

Le due repubbliche
Pensare la Rivoluzione nella Francia del 1848

Daniele Di Bartolomeo
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From farce to *opera seria*. *Le due repubbliche* can be described as a double reappraisal, aimed at reinterpreting the role of the recent past during a specific historical moment marked by the dramatic duplication and reactivation of characters, institutions, traumas, and hopes—elements of a past that showed no signs of fading away. As is well known, France on the eve of 1848 presented itself as an aspiring Republic gazing into a mirror that distorted its image, reflecting the features of protagonists who had driven first the French Revolution and then the Napoleonic era. What is entirely new in this book, on the other hand, is the deliberate intent to *take seriously*—a phrase that not by chance is repeated several times in the text—the re-actualisation of the recent past, as carried out by commentators and spectators who were often the very actors on stage.

Daniele Di Bartolomeo, the author of this stimulating book, revisits a field of analysis previously explored in his earlier work (see, for example, *Nelle vesti di Clio. L'uso politico della storia nella Rivoluzione francese (1789-1799)*, 2014). The *historical repetition*, resulting from the interplay of objective elements and personal interpretations, is characterised by a series of distinctive traits presented in paragraph 4 of chapter 4 (*Nani e giganti*, 103–12). These traits range from the complexity and variety inherent in the various recoveries of the past, to the asymmetry and contrast—both in terms of importance and degree of (in)authenticity—between the two temporal planes, which often underpin more or less substantiated accusations of anachronism. This form of repetition is primarily *predictive*, capable of prefiguring various and opposing future scenarios through comparison—whether by excess, deficiency, or contrast—with specific episodes of an extremely recent past, in order to make an interpretation possible as well as to predict its outcomes ('al fine non solo di consentirne un'interpretazione ma anche di pronosticarne gli esiti', 204). Taking historical repetition seriously constitutes the common objective of the two levels of analysis structuring this book: on the one hand, to reread a pivotal moment of nineteenth-century European history through a fresh analytical lens and on the other, on a more

general level, to measure the relevance of the use of history in the development of a French political culture.

In this regard, as the author himself acknowledges (204), the entire analysis serves as a case study to test the diagnostic concepts developed in collaboration with Francesco Benigno in the recent *Napoleone deve morire. L'idea di ripetizione storica nella Rivoluzione francese* (2020). This is an exceptional case study indeed: unlike the Revolutionary Decade explored in the author's earlier work, a very recent historical precedent could be reiterated in the historical period under examination here, one whose memory remained vivid and was experienced firsthand by some of the protagonists themselves. However, French 1848 is also notable for its ability to create new references for historical repetition and thus by the possibility of quickly becoming a precedent in its own right. And here lies perhaps the reason for the emblematic ellipsis in the title of the work. Rather than anchoring the revolutionary dimension to 1789, the title places the concept of revolution in a broader dimension, demonstrating how historical repetition is based on a process *in fieri*—a construction through accumulation and composition rather than a singular or sudden creation. The cover image (L. Fortuné, *Tentative de 1793*), which iconographically depicts the typical parallelism between the first two French republics, illustrates this ongoing redefinition of historical exemplarity (78–79). Although the lithograph was modified in some fundamental stylistic features in light of how the events of 1848 played out, it could not escape the rapid fate of obsolescence that condemned historical snapshots to premature ageing. Such snapshots paled in comparison to a continually unfolding historical 'film' that required new symbols, messages and meanings (162).

While the core of the research is centred on 1848, key moments both before and after are also considered. The *Prologo* (21–25) opens with a view of the events of 1830, already shaped by the dissemination of parallels with the past, both national and foreign, with the narrative of the Glorious Revolution serving as the ultimate historical reference—and cautionary tale. 'L'anno dei portenti'—1848—is placed at the centre of a live history, which from February and the first signs of the imminent revolution follows the evolving public debate on the repetitiveness of history and culminates in the rise of Louis Napoléon to the presidency of the Republic as the embodiment of the political use of the past (chapters 1–3). Particularly noteworthy are the pages of chapter 4 («*Le cercle où nous tournons depuis bientôt soixante ans*», 113–40), which reread the constitutional process in light of the influence of a past that constantly threatened to return to the fore. This influence decisively shaped a work that was far from a mere exercise in abstract constitutional engineering.

The choice of sources stands out here, extending beyond the reports of assembly proceedings to include a wide-ranging analysis of the political periodicals of the time, which are examined in search of every reference to events of a recent past ready to return to the limelight. These are tales and imaginaries grounded in recent history that take the form of 'oroscopi del passato', an expression that gives chapter 5 its title. This concept also ties to the use of images, the other main analytical focus of this study.

Prints and lithographs—often found within the same journalistic sources—are examined alongside paintings whose symbolism, allegorical meanings, and historical references are deconstructed by the author.

The study demonstrates that the key features of the 1848 Constitution—from the election of the president to the organisation of the legislature into one or two chambers—were shaped by the perceived threats from the revolutionary past. These threats were seen as oscillating between two opposing scenarios: the potential for an all-powerful Assembly leading to anarchy and the tyranny of a single man poised to repeat the deeds of the first emperor. Hence the relevance of the *interpretation* of revolutionary events and, thus, the centrality of historiographical works on the French Revolution. It is no surprise, then, that some of the key characters of the 1848 events overlapped with the most prominent historians of the period, such as Alphonse de Lamartine, Adolphe Thiers, and Louis Blanc. Di Bartolomeo's analysis thus ends up, perhaps even unintentionally, intertwining with the complex evolution of revolutionary historiography, which, through different perspectives, converged in deconstructing the monolithic portrayal of the French Revolution.

As good 'finalistic readers', we read the pages that minutely reconstruct the evolutions of the politics and imagery of past history in 1848 while waiting—almost yearning—to reach the known conclusion: the imperial restoration. This outcome remains in the background throughout the analysis before being addressed in the last strictly analytical chapter (*Oroscopi del passato*, 141–176), which delves into the plots surrounding the rise of the new emperor. It is precisely plots and narratives that we are dealing with, as we understand that it is only the telling of a particular historical event and the creation of a *script* by the protagonists—according to the concept developed by Keith Michael Baker and Dan Edelstein (*Scripting Revolution. A Historical Approach to the Comparative Study of Revolutions*, 2015)—that make possible the revitalisation of the past and its political significance for the present.

The final chapter, external to the main analysis at first glance, reconstructs an 'archaeology of the state of the art', from early proponents of a century consumed by continuous repetition to the most recent developments in historiography on the use of the past in French 1848. This chapter highlights the most original trait of this book—its commitment to treating *ripetizione storica* as a serious historical object, rather than dismissing it as a mere rhetorical tool or a decadent embellishment. However, this recurring call for *seriousness* seems to depend on an earlier shift in perspective that leads the historian to examine the political use of historical precedents *before* the unfolding of events. This approach illuminates the *predictive* potential of historical repetition—its capacity to forge plausible *scenarios* of imminent realisation, or 'di delineare influenti ipotesi di futuro' (45).

Anyone approaching the book cannot help but think at first of the famous Marxian reading of the rise of the new emperor, as presented in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Marx's analysis profoundly influenced how contemporary observers

and later scholars interpreted the *coup d'état* of 2 December 1851. Di Bartolomeo's study, however, convincingly demonstrates the limitations of the great German philosopher's approach, which was engaged in a frantic search for meaning in the reiteration of a history that seemed perpetually unable to progress. In Marx's construction, the farcical quality that minor duplications of unattainable events take on largely stems from his impatience as a philosopher of historical progress with the permanence of a past that had to be overcome at all costs—leaving the dead to bury their dead ('che i morti seppelliscano i loro morti', 181).

Yet, we might also recognise in this typical mechanism of affirmation and comic denial a form of exorcism: a desperate attempt to dissipate the subversive potential—both psychological and objective—of the most terrible scenarios by evoking them and proclaiming their impossibility. This strategy, while remaining distinct from it, bears certain similarities to the *homeopathic* cure described by the author, whereby some historical actors pre-emptively realised a given event in order to neutralise its destabilising potential (77).

Despite the relevance of Marx's reflection, it is telling that the author chooses to address its contents analytically only in the final chapter («Hegel nota in un passo...», 177–212), relocating the work in its historical context—namely, the aftermath of the nephew of the great Corsican general ascending to the imperial seat. Here, we learn that Marx is not the initiator of the *topos* of the farcical repetition of the past, as this theme had already been introduced by the likes of Heinrich Heine, Alexis de Tocqueville, Victor Hugo and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Nor—as the author himself points out—was *The Eighteenth Brumaire* the first trace of political conditioning of the past in the philosopher's own production (147–48). Although no longer seen as a pioneering work, Marx's reflections seem to take on an even greater importance as a sign, a 'paradigm of an epoch'—to keep borrowing vaguely Hegelian language. The decision to limit its analysis to the concluding pages of *Le due repubbliche*, however, depends on the ability of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* to indelibly influence (almost) every subsequent approach to the theme of historical repetition. It effectively confined the phenomenon to the realm of farce—or, at best, to the category of the tragicomic—denying its potential as a crucial moment for orienting the present and constructing the future. Hence the importance of Di Bartolomeo's study: by shifting the perspective from retrospection to prediction, it shows that history not only worked as a repertoire of prescriptive exempla, but also as a simulator indicating the political outcomes of different institutional frameworks ('la storia fungeva non solo da repertorio normativo, ma anche da simulatore capace di anticipare le conseguenze politiche dei diversi modelli istituzionali', 127).

By the end of the study, the image of history as “farmaco”, insieme medicina e veleno della politica' proposed in the Introduction (18–19) is confirmed—indeed, it remains to be clarified which of these two poles ultimately prevails. Even if we account for the intrinsic limits of any *philological* conception of historical repetition—i.e. the belief, shared by the actors of 1848 and many later interpreters, that the only way to

duplicate the past is an unrealistic repetition of the same historical, social and political conditions—the obsession with a resurrected past nevertheless seems to threaten both the progress of the future and historical development itself. This fixation risked conditioning the lucidity with which contemporaries read the events they experience firsthand, as they constantly viewed them through the deforming lens of ‘historical precedent’.

The whole issue could be resolved precisely by shifting from an unrealistic notion of full historical coincidence to one of partial repetition, which allows for the progressive development of history. This approach does not account for exact re-editions and rather focuses on parallelisms and analogies with forms of the past. Therefore, partial repetition triggers processes of ‘sincronizzazione’: encouraging dialogues between the present and specific historical scenarios. In this framework, the common people are recognised as a fundamental actor in enhancing the aspects of the past that the present seemed to reproduce, giving the analogy an image of objectivity (215). While the creation of repetition has long appeared to be the monopoly of the ruling classes or the intellectual élite, Di Bartolomeo underscores the crucial role of the popular base: such processes, the author argues, could not take place without its consent. This raises questions about how images of historical repetition circulate within society and, more specifically, among sections of the population not as directly involved in political struggles as representatives and publicists. In addition to the audiences of individual newspapers examined in the book and the circulation of the images they contain, the only thermometer for measuring how imagery from the past influenced the French common people seems, paradoxically, to be electoral outcomes. These, however, represent only the final snapshot, the concluding moment of a process that the author has invited us to consider in its origins and developments.

Thus, while the problem of measuring the incidence of different forms of historical repetition on the people remains inevitably pending—for the time being—its partial application seems to be the only truly productive way to harness history for political use. This is exemplified by the shaping of the concept of *césarisme* (167 ff.), a neologism indicating a newly coined form of government. As the author demonstrates, such a term could only arise from a non-philological understanding of historical repetition. Hence the importance of legacy (‘eredità’), a concept evoked by the author (110), as the true dimension for framing the productive potential of historical repetition in a progressive context. It suggests a form of ‘ripetizione creativa del passato’ (221), which produces ever new historical scenarios and thus manages to escape the *cul-de-sac* of anacyclosis. Among the many historical scenarios evoked and described in this insightful study, one seems to be excluded from any foreshadowing: the Republic as a blank slate—the problem of creation itself.