the *ancien regime* appears. We can find a psychological portrait of this type of person, for instance, in Sieyès. Baczko cites one of the initiators of the 1789 Revolution: 'The privileged one...endlessly focuses his eyes on the noble past. He sees there all his titles, his whole strength, deriving from their ancestors. The bourgeoisie, to the contrary,

<sup>1</sup> The essay above is an edited version of a text which appeared in the journal *Kronos* 21 (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Bronisław Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, (Gdańsk: W. Dłuski, 2010), 67.

<sup>3</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza nadzieje rozterki*, 34.

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turns its gaze to the wretched [from the perspective of the aristocracy, J.T.] present time. [He] 'is' and not 'was'... Oh! Why can't the privileged one travel back in time to relish in his titles, splendor and bequeath the present moment, along with its entire wretchedness, to the stupid nation:<sup>4</sup> The privileged aristocrat thus looks down on the representatives of the Third Estate. However, Sieyès' description also reflects contempt of the revolutionaries for the privileged. The desire to improve people's lives mixes here with resentment in such a way that the two ingredients cannot be separated from each other anymore.

After the 'privileged one', who is responsible for the existing oppression, 'the emancipator', revolutionary, 'the new political actor', comes onto the scene. Revolutionaries are, as Baczko writes, 'primarily supporters of some new ideas, who engage in political action and share in the general enthusiasm. Unique events, particularly those which cause the movement of masses, mold leaders who suddenly break through to the top and whose careers quite often end abruptly.'<sup>5</sup>

These two characters – the privileged one and the emancipator – and the tension that arises between them are enough to make a revolution do what it's supposed to, that is, to disintegrate time, and split into two the continuity of history so far undeterred. We watch this event as if we were spectators in a theater. 'The scene: an open cityscape, streets and squares. The actor: the crowd, fairly large, from a few thousand up to about 20,000 or even 30,000 people. Duration: a short time not more than two days. Legitimation: the movement relies on fundamental democratic legitimacy, due to the 'rising people' and older than any legal order. The method of action: a demonstration of strength, and in certain cases: violent altercations.'<sup>6</sup> That is how a revolution is made. In the uniform rhythm of time a radical division is introduced – a turning point, a zero hour.

### III

Let's pause for a moment at the issue of revolution's legitimacy and, expressing it somewhat more precisely, its relationship to modern democracy. Baczko noted, 'historically, revolutionary upheaval and the development of democracy are intertwined phenomena that are reliant on one another'. But beyond the similarities there are also differences. Although in both cases there is some talk about the citizen, about the individual and their inalienable rights, revolution and democracy do not lend themselves to be associated with one another. On the contrary, they 'work' differently. They are separated by a difference of rhythm and perspective. 'In fact, revolutionary crises and upheavals, and especially the moments of culmination during which the people are mobilized en masse and rise up, put

<sup>4</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza nadzieje rozterki*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza nadzieje rozterki*, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza nadzieje rozterki*, 36.

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representative institutions to a difficult test. Particularly from a long-term perspective it can be seen that revolutionary upsurge and democracy do not work in the same temporal dimension. Revolution situates itself in the short term and sets out enormous goals: to establish liberty and equality, to lead to the triumph of good and virtue, to ensure the happiness and well-being of each person, to institute justice, right wrongs and punish the perpetrators. Democratic institutions, on the other hand, work in the long term and intend to meet limited goals: to guarantee citizens the freedom to exercise their rights, particularly voting, to establish a state of law and equality before the law, to create a new elite and cultivate a spirit of citizenship'. Thus revolution, 'reaches for the absolute and seems to place it within the reach of everyone'. Democracy, on the contrary, 'situates itself in the realm of relativity and certainly does not satisfy everyone.'<sup>7</sup>

And yet their joint entrance onto the political scene is not something accidental. Despite the many differences separating them, an intimate, even mysterious, bond ties democracy and revolution. One can say even more: they complement one another. Each one extracts from the other what is present in it, but what cannot be seen at first glance. Revolution reveals democracy to us as a revolutionary order; an order of equality and freedom, creating – as we know from de Tocqueville – a new type of man. Democracy, on the other hand, points to the aspiration to achieve a systemic whole that is contained in revolution, and therefore a desire to stop its own movement, so that it can become at last the *nouveau régime*. Revolution is thus inevitably accompanied by a conception of its own end. It is not quite clear how that end should look, nor which path should be taken to get there. 'For some, revolutionary goals were to be achieved quickly, and that could happen thanks to liberation and mobilization of enormous energies. For others however, the end was supposed to be near because the promises of the revolution are unfulfillable and the fire of passion lit by the demagogues will quickly dissipate.'<sup>8</sup> Democracy uncovers, however, that the fundamental element of revolution is not some noble idea, nor an ideology, but rather a question of time. A revolutionary is someone who first tries to disrupt its continuity and then to control the chaos he has caused.

#### IV

Bronisław Baczko writes, 'At the very heart of revolution we find its relationship to time: it presents and announces itself as a radical break with the continuity of history, a zero hour of history, dividing it into 'before' and 'after'. Nestled in eternal presentness, revolution brings an unappealable court case against the principles, values and symbols of a regime – the regime it drowned in the past for good. What the revolution is chiefly

<sup>7</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza nadzieje rozterki*, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza nadzieje rozterki*, 21.

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responsible for is the bursting of time, which it shattered into pieces on all planes of communal and individual life.<sup>9</sup>

Breaking up the continuity of time turns out to be a simultaneously unprecedented and ambiguous event. Unprecedented, because it marks the dawn of the modern age. The prevailing political order is now no longer treated as a reflection of a more elemental and 'natural' condition of reality. The theater of revolution appears in the moment when everything turned out to be theater. What had seemed to be a face, was just a mask. Those who govern are not God's anointed people. Power is only power and the rules of the collective life it invokes are its own rules, so they can be changed, and designed differently, in a more rational way. That's how utopia enters the political scene – a bold plan to build a new world, on the new principle of a new man. Politics is an art, the content of which is decided by us. Thus we can write its history anew, not giving in to any kind of fate (which is not real anyway). Bronisław Baczko writes in his work *The Lights of Utopia*, 'The sphere of imagination which infiltrates history and becomes reality, and the history that renews itself as if writing a 'novel' – these two attitudes characterize the 18th century encounter between utopia and the idea of progress. This is an encounter between images; one of another society breaking away from the social reality and opposing it, and an idea of history treated as a purely human work and a series of new things, the cumulative effect of which ensures continuity and purposefulness to the collective fate.'<sup>10</sup>

And precisely in this place the rupture of continuity turns out to be something ambiguous. Not only because it is supposed to establish a new and different continuity – a continuity of History inevitably making its way, step by step, to point Omega. It is ambiguous primarily because abandoning utopia, with time, becomes in an ever larger degree a part of the tangible experience of the revolutionaries themselves. In the course of time, Baczko writes, 'a new and ever more authoritarian power, does not need a citizens' utopia: it belongs on the junk heap because it can only bring more problems. Bonaparte extracts only a sense of the state from among the civic republican virtues he inherited, the one element he regards as fit for use. The revolution is over, the country suffers from a lack of public order, and not political activism. The achievements of the Revolution amount to property rights, guarantees of personal safety and equality before the law. The rest is only turbidity and chimera. The bond between the nation and their leader is direct. The providential man, elevated above abstract legal norms, embodies the will and the destiny of the nation...'<sup>11</sup> Rule by everyone becomes the rule of one. The Revolution passes into tyranny.

Something else happens too though, something totally unintentional from the perspective of the revolutionaries. The post-revolutionary nation, having passed through

<sup>9</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza nadzieje rozterki*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Bronisław Baczko, *Światła utopii*, (Warsaw: W. Dłuski, 2016), 164.

<sup>11</sup> Baczko, *Światła utopii*, 10.

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the turbulence of revolution, experiencing with full force the rupture of the continuity of time, 'does not want change at all, to the contrary, it feels as if there were too many changes, and the nation is saturated with them. The country needs lasting peace, a return to the continuity of its history, and a reconciliation of the new France with the old.'<sup>12</sup> A longing for the future is replaced with a longing for that which has passed. The exaltation over the idyll of the future society is superseded with a devout regard for the roots ripped out from the earth by the revolution. The final child of the revolution thus is the least expected one, the kind that the revolution will not be able to devour, that is: counterrevolutionary passion. It is that which (at least within the limits of its own plans and ambitions) 'restores continuity above the revolutionary rupture; it sets durability against the confusion of disjunctive time. In defiance of the pernicious fondness for faddism, it proclaims values sanctified through the ages. Against the critical and timid mind it defends the certainty of faith and internal sense of infinity's existence. Anticipations of the future are abstract, chimeric and empty. A man bereft of memory, blind, loses himself in his own life; whereas the people who are faithful to their past, regain their life-giving resources.'<sup>13</sup> The lights of utopia do not shine from the future anymore. Utopia is that which has passed on, the paradise that we lost and which we want to return to at all costs. The revolution and counter-revolution are two sides of the same coin.

## V

The experience of breaking the continuity of time therefore births a new figure, a new character: the counter-revolutionary. The one who, although he vehemently opposes the revolution, is forever marked by it. Jerzy Szacki wonderfully threw light on this in his book *Counterrevolutionary Paradoxes* – a book that is still underappreciated but rescued from obscurity through a reissue by the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences (IFIS PAN). It is worth reading alongside Baczkó's work not just because it would be an occasion for another respectful nod to a master who recently passed on.

In that work, Jerzy Szacki quoted Raymond Aron who wrote, 'Traditionalism always contains in itself a kind of contradiction. If ways of living and thinking handed down through generations can be called tradition, then it was first lived and then people were made aware of it. As much as it may be obvious, no one would put it that way. Collectivity uncovers the separateness of one's customs and values, comparing oneself to other communities. Because of this it weakens its own tradition which is no longer accepted without reflection, since it is clear that it is just one of many traditions. Traditional societies do

<sup>12</sup> Baczkó, *Światła utopii*.

<sup>13</sup> Baczkó, *Światła utopii*, 11.

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not know of traditionalism because they do not know distinctiveness.<sup>14</sup> Counterrevolution and traditionalism thus are chronically 'infected' with revolution. They find their ideological spokespersons at the moment when the break in time is already a *fait accompli*. Tradition begins to be defended as something living and apparent exactly when it turns out to be fake, when its authenticity has been questioned. Even more so, when one can see with their own eyes that it is certainly no holy order established by God, but just another man-made – arch-man-made – theater. This is a paradoxical – maybe even tragic – situation in life that counterrevolutionaries find themselves in. They are, as Szacki emphasized, 'spokesmen of a tradition which became irrevocably broken; the anti-philosophers who are forced to philosophize; uprooted ideologues of rootedness; organizers of counterrevolution which, in order to succeed, needs to be a new revolution. The more the *ancien régime* moved away from the past towards the sphere of dreams, the more the idea of counterrevolution had to be distinguished by a break with the past, the greatest expression of which was the contradiction between the two basic postulates of *restaurer* and *conserver*.'<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, this relationship to time defines not only the revolutionaries, but also their opponents. They can recognize the revolution as a *fait accompli* and oppose the consecutive radical takeovers. (De Maistre wrote: 'The project of pouring Lake Geneva into bottles is so much less crazy than the project of returning things to the same place they were in before the revolution.'<sup>16</sup>) Alternatively, they may recognize that the revolution should be undone, that it is necessary to bring about the next convulsions of history in the name of returning the pre-Revolutionary era, and all things will return to their natural place. There can be no agreement between conservation and restoration.

The paradox of the counterrevolution is predicated on the break which follows between that which is and that which should be. Thus counterrevolutionaries are inevitably divided into two internally troubled camps: 'some maintained that the 'former' is absolutely what should be, while others resigned from old obligations in the name of the primacy of what 'now is'. Unanimously praising tradition, they gave it two diametrically opposing interpretations: for some it was a ossified image of a good society, for others – a fluid principle of the continuity of social life. Some are demanding a restoration, others – a conservation. The *raison d'être* of the counterrevolutionary doctrine was a reconciliation of these two positions which was, in fact, impossible!<sup>17</sup>

However, the split between that which is and that which should be also applies to the revolutionaries. Once again, the imaginaries and symbols weigh more heavily on what

<sup>14</sup> Jerzy Szacki, *Kontrewolucyjne paradoksy. Wzję świata francuskich antagonistów Wielkiej Rewolucji 1795-1815* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Filozofii i Socjologii PAN; Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2012), 29-30.

<sup>15</sup> Szacki, *Kontrewolucyjne paradoksy*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> Szacki, *Kontrewolucyjne paradoksy*, 58.

<sup>17</sup> Szacki, *Kontrewolucyjne paradoksy*, 63.

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is happening than facts. In Baczko we read, 'The revolution creates an image of a break with the course of history. It is conceived as a moment when history breaks, when every dimension of collective life is subjected to a radical regeneration.'<sup>18</sup> It is accomplished through revolutionary violence. Importantly it does not amount 'solely to destruction and revenge, it is used consciously as a factor determining the sense of the events. In an extreme situation [and revolution belongs to such situations – J.T.] it fulfills a foundational function: it expresses in a radical way the will to establish a new social and moral order. Revolutionary change is inseparable from its range of expectations and hopes: revolution draws its strength not from the past it rejects, but from the future it summons. It stands for rebirth, its expectations hide inside themselves secularity and divinity, the promises of the Enlightenment and Christian eschatology, unity in prosperity and the exclusion of those who are not worthy; the imperative of social justice and faith in the pedagogy of emancipation.'<sup>19</sup>

However, reality never achieves that ideal – perhaps only in the blind imaginations of ideologues; while the violence, and the lust for retaliation and terror that accompanies it, become integral companions of revolution. Along with them, new figures and matrices of the events populate the political proscenium: the ideological accuser and political trial. These figures remain dynamic also when to grips with the epoch of the Thermidorian terror. Court hearings from the period of the revolution's 'petering out' were, as Baczko observes, 'trial-spectacles: the audience is numerous and displays its agitation violently. Tens of witnesses come before the court, each one brings their own piece of truth, the newspapers and brochures publish detailed accounts. The time for justice on the order of the day is also the time of menace on the order of the day. It marks a moment in which – at last – it became possible and justified to reveal the terrorist crimes which were obscured up to that moment, and it also became possible to publicly accuse those who were responsible for them.'<sup>20</sup>

It is not, however, a reckoning with the period of Terror that is the nightmare of those who wish to end the revolution. The main problem turns out to be the past whose shadow still hangs over the present. An ultimate break with the bygone era turns out to be impossible. 'History puts the revolutionary will of liberation from the reign of time to a difficult test, because the revolution only theoretically ensures control over history. In reality it discovers, often by circuitous routes, its irresistible continuity. It inscribes itself in the history which transcends it. Revolution launches events the course of which it cannot control. It announced abolition of the past but the past does not want to pass therefore revolution sees itself condemned to negotiating numerous compromises with it. Revolution shapes history in mysterious and twisted ways. It is a symbol of a rupture and

<sup>18</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, 35.

<sup>20</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, 114.



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yet it reties the thread of time anew. It is an image and matrix of universality even though, in its deepest sense, it is characteristically French. Tilted towards the future, it is constantly referring to the past.<sup>21</sup> In other words, 'the end of the revolution begins to dawn when, despite the expectation for a tabula rasa, the continuity of history returns to the conscious minds of the people.'<sup>22</sup>

What is needed to tie together the disentangled threads of time? How can one glue back together shattered pieces of that which is and that which was but does not want to finally come to pass? The situation demands the presence of a new actor – one who will delineate the symbolic arc connecting the bygone world with the one of today. In Baczko's opinion, this is accomplished by Napoleon. Once again let us focus our attention on the weight of gestures, symbols – not on what is going on backstage, but on that which is visible for all to see on the stage of political theater. Thus in 1800 Napoleon decides to move the ashes of Turenne, the marshal of France and legendary military leader from the times of Louis XIV, to St. Louis Church. What is the purpose of this action? The architect of it wants to 'glue back together pieces of time shattered by the Revolution'. Because after all, 'to end the Revolution also means to return (to?) France her history and unite her with her past (unite it with its past?)'.<sup>23</sup> Thus a modern despot appears on the stage – a savior for some, a tyrant for others. The people believe in him, but he believes in himself even more. Napoleon 'is cherishing the unwavering conviction that after all the shocks of the Revolution, only he is able to save France, and the people can only share this truth and feel it equally strong as he does'.<sup>24</sup> That is why the results of the plebiscite on the constitution of 24 Frimaire (15 December, 1799) are falsified by Lucien Bonaparte, Napoleon's brother. 'In the ultimate resolution (probably just 'in the end'); Baczko writes, 'the 'corrected' results of the plebiscite are meant to 'clean up' the tempestuous and random sources of power, and not the person who inherited it. Through his charisma, he is the one true representative of the people'.<sup>25</sup> Thus, 'the nation, the highest level of legitimacy comes full circle – from original unanimity to unanimity regained'.<sup>26</sup>

Summing up, in Bronisław Baczko's work we can see how revolutionaries have a problem with the rupture of the *ancien régime*. Whereas Jerzy Szacki – in the book I mentioned – reveals to us how counterrevolutionaries cannot free themselves from the Revolution. The game of continuity and breaks works here with a certain contrariness worthy of the Hegelian 'cunning of reason'. It is also visible at the level of language used by the antagonized parties of the conflict. 'The two contradictory rhetorics, revolutionary

<sup>21</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, 354.

<sup>22</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, 354.

<sup>23</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, 352-353.

<sup>24</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, 373.

<sup>25</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*.

<sup>26</sup> Baczko, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, 372.

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and counterrevolutionary, equate revolution with a giant natural disaster: a storm, a hurricane, volcanic eruption, earthquake, and so on. For some, such comparisons come to mind purely because of the destructive character of the revolution, for others such a comparison occurs because the revolution is an extraordinary moment: a redemptive crisis, through which history is renewed, like nature.<sup>27</sup> Revolution, its rhetoric and its symbols pulls everyone into its vortex. The masks and costumes it provides, and the roles that it proposes – though ever more transformed and distorted, reflected repeatedly – are also our masks, costumes, and roles. If – after Heidegger and the existentialists – we accept that man is ‘thrown into the world’, then we can also say that modern man is ‘thrown into the revolution’. In this sense, thinking about politics is to a certain degree thinking about time – about the breach that it achieved and about continuity that cannot be ruptured for good.

Can the answer to this dilemma be liberal democracy? As Baczkowski rightly observed in the new 2001 introduction to his book *The Lights of Utopia*, ‘the liberal system, the great victor of the Cold War, is not conducive to a utopian imagination because liberal ideology is characterized by skepticism towards political volunteerism and any global social projects. Liberal societies, flexible and pragmatic, renounce the planning of their own future and in their relationship to time stand firmly in the present. As long as individuals are allowed to act freely in accordance with their interests and with mutual respect for everyone’s rights, so that within the frames of the rule of law, relationships between social subjects will provide a just division of wealth and prestige, according to individual achievements and in imitation of the ‘invisible hand of the market’. Public authorities should only take care to respect the rules of the economic game, protection of conditions favoring reproduction of the system and to correct the negative social effects of its defects, if need be. Similarly to the pursuit of happiness, – which is an inalienable right of the individual – the future is also, first and foremost, a personal matter. The state is always supposed to stand behind the social structures organizing the future, which implies the growth of its interference and regulation, in which we can always suspect a tendency towards totalitarianism.’<sup>28</sup> And yet in the case of liberal democracy too the key question from the perspective of the stability of the political system is a question of time. Liberal democracy is a grand theater of the present. In the moment when such theater stops being enough for the public, in short, when the present ceases to be enough for the people, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary passions can return on the scene. Longing for the convulsions of history is a truly unintended, but legitimate child of an epoch laden with boredom of the present moment, deprived of references to great historical beginnings and ends.

<sup>27</sup> Baczkowski, *Rewolucja. Władza, nadzieje, rozterki*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> Baczkowski, *Światła utopii*, 12.