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## THE FRENCH REVOLUTION IN THE EARLY WORKS OF ERNST MORITZ ARNDT\*

*Today, Ernst Moritz Arndt is commonly considered to be one of the first German liberals, or more precisely, national liberals. Like other German liberals of his time, he was very concerned with the development of the political situation in France and devoted many of his works to explaining the events which took place in France from 1789 and onward. The ideas behind the French Revolution played an important role in the intellectual development of Ernst Moritz Arndt, even though he was never prepared to accept them without a large dose of criticism. In this paper, the author aims to give insights into Arndt's main political ideas from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and to explain the contradictoriness of the influences, which the French Revolution had on them.*

Key words: *French revolution. – People. – Estate. – Germany. – Nationalism.*

The French Revolution left a deep impression on a large number of Germans, amongst which is Ernst Moritz Arndt.<sup>1</sup> At the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Arndt's lectures at the University of Greifswald were filled with strong political tension, and they placed special emphasis – in the spirit of the ideas behind the French Revolution – on the social significance of individual liberties (Steffens, 1912: XXV). The lasting ardour with the ideas from 1789 was most likely a consequence of the still strong influence of Fichte's *Beiträge zur Berechtigung der Urteile des Publikums über die französische Revolution* from 1793 (Musebeck, 1914: 75). Namely, as emphasized by Ernst Musebeck, Arndt shall not, even when he enters the nationalist phase later on in his life, become an opponent of the French Revolution, because he always kept to his opinion

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1 Even though he denied it later on, at nineteen and a half years of age, Arndt welcomed the French revolution with great enthusiasm.

that the old monarchy had wronged its people to a great extent and that it provoked their rebellion. His serf descent told Arndt only too well that the French people had every right to do what they did and no doctrines or emotional reasons could wash away that thorough insight. This will, after all, be a significant element of Arndt's most liberal core idea, which obligated citizens to rebel against the monarch if he doesn't respect the divine order and imperils the civil liberties.

Except in that view, Arndt was a radical royalist. At one time he self-critically stated: "I have always been most likely an extreme monarchist" (Arndt, 1912b: 70). Arndt's extreme monarchism was to a great extent a consequence of his infatuation with the King of Sweden Gustav IV Adolf during his youth. This enlightened monarch served as an example, to Arndt, of a "real king" with whom no republican leader could have been compared. Driven by his love for the king, Arndt had become a principal royalist from an early age. That love, as is usually the case, went hand in hand with hate toward another object – (the long-gone) Louis XIV. Animosity toward this French King transfused to a great extent onto the French people, so that from an early age Arndt celebrated all of their defeats in war, regardless of who the enemy was. The shadow of that hate fell upon the French Revolution, but as already mentioned, it never made Arndt turn against it completely. In any case, it was not until 1806–1807 that Arndt's Francophobia grew into a blind anger toward the French, as a direct consequence of Napoleon's conquest of Prussia and Sweden.

All of this had a personal dimension in Arndt's life. Namely, toward the end of 1806 when the French, following their defeat of Prussia, began to warm up to Pomerania, Arndt was forced to leave his post at the University of Greifswald and flee to Stockholm, because of his open anti-Napoleon ideas, where he was deeply disappointed in Sweden and its people. As it turned out, the Swedish were very partial toward the French and quite excited by Napoleon's arrival (to the extent that they dethroned Arndt's idol and great Francophobe Gustav IV Adolf),<sup>2</sup> which only confirmed Arndt's belief that they became an entirely "unhistorical" nation. If he had, during his travels through Europe between 1798 and 1799, continued to present himself (and certainly feel like) a Swedish, following 1806 when he fled from Pomerania to Stockholm, Arndt shall never do so again (Arndt, 1960: 75). For Arndt, identification with the Germans was inseparable from his belief that the Germans could only

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2 Gustav IV Adolf was a deputy in German Reichstag based on the fact that he ruled over the Swedish part of Pomerania. As a sworn enemy of Napoleon, he strongly protested when the Emperor renounced his German throne in 1806 and turned to the Austrian empire.

overcome Napoleon if they united. The attractiveness of the Swedish political and all other identities had become obsolete and the only homeland worth living and fighting for was Germany. The trouble was however, the fact that Germany at that time was still only an imaginary entity. However, if there was no Germany that only meant that it had to be created. And it will in fact be Arndt who will literally give all he's got so as to "awaken" the German nation for a fight against the French and establish the foundation for the union of the German states. The hate toward the French, which had become constituent of the German identity of a large number of intellectuals of that time (Fichte, Kleist, Schleiermacher, etc.), had evolved into something else in Arndt – a planned propaganda of a popular war and national hatred (Kallscheuer and Legganie, 1994: 154).

Friedrich Sell was right, when he wrote in his study on the tragedy of German liberalism, that the French Revolution was for Arndt the last expression of (French) enlightenment, which had surely already belonged to the past (Sell, 1981: 62). Therefore, even though he never became a passionate adversary of the French Revolution (but only the French people), Arndt saw in it something that was characteristic of the "French being" and which the Germans should avoid in imitating. Of course, the Germans want freedom, as the French revolutionists did, but allegedly they did not want it through "wild revolutions of Mirabeau, Robespierre and Sieyès", because such insanity was not a "German trait" (Arndt, 1912i: 36). In addition, according to Arndt, the Germans should not strive toward anything universal; what they should effectuate are "old freedom, old virtue, old honour, old courage, old Germanic virtue" (Arndt, 1912e: 177). For this reason in 1813 he referred to the German people as follows: "You are a loyal, grateful, obedient and peaceful nation which does not like bloodshed without reason; and because of this you won't and cannot, even if you wanted, have all that is old be destroyed and crushed, as the rabid people of Paris did twenty and fifteen years ago" (Arndt, 1912e: 174).

The French Revolution was, therefore, an aspiration for radical changes, and in Arndt's opinion that could never yield anything good. During the first couple of years following the revolution, enthusiasm and sublime spirit reigned amongst the French people and a belief that from the chaos a new and improved government shall rise. However, soon France was wading in blood. In *L'Esprit des Lois*, Montesquieu noted that the French do serious things foolishly, and foolish things seriously. For this reason Arndt asked himself, what kind of miracle could at once turn such a nation of slaves into a free republican nation, and that through a revolution, which had devoured itself, until only murderers remained in power. From such chaos Napoleon had to be born. Arndt quotes Mon-

tesquieu again when he says that a free nation can only have a liberator, while an oppressed one can only acquire a new oppressor. The enslaved French nation sent Louis XVI to the guillotine, but only to make room for new despots: Robespierre and finally Napoleon. After the king, the aristocracy, the clergy, and finally the new constitutional government were ousted, “the spirit of evil” and the “mob” reigned. Such epochs, Arndt is to conclude, history does not explain, “Madness and reason, fanaticism and malice, chance and plan, heroism and low intentions, lay so close to one another that only God could pass judgement” (Arndt, 1912c: 159).

Nonetheless, Arndt was not always this reserved in his opinion of the French Revolution. At other times, he explicitly blamed humanism and rationalism for all of the evil it had created. It was precisely the idea of humanism that, as Arndt thought, through “free and mutual fraternization” of the people of Europe led to conquest, inhumanity and despotism. The French people were overcome by a type of enthusiasm which was purely of spiritual nature and believed that it was really achieving freedom and equality of all people in the world. Through a play on words and names there was an intent to regenerate the world. Even the peasants – “always the first part of the nation” – were more than ever willing to follow the goals of the new government, including going to war, as the shackles of feudalism were removed. In that way they were used for ideas of humanism which they otherwise do not accept and which are not typical of them. Still, the rationalism was not less the instigator of evil of the French Revolution than humanism was. Arndt identified its generator in the Third Estate of the old Parliament, where the greatest minds of the French nation sat. They created the National Assembly, which carried a great meaning in its name. That assembly was “in its talents and the disposition of the people frightening”. However, with the work of this assembly, the entire nation was so “enlightened” that words lost all touch with reality and an escape had to be found in despotism. People wanted to consummate the philosophy of Rousseau and Montesquieu, which was only “devilry of transcendental spirit”, that wants to create all from notions (Arndt, 1940: 172–174). In this way religion, through which man gets the possibility to advance within the frameworks of God’s order was neglected. For this reason, Arndt proclaims the French Revolution the milestone marking the commencement of the third epoch of Christianity. The first epoch lasted until Luther and it was characterized by the attempts of spiritual reconciliation. Luther offered the world a “deep mind” and “high faith”, but the world was not prepared for them, because reason was underdeveloped. Because of this in the next three centuries reason had to evolve. In that sense, the French were most dominant “as the most reasonable of all European people”. However, that led the

French to the loss of faith, because everything had to be known, explained and understood. That was the triumph of reason over the mind. The French Revolution showed what limitations to reason as opposed to the mind meant, with which only the great godly truth can be perceived. Following (the failure of) the French Revolution, Arndt expected the period of the mind, which shall be based on faith, to set on, and during which reason shall be degraded into its servant (Arndt, 1912d: 138). In the irony of faith, that shall finally happen: nationalism can be defined as instrumental utilization of reason for awakening the blind and irrational faith into a new deity – the Nation – and its delegate on Earth – the nation’s leader.

The basis of Arndt’s understanding of people lies in the notion that people are not only an organism,<sup>3</sup> but a spiritual entity, a “character”.<sup>4</sup> A character is something possessed not only by individuals, but also by things, plants and even a nation as a whole. According to Arndt two factors are important for the character of a nation. The first is geographic, and relates to the climate and environment in which a nation lives (Arndt, 1810: 69)<sup>5</sup>. The second, even more important factor for the origin and formation of a character and “spirit” of a nation is the language which its people use to speak and which, because of this, must be preserved and considered sacred (Arndt, a: 53–54). Even though he sets apart these two factors, Arndt is actually of opinion that there is a “strong union” between them (Arndt, 1805: 18–20). For example, the French language, as well as the French people, is a mixture of the north and the south and for this reason it cannot achieve a “full measure in the accent”, so that certain tones are detained in the nose and throat. And for this reason it is entirely sensual. On the other hand, the German language reflects the north: in a cruel nature man turns to himself, to his heart and mind. The language is sharp, crude like soil, and exemplary of the spirit (Arndt, 1805: 38–40). Because the character of a nation is reflected in the language in this way, one should take the necessary precautions so that a child does not learn two or more languages, but only one, that being the one spoken by its nation (Arndt, 1940: 228). This is because every child, in the first five-six years of its life, in its “unconscious innocence” absorbs the language of

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3 Arndt took over the notion from German romanticism about the organic unity of the estate, which he opposed to individualistic moral ideals of German enlightenment (Musebeck, 1921: XIV).

4 “The character of one object and one person is that which stays and which differs, it’s what nature has planted so deep within that nothing can change or destroy it” (Arndt, 1810: 20).

5 The size of a nation was not an important factor of his existence: the Swedish are for example one nation although there is only three and a half million of them (Arndt, 1839: 6).

the nation to which it belongs and together with the language the “spirit of its nation” (Arndt, 1912f: 146). In that way, through language identical individual “characters” are formed which correspond to the collective type of a given nation.

In accordance with these two factors of national “character”, all nations have linguistic and geographical (“natural”) boundaries. In contrast to the “weight” which Arndt ascribes to the geographic and linguistic factor in the establishment of the “national character”, he gives geographic boundaries priority over the linguistic, but immediately asserts that the (one nation) state in which both coincide is a happy one. This assumption was used by Arndt to describe the attempt of France to conquer all of Europe as “unnatural” (Arndt, 1940: 215) and even “godless”. Because, against God are all those who strive toward one state, one religion, one people and one language. Arndt thought that God had created diversity in the world and that anyone who is trying to deny this is a “tyrant” (Arndt, a: 11). Here we can see a decisive turnaround in the criticism of tyranny in comparison to earlier (in particular eighteenth century) tradition: a tyrant is no longer one who violates the regulations of natural laws (social contract) and the universal human mind, but the one who violates the “natural” and “God given” pluralism of people in the world and (the geographical and linguistic) boundaries between them. Arndt still does not openly declare that he is against the ideals of citizenship of the world, but he noticeably changes their content as well. A real citizen of the world is now the one who is “ready to help” his people and “who is humane, righteous” and does not allow for his love toward man to scatter into “boundlessness” (Arndt, 1940: 157).

Soon enough Arndt shall sharply criticize the Germans who are still “slaves” of the old enlightened – now growingly considered as the French – ideal of citizenship of the world. No nation, according to him, had so zealously like the Germans accepted “Rousseau’s ideas”: enlightenment and cosmopolitanism. In cosmopolitan enlightenment the mind has entirely neglected the body and has made from nature a carcass which should be “anatomized”. The idea that cosmopolitanism is more dignified than nationalism, and humanity sublime over the nation is still deeply rooted in the German people, but it is not the mind, but that which is the mind, concludes Arndt surpassing Hegel, is more than that which is real. The Germans “have become cosmopolite and despise the miserable vanity to be one nation: that is one fine, frivolous and enlightened group without a homeland, religion and anger, which only barbarians keep for something big” (Arndt, 1912d: 29). Except for being a “barbaric” value, cosmopolitanism is according to Arndt a dangerous mistake, because it disrupts the hierarchy of communities to which all people belong and imperils the basic postulate that above the people there is nothing better,

nor more important. “Without people there is no humanity, and without a free citizen there is no free man” (Arndt, 1912c: 107). The notion of “citizen”, which Arndt uses here is deprived of an ingredient of Kant’s universalism and already has a sense of “compatriot”, which within himself really only partially retains political connotation. Therefore, when he says that “higher humanity” must be achieved by becoming a “citizen”, that simply means that “our people and our homeland must be loved” more than humanity (Arndt, 1912d: 87). Of course, the question is only whether any love will remain for humanity (as well as communities smaller than the nation) from the hypertrophic patriotism.

Arndt’s fundamental political idea was that the state must be the nation – in other words it must allow for spontaneous development of a nation’s “life”. The state itself is for him “life”, and the best state is the one which allows the most liberal life for the nation. Moreover, the government of a state must be subordinate to its people, because “the people are not because of the princes, but rather the princes are because of the people” (Arndt, 1912m: 192). The task of serving the people the state can answer only if it is organic (that is a harmonic symbiosis of estate) and if it is ceased to be observed as a machine (Arndt, b: 30). Organic abandonment of the state as a machine represented a knotted point in which Arndt’s open attacks accumulated and not only on Prussian inheritance of the absolute monarchy, but at the same time on enlightenment, and as we will be able to see later on, liberalism as well.

In his works Arndt firmly kept to liberalism as a starting point according to which real political freedom is founded on the rule of law (to which the king himself should be subject to). At one time he will even conclude that the king must also be subjugated by the law, like every servant, because any deviation from this principle leads to (political) slavery (Arndt, 1912b: 195). The trouble with this concept lay in the fact that Arndt immediately made it relative by claiming that in a state there must remain, aside from (civil) law one higher (political) law, one *arcane imperii*, in which there will continue to be unlimited monarchical sovereignty. In that sense, Arndt continued to be very clear: “But this (political) law cannot be reduced to the notion of civil law and civil rights, without revoking all of the monarch’s strength and courage, and his acts of grandeur and highness” (Arndt, 1912d: 158). Aside from depriving civil law from its universality by endorsing political law, Arndt also renounces its positivism. This can be best seen in the fact that his concept of rule of law does not allow for “paper despotism” to govern over the state (Arndt, b: 33–35). Based on this it can be concluded that the law to which he refers is a mere moral law, which is not created, but perceived. In other words, it can be said that Arndt in his endorsement of

the rule of law did not take into consideration (at least not primarily) written civil laws (and even less so a constitution), but “an unwritten law in the heart of the people” (Musebeck, 1921: XII). Furthermore, the laws on which Arndt insisted were in no way the result of “the will of the people”. It is good, of course, if laws originate “through the people”, but that does not mean that the people give them to themselves (through the parliament), but that they accept them voluntarily (from their governor, monarch) and acknowledges them as valid (Arndt, 1949: 196 and 213). Finally, Arndt cuts all ties between the law and natural law. The latter for him amounts to meaningless words, because nature (or better said the natural state) does not precede the state, but coexists with it, and can therefore not represent any kind of criterion for assessing the latter. The state is part of nature, and not a contractual creation of an individual. Or as Arndt so poetically said, the state is an “unrestrained horse”, which like any other “natural element”, cannot be limited by “meaningless words”. Only chaos can be an alternative to the state, while nature is an entire world order, in which states find their place without any natural law (Arndt, 1940: 188).

As he in essence accepted the liberalistic postulate of the rule of law, Arndt also supported the ideals of the French Revolution: equality and liberty (brotherhood was also incorporated into national unity). He openly stated that equality in society should be equality before the law and that liberty is the rule of law without any exceptions (Arndt, 1938c: 385). Also, ideas of equality and freedom, which are the foundation of law, for him, they were the product of “original equality of human desire for happiness and pleasure”. On the other hand, he admitted that alongside this aspiration for equality (and freedom), people are prone to oppression and force, so that they could provide happiness and pleasure for themselves by inflicting harm to someone else. A glance at the modern nation provides Arndt with evidence of this: it could be said that amongst them there are two different types: those born as masters, and those born as servants. The most liberal traits are shown by Arndt’s voice that denounces that conclusion and states that acknowledgement of inborn slavery means attribution of that which is the deed of man to destiny (Arndt, 1938a: 182). Therefore, what is created can be destroyed. And if slavery was created by man (by mistake?), then man can destroy it as well. At this point, Arndt’s theory of political emancipation shows its best side and a deep influence of the ideologies behind the French Revolution.

One of Arndt’s most serious accusations regarding the French Revolution was that the idea that land and other goods to be freely traded originated from it. From there, came forth the “true” Gallic, or French being (i.e. slavish Romanic spirit). Following the French, there were



many other modern nations, who all renounced the liberalistic legislation and adopted the principle of unlimited sale of real estate (which causes overpopulation, poverty, begging and crime) (Arndt, 1912b: 217). Because of this, what is referred to as “Manchester liberalism” is only one echo of the old lack of freedom, and not a true project of emancipation (Arndt, 1912b: 235–236). However, the main problem was not the distorted liberalism, but the fact that the orthodox conservatives were opposing it, pleading for the return to the old, imposing obedience and renewal of the estate system (Arndt, 1912b: 214). In this conflict, Arndt refuses to be classified into either side and pleads for the middle road between extreme liberalism and conservatism. That “third way” which was so abused later on was supposed to consist of a return to the past, but no longer into the old regime, but all the way back to the ancient Germanic traditions of liberal peasantry and the prohibition of the transfer of land by laws. The cornerstone of that tradition represented by regulation in which one half to two thirds of the total land of one state is in the ownership of the peasants, while only one third to one half is left in free trade. Arndt believes that this solution had formerly protected, and it is also possible now to protect the middle possession and the middle (peasant) class, on which rests the strength of one free nation (Arndt, 1912b: 229). This proposition had as an example Fichte’s model of a closed commercial state, which Arndt wrote was entirely applicable in real life, even though Fichte examined it primarily from a moral perspective (Arndt, 1912b: 234). Arndt’s contribution to this model was the emphasis on the role of peasants and traditional peasant economy in an autarchic national state.

It is interesting to mention Arndt’s understanding of the “mob” from the perspective of the social content of a state. A part of the mob, most generally defined, is anyone who does not obey the laws (Arndt, b: 12). However, it is not so much about a group of (“professional”) criminals, but a group of handicapped people, who are forced by their position (in “Manchester liberalism”) to be excluded from all political and social events in the state. The mob accuses the government of its evil, while in fact each government “follows along, passively or actively, unintentionally and subconsciously, with the spirit and will of the entire nation” (Arndt, 1912g: 35), which means that the existence of a mob is actually the result of a concrete state of each individual nation. If the significance of peasantry in each state is taken into consideration (or in other words nation), then the existence and size of the mob shall depend on how (politically and socially) strong the peasantry is and how much it resists the course leads toward “Manchester liberalism”. In the strengthening and restructuring of the peasant estate, Arndt saw “one

obstacle against the threat of turning of a large number of nations into rabble (*Verpöbelung*)” (Fahrner, 1937: 73).

This political program had one very serious defect. Namely, he relied on the enormous emancipated potential of the peasants, even though at the time the old regime was breaking apart it was precisely the former serfs (newly liberated peasants) that were politically most inexperienced and authoritative. The best evidence of this is in fact Arndt’s investigation of current political conditions in Pomerania. The liberal population was made up of two classes up until 1806, including (aristocrats and the middle class) and the “mob”, which did not want to earn its bread by working (Arndt, 1817: 16–17). Peasants did not have freedom and did not in any way participate in the state. When in 1806 serfdom was eliminated and Landtag (that in the Swedish sample had four classes: aristocrats, the middle-class, the clergy and peasants) was formed in Greifswald, the peasants were forced to step onto the political scene unprepared and basically overnight. For this reason, Arndt realistically observes that at that time they were still not in fact (really) free and independent so that they could equally participate in the activities of the Landtag, so they simply and always entirely authoritatively voted for the proposals made by the King, regardless of their content (Arndt, 1817: 25–26). Therefore, regardless of all heroic stories about the emancipative potential of peasantry “in general”, a concrete problem with much higher priority arose: in which way, following the elimination of serfdom, should the peasants be reintegrated into the activities of the political organs, so that they would not “pour” into a mob and imperil “their own” state, instead of helping it. If strong peasantry was really the best medicine against “*Verpöbelung*” according to Arndt, it remained unclear how to prevent “*Verpöbelung*” of the peasants themselves when it is weak and that is, concretely, always the case, when they are, as a group, leaving the serf position. He shall never ask himself this question, and succeed in giving an adequate answer. His attention was occupied by completely different problem, so that in time the problem of peasantry itself and its emancipative roles were placed in their entirety put aside, so as to concentrate on the task of ethnic integration of Germans and escalation of national love and hate, as the most efficient integrative resources.