

REFLECTIONS ON REREADING SIMON SCHAMA'S *CITIZENS:*
A CHRONICLE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

I read this exemplary and engaging history when it was first published in 1989, the bicentenary of the storming of the Bastille. It's graphic description of revolutionary terror and violence stayed with me as an object lesson in the danger attached to regime change. A long established order does not usually go quietly, and erecting a new one can be chaotic at best and bloody at worst. Now, thirty some years later, what stands out for me is Schama's picture of the circumstances and events that precipitated the revolution and that all but guaranteed it would end in madness, because I see so many parallels between pre-revolutionary France and contemporary America.

In essence, the *ancien régime* was so ossified that it could not bend, it could only break. And the King in particular was both vacillating and stubborn, so he missed opportunities for reform and compromise that might have saved both the institution of monarchy and his own neck.

However, if you had to point to the one factor that brought down the *ancien régime*, it would have to be its inability to raise enough revenue to cover normal and ordinary administrative expenses while also maintaining its position as both a continental and a maritime great power. The latter turned out to be especially onerous. French support for the American Revolution had left the state deeply indebted, and the necessity to be ready to fight both on land and at sea afterward drained the exchequer.

The parallels with the U.S. plight should be obvious: defense spending crowds out discretionary spending and contributes mightily to the growing national debt. And examples of wasteful initiatives abound in both cases. To pick just one, take the French effort to build a large and innovative ship of the line with which to combat British naval superiority: despite many delays and massive cost overruns, the vessel never saw battle. Compare the U.S.'s F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program: the same story of delays, overruns, and ultimately an aircraft that fell far short of its promised performance.

In France, Louis XVI tasked a succession of ministers with reforming the essentially medieval tax-farming system but then refused to back them in the face of the inevitable opposition from stakeholders in the old system. To be fair, it is not clear that any of the proposed reforms would have succeeded, but the fact is they never got a chance. So the state slouched toward bankruptcy, until the King had no choice but to call a meeting of the Estates-General, opening thereby the flood gates of revolutionary change that swept him away.

America is not yet so desperate, because its tax system is by comparison reasonably efficient. So it is able to pay its bills—but only by printing money, which threatens an inflationary future and postpones the necessity for major reform of both the tax system and the budgetary process. Meanwhile the government is starved of funds badly needed for non-defense expenditures like long overdue investment in infrastructure, which looks positively Third World compared to Europe. In short, barring serious fiscal reform, which seems

nowhere in prospect, America is also headed for bankruptcy. That almost all the major credit rating agencies see the handwriting on the wall and have begun to downgrade U.S. sovereign debt does not inspire confidence in the future.

A second major parallel is that the reign of Louis XVI was a time of rapid technological change, which then spawned extensive economic and social changes. Thus the gap between “progressives” and “conservatives” became all but unbridgeable, and the essentially mediaeval character of the state stood ruthlessly exposed as utterly outdated and wholly inadequate for contemporary conditions.

Although the U.S. is not nearly as ossified as Louis XVI’s France, it is stuck with a constitutional order established in the 18th century that is now confronted with 21st century technological developments, such as artificial intelligence, that challenge the epistemological basis and administrative capacity of that order. The polity does not control, but only reacts after the fact, to developments made elsewhere.

A media revolution is the third major parallel between late 18th century France and early 21st century America. Although very different in form, they have had a similar effect on the body social and politic—namely, to call into question the legitimacy of the current order, to fuel resentment of differences in status and wealth, and to create what can only be called a pre-revolutionary ferment among all classes of society. In France, although it was strictly against the law, books, gazettes, and tracts spread the ideas of Rousseau, Voltaire, and

other critics of the regime, as well as progressive ideas in general. And since literacy was becoming relatively common (at least in major urban centers), those revolutionary ideas penetrated deeply into the population, leading to calls for reform by all elements of society (including many aristocrats). Printed media—supplemented by popular posters, poetry, and song—also spread scurrilous, satirical, and salacious stories about *les Grands*, causing them to be increasingly despised and hated. In this connection, Marie-Antoinette was a particular target: she was depicted as “the Austrian whore,” a symbol of the iniquity and corruption of the court and all those connected to it. (Although much of what was said about her was untrue or unfair, her attitude and behavior did make her an easy target: she was the Princess Diana of her time, wanting to enjoy the perks of royalty without conforming to the rigid code of the court.)

The media revolution in America may be different in form—television, podcasts, and videos instead of political tracts or broadsides condemning the Queen—but the impact on society is similar, or in certain respects worse. For while written media promote thought, however subversive, visual media tend to foster emotion, especially anger. And also to fuel irrationality, leading to the prevalence of conspiracy theories and ultimately to an antinomian refusal to accept the legitimacy of basic political institutions like courts and elections. Then there is the degree to which the well of discourse has been poisoned by crackpot ideas, personal bile, and sheer slop. In short, just as in France, the

legitimacy and epistemological foundation of the American polity has been fatally undermined by a media revolution.

That France would undergo a revolution was a certainty. That it had to take such a violent turn was not. Had the King seen that royal absolutism was doomed, he might have been more open to a compromise along the lines of England's Glorious Revolution. Alas, he did not, so the intense revolutionary fervor that had seized Paris virtually guaranteed that an episode of revolutionary violence would follow the overthrow of the monarchy.

The American future is, of course, open. It may still be possible to bend rather than break—that is, to find a way to reform a defective system and reestablish the polity without passing through an episode of revolutionary violence. But although it is becoming widely understood that reforms are critically necessary, there is no consensus on the direction of those reforms. Indeed, quite the contrary, and the the ham-fisted measures of the current administration would seem to be leading us in exactly the opposite direction, toward chaos. It would therefore be prudent to consider what can happen once a society comes unglued, if only to inspire us to make sure it does not happen: mob rule, psychic contagion, and social breakdown at the very least, and a reign of terror at worst. For without the container of an established social order, humans lose their ground and go mad.

