*Modern Intellectual History* (2025), 1–11
doi:10.1017/S1479244324000532

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

REVIEW ESSAY

# Freedom and Regeneration in Revolutionary France

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Geneviève Rousselière, *Sharing Freedom: Republicanism and Exclusion in Revolutionary France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024)
Emma Planinc, *Regenerative Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2024)

For anyone writing about the state of the world in the last decade, it almost goes without saying that global politics is increasingly defined by the extremes. Far-right parties continue to make electoral inroads across Europe, and their relative successes prove that radical challenges to the status quo have more durability than anyone could have foreseen even a few years ago. In the United States, another contentious presidential race emboldened extremists from both sides months before a single vote could be cast. What's more, ideas that once sat at the margins have a presence in the public square. Entire literatures decry liberal democracy, only to propose either reactionary or ultra-progressive alternatives in its place.[1] Even then, it has become conventional—easy, in fact—to denounce such mounting objections to the status quo as dangerous forms of "illiberalism," ideologies that awaken humanity's base tendencies toward tribalism and violence and thrust them into electoral politics.

But the authors of two recent books at the intersection of contemporary political theory and French intellectual history, *Sharing Freedom: Republicanism and Exclusion in Revolutionary France* by Geneviève Rousselière and *Regenerative Politics* by Emma Planinc, take a distinctive approach to the study of a fanatical public square. Both Rousselière and Planinc marshal recent complaints from the far ends of the political spectrum, right and left. Both authors take those claims seriously. Yet they raise objections from the margins to pursue a particular goal: to cast light on tensions in the political center—a center that they each hope to fortify against its opponents.

Both books open with examples from the extremes. Rousselière quotes the 2005 manifesto of the Parti des indigènes de la République, a decolonial group that troubled

[1]Patrick J. Deneen, *Regime Change: Toward a Postliberal Future* (New York, 2023); Guillaume Faye, *Why We Fight* (London, 2011); Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC and London, 2019).

detractors with its "reactionary, anti-republican, *antilaïque*, ethnicist" attack on the "jingoistic universal" (2). This manifesto, as Rousselière explains, prompted intense public debate about the legacies of France's colonial past. Planinc issues a call for change all her own, announcing in the book's opening line that "there are no humans left in politics" before engaging with the anti-universalist philosophies of Guillaume Faye and Alain de Benoist and later with progressive academics in the shadow of Michel Foucault (1). Still, neither author lingers at the fringes for too long. Rousselière cites the *indigènes*' manifesto against colonial injustice to reveal a deeper "legitimacy crisis" of French republicanism, or the inability of republicanism, that "official doctrine of French institutions," to live up to its guarantee of safeguarding freedom for all (4, 3). Rousselière's goal is not to jettison republicanism. Instead, she aims to restore its fundamental commitment to "sharing freedom." Planinc, too, turns inward from the margins. *Regenerative Politics* targets the once-sacred cows of political liberalism and the Enlightenment conception of the human being, exposing cracks in the anthropological foundations of our modern concept of rights. But this remains an "antiradical" book, according to its author (10). Rather than restating conclusions from today's critics of the Enlightenment at either far end of the political spectrum, Planinc endeavors to resuscitate liberalism by replacing its broken foundations with humanizing alternatives, starting with liberals' supposedly lifeless defenses of human rights.

Although these two books draw inspiration from the present, the authors spend most of their respective time in eighteenth-century France. In the French revolutionaries' defenses of republicanism, Rousselière finds the source of the duplicity of republican discourse that promised emancipation for all but justified the exclusion of certain groups (women, slaves, the *indigènes* or the colonized) from the rights and freedoms of citizenship. Planinc illuminates forgotten eighteenth-century debates in natural philosophy that informed the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This alternative vision of "regenerative" human nature, Planinc maintains, found its fullest expression in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. And most importantly for her argument, the "human" of this regenerative French tradition bears little resemblance to the familiar rights-bearing individual of the Lockean state of nature. Both Rousselière and Planinc, in fact, identify Rousseau as the pivotal figure in their respective stories—Rousselière's on the tensions inherent in a republican discourse that embraced democracy after Rousseau, Planinc's on the ideal of a regenerating, perfectible human being, the subject of the revolutionaries' Declaration. Both books offer creative, thoughtful interpretations of pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary political thought. Both present convincing revisionist accounts of aspects of the Revolution: its rights discourse (Planinc) and the thought of its prominent republicans (Rousselière). Remarkably, each writer manages to present novel readings of the canonical writings of Rousseau—no small feat given the vast literatures in philosophy and political theory on *The Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (Second Discourse)* and especially *The Social Contract*.[2] In light of the authors' shared subject matter (eighteenth-century

[2]Rousselière, for her part, offers rereadings of key passages in *The Social Contract* but looks beyond that text to cement Rousseau's status as a transitional figure in modern republicanism. Rousselière's chapter on Rousseau also includes a convincing interpretation of the role of virtue in a large republic from the *Discourse on Political Economy*. In this respect, Rousselière's monograph intervenes in literature on the

philosophy and Revolutionary debates), most of the article that follows will highlight the contributions of each book to the history of ideas. But in the spirit of the contemporary developments that inspire them, these two authors also push boundaries. *Sharing Freedom* and *Regenerative Politics* are ambitious books that, this essay will argue, test the limits of their genre: normative-historical works of political theory that extend their reach to address problems that manifest in particular ways in the present day.

## Whose freedom? Which republicanism(s)?

For Rousselière, the call of the *indigènes* was one episode in the ongoing legitimacy crisis of French republicanism. Other episodes include impassioned debates over the principle of *laïcité*, the burning of the *banlieues* in 2005, the year-long protests of the Gilets Jaunes in 2018, even the 2015 terrorist attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*. Each of these explosive moments exposed existing fractures in the social order, Rousselière argues. More than this, the source of a fractured French society can be traced to the nation's republican roots. Why has republicanism, a theory that claims to protect freedom as the common good, also been used to justify nationalism, imperialism, and the exclusion of entire groups from French citizenship? How can we explain the Janus-faced character of French republicanism, with its universal claims to "share freedom" alongside its circumstantial limitations on that freedom? Why does France, a nation that hews so closely to the emancipatory ideal of a universalist republic, stand accused of hypocrisy and injustice by marginalized populations within its own purportedly inclusive borders?

Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial scholars have answered similar questions with structural explanations for the persistence of social exclusion. *Sharing Freedom* showcases a more original method. Rousselière scrutinizes the "argumentative structures" (8) and stated "reasons" (6) that enabled eighteenth-century French theorists to affirm emancipation and excuse exclusion at the same time. Rather than framing exclusion as a systemic feature of Western societies or one effect of decolonization, Rousselière analyzes the steady arguments that self-professed republicans delivered in defense of political and social exclusion. This method yields two "paradoxes": of shared freedom and the limited capacity to exercise it, and of universal principles and nationalist belonging (25). These two paradoxes explain most of the tensions that have dogged French republicanism since its beginnings in the Revolution, Rousselière argues. One of the many merits of *Sharing Freedom* is the author's careful dissection of republican arguments. Despite her sympathy for republicanism as our "most powerful" discursive weapon against domination (1), Rousselière never shies away from highlighting its internal inconsistencies, the tensions that pressurize a divided society operating under the veil of complete emancipation. This is a book written by someone who cares deeply about the future of the French republic, so much so that the author refuses to gloss over the endemic problems that may one day spell its undoing. Indeed, in the monograph's

pre-Revolutionary political economy of virtue. See John Shovlin, *The Political Economy of Virtue: Luxury, Patriotism, and the Origins of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, 2006); Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, 2007).

final pages Rousselière encourages her French readers to do the same—"to take a long, hard look at the history of their republicanism" (226).

That history features in the book's five main chapters. Rousselière's method, the careful tracing of republican reasons, leads invariably back in time to "the beginning" of the tradition in France. Here, Rousselière makes a provocative intervention into the scholarship on republican thought: "the beginning of French republicanism is not a birth," she specifies, "but rather a transformation of an older language, the reconfiguration of an inherited way of thinking" (14). The French Revolution seems to mark this new beginning—the world-shaking upheaval that Rousselière puzzlingly describes at one point as "a situation" (108)—though the book also suggests that Rousseau earlier transformed an inherited Italo-Anglo tradition into its French variation, leaving the reader uncertain about where the "beginning" of French republicanism really lies.

By writing on the theme of republicanism at all, Rousselière wades into muddy conceptual waters. The challenge is not only, as the author writes, that "defining [republicanism] is surprisingly difficult" (8) but that the term has been claimed by historians and contemporary philosophers alike. It designates both a loose, multinational historical tradition and a normative political philosophy—and the relationship between the historical roads taken by republicanism and the term's use in today's philosophy departments is far from direct. Many of the core commitments of republicanism—nondomination, independence, "the empire of laws," emancipation, self-government, even freedom itself—vary across time (54–63).[3] Republicanism has always been plagued by a lack of clarity, Rousselière admits, as its central concepts lend themselves to multiple interpretations. With so many plausible meanings in play, it is no wonder that republican values have been stretched in diverging directions, resulting in the two paradoxes of *Sharing Freedom*. To make sense of such a wide-ranging history and its troubling conceptual ambiguity, the author attempts to narrow the scope of her study to *French* republicanism (13). Yet Rousselière is too modest about the book's contribution in this regard. *Sharing Freedom* draws a concise but clear genealogy of the republican tradition that spans its classical and modern variants. Its first two chapters identify when and how the French tradition branched off from theories that took root elsewhere on the Continent, departing from an inherited tradition rather than inaugurating republicanism in France *de novo* with the Revolution. In Chapter 1 on republicanism's "plural beginnings," we follow the tradition's travels from antiquity to the Italian Renaissance to seventeenth-century England and finally to France, where Montesquieu identified the perils of importing classical republicanism into the modern commercial age.

According to Rousselière, this is when French republicanism attempts to shed its elitist inheritance to grow in democratic but eventually conflicting directions. Here Rousseau becomes the author not only of the Revolution but of the republic as well (Chapter 2). Still, his greatest contribution to republicanism was not, as many of his interpreters argue, the celebration of the small, homogeneous Spartan republic that

[3]Frank Lovett, *The Well-Ordered Republic* (Oxford, 2022); Rachel Hammersley, *Republicanism: An Introduction* (Cambridge, 2020).

could never be realized in large commercial states. Rousselière corrects this misinterpretation, and her rereading of Rousseau has implications for understanding republican discourse in France as both a distinctive tradition and ultimately a paradoxical one. On paper, Rousseau "solves" Montesquieu's challenge about achieving stable republics in modern countries. Rousselière's persuasive reading of *The Social Contract* emphasizes the achievements of Rome—a large and decadent republic—rather than the traditional, austere city-state of Sparta. At the same time, however, Rousselière's Rousseau introduces new challenges into modern republicanism. By replacing an elitist standard of "virtue" with the concept of popular sovereignty, Rousseau insisted that freedom could indeed be shared, or that no one could rightly be dominated. It is this innovation, the collision of long-standing republican theory with novel democratic aspirations, that set French republicanism on shaky conceptual ground well before the Revolution. When Rousselière revisits Revolutionary debates over representation that involved Sieyès, Condorcet, Robespierre, and a wide supporting cast from the Jacobin Georges Couthon to the *salonnière* and pamphleteer Sophie de Grouchy, she positions them in new light. Taken together, the trio of Condorcet, Robespierre, and the technocratic Sieyès represent a range of "theoretical options" (107, 117–18) for a future republic. All of these figures, in one way or another, wrote and thought in Rousseau's republican shadow. Condorcet and Robespierre tried to adapt republican commitments to democratic "facts" and French circumstances, and Sieyès could not help but react to the prevailing republican perspective voiced by his contemporaries. And it is here, in the Revolution, that the paradoxes that continue to plague a French republic emerged—not in the well-documented power struggle between Jacobins and Girondins, but in attempts to democratize an existing discourse that crossed the factional lines dividing republicans. There was indeed a single Revolutionary republicanism, in Rousselière's estimation. Yet it was rife with contradictions from the start. The republican ideal of emancipation took years to reach the more than one million slaves in the colonies and longer to reach the 13 million women of metropolitan France. Even now in the twenty-first century, it has failed to live up to the egalitarian standards that Rousseau promised. Montesquieu's "challenge" to establish a true republic in modern societies remains alive and well (Chapter 1).

*Sharing Freedom* makes a compelling case for reinterpreting republicanism in France as a "multifaced inheritance" (15), whose eighteenth-century leading lights struggled to universalize and thus radicalize the older notion of freedom as nondomination. It makes an equally compelling case to reevaluate claims to shared freedom through a critical lens. But while Rousselière expertly deconstructs republican claims in order to expose the paradoxes within them, the reader may be left wondering whether *republicanism* is uniquely susceptible to such contradictions and whether *republican discourse* is in fact responsible for "the enduring moral and political wrongs" (1) that continue to bedevil French society. Republicanism does uphold an idiosyncratic, if inconsistent, conception of freedom as nondomination. Even so, the two paradoxes of emancipation and universalism do not seem to hinge on concepts such as nondomination that belong *exclusively* to the republican project. Nor do these paradoxes find expression *solely* in the writings of republican theorists. Rousselière comes close to admitting as much. In the chapter on revolutionary republicanism(s), we learn

that just about everyone in the National Assembly wrestled with the same practical problem: could the new revolutionary society survive without knowledgeable, virtuous, politically active citizens, capable of making rational use of their newfound freedom (107)? Or, put otherwise, if self-government is the guarantee of freedom, what about those persons and groups who are incapable of self-governing? Sieyès, who is depicted in these pages as a technocratic liberal and not a republican, was just as invested in these matters as his republican contemporaries, though his solutions departed from those of Condorcet and others.[4] Sieyès proposed to distinguish between passive and active citizens—to extend some, but not all, freedoms to all people. And while Rousselière's study stops at the Revolution, similar questions captivated the French after the dust of the First Republic and Bonapartist First Empire had settled. Beginning in the Bourbon Restoration (1814–30), moderate *liberal monarchists* would initiate the search for "capable citizens" who possessed the necessary *capacité politique* to vote for their legislators. But they championed universalism as well, maintaining that civil rights extended universally regardless of any limits on the franchise.[5] It is not republicans alone, then, who held potentially contradictory commitments in the governing of a modern state.

Given that such questions crisscrossed philosophical traditions, political parties, and schools of thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is worth asking whether the dilemmas of *Sharing Freedom* are in fact *republican* dilemmas. Are such paradoxes instead triggered by any appeal to *universalism*, a goal that cannot be easily realized in a world of nation-states? Perhaps the problem lies in a *representative government* that claims to represent the popular will but must first determine which individuals and groups make up "the people." Or, more likely, are these *democratic* dilemmas, triggered by the proposed egalitarianism of Rousseau and deepened by the principle of popular sovereignty?

Even if we *can* attribute the recurrence of exclusionary politics to republicanism in France, it is worth asking *which* republic. Is the republic of today, more than two centuries removed from the Revolution, really racked by problems born in the transitional republicanism of Rousseau in the eighteenth century? The historical set piece of Rousseliere's book portrays the Revolution in careful detail, while the book's framework takes its cue from today's France. There are plenty of intervening variables (to borrow from the toolkit of social science) that may account for the more recent controversies of exclusion and inequality in French society, and we need not delve into the complexity of eighteenth-century republican thought to find them. To take one example, the book concludes decades before French republicans would justify the colonization of Algeria as a *mission civilisatrice*, a legacy that looms large over French society and

[4] A different vein of scholarship depicts Sieyès as a republican, though one who set himself apart from the likes of Condorcet. On this reading, Sieyès was a transitional figure from the ancient republic of virtue to a modern republic that safeguarded the liberty of the individual. Murray Greensmith Forsyth, *Reason and Revolution: The Political Thought of the Abbé Sieyès* (Leicester, 1987); Pasquale Pasquino, *Sieyès et l'invention de la constitution en France* (Paris, 1998).

[5] On *capacité* and liberals' attempts to square the universality of civil rights with the limitations of capable citizenship see Gianna Englert, *Democracy Tamed: French Liberalism and the Politics of Suffrage* (Oxford, 2024).

resonates quite clearly in the call of the *indigènes*.[6] Is French republicanism still reckoning with its incoherent pre-Revolutionary beginnings, or has French society become something else entirely, shaped by democracy and empire across successive republican experiments?

## The lost history of regeneration

Along the same lines as Rousselière's *Sharing Freedom*, Planinc's *Regenerative Politics* is motivated by the contemporary wrongs of exclusionary injustice. But it locates the justification for such wrongs elsewhere: in the Enlightenment vision of the human being, its subsequent appropriation by liberal political theorists in the seventeenth century, and the sham universalism that modern humanism and political liberalism have managed to sustain ever since. Planinc shares her target with writers on the far right and far left, from Faye to Angela Davis, Patrick Deneen to Achille Mbembe. Chapter 1 assembles a cast of iconoclasts who would balk, to say the least, at the slightest suggestion that their ideas might appear in the same book. Nevertheless, left and right meet in their assault on the anthropological core of liberalism. The "largely accomplished" image of man, the rights-bearing, rational agent of the Lockean natural state, "is problematic, either for its vacuity or its exclusionary injustice," Planinc writes in agreement with the authors she cites (4). Our dissatisfaction with politics today stems from seventeenth-century inventions, particularly liberals' impoverished notion of the self: "Human beings have both a regenerative desire and a need to determine themselves in the world that is not currently being met" (9). The hardline critics of today who travel alongside Planinc would have to admit to finding rare common ground on, or at least near, this point. In fact, some of Planinc's critical appraisals in the book recall "classic" objections to liberal principles. When Planinc asserts that "the very rights that are there to secure our material well-being" detach us from our own humanity, she edges closely to Karl Marx's argument on the inhumanity of liberal rights in *On the Jewish Question* (8). When she laments the loss of our "humanist commitments," we hear clear echoes of Alisdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor (4).

The author and her interlocutors from the extreme and the mainstream nevertheless part ways by the end of the book's first chapter. Unlike Deneen on one side and Davis on the other, Planinc does not see herself thinking *outside* liberalism or skimming the margins of academic discourse with contemporary critics of the liberal polity. Instead, her argument affirms an essentialist vision of human nature while acknowledging the value of at least one element of political liberalism: a defense of human rights. Far from abandoning all of what liberal political theory defends, the book imagines rights and regenerative politics as complementary ideals—as the great minds of the Revolutionary era once did, according to Planinc.

Nevertheless, liberal rights do not escape the author's critical eye. Liberals introduced a static, unimaginative vision of the self to ground the typical conception of inalienable rights. And this self-evident reliance on rights has entirely obscured

[6]Rousselière mentions the intervening variable of French colonization briefly in the "Conclusion" at 225–6.

our "first right," Planinc insists: the right to determine ourselves; that is, a right to question the "self-evident" goodness of a liberal rights regime in the first place. Rights—and, by extension, liberal democracies—"are always one possible iteration of the human political experience in the world," and in a truly self-determining political world, their self-evidence must be a subject of interrogation and contestation (31). Planinc herself does not imagine a world beyond rights, though she grants that other regenerating humans may do so (16). Instead, she believes that liberal democracies and their attendant rights claims must be willfully abandoned, revised, and reaffirmed to maintain their legitimacy. Planinc hopes that we end up choosing liberal democracies, but first we must see them as one regenerative option among many, as the result of *our* self-determining and not the product of a world that has already determined us.

Defenders of liberalism, then, need not look too far outside its history to find regenerative humanity, on Planinc's view. Nevertheless, they do need to gaze well beyond what the Anglo-American tradition has to offer. In five central chapters, Planinc returns to the French Enlightenment for the forgotten theory of human nature that influenced the Declaration's architects. There may be no human beings *left* in politics, but they were there at one time—in the vitalist account of humans' natural potential in the French Enlightenment (Chapter 2), in the malleable *homo duplex* of Rousseau's *Second Discourse* (Chapter 3), and finally in the Declaration of the Rights of Man (Chapter 4). How did liberal rights stray so far from this belief in the regenerative power of human beings? The loss of regeneration and the attendant dehumanizing of politics, it turns out, were initiated deliberately by counterrevolutionaries in France. Reactionaries such as Joseph de Maistre and Antoine de Rivarol drew a straight line from eighteenth-century images of regeneration to the horrors of the Terror and thus endeavored to stamp out the memory of both (Chapter 5). The first self-identified liberals, Madame de Staël and Benjamin Constant, had their own part to play in expunging the tradition of regenerative politics beginning in the nineteenth century in favor of moderation. Whether we search within a minimalist, modus vivendi liberalism or in the tradition's richer "lost history" that features Constant as a central player, we are unlikely to find any remnants of regenerative rights.[7] And, some would say, for good reason. Appeals to social and political regeneration would later permeate fascist myths of nationalist rebirth, bringing the concept of regenerative politics full circle from the atrocities of the Terror to the totalitarianism of the twentieth century, a story that Planinc sketches in the second half of Chapter 5.

Without papering over the fascist trajectory of regeneration, Planinc directs readers back to the concept's beginnings in the French Enlightenment. As in Rousselière's *Sharing Freedom*, Rousseau again plays a transformative role in this story of conceptual continuity. Two of Rousseau's forgotten contemporaries, the natural scientists Georges-Louis LeClerc and Charles Bonnet, held that humans alone within the natural world possess a "palingenetic consciousness": an awareness of our place in history, of our capacity to influence the future, and of the ability to re-create ourselves

[7]Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, 2018).

(Chapter 2). Knowledge of this context gives color and shape to the savage man of *The Second Discourse*, the perfectible creature of the natural state with the faculty to become something other than what nature made him—that is, to regenerate. This regenerative Rousseau sometimes intersects with Rousselière's republican innovator; echoing republican themes, the title of Planinc's chapter is "The Right to Renounce Dependence." Once again, however, the emphasis lies elsewhere for Planinc. Rousseau is remarkable not for upholding freedom as nondomination or for giving French republicanism its distinct flavor, but for imagining that human beings could refashion the conditions of their dependence, to reforge the chains of *The Social Contract* for themselves.[8] No man is ever so determined by the regime under which he lives that he cannot dismantle and develop it anew. No man is so much a product of politics that he can never, in Rousseau's imagination, renounce it altogether.

Rousseau takes us to the Terror, or so scholars have often argued. Planinc's revisionist account of Revolutionary regeneration, by contrast, emphasizes the concept's ubiquity well before 1793. Regeneration did not belong to the Jacobins alone; nor, for that matter, did Rousseau. Even the moderate members of the Convention restated Rousseauean themes of self-creation, reinvention, and reform (101–4); they called upon Rousseau's dynamic account of nature and of the palingenetic human being in drafting the Declaration (108). Regeneration was thus in the revolutionary air years before Robespierre would turn to violence to remake French society.

## From history to theory

*Regenerative Politics* thus makes a compelling case for the regenerative thrust of the Declaration and unearths the fascinating buried history of the document's genesis. Yet it is in the transition from historical revisionism to bold normative theories that the book becomes less convincing, both in the problems that it identifies and in the solution it suggests. On the problems, the premise that liberal theory precludes regeneration or reconstitution rests on two intertwined mischaracterizations of the liberal project. First, *Regenerative Politics* introduces liberals' insufficiencies by targeting their states of nature. The book laments that the Hobbesian and Lockean natural states closed off the determinative possibilities of liberal subjects, leading individuals inexorably toward a regime of self-evident universal rights. What Planinc characterizes as these "closed loops" (8) of liberal politics result in an eternal recurrence from nature to the political compact and, sometimes, back again (64). In eliding the Hobbesian and Lockean states of nature, however, Planinc may have created a problem where one never actually existed. It is true that Hobbesian subjects must decide between the state of war and the omnipotent Leviathan, a stark choice meant to nudge readers toward the purportedly obvious advantages of an absolutist state. But it is simply not true that Locke forces a "return to nature and to the same rights and laws that [human beings] possessed before the institution of the state" (8). Locke theorizes a two-step social contract as a mechanism for escaping the inconveniences of the natural state *without* entrapping human beings in a predetermined political society or

[8]Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, in Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1996).

its given laws. Lockean subjects may in fact stay suspended in a Community or Body Politick (united by an agreement to escape nature, at least for the moment) before determining their government, a possibility that renders revolution—political re-creation, we might call it—all the more attractive to Locke's more cautious readers.[9] To take the claim further, one finds room for self-determination throughout Locke's *Second Treatise*, from man as *homo faber* in Chapter 5 to the potential revolutionary envisioned in Chapter 19.

Second, while Planinc follows regenerative histories through the end of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, her study does not do the same with liberalism (nor, in fairness, should we expect it to). But there, she may have noticed traces of the determining self that earlier, more hesitant nineteenth-century observers of the Revolution and the Terror abandoned. Who could read John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* (1859) and deny the author's celebration of a regenerating liberal citizen, free to construct herself and to refashion her world against the despotism of custom? The question of what it means to be human—"a progressive being," Mill himself tells us—is far from settled in Millean liberalism, such that the purpose of liberal theory, in Mill's eyes, becomes fortifying the pursuit of individuality against the tyranny of prevailing opinion and feeling.[10]

This brings us from the book's normative premise to its conclusion. Planinc confronts regeneration's past connections to violence, mythmaking, and fascism to depict the idea's alternative genealogy after its rejection by counterrevolutions and moderate liberals alike. What we still lack at the book's end, however, is an answer to the question whether regenerative *politics* is bound to excuse, even demand, violent action. Is there an intrinsic connection between regenerative political goals and violent means to realize them? Can we indeed reintroduce regeneration *without* its violent associations? Under what conditions can a politics of regeneration lead to its intended ends *without* bringing palingenetic nationalism and totalitarianism in its wake? Most importantly for Planinc's positive project, has the age for regenerative politics passed us by, rendered unthinkable by the twentieth century's (even the Revolution's, for that matter) disastrous attempts to realize political rebirth?

For the many merits of these two books—their careful revisionist stories of Revolutionary thought and their contributions to the pantheon of eighteenth-century political theory, to name only two—worries such as these about historical (dis)continuities and the normative possibilities of history may linger for readers of each of them. How long do historical legacies endure, and how much of a hold do historical missteps or miscalculations still have on the present? How much can we attribute present-day failings to flawed or incoherent origins? Are today's crises and extremist politics evidence of the original cracks that disfigured the republican and liberal traditions from their inception, or are such phenomena traceable to more proximate causes? On the reverse side, are certain ways of thinking best left in the past rather than brought forward into the contemporary political fold in reaction to today's versions of radicalism?

[9]John Locke, *Second Treatise*, in Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, 1960), 265–428, Section 95.

[10]John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. 18, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto, 1977), 2130–310.

*Sharing Freedom* and *Regenerative Politics* cannot be expected to provide us with all or even most of the answers, but given ambitious aims to bridge contemporary anxieties and historical solutions, both books leave us with questions worth asking.

**Cite this article:** Gianna Englert, "Freedom and Regeneration in Revolutionary France," *Modern Intellectual History* (2025), 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000532