
H-France Review Vol. 21 (March 2021), No. 50

Daniel Chirot, *You Say You Want a Revolution? Radical Idealism and its Tragic Consequences*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. xii + 171 pp. \$29.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780691193670.

Review by Lloyd Kramer, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Daniel Chirot has written a timely history that compares revolutionary upheavals in France, Russia, and numerous other countries and also explores a question that emerges from almost every modern revolution: why do the high ideals that inspire these momentous events soon lead to violence, repression, the failure of utopian aspirations, and the disillusioning corruption of post-revolutionary governments?

Chirot is a long-serving professor of Russian and Eurasian Studies at the University of Washington, and much of his book examines revolutionary conflicts that erupted far outside of France. He gives much attention to the Russian Revolution of 1917, for example, and his search for historical evidence carries his narrative into Mexico, China, Cambodia, Iran, and Nazi Germany (which he analyzes insightfully as a sociopolitical revolution from the radical Right).

Chirot's history of modern revolutions also refers often to the legacy of the French Revolution, partly because France was the first modern nation to pass through all of the revolutionary phases that intrigue him and partly because revolutionary leaders in other countries have often found political lessons in the history of late eighteenth-century France. Although they lived in very different historical contexts, the people who led later revolutions learned from French precedents that they must struggle against counter-revolutionary forces, fear the betrayals of early allies, resist foreign enemies, expose internal conspiracies, watch for Thermidorian Reactions that would remove the most committed activists, and control Bonapartist generals who might claim to save the revolution by destroying it in a military coup.

Chirot is also interested in the lessons of history, but he aims his lessons at moderate liberals rather than latter-day revolutionaries. Analyzing broad historical patterns in widely scattered times and places, he uses methods of historical sociology that can be compared to the categorizing, structural work of historians such as Jack A. Goldstone, Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, and Bailey Stone.^[1] Although Chirot constructs his narrative from secondary sources and connects historical events mainly as an analytical lumpner, the themes and generalizations in *You Say You Want a Revolution?* are neither simplistic nor uninformed.

Chiot's overarching lesson of history shows that revolutionary conflicts repeatedly create historical tragedies. Like tragic plays that move through several acts and portray the flaws of multiple characters, revolutions replicate tragic cycles that are disillusioning or even deadly for most of the people who launch them and disappointing for most of the historians who study them. Chiot examines the diverse causes, phases, and wars of past revolutions--and he frequently discusses the failures of moderate liberalism. This theme grows out of his own preferences for an activist liberalism that requires bold actions and ideas, especially when intense polarizations generate anti-democratic political parties and extremist leaders.

One simple way to summarize Chiot's argument would be to note his opposition to an aphorism from someone he never mentions: Jim Hightower, the former Texas Commissioner of Agriculture. Hightower's contribution to public discourse comes from the title of his book, *There's Nothing in the Middle of the Road but Yellow Stripes and Dead Armadillos*,^[2] which precisely conveys a viewpoint that Chiot rejects. He understands that moderate centrists are frequently crushed like Hightower's "dead armadillos," but he regrets their demise and makes a persuasive argument for their important work in the dangerous middle of the political road. Moderate liberals see the need for social and political reforms, yet they become unpopular because they look for strategic compromises that are unacceptable to everyone who believes their own higher cause justifies the annihilation of their political opponents.

This emphasis on the importance of moderate, progressive reform leads Chiot to three French leaders who lived in highly polarized times--the Marquis de Lafayette (1757-1834), Nicolas de Condorcet (1743-1794), and Raymond Aron (1905-1983). They all represented a rational, liberal centrism that Chiot respects, so he introduces his overall themes by explaining how both Lafayette and Condorcet became prominent victims of the French Revolution. Lafayette was fleeing from the radical Jacobins when he was captured by Austrian soldiers in 1792 and held for five years in Prussian and Austrian prisons. Condorcet was also fleeing from the most radical Jacobins when he died either by suicide or murder in 1794. Aron survived the Second World War as an exile in England, but his middle-of-the-road ideas were often condemned by radical critics on both the Left and Right wings of France's postwar political culture.

Chiot frames his concluding "lessons for us to learn" with a quotation from Aron that seems to convey his own anxieties about anti-democratic threats in our present era of intensely hostile political polarizations. "The [current] mixture...of rationalized technology and demagogic propaganda, presents a caricature of the kind of inhumane society that could come about," Aron wrote in June 1939. "The decline of democratic institutions, the crisis of capitalist economies...together with the degeneration of traditional values, culminate in the present situation, where everything remains to be done because everything is called into question" (p. 127).^[3] The moderate center is thus a crucial political site where much "remains to be done" in polarized societies, but the recurring failures of moderate liberals give Chiot the kind of fears that Aron described during the European crisis in 1939.

The collapse of moderate liberalism, therefore, becomes a key theme in Chiot's account of the French Revolution. Lafayette and Condorcet were early political allies who believed in Enlightenment conceptions of natural rights and religious tolerance. They both supported the American Revolution, opposed slavery, and believed that a reformed French state could promote political and intellectual progress in France's modernizing society. Lafayette introduced the first proposal for a "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen" (July 1789) and commanded the

Parisian National Guard until 1791; Condorcet served in the Legislative Assembly and National Convention (1791-93), advocated educational reforms, and called for women's suffrage.

Yet neither Lafayette nor Condorcet could understand their angry, radical opponents, and their shattering defeat in 1792-94 points toward the experience of moderate liberals in every modern revolution. "La Fayette's and Condorcet's failures," Chirot argues, "look like the probable fate of those like them who tried to steer a middle course in turbulent times. That is as true today as it was in the French Revolution" (p. 4).

Chirot notes that moderates have often supported major political reforms in their actions and writings, so they cannot be simply condemned as mushy centrists who lack strong beliefs. When a vast crisis envelops their societies, however, their pragmatic efforts to find political compromises or defend moderate reforms are overwhelmed by the long-suppressed anger of people whom they misunderstand and by radical firebrands whom they despise.

Chirot argues that moderate leaders wrongly assume that most people will recognize the political value of mutual tolerance and accept (as they do) the need for political balance between opposing extremisms. Tolerance for political differences, however, becomes a traitorous peril for the extreme factions in revolutionary conflicts, and the moderates are inevitably swept away in the maelstrom. Chirot creates his own term for this common historical pattern--the "La Fayette Syndrome"--which reappears whenever political leaders believe rational people will embrace a reasonable middle way. "This illusion," as Chirot describes it, "has destroyed many a moderate, more liberal proponent of democratic change in revolutionary times" (p. 5).

Lafayette's failures would be repeated by Alexander Kerensky in Russia (1917), Ahmed Ben Bella in Algeria (after 1962), Shapour Bakhtiar in Iran (1979), and others who assumed they could control revolutions that destroyed their expectations, their politics, and often their lives. Drawing his own lessons from history, Chirot argues that moderates frequently offer realistic strategies for social reform in pre-revolutionary situations, but their efforts are doomed when full-blown revolutions explode in violent polarizations. Liberal reformers are replaced by the radical advocates of a social utopianism that attracts passionate believers, but the real-world campaigns to achieve utopian goals generate massive resistance, require massive repression, and end with massive disillusionment.

Chirot argues that both the moderates and the radicals have unrealistic ideas that prevent them from achieving their goals. The moderate liberals cannot understand the deep popular rage that extremist leaders mobilize to drive the revolution forward. The extremists cannot understand the deep resistance to their radical campaigns to transform traditional beliefs, institutions, and social relationships. These contrasting misperceptions shape the trajectory of every four-act revolutionary tragedy.

Chirot identifies four stages in the revolutionary conflicts that repeatedly destroy the Lafayettes and Condorcets after the early phases of idealistic revolutions. First, the old regime's incompetence, social injustices, and resistance to reform lead to the overthrow of governing elites who defended their privileges against modernizing social and economic changes. Moderate liberals launch the revolution with influential new ideas and major political changes, as in France during 1789 and in Russia during 1917; but the liberals cannot placate popular discontent or the growing desire for radical transitions.

In the second stage, the revolution generates belligerent opposition from groups who oppose even moderate changes in political, religious, and economic institutions. Violent conflicts and civil wars begin to develop, demonstrating the counter-revolutionary danger of internal and foreign enemies. Radical leaders condemn the moderates and gain support by calling for decisive action against the revolution's opponents. Repressive systems are set in place and moderates are purged from the revolutionary government.

During the third stage, the new ruling party promotes aggressive, idealistic campaigns to implement its utopian vision and radically transform the nation's political and social life. Resistance to these ideologically driven actions leads the revolutionary leaders to believe that conspirators and internal enemies (not flaws in the ideology) are impeding the expected progress, so the revolution rapidly becomes much more violent and repressive.

Finally, the violence gradually diminishes after the most radical leaders are overthrown in a Thermidorian reaction that brings more pragmatic factions to power. During this final phase of the revolution, high ideals give way to corruption and to Bonapartist-Stalinist governments, but the repressive structures of the radical revolution continue to control the population until the dictatorial regime finally collapses into a new system.

The French Revolution provides the ideal-type example for Chirot's four-stage account of revolution as tragedy, because it passed quickly through all of the key political phases and its leaders attempted to achieve utopian goals through repressive violence. Chirot's description of France's revolutionary history thus resembles the interpretations of François Furet and others who describe the Terror as embedded in the logic of the Revolution itself rather than as a response to particular threats or changing circumstances.

Chirot recognizes that specific events such as military setbacks and the opposition of the Catholic Church contributed to the surge in revolutionary violence and to the civil war in the Vendée, but the radical utopianism of the Jacobins provoked the kind of deep resistance that always emerges when revolutionaries try to reconstruct a whole society. As Chirot describes the problem, revolutions inevitably collide with "greed, corruption and the unwillingness of most people to voluntarily sacrifice everything for a future, unattainable heaven on earth" (p. 64).

The repressive consequences of what he calls "the tyranny of idealistic certitude and imagined utopias" is the aspect of revolutionary movements that Chirot most deeply dislikes (p. 63). His longest chapter explains how this "idealistic certitude" leads to violent events such as the Reign of Terror in France, the brutal collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union, the devastating Great Leap Forward in Mao's China, the genocidal killing fields of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and the mass murders that the Nazis committed throughout German-occupied Europe. Despite their many differences, Chirot connects all such atrocities to the "tyranny of idealistic certitude."

Moderate liberals and moderate conservatives may disagree about most issues in daily political life, but they share a similar incomprehension when political and economic crises push their national populations toward the self-certain advocates of radical utopianism. Rational German conservatives were as ineffectual in the 1930s as the rational liberals in the earlier crises of France and Russia. "There is no better confirming case than the rise and fall of Nazism," Chirot notes,

“to show that a strong revolutionary utopian ideology held as an absolute faith, if its believers come to power, will lead to immense human tragedy” (p. 77).

The Nazis therefore offer good examples for Chirot’s claim that the ideological certitudes in all extremist parties lead to the brutal suppression of political opponents. Every extremist movement—from Nazis and Bolsheviks to radical Islamists and genocidal ethnic cleansers—faces resistance from those who reject their utopian goals, but this resistance never generates self-doubt among the revolutionaries. As Chirot explains in a discussion of revolutionary obstacles and setbacks, “It is perfectly understandable that for those who strongly believe in a revolutionary ideology, failures cannot be attributed to that ideology’s faulty reasoning. Mistakes and particularly long-lasting problems must then be blamed on...sabotage by ideological enemies, by treachery, or...by foreign powers” (p. 82).

The tragedy of revolutions thus reappears as a permanent feature of modern history, from the era of the French Revolution to the idealistic, anti-colonial revolutions that ended in autocracy and corruption instead of political freedom and social justice. No matter where Chirot looks for historical evidence or counter-examples, he mostly finds the same story: radical revolutions “imposed brutal policies to force change” before lapsing into autocracy and corruption. “All the original idealism and hope that produced and justified such bloody sacrifices,” he concludes, “turned out to have been for naught” (p. 117).

Chirot is not inclined to reflect on the literary tropes of historical writing, but his narrative conveys the tragic perspective that Hayden White described in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. In a tragic theatrical drama, White explained, the “fall of the protagonist” creates a “shaking of the world,” but the spectator who observes this tragic failure gains a better consciousness of the existential constraints that shape human lives and aspirations. The classic tragedy shows how certain realities cannot ultimately be changed and how people must learn to live within conditions that “set the limits on what may be aspired to and what may be legitimately aimed at in the quest for security and sanity in the world.”[4] White’s summary of tragic emplotments carries political implications, and it offers a helpful theoretical framework for understanding Chirot’s analysis of the “tragic consequences” that flow from radical revolutions.

More generally, Chirot’s themes also convey an ironic perspective which (as White described it) assumes the inevitable failure of utopian attempts to transform social and political systems. Indeed, in its most extreme form, “Irony tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions.” Chirot does not extend his irony to this extreme position, because he believes that moderate liberal action remains a viable, positive intervention in the political world. Ironic writing emphasizes the disappointing gap between expectations and reality, which White found to be a common historical theme when historians discuss the failures that past actors could not understand in their own lives. Chirot’s views overlap in this respect with perspectives that White identified in Alexis de Tocqueville’s tragic, liberal emplotment of the French Revolution. “Tocqueville began in an effort to sustain a specifically Tragic vision of history,” White wrote in a generalization that could also be applied to Chirot, “and then gradually subsided into an Ironic resignation to a condition from which he perceived little prospect of liberation....”[5]

In addition to the echoes from Tocqueville and Hayden White, there are some notable refrains from the classic work of Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*. Although Chirot briefly

mentions Brinton in an endnote, he does not explain how his own thematic structure either challenges or converges with Brinton's *Anatomy*. Brinton also described a four-stage cyclical revolutionary pattern that ended when a Thermidorian reaction finally broke what he called the revolutionary "fever." [6] There are numerous connections between Brinton's themes and the organization of Chirot's book, so he could better define his own interpretive positions by noting the ways in which he may disagree with Brinton's much-debated schematic analysis.

Chirot's interpretations also converge with Brinton's account of how the American Revolution was exceptionally successful in mostly avoiding the violence of a civil war and internal repression. Such claims, however, have become problematic for historians who write about how American revolutionaries violently attacked their British loyalist neighbors. Many loyalists lost their property or were killed, and about 60,000 émigrés fled permanently from the new republic. Early American governments also violently displaced Native American tribes and harshly suppressed the rebellions of enslaved people. [7] Viewed from the position or experiences of Native people and enslaved Black workers, the repressive apparatus of the American Revolution could well be lumped with some of the repressive systems that later revolutionary regimes used to consolidate their social and political power.

Chirot acknowledges that early political agreements with the slaveholding elite created long-term problems for moderate liberals in the post-revolutionary United States, so the new republic's internal conflicts raise unexamined questions about the destructive consequences that can flow from strategic compromises. The destruction of the slave system during the American Civil War could well be viewed as the last stage of the American Revolution, which after an eighty-year truce plunged (like the revolutions in France and Russia) into bloody, internal violence. The struggle for human rights and the project of radical Reconstruction also gave way to a classic Thermidorian or counter-revolutionary reaction that brought racist white autocrats to power across the American South.

In the end, though, Chirot is less interested in historical debates about eighteenth-century events than in questions about what we can learn from past revolutions as we respond to present-day crises. The political parties and social media in our own fragmented societies differ from the opposing forces and communications systems of earlier historical eras, but Chirot clearly believes that the intense polarizations and political failures in present-day democratic societies should be compared with the conflicts and governmental breakdowns that have always preceded revolutionary upheavals: "We are returning to a pre-World War II world of unbridgeable polarization and doubts about the foundational ideals of democratic liberalism" (p. 128). He also seems to assume that moderate liberals remain vulnerable to the "La Fayette Syndrome" as they try to understand why so many people have turned against democratic traditions and institutions.

Although Chirot does not explicitly discuss Trumpism or the kindred right-wing European parties that now endanger even the most long-established democracies, he describes familiar historical threats that are undermining democratic institutions in our culture of internet-based political propaganda. The dangers are acute because liberals *cannot* "easily counter systematic lying if that is done skillfully enough to persuade people to deny evidence that runs counter to their beliefs. To any moderate, not only liberal ones but also conservatives, extremist ideology too often seems preposterously unreasonable. So the danger is recognized too late" (p. 5).

But how can rational, pro-democratic activists avert the deadly “La Fayette Syndrome?” Chirot answers this question by arguing for the strongest possible defense of the legacies of the American and French Revolutions (with no guarantees of success). Despite their obvious racist flaws and repressive violence, these revolutionary events gradually led to sociopolitical systems that sought to institutionalize Enlightenment ideals such as respect for individual rights, rational approaches to social problems, better education and scientific knowledge, broader participation in public life, and mechanisms to enact reforms that grew out of national traditions.

This political legacy is now at risk, Chirot warns, because “even in the democratic West there is a turn against the Enlightenment tradition” and the “attacks from both the right and left [that] seek to delegitimize liberal capitalist democracy...now appear to be stronger than ever” (pp. 128, 134). Much like the French nobility in 1789 or the Russian elites before 1917, however, the governing leaders in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere are mostly unable or unwilling to make the moderate reforms and compromises that Chirot believes are essential for social progress and long-term social order. Current elites continually ignore the lessons of history as they repeat the common, self-interested desire to “defend their wealth and privileges by blocking essential change and innovation” (p. 129).^[8]

The overall conclusions in *You Say You Want a Revolution?* therefore assert that moderate liberals must remain key actors in modern political cultures because they recognize the historical importance of both change and continuity. Those who embrace “idealistic certitudes” will always reject the middle way as disappointing and insufficient, but Chirot makes a good argument for why moderate reforms and painful compromises usually prevent the deadly explosion of repressive violence and provide the strongest foundation for permanent sociopolitical changes.

Chirot rightly stresses that defending democratic institutions and evidence-based public policies will give moderate liberals constant challenges and conflicts in the polarized, increasingly anti-democratic twenty-first century. His lessons of history suggest that left-leaning centrists will likely be swept away again in resurgent tides of extremism, yet their actions will still be needed and their ideas will endure because the struggle for democratic institutions and rational reforms never ends. Chirot’s carefully argued book clearly describes the aspirations, condemnations, and bloody failures of this endless struggle, thereby showing how historians can also contribute to the crooked, painful arc of human knowledge and progress.

NOTES

[1] Notable examples of comparative, sociologically inflected historical works include Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World: Population Change and State Breakdown in England, France, Turkey, and China, 1600-1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991; rev. ed., New York: Routledge, 2016); Charles Tilly, Louise A. Tilly and Richard H. Tilly, *The Rebellious Century, 1830-1930* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), and Charles Tilly’s discussion of comparative methods in *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Bailey Stone, *The Anatomy of Revolution Revisited: A Comparative Analysis of England, France, and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Although Chirot works within this historiographical tradition, he (somewhat surprisingly) pursues his analytical

concerns without referring to any of these books. His tendency to group diverse events together (lumping) rather than to stress analytical differentiations (splitting) places Chirot's book on the "lumper" side of comparative historical methodologies.

[2] Jim Hightower, *There's Nothing in the Middle of the Road but Yellow Stripes and Dead Armadillos* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997). Hightower's book attacked both conservatism and the moderate center from the political and economic Left.

[3] Chirot draws the quotation from Raymond Aron, "Democratic and Totalitarian States," in Raymond Aron, *The Dawn of Universal History: Selected Essays from a Witness of the Twentieth Century*, trans. Barbara Bray, with an introduction by Tony Judt (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 164.

[4] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 9.

[5] White, *Metahistory*, 38, 192; see also p. 251, where White describes the ironic historian as someone who claims to be "the possessor of a higher, sadder wisdom than the audience itself possessed."

[6] Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Vintage books, rev. ed., 1965); Brinton published the first edition of this book in 1938. Other recent works on this theme include the previously noted book by Bailey Stone, *The Anatomy of Revolution Revisited* (2014), which Chirot does not mention, and George Lawson, *Anatomies of Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), which expands the comparative analysis to places such as Chile, Cuba, and South Africa (though it was not yet available when Chirot was writing his book).

[7] The internal violence of the American Revolution was of course nothing like the systematic, mass killings in twentieth-century revolutions, but the American violence was definitely significant for its victims. For descriptions of the repression and violence within specific states, see John R. Maass, "North Carolina and the New Nation: Reconstruction and Reconciliation Efforts in the 1780s," in Alan Forrest, Karen Hagemann, and Michael Rowe, eds., *War, Demobilization and Memory: The Legacy of War in the Era of Atlantic Revolutions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 119-131, and Gregory T. Knouff, "Seductive Seditious: New Hampshire Loyalists' Experiences and Memories of the American Revolutionary Wars," in the same volume, pp. 271-286. The estimate of 60,000 exiles comes from Maya Jasanoff, *Liberty's Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), 357. For a well-informed account of how the American Revolution contributed to the displacement of Native Americans, see Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and for examples of how enslaved African Americans were repressed after the American Revolution, see Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). The enslaved persons who were executed for their involvement in this abortive rebellion were suspected of conspiring with Jacobin agents after the recent revolutionary events in France and Saint-Domingue.

[8] Chirot draws this perspective from the economist Mancur Olson's argument in *The Rise and Decline of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).

Lloyd Kramer
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill
lkramer@email.unc.edu

Copyright © 2021 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of *H-France Review* nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on *H-France Review* are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172