NAPOLEON AND BONAPARTISM

I. Purpose of Lecture
   A. To explore images of Napoleon, one of the great, romantic figures of modern times
   B. To examine the exhaustion of the revolution, its running out of steam, its turning to him as “savior”
   C. To provide an overview of the Napoleonic years
   D. To explore key questions of interpretation about him
      1. How great a general was he? How great a man?
      2. Was he an idealist, hoping for a better world for all, or a cynical, power-hungry despot?
      3. Was he a heroic figure and merely a blasphemous manipulator of men?
      4. Were his goals limited and reasonable (a unified and peaceful Europe), or was his ambition unbridled, ever-growing?
      5. More subtle questions: What was his connection to the ideas and ideals of the Revolution?
         a) Was he the fulfillment of the revolution or its betrayal? An early fascist model?
   E. Historians have by no means agreed on these questions
      1. But they have agreed on the great fascination of the man
         a) It is a life story, as Napoleon himself once stated, that reads like a novel

II. Stagnation of the Revolution: weariness and the desire for stability
   A. By 1795 the revolution had achieved tremendous reforms
   B. Yet it had still failed to provide stability
   C. And there was a growing proportion of Frenchmen who yearned for it
      1. These were people who had previously favored the revolution and who had benefited from it
      2. They had acquired wealth and status, were on the whole satisfied
a) For example, those peasants who had been freed from feudal obligations and had acquired land

b) Or, those artisans who had taken advantage of the abolition of the guilds to go into independent business and had prospered

c) Or, professional people who had found tremendous opportunities, above all in government service (an especially notable “career open to talent”)

d) Or, the many investors and speculators who had made tremendous fortunes, especially in real estate

3. In crude terms, these people had “gotten theirs” and had lost interest in further reforms (“yuppies”!)

D. Similarly, the awesome and bloody events of 1788-95, the constant excitement, had exhausted people’s energies

1. Such was true even of those who had not benefited from the revolution, for the poor and downtrodden

2. Everywhere there was a yearning for peace, order, and tranquillity

III. The search for an authority figure

A. How could these things be accomplished?

B. A restoration of the Bourbon monarchy?

1. That was not widely popular by this time

2. Such a restoration would bring back the émigrés, the upper clergy, those who had been expropriated by the revolution

C. A popular, “revolutionary” general?

1. Such a man might bring back stability, without bringing back the Old Regime

D. The social and economic foundations of bonapartism:

1. The above points suggest how history had “prepared the way” for Napoleon Bonaparte

2. He was no doubt a great man, but Great Historical Forces had made people ready to accept him

3. Similar points might be made about Napoleon as a
general

a) Revolutionary armies had already won a great many victories, as had other revolutionary generals

b) Those victories had many explanations: Weakness, decadence, divisions of France’s enemies, advances made by French artillery before the revolution—French guns shot farther than others—changes in drill and field operations, again before the revolution

c) All of these took on greater importance because of the enthusiasm, the self-sacrifice of the new citizen armies

d) Perhaps most important: their greater numbers (Napoleon’s armies almost always outnumbered those of his opponents)

e) In a related way: Napoleon had behind him a state organization of unparalleled power, which could enlist great numbers of men, collect tremendous tax revenues, and generally operate with unprecedented efficiency in organizing power

4. In short, as dictator and as general Napoleon benefited from important impersonal factors, structural changes

5. But we should not forget: He knew how to make full use of them

IV. Napoleon: Stabilizer and Revolutionary

A. While people in France turned to Napoleon as stabilizer inside the country, he remained a revolutionary for the rest of Europe

B. In the rest of Europe, France’s armies under his direction brought the ideas and institutions of the revolution

1. In territory after territory, the old, feudal institutions were destroyed and replaced by new, revolutionary ones

2. Ghetto walls were torn down, noble and Church lands expropriated

C. Bonapartism has been called the culmination of the French Revolution and of the “bourgeois revolution”
1. Both inside France and out, the long-term effect of Napoleonic rule was to aid certain elements of the property-owning classes.

D. And it was generally at the expense of the older privileged orders and the poorest classes.
   1. And this shift, this “revolution,” would endure throughout the following century in most of western and central Europe.

E. It was certainly not without ups and downs, not without important qualifications, not without great regional variations.
   1. But there was no real return to Old Order after Napoleon left the scene.
   2. In this sense, Napoleon can be said to have “saved” the basic accomplishments of the revolution and to have prevented the return of total reaction.
   3. Or, perhaps more accurately, one can say that he saved one, relatively moderate vision of the revolution—most certainly not that of the Jacobin left or of Babeuf.

V. Napoleon Bonaparte’s Rise to Power

A. Bonaparte’s rise to absolute power was a long and involved process—again, a “sacred narrative” for many, with endless surprises and ironies.

B. His popularity was already great by the time of the overthrow of Robespierre and the Jacobins.
   1. And he was almost brought down with them.

C. In 1799 Napoleon joined in a conspiracy to overthrow the Directory, which had grown ever more unpopular.

D. The new regime was to be more authoritarian, centralized.
   1. The conspiracy is known in history as the “18th Brumaire” (Nov. 9, 1799).

E. The plot entailed a false warning to the legislative chambers that there was a Jacobin—that is, left-wing—plot afoot.
   1. But soon enough the deputies learned that they had been duped.
   2. When Napoleon appeared before them, they booed him—and almost succeeded in lynching him.
3. He broke down completely, became hysterical and almost fainted

4. He was saved by being dragged outside

F. So began the political career of Napoleon the Great

1. He was saved by the intervention of his brother Lucien, who persuaded the soldiers outside that his brother would always protect French liberties

2. In a theatrical gesture, he pulled out his sword, and swore that he would kill Napoleon if he ever plotted against French liberties

   a) The soldiers then dispersed the angry deputies

G. France then soon had a new government, the Consulate, with Napoleon as First Consul

H. Napoleon was from then on in the driver’s seat

I. One of his first, symbolic acts: to move into the old royal residence of the Luxembourg Gardens

   1. France had a new king in a substantial sense

VI. **Napoleon as Law-giver and “king”**

A. He moved quickly to have yet another constitution written

B. Here the issue of his being the culmination or culmination of the revolution comes sharply into focus

   1. As First Consul in the new constitution, he was given wide powers

      a) He could promulgate laws, initiate legislation

      b) He could appoint and dismiss all state officials

      c) He had control over state finances

      d) He directed foreign policy—and had the power to declare war

      e) He had direct command of the armed forces

   2. The representative institutions below him were given little more than rubber-stamp powers

C. In truth, the first consul was given greater powers than the kings had had, or at least than they had ever exercised effectively

D. The new constitution was also remarkable for its lack of the French equivalent of the Bill of Rights
1. Such guarantees had been in all the previous constitutions (1791, 1793, 1795)

E. What was the reaction of the French people to this rather blatant violation of the libertarian aspects of the revolution?
1. 99.9% approved the new constitution
2. So great, then, apparently, was the yearning for stability and authority, as well as the charisma of Napoleon

F. Administrative laws of the subsequent year
1. These further enhanced the power of the First Consul
2. A system of prefects was initiated to represent the central state authority
   a) Each prefect was appointed by the First Consul and responsible to him
   b) Furthermore, in each departement the prefect exercised a powerful, centralized authority over sub-prefects, mayors, police officials, tax collectors, etc.

G. This basic administrative system had amazing durability, lasting through the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries
1. It stood as well as a model for many countries, in Europe and elsewhere, as centralized unified state power

H. Napoleon’s famous Civil Code (*Code Napoléon*)
1. The guiding principle: The Revolution had atomized French society, broken up the sense of cohesiveness
   a) The remedy: Reaffirm principles of authority, from the top to the bottom

I. The First Consul: the supreme authority figure

J. Below this, Napoleon built upon four institutions: private property, the family, the Church, the nobility
1. Property: The “Roman” concept of absolute property
   a) Utterly different from the feudal notion
b) This concept of property reflected in part Napoleon’s understanding that the property-owning classes were his firmest supporters

2. Family
   a) It was of course already a central institution, especially among the peasantry and bourgeoisie
   b) Napoleon strengthened the role of the father and husband in it—establishing something like the Roman *paterfamilias*
   c) A wife suspected of adultery could be sent directly to jail, on the authority of the father
   d) Generally, women were not allowed to own property, vote, have control of children, etc.
   e) One exception: divorce made relatively easy (Napoleon was at this time contemplating it—he soon got rid of his former wife, Josephine, and got himself a beautiful Austrian princess)

3. The Church (religion, more generally)
   a) This area had long been one of the most troublesome and divisive
   b) The anti-clericalism of the Jacobins was not really shared by the great majority of Frenchmen—and even less by Frenchwomen
   c) Napoleon thus concluded that it was necessary to work out a compromise with the Church: The Concordat of 1801 was the result
   d) The Vatican in fact made more compromises than he did, although he did recognize Catholicism as the religion of France’s population, a vital concession to the Church
   e) Napoleon retained the notion of the supremacy of the state over the Church (churchmen were paid by the state, for example)

4. The Nobility
   a) Also a very touchy and difficulty subject
   b) This was the class that had in many ways been displaced by the revolution, by the
Napoleon recognized that the nobility could have an important social utility.

A noble class could reinforce social and political stability.

At first at least, he could not re-establish the old kind of nobility, nor bring back the most bitter of the émigrés, but the great majority of nobles did eventually return, and he created a new nobility of merit.

1802: Establishment of the Legion of Honor, which was legally privileged corporate body, both military and civilian, of men who performed significant service for France.

By 1808 Napoleon had reintroduced a hereditary nobility, and he held court with all the formality and pomp of the Ancien Regime.

In 1804 he had himself declared Emperor, and a plebiscite overwhelmingly approved of it.

A splendid coronation ceremony followed, with the famous episode of Napoleon taking the crown from the pope’s hands, putting it on his own head.

VII. Summary of Napoleon’s accomplishments

A. Looking over his political, social, and administrative measures, it is hard to accept that he represented the fulfillment of the revolution, except in qualified ways.

1. Of the central slogan, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, perhaps only fraternity survived.

B. One might indeed say that he represented the culmination of the ideals of the monarchy.

1. He was able to centralize, rationalize, and make a more powerful state, as French monarchs had sought to do.

C. Yet, in certain ways he did fulfill what the men of 1789 had hoped for.

1. He consolidated the position of the bourgeoisie and peasantry, of the Third Estate, or common people.

a) He gave them clear title to a new economic
and social position

b) And it may well be that the satisfaction of material ambitions meant more to these men, finally, than the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity

VIII. Expansion and Demise of the Napoleonic Empire

A. The stability that Napoleon provided inside France was matched by great and inspiring events outside France

B. From 1805 and until 1815 Napoleon launched a series of brilliant military campaigns

C. This is the period when the Napoleonic legend was born

D. He was able to achieve the long-term goal of the Bourbon monarchs: hegemony over the European continent

E. But, as with Louis XIV, France paid a terrible price

1. Napoleon’s wars cost perhaps 3 million lives

2. They siphoned off human and material resources that would otherwise have gone into industry, which may be part of the reason for France’s lingering industrial backwardness in the 19th century

F. Napoleon’s goals

1. His apologists have maintained that his conquests were all in the interest of European peace and the spread of the ideas of the revolution

2. They maintain that constant war was forced upon him by others

   a) There is some truth to that assertion: England could not long accept his hegemony, since it was contrary to English interests

   b) But there is also much evidence that he himself was not really interested in an enduring peace

   c) On several occasions he had the opportunity to offer a peace of reconciliation, but instead he imposed severe and burdensome treaties

   d) He treated the conquered populations all too often in callous and inhumane fashion—and ruthlessly stripped conquered countries of art treasures, taxed them heavily, etc.
G. Factors in Napoleon’s downfall

1. His harsh treatment of defeated nations was related to his inability to understand the force of foreign nationalism or identities
   a) He assumed that all people could be made to enjoy French institutions, ideals, political control
   b) And for those who resisted, he thought that shooting a few hostages would be enough to change people’s minds

2. Napoleon’s citizen armies
   a) They were “raw recruit” armies, effective in short, triumphant campaigns, but not good in long grueling ones—especially not against guerrilla warfare
   b) Special problem in Spain
   c) Even more in Russia

3. The fatal campaign in Russia
   a) It was a clear case of foolish and unbridled ambition by Napoleon
   b) He had much changed by 1812: had grown fat, was moody and irritable—was obviously bored
   a) The beginning of the end for him was near...