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The work of Pierre Rosanvallon, which this volume introduces, suggests that it is no trivialization to take this apparently wholly contemporary and post–September 11 alternative as the point of departure for responding to the challenge, because the alternative, seemingly new and up-to-date, is in fact very old.

Rosanvallon, a professor at the Collège de France, represents a perspective dispiritingly little known in the United States compared to the antitotalitarian new philosophy of the moment and the Marxist-postmodernist resistance in response—a perspective that allows one to see the contemporary debate as another act of a pathological rivalry that extends very far back in modernity, and is even constitutive of it. The alternatives are not simply to be dismissed as passing fancies or poor options, since they are consequences of a modernity in which everyone now shares. Rosanvallon’s proposal, indeed, is that only by rooting such recurrent dilemmas in their long history, and recognizing the duration of their compulsive repetition, can a potential way beyond them come into view.

Yet another French theorist, one finally worthy of prostration after the twilight of the old idols? It is true that Rosanvallon is in the first rank of contemporary European intellectuals and, in his own country, in a position at the institutional apex of intellectual life—as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu once were. The range of his work, written over a period of more than three decades, might justify such an attitude, too. And one might add that Rosanvallon offers an approach with the scope and depth of theories of democracy from comparatively better-known figures like Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls (both of whom Rosanvallon criticizes for having excessively normative approaches to democracy that do not sufficiently respect its historicity). But searching for premises for a new discussion rather than another humbling master is the point or the purpose of the selection of texts that follow. Rosanvallon’s work, indeed, is notable for its lack of hermetic obscurity and for a modesty often absent in theorists who invite discipleship rather than debate. Most

of all, it presents an effort of thought that takes seriously the importance of the antitotalitarian perspective today—Rosanvallon's career emerged out of that school—even as it suggests the need for a next step. It outlines, by considering the vicissitudes of democracy past, a way to begin thinking about democracy future.

An Itinerary in Theory and Practice

Born in 1948, Rosanvallon is a member of the 1968 generation, and his democratic theory is tethered, from beginning to end, to the hopes for democratic revitalization—with democracy redefined not as a matter of party control of the state but reinvention of everyday life—of which his generation became the historical bearer. But unlike much of his generation, the brand of left-wing militancy in which he engaged committed him both to a highly continuous, and highly reflective, itinerary. Never a Trotskyist or a Maoist—the two most significant of the welter of allegiances for young leftists in the brief but spectacular period of *gauchisme* in the years after France's May events—Rosanvallon joined a trade union called the Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT) as a house intellectual and spent his early career advancing and rethinking its particular brand of radicalism within the turbulent and fascinating battle for a plausible left-wing vision of the period.⁴

The CFDT had evolved from Christian syndicalism of the interwar years and became secular, noncommunist, and reformist in the postwar period (unlike its major competitor, the dominant and staunchly communist Confédération Générale du Travail). Thanks to its enterprising general secretary after 1968, Edmond Maire, the CFDT affiliated itself quite rapidly with one of the principal ideals of the student revolt, that of *autogestion*, or self-management. In its origins, the coinage referred to the autonomous organization of enterprise, but it quickly became a generalized term for what life in all sectors would look like after the refusal of hierarchy symbolized by the May 1968 events. The

CFDT became the principal vehicle for the spread of the *autogestionnaire* ideal in French politics of the period, and Rosanvallon, in turn, became its principal theorist. He published his first book under his own name in 1976, in which he celebrated and attempted to refine it.⁵ Self-management meant the liberation of the forces and freedoms of civil society outside and against the state, though some of its partisans took their enthusiasm for it so far as to think that it portended the withering away of politics altogether. It stood for the condemnation of the bureaucratic state—whether Western or Eastern, capitalist or communist in its lineage—in the name of a revived civil society. (In fact, the celebrated concept of “civil society” returned in France in this socialist current that came to be called, retrospectively, the “second” or “other” left, shortly before East European dissidence would spread the concept globally.)

Though overly simple and institutionally vague, the self-management concept offered a partial programmatic translation of the aspirations of May 1968, placing traditional leftist egalitarian concerns within a much broader, and much more libertarian, framework. It augured a new definition for progressive politics that helped break the left’s historical ties to the communist Soviet Union and its conceptual basis in an outmoded vision of politics as state capture and control (through electoral means or not). The concept had to make its way, however, in a complicated struggle for what vision should claim the hearts and minds of French socialists, and it was together with a number of other intellectuals that Rosanvallon agitated in the Parti Socialiste for a cleavage between “two cultures of the left,” statism and self-organization, whose existence their standard-bearer Michel Rocard proclaimed in a famous speech, co-written by Rosanvallon, at the party’s July 1977 Nantes congress.⁶ Rocard, however, lost out to François Mitterrand as party leader. It was around this time that Rosanvallon turned his energies to scholarship, without ever losing his interest in day-to-day politics.

Following on the heels of the collapse of *gauchisme* and the decline of hopes for imminent social transformation, the critique

of totalitarianism counted as the decisive intellectual event of the French 1970s. It is well known, of course, that the publication of Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* in the early 1970s set off, in France far more spectacularly than in any other land, a fundamental rethinking of the nature of the Soviet Union and of the validity of any revolutionary enterprise. The versions of and sequels to the antitotalitarian moment have been various. But it stood above all for the lasting proposition that the left had to be reinvented in light of its twentieth-century failures. It demanded a left meaningfully chastened by the Soviet Union's perversion of the quest for freedom into repressive tragedy. It put many intellectuals on guard against the persistent return of an archaic vision of progressive politics that has occurred, once again, today.

Along with François Furet, Claude Lefort—the central thinker of the antitotalitarian moment—became Rosanvallon's major teacher and influence. (Both taught at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, where Rosanvallon did his graduate work, and later became a professor.) Lefort's philosophy, though difficult, is nonetheless the key theoretical basis and precedent for Rosanvallon's work, and beyond much doubt the most lasting monument of the antitotalitarian era. According to Lefort, no societies are characterized by factual unity, but the source of division and conflict that characterizes all societies is not just of a factual or sociological nature. For there is also a necessary gap or difference between a society and its self-representation. And since the latter is a necessary part of the former (no society is possible without a self-representation split away from it), what Lefort called "symbolic division" is constitutive of society. The sources of this theory in French intellectual history are complex; but Lefort mobilized it to create a fascinating—and in the Anglo-American world undeservedly obscure—new classification for political regimes and their historical relation to one other, running from primitive societies without a state, through the demo-

cratic emancipation of civil society, and culminating in totalitarian statism.⁷

Democracy and totalitarianism are, according to Lefort, the key couplet of modern ideological history. Democracy, Lefort argued, is a disincorporated political form in multiple senses. It is organized around individuals rather than corporations, and it loses the monarchical, personally embodied, and partly exterior symbol of power that clearly organized society. Finally—and again in corporal terms—by dispensing with the king’s body, and thus by making the central site of power “empty,” in Lefort’s celebrated phrase, democracy also invited the temptation that society might finally dispense the exteriority that makes all polities possible, allowing it to become one with itself. The violence of totalitarianism, according to Lefort, flows from its attempt to make society in democracy forcibly coincide with its representation of itself as a collection of free and equal individuals—to transcend “formal democracy” in the name of a putative real democracy. In this sense, in Lefort’s conception, totalitarianism is possible only on the basis of, and as a kind of perverted attempt to realize, democratic aspirations. But Lefort’s refusal of this totalitarian aspiration did not mean falling back on some existing institutional repertory or on a conservative return to some prior defense of representative government. It did not, in other words, mean taking the opposition to totalitarianism as an end in itself, as occurred in the so-called “new philosophy” of the time and since. Instead, it meant the pursuit of democratic emancipation in better awareness of its potential ruin. “Democracy? It is a dream to suppose that we already know what it is, whether out of satisfaction with our present state or to attack its misery,” Lefort wrote in the 1970s. “It is simply a play of open possibilities, inaugurated in a past still close to us, and we have barely begun to explore it.”⁸

It was Furet’s *Interpreting the French Revolution* that extended Lefort’s theory and provided one culmination of the an-

titotalitarian moment in French politics by rethinking the history of their nation in precisely such a spirit.⁹ For Furet, French history afforded the most illuminating materials for understanding the dynamics Lefort described. In an account owing much to Lefort, Furet painted the French revolution as giving rise to a voluntaristic drive to unify society according to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory of the general will, to incarnate it institutionally, and to purify it of its sociological differences and its internal antitheses, in a bloody purgative ritual of terror that also bequeathed a highly problematic—indeed potentially criminal—legacy to the modern political imaginary. That such a campaign is unfulfillable did not make the fantasy of its completion any less alluring in its appeal to revolutionaries, or less disastrous in its political consequences. And not simply at the time: it made it the permanent temptation of progressive thought and action to achieve “real” democracy, unity at the price of pluralism, in a withering away of politics in the violent name of its realization. The idea of a politics that would begin by putting terror at the center of its concern—internalized in the French Revolution, externalized for the antitotalitarians of today—is given classic form in Furet's work.

The philosophy of Lefort and the history of Furet laid the intellectual and professional foundations for their follower's career as a student of democracy, encouraging Rosanvallon to face up to the task of envisioning the emergence and history of the sovereign people—including its perverted and pathological forms, beginning with the revolution. It was Furet too, among other things a great intellectual impresario, who initially conscripted Rosanvallon into a small coalition of senior intellectuals like Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis and younger thinkers like Marcel Gauchet, Pierre Manent, and Bernard Manin, and later founded the Institut Raymond Aron, which has served as the institutional focus of “new French thought,” and whose successor center at the École des Hautes Études Rosanvallon has directed in recent years. (Furet and Rosanvallon also collaborated on the

Fondation Saint-Simon, an important and influential think-tank of the 1980s and 1990s.)

Far from a homogeneous group of thinkers, however, this coterie, though united by an opposition to the totalitarian potential they saw in modern politics and an interest in the history of political thought and experience, lived through and applied the antitotalitarian moment in diverse ways. Above all, it is a mistake to interpret the antitotalitarian moment as a “liberal” moment in French intellectual history, even if some of the group’s members championed liberalism and all of them interested themselves in liberalism’s classical texts.¹⁰ Indeed, as the following selections rather graphically show, for Rosanvallon liberalism is also a central source of a dangerous utopianism in modern life that could also climax in totalitarianism. And yet it is undeniable that Rosanvallon came to be highly influenced by the new style of thinking about modern politics and French history that flowed out of the antitotalitarian moment. Among the earliest to join in and attempt to update it, Rosanvallon has spent most of his scholarly time since the 1970s engaged in a vast reconstruction of the history of democracy, of which this volume provides a basic and introductory overview.

In 2001, Rosanvallon received his appointment to the Collège de France, which marked a turning point in his career at the same time as more global ideological shifts were showing the limits of the antitotalitarian perspective which generated many of the lasting efforts that this volume showcases. For this reason alone, one would be making an enormous mistake to consider Rosanvallon’s work as simply another exercise in antitotalitarian history or philosophy, much less a stalwart and lucid defense of antitotalitarian liberalism deemed so relevant by many, in the United States not least, today. It is true that very little about his project is intelligible (even or especially when his writings venture into historically distant periods) if it is not kept in mind that the horizon of the inquiry remained for a long time how the ingredients of totalitarianism were assembled in modern history.

But Rosanvallon's work now stands for the proposition that antitotalitarianism, too, has limits, and is not the sole basis for theorizing and practicing democracy today, for conducting a foreign policy, or for conceptualizing one's own society. This volume, accordingly, does not simply illustrate antitotalitarianism in its historical applications, but also intimates what plausibly might come after, or at least supplement, that commitment.