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Published by the Council on Foreign Relations

January 3, 2013
SNAPSHOT

The Missing Half of Les Mis

The Film's Pessimistic View of Revolution -- And Ours

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Russell Crowe as Javert in Les Misérables. (Courtesy

Universal Pictures)

Before there were blockbuster films, there were blockbuster books. Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, published in 1862, was one of them. Thanks to a market-savvy publisher, this monument of French romanticism, which was serialized in ten installments, became an immediate bestseller across Europe and North America. Demand was so great that other authors, notably Gustave Flaubert, postponed the publications of their own books to avoid being outshined. On days when new installments went on sale in Paris, police were called in to stop impatient crowds from storming the bookstores. Some high-minded critics, not unlike those who spurn sensational Hollywood films today, found the hype distasteful. Edwin Percy Whipple, in a review for *The Atlantic*, referred to "the system of puffing" surrounding the book's release in terms worthy of Ebenezer Scrooge: it was "the grossest bookselling humbug," a spectacle "at which Barnum himself would stare amazed."

Despite the hoopla, the novel's reception in France was mixed. Some declared it to be the greatest novel of all

time; others found it absurd and sappy. Some even considered it dangerous. Reading it, they feared, was a political act, and Hugo's detailed description of the barricades provided a how-to manual for insurgency. Hugo never denied his revolutionary sympathies. He was proud of a comment made by one of his readers, a former insurgent, who said, "This book will advance the Revolution by ten years."

Victor Hugo was no Karl Marx, but he did believe in progress through revolution -- a fact that viewers of Tom Hooper's new film, *Les Misérables* [1], would never guess. Adapted from the immensely popular musical version of Hugo's classic (first performed in Paris in 1980), Hooper's cinematic rendering is stunningly staged and brilliantly performed, but it cuts the author in half: it gives us the religious Hugo, not the revolutionary one. It tells the story of individual redemption through an odyssey of Catholic conscience, not of France's collective redemption through political violence.

Religion runs throughout the film, from an early scene in which a priest saves the ex-convict Jean Valjean from being arrested for having stolen his silverware (the priest lies, telling the police that it had been a gift) to Valjean's lifelong commitment to paying off this moral debt through acts of charity and self-sacrifice (he saves his one-time employee, Fantine, from a life of prostitution and offers to raise her daughter, Cosette, as his own when she dies). Toward the end of the film, when Valjean confesses his past as a convict to his future son-in-law, Marius, whom he rescued at the barricade, we see Valjean backgrounded by a conspicuous crucifix. When Valjean dies -- in a convent, no less -- the ghost of Fantine descends like an angel to take him "somewhere beyond the barricade," to "the garden of the Lord," as the chorus assures us.

To be sure, religion is a central theme in Hugo's original novel -- but so, too, is revolution. In fact, Hugo's aim in writing *Les Misérables* was to reconcile the two, which had been at odds ever since the French Revolution erupted in 1789. He believed in democracy and social justice and sought to encourage everyone, including the bourgeoisie, to rise up and fight for these principles. Unlike Marx, who imagined the downfall of the bourgeoisie, Hugo wanted to stir the comfortable classes from their shameful complacency with the authoritarian regime of Napoleon III (1851–1870), which offered security from working-class agitation at the price of freedom and justice for all. "A desired peace without [democratic] principles is more onerous than war," the narrator of the novel insists. But Hooper's film, like the staged version before it, conveys a different view: it presents revolutionary idealism as misguided and futile. Viewers are led to believe, for example, that Marius's insurrectionary friends die in vain, because their deaths do not lead to any clear progress. Wandering around the empty chairs and tables where the insurgents had held their "last communion" the evening before the fight, Marius sings, "Here they talked of revolution / Here it was they lit the flame / Here they sang about tomorrow / And tomorrow never came."

Nor would tomorrow ever come through revolution, viewers may well presume. It comes only through religion. This perspective obscures Hugo's optimism about revolution and his deep compassion for its false starts, such as the one he depicts in the novel version of *Les Misérables*. In basing the climactic barricade scene on the failed insurrection of 1832, Hugo sought to move his readers to sympathize with the rebels' cause, to spur them to carry on the struggle. "It is impossible not to admire those who gloriously fight for the future, whether they succeed or not," the novel's narrator says. Such "insane but heroic" sacrifices offer hope for a democratic and just tomorrow. "The French Revolution is a movement of God," Hugo writes, and revolutionary martyrdom "a pure gift to progress."

Hugo's attempt to weave religion and revolution into a divine comedy of the nation was the culmination of a lifelong struggle of political conscience, one he shared with many of his compatriots. Over the course of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, France found itself repeatedly upended by insurrections, coups, and military defeats. The nation became an overheated bouillabaisse of political ideologies: constitutional monarchy, republicanism, authoritarian liberalism, reactionary conservatism, socialism, and various offshoots and permutations of all of these. (In the book, Marius distinguishes himself from his republican friends by describing himself as a "Napoleonic democrat," a rather odd hybrid.) Hugo's ability to render sympathetically all points along the political spectrum owed to his peculiar parentage, the result of the unlikeliest of marriages: his father was a military officer during the First Republic (1792–1804) and a general under Napoleon, whereas his mother came from a reactionary, arch-Catholic family from the Vendée, which had been laid to waste by Republican forces during the Terror (1793–94). Hugo sought to heal these wounds with *Les Misérables*, to unite Catholic and republican France.

Why does the movie-musical present revolution as pointlessly utopian rather than as a venerable, if tragic, vehicle of change, as Hugo saw it? The reason, perhaps, has to do with our own pessimistic view of revolution. In recent decades, cynicism has replaced idealism, and revolution has come to be seen as the high road to totalitarianism. Utopianism leads only to guillotines, gulags, and killing fields, not to freedom. Today, we tend to see revolution not through Hugo's optimistic lenses but through those of his pessimistic contemporary, Alexis de Tocqueville.

Hugo and Tocqueville had remarkably similar life trajectories. Both were born in the first decade of the nineteenth century (1802 and 1805, respectively), and both came from families who had been victimized during the Terror. As young men in the 1820s, both obtained patronage from the reactionary King Charles X, brother of the guillotined Louis XVI. Hugo even penned a poem for Charles's coronation in 1825. When the revolution of 1830 installed the constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe, both men shifted leftward. Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America*, predicting that the U.S. political model was the future of Europe; Hugo wrote tracts against the death penalty and began planning a novel criticizing the social and political injustices of the day. (It appeared decades later as *Les Misérables*.) Both men were appointed to the prestigious French Academy in 1841, and both wrote important reports for the government before its collapse -- Tocqueville on Algeria, Hugo on Poland. When the revolution of February 1848 brought down the (barely) constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe and established the Second Republic, both men were elected to the National Assembly. Both opposed the workers' revolt in June of that year. Hugo tried to talk the rebels down from the barricades and ended up with fourteen bullet holes in his front door on the Place des Vosges. Both paid dearly for opposing Louis-Napoleon's coup d'état of 1851, when he dismissed the National Assembly, clearing the way to crown himself emperor (Napoleon III). Tocqueville was briefly imprisoned; Hugo went into exile for 19 years.

It was in the aftermath of the 1851 coup that the two men parted ways in their views on revolution. Tocqueville brooded, became chronically ill, and wrote *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. The book conveyed a dim view of France's revolutionary tradition, setting out to explain why revolutions about freedom and equality kept ending in terror and oppression. The reason, he thought, had to do with the "abstract literary politics" of enlightened but inexperienced men who rose to power through revolution. In short: when philosophers become sovereigns, calamities follow. Although historians have debunked some of this (the revolutionaries of 1789, it turns out, had much experience working in Old Regime institutions), Tocqueville's pessimism about revolution

still pervades collective political imaginations. It certainly pervades Hooper's film.

As Tocqueville grew increasingly skeptical about revolution, Hugo embraced it ever more firmly. Although both men opposed Louis-Napoleon's suppression of the Second Republic in 1851, Hugo took a more active role in resisting the coup. He zigzagged across Paris summoning the people to mount barricades. Like the tragic scene in *Les Misérables* that loosely depicts the failed uprising of 1832, the revolt of December 1851 was brutally crushed. One of Hugo's friends and fellow insurgents, who had transcribed Hugo's call to arms and helped spread it through the streets of Paris, was shot dead on a barricade in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Staggering through the carnage of that day, Hugo came upon the corpse of a seven-year-old boy with two bullets in his head. The image haunted him for years and became the inspiration for several of his writings.

Les Misérables was a kind of therapy for both Hugo and his readers. It sanctified revolution, giving an unvarnished account of its irrational, brutal aspects while venerating it as a means of national redemption. "After the troubles which bring humanity to a boiling point," Hugo writes, "we see that we've advanced along the path ... progress will come through stages of revolution."

If the film fails to capture Hugo's optimism about revolution, it does at least do some justice to another central theme of the novel: social misery. In doing so, it departs from other cinematic interpretations of French revolutionary moments from the past few decades. Andrzej Wajda's *Danton* (1983) [2] and Eric Rohmer's *The Lady and the Duke* (2001) [3], for example, adopt a Tocquevillian view, focusing on the tragic idealism of elites rather than the concrete misery of the poor. In the few scenes in which ordinary people are depicted in these earlier films, they appear as open-mouthed enragés parading heads on pikes. Sometimes they appear in long breadlines, but the assumption is that the lines are long because French revolutionaries were socialists.

Hooper's *Les Misérables*, meanwhile, humanizes the underclass. The suffering of Fantine, who loses her job and finds herself plunged into abject prostitution, is powerfully conveyed through Anne Hathaway's disconsolate voice (bring tissues). It must be said, however, that Hooper's portrayal of poverty is heavily stylized. Monsieur and Madame Thénardier, the despicable innkeepers who try to fleece everyone, rich and poor, look like macabre, Halloween versions of the 1980s pop stars Adam Ant and Cyndi Lauper. The sensationalized squalor and moral turpitude depicted in the film are sometimes more entertaining than shocking. Still, the images and the singing introduce viewers to the harsh realities of poverty in nineteenth-century France, when countless women turned to prostitution to survive, when neglected children (like the memorable Gavroche) contributed to popular revolts, and when con artists and street entertainers bilked the curious and gullible as best they could.

In the wake of the Arab Spring, one wonders whether Hooper's *Les Misérables* will contribute to changing sensibilities about revolution. It was frustration with an oppressive economic and political order in Tunisia that prompted Mohamed Bouazizi to set himself on fire, sparking revolution throughout North Africa and the Middle East. In recent interviews, Hooper has said that he wants the film to speak to these developments. But to do so would have required departing further from the musical to revive Hugo's faith in revolution, his hopes in its capacity to alleviate misery, and his efforts to reconcile religion and democracy through revolutionary change. Hugo's novel speaks to the twenty-first century in ways that Hooper's film does not. That these opportunities were missed -- that Christianity rather than revolution prevails as the means of redemption -- is not surprising. The film was, after all, released in the United States on December 25, not July 14.

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