Ultraroyalism in Toulouse

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INTRODUCTION

FRANCE HAS PRODUCED a rich and varied crop of “true” conserva-
tives who find it impossible to accept gradual, empirical re-
form. This fact has vexed most Anglo-American historians
almost as much as the constant appeal to violence in the French
revolutionary tradition. However perplexing the “jusqu’au bout”
ideal is to many foreigners and even some Frenchmen, its origins
and nature are an engrossing study. The social background of the
politics of frustration in France is part of the explanation of the
attitudes which the far Right derived from explanations of past
events. These attitudes are not only to be found codified in the
arguments of the theocratic reactionaries of whom the most famous
are Maistre and Bonald, but in the social roots of that nostalgia
which affects nations as well as individuals. The émigrés, the ultra-
royalists, the Carlists and supporters of Henri V, the Action fran-
çaise, and elements of the O. A. S. display a widely differing set of
concerns, but they all exemplify a persistent type in French political
life, those whom a Gaullist deputy once described as the “éternels
vaincus.” These men, consistently defending untenable positions in
a heroic, if obtuse, manner have fought an unsuccessful rear-guard
action to defend a vanishing social order. Whether the explanation
of their hostility is to be found in economic trends, social tensions,
or institutional failures, their private jeremiads fit into a public
framework. Their concerns are as important as those of more suc-
cessful groups in the explanation of historical change in France
since the Revolution. Lost causes are an integral part of those
which have been won by their defeat, and deserve equally close examination.

France, like other nations and societies, has produced a variety of theories of decline, corresponding to her changing political fortunes in Europe and the world.1 Eighteenth-century pessimism was insignificant by comparison with that induced by the course of the Revolution. It was not only Lammenais, de Musset, the returned émigrés, and the rarified world of the intelligentsia who suffered from the *mal du siècle* following Waterloo. The Revolution represented another, at least temporary, victory of the state apparatus over local community and privilege, and it stimulated the longing, apparent in all parts of the country after the fall of Napoleon, for a return to older forms of society and government that were essentially provincial and rural. The dockers of Marseille, the fishermen of Brittany, the peasants of the Auvergne, saw plainly enough that the Revolution had not solved the problems of poverty and economic distress. Like the nobles, the ex-parlementarians, and the descendants of other local oligarchies, they were hostile to the ascendancy of Paris. On all levels of French society, there were those who selectively remembered the best of the Old Regime, dwelt on the most obvious failures of the Revolution’s religious and welfare policies, and blamed facile utilitarians who did not understand tradition for the destruction of the pre-1789 institutions.

The *locus classicus* of this nostalgia in nineteenth-century France was the Paris salon of that undignified deputy, M. Piet. He possessed, happily, a room large enough to accommodate his ultra-royalist colleagues at the *Chambre Introuvable*, who gathered there to plan parliamentary strategy. The lawyers, doctors, country gentlemen, and aristocrats, disapproving of the policy of Louis XVIII which they thought mistakenly conciliatory, formulated the basic themes that constantly reappeared in their critique of technological modernization and egalitarianism.

The most able among this company was Joseph de Villèle, a very short man with a pock-marked face and a strong southern accent, deputy and mayor of Toulouse. He was level-headed, of austere morality, pragmatic in his ideas, and intent more on balancing the budget and reducing taxation than on composing rhapsodies

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about royalist fidelity. The monotone quality of his personality together with his remarkable organizational abilities in financial matters contributed to his success among the ultras. The most talented man there, at least in the eyes of literary historians, was the Breton noble Chateaubriand, vain, unreliable—and a brilliant writer. These two men represented the extremes of ultraroyalism: one was the pragmatic defense of the position of the landowner and noble in post-revolutionary French society; the other, an emotional invocation of the past and a self-glorification on the level of heroic fantasy. The mass of the deputies were uncertain which of these two ways they should follow. They praised rural values, ancient precedents of noble liberty, familial discipline, and an hierarchic society which they claimed to be in the best interests of the majority. They hated the Revolution that had broken the orderly community they believed to have existed in France. Even those who had not suffered the loss of property or relatives were mesmerized by the image of the guillotine. As with Chateaubriand, Labourdonnaye, or Montlosier, their own biographies became more mythic with each retelling. To reinforce the strength of their version of the Revolution, they dramatized the extent of their revulsion against the recent past; each and any accommodation was seen as a betrayal. Many ultras remembered the suspicions expressed in the entourage of the Comte d'Artois at Versailles concerning the "liberal" opinions of his older brother the Comte de Provence in 1789. Now that he was no more a poetaster but a king marked by long years of exile, they still felt they knew much better than he what really ought to be done. Until Louis XVIII came to his senses, they would shout the famous exclamation of Béthisy: "Vive le Roi, quand même!"2

During the Bourbon Restoration of 1814–15, with its response to the preceding quarter-century of revolutionary upheaval in France, local variations appeared within the royalist crescent in the South that reached from one of its tips in Brittany, down to Bordeaux, had its heartland in the triangle of Toulouse–Mende–Montpellier, and extended across the garrigues to the Rhône, from Aix-en-Provence and Marseille to Lyon and up to its second tip in Burgundy. In this area, the most persistent supporters of ultraroyalism,

deeply suspicious of Paris and the revolutionary North, were to be found in the early decades of the century. The Duc d'Angoulême remarked in 1815 that the Bourbons preferred departments to provinces, but this was untrue of the enthusiastic supporters of Restoration which was perceived as a return to past regionalism rather than as a victory for the centralizing ambitions of the Old Regime monarchy. Ultraroyalism found its strength in departments with the least technological and agricultural development: the more illiteracy and poverty, the more likely was popular royalism to flourish. Enthusiasm for the Bourbons was also found where the local economy had suffered most from the Revolution and the Continental Blockade. Once Louis XVIII was again on the throne, poor roads, linguistic variations, local customs, and a larger measure of regional representation reinforced this trend toward decentralization, and the nobles and notables began to emphasize more strongly the distinctive traits and traditional personalities of their own areas.

The Napoleonic maritime blockade stifled the Atlantic commerce of western and southern France just as the Revolution had disrupted trade from the South-West into the Levant and caused economic hardship. Northern authority in the form of troops, revolutionary officials, tax collectors, prefects in uniforms, and their bureaucrats, all seemed to have diminished and humbled the proud municipal traditions of the Midi. They were resented. Gangs of royalist thugs appeared during Thermidor to terrorize Jacobins, grain dealers, buyers of confiscated property, and all those who seemed to be supporters of the revolutionary changes in society. These bands had names like the Nîmes Onion-Eaters (cébets), the Arles Rag-Pickers (chiffonistens), the Ostlers of the Cévennes (palefreniers), and the Companions of the Sun (or of Jéhu)—names which showed the frustration and hostility of a portion of the common people to the Revolution. These outbursts of violence were poorly coordinated, despite the conspiratorial theories advanced by the revolutionary officials, and they were betrayed by geography. Tocqueville can be rephrased in saying that tyranny is best exercised over flat land; to keep order, Paris put to good use the army and the excellent roads constructed in Languedoc under the Old Regime. The poor military communications typical of the Vendée, Brittany, the Lozère, the Ardèche and the Pyrenees made easier the resistance of the population, but this resistance remained
sullen and localized, never building up into a unified opposition to the central government with its network of officials and interested partisans, its army and police. The Jacobins defeated the Federalists, rebellious peasants, and royalists because they all were too local in their resistance activities. The royalist dislike of centralization, which they dimly sensed as the cause of their failure, explained the desire to duck the issue by relating to an ideal past which had none of the frustrations of the present.

Regional politics make sense only in relation to the urban centers which coordinate and reinforce them. This is particularly true of Haut-Languedoc between 1750 and 1850, an area dominated by Toulouse that was at the time called the capital of the Midi. The city drew its prestige from the institutions of a traditional society and its prosperity from a rural-based economy.

The rulers of the city showed this in their outlook. Disorder, crime, religious controversy, and intellectual debate were blamed either on outsiders or on the wickedness of the lazy and immoral. The rulers of Toulouse in the Old Regime stressed obedience and morality in their approach to public order, and only dimly, if ever, realized that the strains and changes of population growth, the breakdown of family discipline in a large city, and rivalries between professional and religious groups were not solved any better by pious exhortation than by repression. If some younger judges and liberal-minded advocates displayed a fashionable interest in philanthropy and criticized the political views of their elders on Jansenist and governmental matters, this had little effect on the ruling circles of the city. Even by the standards of the Old Regime, Toulouse was notorious for the savagery of its punishments of criminals. Many unfortunates had preceded and many followed Calas to the Place Saint Georges during the eighteenth century where they were broken alive on a wheel. The parlementarians, the local aristocracy, and the municipal officials set their faces against change and turbulence in a city which attracted peasants, artisans, vagabonds, criminals, university students, merchants, seminarians, and hopeful candidates for official jobs. The elites of Toulouse maintained an essentially rural outlook on society.

The Revolution asserted the victory of town over country and

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humbled the southern regional centers before the northern capital. The subsequent resentment of Paris surfaced in 1814 and 1815 when Toulouse, one of the "faithful" cities where people and nobility were of a common opinion, showed great enthusiasm for the Bourbon Restoration. The reasons for that fidelity and its expression reveal much about the reactionary mind in France. Charles de Rémusat, *littérature* and a minister of Louis Philippe, wrote in his memoirs:

Apart from some spiteful Jacobins and some loitering Bonapartists, the one and the other fairly rare, the Revolution produced nothing at Toulouse.... the higher classes were royalists by pretension and ignorance, the lower classes in imitation of the upper classes and by Spanish devotion. But even royalism insofar as it had serious and good qualities could not count on effective loyalty, all the more reason why the law, liberty, the motherland herself, did not have partisans.4

As a young man, de Rémusat had experienced the fevered emotions of Toulouse during the White Terror of July and August 1815 and, like his father who was prefect there during those frightening days, he was unsympathetic to extremism. In fact, he had a very low opinion of the general character of the people of Toulouse. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the city was an offense to the liberal mind.

Toulouse was conservative in its economy also. The surrounding countryside was generally inactive; in the foothills of the Pyrenees there were only small rural industries in the environs of Saint Gaudens, Volvestre, and around Castres and Albi on the plain. In the Gers and along the length of the Garonne, from Cuzères to Toulouse and beyond to Grenade, only small artisans existed, dependent on a limited local market.5

This industrial backwardness was matched in agriculture. Until the last third of the nineteenth century the system of *métayage* (share-cropping) was practised on the alluvial soil of the Lauragais and the rolling hills of the Toulousain. This reliance on share-cropping put a distinctive stamp on local agriculture and the society supported by it. It also marked the relationship of Toulouse to its

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surrounding countryside and less important towns, for they served as markets for local produce. Certainly merchants, lawyers, and professional men showed little inclination to question the nature of the sluggish agricultural economy. Various reasons have been advanced for the characteristic lack of innovation or drive among those who controlled the local economy, ranging from inherent inaptitude, scarcity of raw materials, and shortage of available capital due to its immobilization in landed investment and real estate, to a desire to ape the manners of the landed gentry. The inefficiency of local agriculture, producing so little surplus, was in large part the consequence of the métayage system, the economic backbone of the area. The share-croppers were generally ignorant men, trying to make a living for their families on a plot of land given to them on a limited lease, under conditions which became harsher during the first half of the nineteenth century. A métayer of fifty years in 1830, surveying the political changes in France which had taken place during his lifetime, might be excused for seeing some good points in the years of his youth before the Revolution. The fact was that the political changes affected him very little, whereas the continuing population pressures in the countryside encroached increasingly on the peasants. If Old Regime landlords had shown themselves ever more exacting in the leases concluded with the tenants who worked the wheat lands in conjunction with growing maize, rye, vegetables, fruit, and fodder, the Revolution had brought the exactions of the armées révolutionnaires which forced peasants to sell produce for almost worthless paper assignats and to provide horses, mules, sheep, poultry, and game wherever these were raised in the department. Few métayers were in a position to buy confiscated property which was put on sale. The clergy owned little land in the area, so that the disruption of the Church was generally unpopular in a pious region. During the Empire, the new landowners together with the nobles who had retained their estates increased pressure on the share-croppers. Customary rights came under vigorous attack, gleaning privileges

were changed in 1807, and the right of common pasture was curtailed, even to the roadside grass verges. The quaint "feudal" nomenclature of the leases had disappeared after 1789, but the same exactions, becoming increasingly severe, existed in the leases which were concluded between rich and poor Frenchmen who were equal in law. In short, the economic situation of the métayer steadily worsened.

There were not only share-cropped farms in the Toulousain. A variant form of land rental existed which, like the métayage system, left free the whip-hand of the unprogressive landowners of the region. This was called faire valoir à maître-valet: unlike the métayer who received a percentage of the crop (between a half and a quarter), the maître-valet, on the other hand, was given the necessary tools, an agreed amount of the produce after the harvest, and a cash payment. At a time of increasing rural population, the landowners favored the maître-valet system, for they could constantly force downwards the fixed cash payments made under this system. Because there was a surplus of peasants looking for a living or terrified of losing at the expiration of the lease the métairie which they worked, they made no effective resistance to this exploitation. More than one committed suicide in despair after he had been dismissed by the landowner. Improvement in the profit margin of an estate was habitually made at the expense of the tenant, and only a small and notable minority of farmers in the region, like Philippe Picot de Lapeyrrouse, Joseph de Villèle, or Louis-Philippe Couret de Villeneuve, made an effort to improve yields or cultivation methods. The métayers and maîtres-valets, demoralized by short leases and frightened by innovations which might not work as well as tested methods, contributed little or nothing in the way of improvement to the farms they worked. In consequence, during the first half of the nineteenth century, the agricultural yield of the Toulousain fell steadily in comparison with the national average.7

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This wretched peasantry was bound to the landlords in tight servitude. In 1808, the prefect of the department noted that the agricultural system of the area placed the population under the direct influence of the landlords, most of whom were nobles. This subjection of the peasantry continued and was romanticized by royalists as an ideal relationship between the lord and the peasant. The children of the nobility were put out to suck at the breast of a sturdy peasant wet-nurse; the first words that many of them learned were in occitan. A writer on the agricultural system of the Lauragais, Pariset, wrote of the peasants' deference for their "natural" superiors, of whom they had personal knowledge, with whom they had frequent contact in the countryside, and who often shared their memories of common childhood games. He cited the proverb, "A l'escuato cal uno centeno"—the skein must be tied with a string (to keep the threads together)—as an example of the instinctive search for order among the common people. By the time Pariset was writing in 1867, the statement was anachronistic, for during the Second Empire the landowners of the Toulousain were reaping the harvest of their exploitation. The countryside was depopulating in consequence of the young people's escape from the rigors of share-cropping. Large estates, no longer able to rely on plentiful cheap labor, unable or unwilling to muster capital, splintered rather than modernized.

Ultraroyalism in Toulouse was nourished from several sources of nostalgia for the past, rural and urban. The share-cropper, the parlementarian, the nobleman, the ecclesiastic, the artisan, and the poor—all could remember what seemed to have been better days while forgetting the conflicts and tensions of the society that had existed before 1789.

Little sense of new ways of dealing with the disruptions caused by the Revolution appeared in the city. Few ultras saw that the Chambre Introwable, elected in 1815, was espousing ideas differing little from those of the aristocratic revolt in the years before the Revolution. One royalist engineer in Toulouse appreciated this similarity and was afraid that history would disastrously repeat

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itself. Most of his colleagues on the municipal council disagreed, however, and were convinced that it was their duty to resist further change, since the present misfortunes of France resulted from bad innovations—or so they thought. The ultras dismissed as so much intellectual legerdemain those social and political theories which appeared in the Revolution. In this study I wish to examine in more detail the origins of this hostility in the local past and the form which ultraroyalism took in Toulouse.

10 Aubuisson de Voisins to Lainé, September 5, 1815, cited in: E. de Perceval, Un adversaire de Napoléon; le vicomte Lainé (Paris, 1926), II: 68.