

DEMOCRATIC TERROR:
REDEMPTIVE VIOLENCE AND THE FORMATION OF NINETEENTH
CENTURY FRANCE

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During the struggle for democracy in France, political thinkers across the spectrum pressed into service an unusual image of violence. Rather than a source of anarchy and disorder, this violence generated social cohesion. Instead of fragmentation, it promised to retie the bonds of democratic society. This dissertation studies how a variety of writers and intellectuals weaponized this image of violence in the political culture of nineteenth century France. What could this violence accomplish that other languages of democratic agency could not? What were the sources of its appeal?

To answer these questions, I consider four episodes where French thinkers believed social disintegration threatened the nation: the regicide of Louis XVI, early French colonization of Algeria, the Paris Commune, and the eve of World War I. In each episode, political thinkers warned of social breakdown spurred by democratization. In each case, they also claimed that violence by the people could repair the cohesion of the French social body. Studying these episodes underscores how no single intellectual tradition held a monopoly over regenerative violence in France, because the problem it hoped to answer was fundamental: how can the

cohesion of the social body be repaired in the age of democracy? It was a problem that could not be remedied by simple appeal to constitutionalism or natural law theory. Thus, to repair the moral foundations of “the social,” French thinkers on both the left and right pushed towards a vision of democratic violence as social regeneration. To form a democratic society in history rather than in theory, French thinkers did not repudiate violence as anti-social or pre-political. Instead, they reached for it in the form of democratic terror.

Biographical Sketch

Kevin Duong studies political theory, with an area focus on the politics and intellectual history of modern France. Having received his doctorate from Cornell University, he is currently Assistant Professor of Political Theory at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. Before Cornell, Kevin completed a master's degree at the University of Chicago and an undergraduate bachelor's degree at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, TN. He was born and raised in east Tennessee.

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Introduction

Democratic Terror in Times of Social Disintegration

The way we think about violence is bound up with our understanding of society and the bonds connecting individuals. When we consider different shapes that violence can take, our accounts of social interdependence shift, as do the patterns of agency and vulnerability that we perceive.

In the case of the social contract tradition, its vision of society has been shaped by an image of political violence as anarchy. Since Thomas Hobbes, to talk about violence is to talk about disorder and the ways the social bond snaps from injury or death. For John Locke, he who commits violence “declares himself to live by another Rule, than that of *reason* and of common Equity, which is that measure God has set to the actions of Men, for their mutual security.”¹ The person who transgresses nature’s law becomes a criminal, a threat to society’s commodious living. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, violence against a fellow citizen expels a person from the social body as an anarchic pathogen: “Every evil-doer who attacks social right becomes a rebel and a traitor to the fatherland...he ceases to be a member of it, and even enters into war with it.” Thus Rousseau concluded, “he must be cut off from [society] either by exile as a violator of the treaty, or by death as a public enemy; for such an enemy is not a moral person, but a man.”² In this tradition, violating the social compact designates oneself as an *hostis humani generis* or an *hors-la-loi*, an outlaw.³ It invites the violence of

¹ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 272.

² Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Politics Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 64-5.

³ Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French*

organized society upon oneself, not as a type of counter-violence, but as justice.

Within the revolutionary and republican political culture of modern France, a different, less familiar image of violence came to prominence. French thinkers invoked it alongside its contractualist counterpart. But in this alternative image, violence was not identified with anarchy. Instead, it was its solution. Rather than something sublimated as men escaped nature into society, thinkers portrayed violence as constitutive of the social bond. This was especially true when the agent of that violence was “the people,” whose world making powers this violence expressed and vindicated. Maximilien Robespierre captured this image of violence in a 1793 speech when he argued that terror “has nothing in common with anarchy or disorder.” On the contrary, its violence instituted society, for it was “not [guided] by individual passions, but by the public interest.”⁴ That link to the public interest made the people’s violence unifying rather than anarchic. “Woe betide us,” Robespierre warned, if through violence they were to “break the bundle apart, instead of binding it.”⁵

This alternative image of violence reappeared in the century following the Revolution by thinkers both right and left. General Thomas Robert Bugeaud invoked it to characterize the French conquest of Algeria in the 1840s. “It is a cruel extremity” to wage total war against native Arabs, “but a horrifying example was necessary to strike terror” into their hearts.⁶ The anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon appealed to it in his

Revolution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 18-20.

⁴ Maximilien Robespierre, “On the Principles of Revolutionary Government” (25 December 1793), in Maximilien Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 2007), 98-107, at 100.

⁵ Robespierre, “On the Principles of Revolutionary Government,” 102.

⁶ Benjamin Claude Brower, *A Desert Named Peace: The Violence of France's Empire in the Algerian Sahara, 1844-1902* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 23.

1861 *La Guerre et la Paix*: “War is divine, that is to say, it is primordial, essential to life and to the production of men and society.” That was because a man only emerged from “the primeval slime which served him as a womb” once “he stood over the body of an enemy he had slain.”⁷ Upon the formation of the Paris Commune in March 1871, communards like Jules Vallès found in the blood shed against Versailles the seeds of a regenerated society: “Trumpets! Blow in the wind!... We have bled and wept for you. You shall harvest our heritage. Son of despairing men, you shall be free!”⁸ This image of violence saturated French political culture on the eve of the first World War. Right wing intellectuals like Georges Valois promised in a 1912 manifesto to restore freedom “in the forms appropriate to the modern world, and which allow [the French] to live by working with the same satisfaction of honor as when they die in combat.”⁹ On the left, Georges Sorel made a similar point in his 1908 *Reflections on Violence*: “It is to violence that socialism owes those high ethical ideals by means of which it brings salvation to the modern world.”¹⁰

This dissertation tells the story of how a variety of writers and intellectuals weaponized this image of violence in the struggle for democracy in nineteenth century France. Its ubiquity raises important questions for the history of political thought. What did this violence offer that alternative vocabularies of democratic agency could

⁷ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, “War and Peace,” in Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, ed. Stewart Edwards, trans. Elizabeth Fraser (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969), 202-3.

⁸ Jules Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, trans. Sandy Petrey (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971; first published 1886), 167.

⁹ Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon, “Déclaration,” *Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon* 1 (1912), 1-2, at 2.

¹⁰ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; first published 1908), 251.

not? What were the sources of its appeal? To answer these questions, this dissertation considers why French thinkers represented violence as regenerating the social bond and how such representations assuaged wider anxieties over social disintegration. It is not my aim to test the coherence of these conceptualizations, nor to offer a normative evaluation of them. I have instead tried to understand their polemical appeal, and to explain how they grew out of the conflictual experience of creating modern republican democracy in France.

Of course, this image of violence was neither unique to the nineteenth century nor to France. Much has been written on the idea of violence as something foundational, regenerative, even purifying.¹¹ Its roots can be traced as far back as the Wars of Religion and medieval penal justice, and it marked political thought into the twentieth century in France and elsewhere.¹² Within conservative and counter-revolutionary traditions, it is associated with writers like Joseph de Maistre, for whom

¹¹ Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Lucien Jaume, *Le religieux et la politique dans la Révolution française: L'idée de régénération* (Paris: PUF, 2015); Jesse Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Richard Bernstein, *Violence: Thinking Without Banisters* (New York: Polity, 2013); Dominick LaCapra, *History and its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Gareth Stedman Jones, "The Redemptive Power of Violence? Carlyle, Marx and Dickens," *History Workshop Journal* 65, no. 1 (2008): 1-22; Emilio Gentile, "Fascism As Political Religion," *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 2/3 (1990): 229-51.

¹² Paul Friedland, *Seeing Justice Done: The Age of Spectacular Capital Punishment in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Isaiah Berlin, "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of Fascism," in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013; first published 1991); David William Bates, *States of War: Enlightenment Origins of the Political* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996; first published 1983); Daniel Lee, *Pétain's Jewish Children: French Jewish Youth and the Vichy Regime, 1940-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Enzo Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: The New Press, 2003).

the executioner's axe was "both the horror and the bond of human association."¹³ Themes of regenerative violence can be found in American history, especially in the context of frontier expansion.¹⁴ This violence has also been connected to revolutionaries of all stripes, from futurists like Filippo Marinetti ("We believe that only a love of danger and heroism can purify and regenerate our nation") to anticolonial nationalists like Frantz Fanon ("violence... binds them together as a whole... a part of the great organism of violence which has surged upward in reaction").¹⁵ It was a promiscuous image of violence, one that Dominick LaCapra has usefully described as redemptive violence. Redemptive violence, LaCapra argues, aims to interrupt "a deadly compulsive cycle of repetition" or to introduce "a radical, even total, rupture with the past" through "purification, regeneration, or redemption."¹⁶ It brings together a normative sociology of the human bond with a moral commitment to forging those bonds anew in an act of violence.

This dissertation builds on this previous work, but what is unique about it is its theoretical focus on cases in which thinkers connected redemptive violence to democratization. It specifically looks to the historical theater of nineteenth century France, for nowhere else was that connection drawn in such clear terms or developed

¹³ Joseph de Maistre, *St Petersburg Dialogues: Or Conversations On the Temporal Government of Providence*, trans. Richard A. Lebrun (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993; first published 1821), 30.

¹⁴ Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975); Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877-1920* (New York: Harper, 2009).

¹⁵ Filippo Marinetti, "The Necessity and Beauty of Violence" (1915) in *Critical Writings*, ed. Gunter Berghaus, trans. Doug Thompson (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux), 60-74, at 62; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963), 93.

¹⁶ LaCapra, *History and its Limits*, 92.

in such sustained ways. Premodern thinkers often conceived redemptive violence as an act of providential agency. But during and after the Revolution, French theorists explicitly conceptualized redemptive violence in the context of an emerging autonomous society—that is, a *democratic* society. It suggested a society capable of ruling itself without the intercession of a superior, extra-social power. The sources of social cohesion were to be drawn, not from God or tradition, but from the activity of the people themselves. Immortalized in the Jacobin Terror, this image of violence nevertheless proliferated throughout the long nineteenth century at key moments in which the integrity of the national community entered into crisis and where political thinkers despaired over the fate of the social bond. It is this historical pattern, where redemptive violence emerged as a vocabulary of popular agency in France, that I call “democratic terror.”¹⁷

* * *

To understand democratic terror, the following chapters examine four episodes where political thinkers and actors appealed to the people’s violence to rescue a French nation on the brink of social disintegration. In chapter one, disintegration was raised by the prospect of executing Louis XVI. Because royalist ideology identified the king’s mystical body as a transcendental guarantee of social cohesion, regicide threatened to dissolve the French social body. Jacobins found a solution, I argue, by redefining regicide as redemptive violence. They modeled the lethal agency of the

¹⁷ On “terror” as a specifically democratic vocabulary of violence, see George Armstrong Kelly, “Conceptual Sources of the Terror,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 14, no. 1 (1980): 18-36; Dan Edelstein, “Do We Want a Revolution Without Revolution? Reflections on Political Authority,” *French Historical Studies* 35, no. 2 (2012): 269-89.

people after the theories of natural disaster and ecological self-regulation which saturated the scientific culture of the late eighteenth century.

In chapter two, the threat of social disintegration was posed by the rise of commercial society and economic utilitarianism. According to Alexis de Tocqueville, this culture of “egoism” led to psychological withdrawal among the nation’s citizens, thereby isolating them from one another. Such an individualistic bourgeois society could not enjoy modern liberty because it had forfeit its taste for monumental collective action. Tocqueville’s desire to save democracy from its own atomization, I argue, motivated his apologies for colonial terror in Algeria.

In chapter three, French thinkers considered social disintegration through the social question. Like Tocqueville, French utopian socialists bemoaned a “political” republic which privileged the individual rights of man at the expense of social solidarity and spiritual renewal. As a consequence, for Communards waging civil war against the French national government in 1871, the creation of a “social” republic was better served by exchanging the atomized idea of the electorate for the unifying assertion of the people in arms. Only by moving beyond the ballot to the barricade could a regenerated society be achieved.

In chapter four, anxieties over disintegration were blamed on the Cartesian intellectual culture of the Third Republic and the secular parliamentary democracy that grew out of it. In unmooring French citizens from *la France profonde*, parliamentary republicanism fostered what Maurice Barrès called a nation of uprooted (*déracinées*). The chapter turns to Georges Sorel and his circle to show how an irrationalist, class

violence promised to counteract that moral decadence—a promise that fed into the mass, republican war mobilization in the lead up to world war in 1914.

In each of these episodes, writers warned of a nation threatened by entropic forces unleashed by modern democratization. In each case, they sought to repair the social bond by reawakening the people’s agency through violence. Whatever their ideological persuasion, these thinkers came to believe that the path leading from an anarchic multitude to an organized democratic society required, not violence’s prohibition or normative regulation, but its opposite: the deployment of violence as productive of sociality itself.

By analyzing the recurring role of redemptive violence in France, these chapters build an argument for rooting its appeal in French republicanism’s ubiquitous demand for a concrete social body. By French republicanism, I mean the political culture that grew out of the historical experience of the Revolution rather than any specific set of ideological prescriptions.¹⁸ Anglo-American political theorists have grown accustomed to speaking of republicanism as a paradigm of normative reasoning, extractable from its historical context, and whose purpose is to develop and defend the Roman ideal of *libertas* as non-domination.¹⁹ But in France, republicanism was never primarily a paradigm for normative reasoning. It was a kind of intellectual

¹⁸ For French republicanism as a political culture, see Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le modèle politiques français: La société civile contre le jacobinisme de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

¹⁹ The classic statement is Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), which formalized in normative language the historical insights of J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975) and Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

gravitational field consisting in a set of common motifs, symbols, scripts for collection action, and shared historical memory centered on the legacy of the Revolution. And far from being normatively in competition with liberalism or socialism, French republicanism was the crucible within which liberalism and socialism developed in France: they named alternative paths to realizing the French republican ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity.²⁰

To explain redemptive violence's appeal by pointing to a specifically French *republican* demand for a concrete social body may nevertheless seem counterintuitive. After all, however heterogeneous and internally contested nineteenth century French republicanism turned out to be, virtually all of its critics agreed that it was essentially a modern language of abstraction. Ever since Edmund Burke developed this interpretation, scholars have denounced French republicanism's "metaphysical abstractions" as a source of violence. De Maistre attributed the Revolution's "satanic quality" to its "artificial" universalism, which was "a pure abstraction, an academic exercise made according to some hypothetical ideal."²¹ What characterized French republicanism, he believed, was its absurd belief in an abstract citizen bereft of any social particularity: "I have seen Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc.," but "as for *man*, I declare that I have never in my life met him; if he exists, he is unknown to me."²²

²⁰ Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics After the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); K. Steven Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Naomi J. Andrews, *Socialism's Muse: Gender in the Intellectual Landscape of French Romantic Socialism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006); Jeremy Jennings, *Revolution and the Republic: A History of Political Thought in France Since the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²¹ Joseph de Maistre, *Considerations on France*, trans. Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994; first published 1797), 41, 53.

²² Maistre, *Considerations on France*, 53.

Jules Michelet, otherwise sympathetic to the revolution, would lament of its leaders, “Being logicians without metaphysics and jurists without law and history... these dreadful *abstractors* of ultimate essences armed themselves with five or six formulas which they used like so many guillotines to *abstract* men.”²³ More recently, François Furet and Pierre Rosanvallon have reprised these explanations by arguing that French republicanism conceives the people as a “political proposition before a sociological fact,” a “promise” rather than a “sociological principle,” and in possession only of an “illusion of politics.”²⁴

According to this familiar interpretation, French republicanism’s emphasis on abstraction distinguishes it from its classical antecedents.²⁵ It inherited the traditional

²³ Jules Michelet, *The People*, trans. John P. McKay (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973; first published 1846), 198.

²⁴ Pierre Rosanvallon, “Revolutionary Democracy,” in Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future*, ed. Sam Moyn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 79-97, at 82-3; François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981; first published 1978); Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013; first published 2008), 8-11.

²⁵ The relationship between “French” and “Classical” republicanism continues to befuddle. Philip Pettit has recently glossed it as the distinction between a Rousseau-inspired, “continental” republicanism and an Italian-Atlantic “classical” republicanism. Whereas the former emphasizes popular sovereignty, universalism, and political rationalism, the latter emphasizes mixed constitutionalism and political contestation. Keith Baker has drawn it in opposite ways. For him, the French/Rousseauian republicanism is closer to the classical tradition, whereas the constitutionalism of Condorcet points to a “republicanism of the moderns.” See Philip Pettit, *On the People’s Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11-18; Keith Michael Baker, “Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France,” *The Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 1 (2001): 32-53. My own position is closer to that of Cécile Laborde’s since one of the distinctive features of French republicanism I identify is its antipathy to constitutionalism and its emphasis on the social. In both these features, republicanism in modern France is at odds with its civic Roman variety; see Cécile Laborde, *Critical Republicanism: The Hijab Controversy and Political Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Joan Scott, *Parité! Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). For other statements on the matter, see Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*; Gregory Claeys and Christine Lattek, “Radicalism, Republicanism and Revolution: From the Principles of ‘89 to the Origins of Modern Terrorism,” in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Political Thought*, eds. Gareth Stedman Jones and Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 200-54, at 212-15; Edelman, *The Terror of Natural Right*; Jennings, *Revolution and the Republic*.

valorization of martial glory and civic virtue associated with the republics of antiquity. But the influence of the Enlightenment and the vicissitudes of national history also oriented French republicanism towards political rationalism and moral universalism, which became its cudgel against the inherited stratifications of the *ancien régime*. If peoplehood for Cicero or Machiavelli expresses our membership in a particular polity, peoplehood in French republicanism expresses our membership in a common but abstract body—“the people”—which we enter into by leaving behind our markers of social differentiation. In so doing, we ascend to become rights-bearing citizens who stand free and equal to one another. The Count of Clermont-Tonnerre described this procedure of abstraction best when discussing Jewish emancipation in 1789: “we must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to them as individuals.” And it was this republican model that Karl Marx critiqued in “On the Jewish Question,” because it emancipated individuals by reducing the citizen to an “abstract, artificial man, man as an *allegorical, moral* person” in false opposition to his concrete or “sensual” existence as a particular member of civil society.²⁶

Undeniably, there is a great deal of truth in this tradition of interpreting French republicanism as a culture enthralled with abstract universalism. Its history consists in a sequence of abstractions—the People, the Nation, and especially after 1946, the Empire—negotiating the realities of political exclusion.²⁷ However, reading the

²⁶ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Early Political Writings*, ed. Joseph O’Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 28-56, at 49.

²⁷ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude & Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 15; Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France*,

struggle for democracy in France through the prism of redemptive violence shows this interpretation to be one-sided: from the Revolution onwards, French republicanism's inclinations towards abstraction were coordinated with a commitment to forging a concrete social body. We see this commitment most prominently in the ways republicans of all stripes insisted that the people cannot be reduced to an aggregate of individuals living together under common laws. In terms more familiar to contemporary political theorists, "the people" were emphatically not adhered by what John Rawls called a *modus vivendi*, a "social consensus [which is] founded on self- or group interests, or on the outcome of political bargaining." In a *modus vivendi*, "social unity is only apparent," because "its stability is contingent on circumstances remaining such as not to upset the fortunate convergence of interests."²⁸ In contrast, republicanism in France defined "the people" in terms of a qualitatively distinct form of social interdependence that pointed beyond the convergence of self-interest. As Rousseau had argued, what is decisive for a people to become a people is the transmutation of natural individual freedom into a civil, moral freedom whose enjoyment is dependent on all others. This type of peoplehood is not the product of an equilibrium or aggregation, but of moral reincarnation.

Indeed, as these chapters will argue, the moral reincarnation of the people

1870-1920 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Carolyn Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

²⁸ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism, Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005; first published 1993), 147; see also his comparison of a *modus vivendi* with an overlapping consensus in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, ed. Erin Kelly (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 192-5.

became paramount for French thinkers in the nineteenth century. The experience of the Revolution compelled thinkers everywhere to identify a constitutive link between moral improvement and social cohesion. It was morality that made social cohesion something thicker than the fortuitous convergence of interests or the quantitative accumulation of preferences. In short, reasserting the moral foundations of the social was required to lift a disorganized multitude into a sovereign people. Historically, French thinkers articulated that requirement through calls for a regenerated social body. Produced in tandem through fantasies of unity and anxieties over *le corps morcelé*, conceptions of the social body were “central to the internal coherence of French ideas about who did and who did not qualify as ‘French.’”²⁹ Social cohesion in French republican culture was therefore never reducible to abstract or representational notions of peoplehood. Democratic terror always sought to convey the presence of a concrete and moral people rather than the people as abstract principle; that conceit was what its critics held against it.

As may be apparent, my argument invokes “the social” in ways that diverge from its common use among contemporary political theorists. For scholars writing under Hannah Arendt’s influence, the social specifies the domain of domestic need, economic necessity, and the biological reproduction of life. It is the sphere of our natural needs, especially as they are satisfied in household governance: the *oikos*.³⁰ It

²⁹ Dean, *The Frail Social Body*, 14; Michael C. Behrent, “The Mystical Body of Society: Religion and Association in Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): 219-43.

³⁰ For representative studies, see Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, *The Attack of the Blob: Hannah Arendt’s Concept of the Social* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Kirstie McClure, “The Social Question, Again,” in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 28, no. 1 (2007), 85-113; and most recently, Patricia Owens, *Economy of Force: Counterinsurgency and the Historical Rise of the Social*

is thereby contrasted with “the political,” which names the realm of speech, action, and publicity and which presupposes our emancipation from immediate necessity.

As useful as Arendt’s framing can be, I have chosen to return to the ways French writers thought about the social historically, not only as “le social” but in debates over “la question sociale,” “le lien social,” “la société en poussière,” and “la République sociale et démocratique.” When these writers worried about the social, they did not have in mind the *oikos*, but sociality itself. This was especially true among republicans, and it will be one of my objectives in the following chapters to suggest that, in addition to political rationalism and moral universalism, a commitment to the social became a salient feature distinguishing French from Classical republicanism. Explaining the prominence of violence as a language of repair and regeneration demands foregrounding this newfound republican interest in the nature of the social bond.

We might say that the dissertation draws its methodological orientation from Emile Durkheim rather than Arendt. The leading social theorist of the Third Republic, Durkheim formalized in theoretical language what was often left tacit in the various traditions of French republicanism. In his 1893 *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim critiqued the economic and contractualist conception of society promoted by English social theorists like Henry Maine and Herbert Spencer. In Durkheim’s eyes, their science of society as a spontaneous, self-organizing product of free exchange (“contractual solidarity”) could not account for the objective forces of social

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

causation that bound together modern societies (“organic solidarity”). Spencer believed societies were held together by a solidarity reducible to “the industrial type,” which capitalism universalized.³¹ In this view, societies must be seen as processual, transient conjunctions of independent social interaction. “Social solidarity” amounts to “nothing else than the spontaneous accord of individual interests, an accord of which contracts are the natural expression.”³²

In contrast to Spencer’s vision of society as a “vast system of particular contracts,” Durkheim claimed that modern society’s division of labor gave rise to objective forms of interdependence that pointed beyond contractual solidarity. Society was an organism that transcended the individuals that constituted it. After all, “If interest relates men” and nothing else, “it is never for more than some few moments.” In such a conception of society, “there is only an external link” connecting men, and “Consciences are only superficially in contact; they neither penetrate each other, nor do they adhere.” Indeed, the contractual theory of society is not even really social. It is virtually identical to Hobbes’s anarchic war of all against all: “For where interest is the only ruling force, each individual finds himself in a state of war with every other since nothing comes to mollify the egos, and any truce in this eternal antagonism would not be of long duration.”³³

Durkheim’s critique of British liberalism shapes his famous sociological realism, or what Judith Surkis has called his commitment “to explain the social by the

³¹ Emile Durkheim, “Organic Solidarity and Contractual Solidarity,” in *On Morality and Society: Selected Writings*, ed. Robert N. Bellah (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 86-113, at 87.

³² Durkheim, “Organic Solidarity and Contractual Solidarity,” 89.

³³ Durkheim, “Organic Solidarity and Contractual Solidarity,” 89.

social.”³⁴ “It is quite true that contractual relations...multiply as social labor is divided,” Durkheim conceded. The contract has become *the* form of sociality in modern democracies. “But,” Durkheim argued, “what Spencer seems to have failed to see is that non-contractual relations develop at the same time.”³⁵ As society’s increasing complexity normalizes the exchange relation as sociality’s generic form, it generates superior mediating social structures that regulate, without ever being reduced to, those contractual relations. These social structures may arise from individual choices, but they grow into quasi-objective forces with their own standing and mechanisms of reproduction which, as individuals, we confront as demands of social necessity. The law is the most obvious example of such a regulatory social structure. The laws governing marriage and conjugality—that is, the laws of kinship—are the most fundamental instances.³⁶

Thus, unlike in Arendt’s parlance, these laws of society do not concern the private realm, but exist to articulate private individuals into public order. Taking direct aim at contractual solidarity’s explanatory sufficiency, Durkheim concluded that “We cooperate because we wish to, but our voluntary co-operation creates duties for us that we did not desire” because “a contract is not sufficient unto itself, but is possible only thanks to a regulation of the contract which is originally social.”³⁷

Men cannot live together without acknowledging, and, consequently, making mutual sacrifices, without tying themselves to one another with strong, durable

³⁴ Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen*, 131; Dominick LaCapra, *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist and Philosopher* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972).

³⁵ Durkheim, “Organic Solidarity and Contractual Solidarity,” 92.

³⁶ Durkheim, “Organic Solidarity and Contractual Solidarity,” 92-3, 95-6; Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen*, 125-84; Robcis, *The Law of Kinship*.

³⁷ Durkheim, “Organic Solidarity and Contractual Solidarity,” 99-100.

bonds. Every society is a moral society... Because the individual is not sufficient unto himself, it is from society that he receives everything necessary to him, as it is for society that he works.³⁸

“Every society is a moral society”—the claim could just as well serve as a credo, not only for Durkheim, but also for republican political culture in nineteenth century France. It is why I have taken my cue from Durkheim, despite well-known problems with historical self-reflexivity in his work.³⁹ In identifying morality as the concrete element of the social bond irreducible to abstract contractual solidarity, Durkheim helps us understand why creating a democratic society in times of disintegration so often invited claims of moralizing, redemptive violence.

By foregrounding “the social” in the struggle for democracy in France, I hope to provide a more complex account of both republicanism and redemptive violence. Republicanism in France was never simply an attack on monarchy on behalf of abstract equality. It was, and continues to be, shaped as much by its hatred of hierarchical society as by its anxieties over social disintegration. Without a cohesive social body, one whose bonds transcended a *modus vivendi*, it was not possible to have a society sufficiently united to legislate over itself. It was not possible to have a democratic society.

* * *

In developing this argument, this dissertation aims to create space within contemporary democratic theory to study the role of political violence’s expressivist and non-instrumental dimensions in democratic politics. Traditionally, political

³⁸ Durkheim, “Organic Solidarity and Contractual Solidarity,” 112.

³⁹ Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, “Emile Durkheim and the Science of Corporatism,” *Political Theory* 14, no. 4 (1986): 638-59, at 645-6.

theorists have avoided studying redemptive violence for normative and methodological reasons. Claims of redemptive violence have long been associated with twentieth-century fascism or totalitarian ideology. Fanon is often the exception, and even then, critics have questioned whether he counts as a straightforward proponent of redemptive violence.⁴⁰

In practice, the phenomenon is studied almost exclusively by twentieth century intellectual historians. Among its chroniclers from Zeev Sternhell to Mark Antliff, redemptive or “palingenetic” violence finds its sources in late nineteenth century French thought and its fullest articulation in the anti-democratic, organicist aesthetics and politics of twentieth century fascist political theory.⁴¹ I have leaned on this historiography for my own arguments, but the teleological association it draws between redemptive violence and fascism has encouraged political theorists to dismiss that violence as beyond rational analysis or so contemptible that it requires no detailed examination. The only appropriate response is moral repudiation. As Tracy Strong has complained, since 1945 “much of the political thought in the West has been devoted to developing theory that would keep ‘it’ from happening again.” Postwar academic political theory is governed by “a tacit question: ‘What is the relation of this thought to

⁴⁰ Although I am not persuaded by those critics, readers can consult David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Life* (New York: Verso, 2012; first published 2000), 460-1; George Ciccariello-Maher, “To Lose Oneself in the Absolute: Revolutionary Subjectivity in Sorel and Fanon,” *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge* 5, no. 3 (2007): 101-12.

⁴¹ Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996; first published 1983); Zeev Sternhell, Mario Sznajder, and Maia Ashéri, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Jack J. Roth, “The Roots of Italian Fascism: Sorel and Sorelismo,” *The Journal of Modern History* 39, no. 1 (1967): 30-45; Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909-1939* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

the Nazis?⁴² As a result, redemptive violence has typically occasioned, not theoretical understanding, but indignation.

Redemptive violence's neglect has been exacerbated by an enduring tendency to view it as the exclusive possession of a single ideological tendency, which is then disavowed as a deviation or "parenthesis" within an otherwise progressive national republican history.⁴³ It has been argued, for example, that redemptive violence is the special weapon of the Counter-Enlightenment,⁴⁴ anti-modernism,⁴⁵ reactionary modernists,⁴⁶ conservatives,⁴⁷ fascist blackshirts and communist revolutionaries⁴⁸—virtually anyone but contemporary liberals,⁴⁹ whose violence is typically realist, a matter of "dirty hands," and checked by either a skepticism of moral perfectionism or a commitment to constitutionalism.⁵⁰ In situating redemptive violence in these habitual

⁴² Tracy Strong, *Politics Without Vision: Thinking Without a Banister in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 4.

⁴³ The classic statement of this position is the "immunity" thesis of René Rémond, *The Right Wing in France: From 1815 to de Gaulle*, trans. James M. Laux (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), but the tendency to narrate French republican history as a gradual perfection of universalism continues in Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) and Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le sacre du citoyen: Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

⁴⁴ Isaiah Berlin, "The Counter-Enlightenment," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 1-24.

⁴⁵ Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left*; Judith Shklar, "Bergson and the Politics of Intuition," *The Review of Politics* 20, no. 4 (1958): 634-56.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁴⁷ Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴⁸ Jacob L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952); François Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999; first published 1983).

⁴⁹ Unlike in the American context, contemporary French intellectuals do not call themselves liberals, but are often considered either "liberal republicans" or "neo-Republicans." See Emile Chabal, "Writing the French National Narrative in the Twenty-First Century," *The Historical Journal* 53, no. 2 (2010): 495-516; Andrew Jainchill and Samuel Moyn, "French Democracy Between Totalitarianism and Solidarity: Pierre Rosanvallon and Revisionist Historiography," *The Journal of Modern History* 76, no. 1 (2004): 107-54.

⁵⁰ A classic statement is Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 2, no. 2 (1973): 160-80; for more contemporary examples of realism against

explanatory paradigms, scholars have quarantined the phenomenon and exaggerated its ideological specificity. What is important is to bring back into view the surprising ways redemptive violence connected thinkers otherwise shaped by diverging traditions and contexts. The thinkers studied here hailed from different corners of French politics, and they disagreed, often profoundly, on the requirements of authentic democratic rule. Yet those differences did not prevent their voices from shading into one another on the question of violence. Tocqueville's remarks on French decadence and war's vivifying moral effects sound as if they were lifted from Sorel, a thinker often considered the intellectual father of fascism. Parisian communards who dreamed of a federated horizontal society could be found invoking, often literally, the same image of violence as a statist Robespierre or St Just. To study these thinkers in isolation from one another, as is typically done, conceals the surprising patterns that connect them. But to group them together into a single "illiberal" or "exceptional" tradition tending towards totalitarianism simply repeats an ahistorical platitude.⁵¹

Rather than grounding these resonances in a hidden ideological filiation, this dissertation focuses on the way these thinkers confronted a common dilemma first raised by the Revolution and its dream of republican democracy: from what was the social bond to be forged in the age of democracy? If the elemental unit of democracy was the emancipated individual, then what was society? Despite everything that

perfectionism, see Marc Stears, *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013) or William A. Galston, "Realism in Political Theory," *European Journal of Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010): 385-411.

⁵¹ Furet makes these sweeping condemnations in *The Passing of an Illusion*. For a powerful critique of Furet's ahistorical redemption of liberalism, see Enzo Traverso, "Intellectuals and Anti-Fascism: For a Critical Historicization," *New Politics* 9, no. 4 (2004): 91-101.

separated them, French thinkers during and after the Revolution found themselves called to answer this question. It was the unavoidable urgency of rethinking the social in an age of democracy that invited so many thinkers to appeal to redemptive violence. That is what this study hopes to reveal in clear, dramatic terms.

This dissertation therefore hopes to make a two-fold contribution to existing scholarship. First, it asks us to reconsider our longstanding belief that violence—especially terror—is driven by political abstraction. We ought to account for the fact that in virtually every modern justification of redemptive violence, its proponents critiqued political abstraction. They critiqued it because the Revolution, and the republican political culture which grew out of it, had taught them that democratic self-rule depended on regenerating the moral fiber of the social body. If the Republic were to limit itself to achieving abstract political citizenship, it would win the sovereignty of the people at the cost of dissolving them back into a haphazard multitude of atomized individuals. The French thinkers considered here therefore sought to mitigate the disintegrating effects of the abstraction procedures so required. The formation of a democratic society in France could not be separated from attempts to reforge the social body, to supplant the severed social bonds of the *ancien régime* with superior republican fraternity.

Second, this dissertation invites scholars to rethink the conventional ways we narrate the role of violence in the history of political thought. It is simply not true that redemptive violence was the exclusive possession of any single ideological faction, and its inevitable telos was not fascism. Instead, it was a flexible vocabulary that

answered a genuine, even intractable dilemma inherited from the attempt to create a modern republic through democratic revolution. If fascists also appealed to redemptive violence, that was because they, too, found themselves compelled to reimagine the social bond in an era in which democracy had called its nature into question. This is not an apology or an excuse for redemptive violence, but the necessary starting point for understanding its widespread appeal. Redemptive violence promised to repair the fraying social bond. That promise held a powerful appeal to French thinkers as they struggled to construct a republic amid the ruins of the past.

The contractualist identification of violence with anarchy has long helped political theorists define the principles of a legitimate democratic society. But when it came to creating that democratic society in history rather than in theory, of incarnating a people rather than philosophically describing one, political thinkers weaponized an altogether different image of violence: violence as productive of sociality itself. Terror took away life, but it did so while rebinding the social tie. It authorized murder, but not before transforming it into something more than death. If we are to understand democracy as an ongoing historical achievement rather than a normative theory of popular sovereignty, we ought to bring this alternative image of violence into focus. Doing so reminds us that democracy was, and is, a battle cry against alternative prescriptions for social order and political authority. In France, that cry invited its political thinkers to reassert republican peoplehood against the disintegrating forces which beset it from within and without. Time and again in the long nineteenth century, that also meant turning to democratic terror.

Chapter I

Regicide and Redemptive Violence in the French Revolution

On 30 May 1791, Maximilien Robespierre took to the podium of the National Assembly to declaim against the death penalty. Although lethal justice was defensible in a state of nature, he argued, it surrendered its rationale in society. “In society, when the force of all is armed against a single man, what principle of justice can authorize society to mete out death to him?” There could be none, Robespierre answered, for “A victor who kills his captive enemies is barbaric!” Moreover, given the chance of erring, societies ruled by justice cannot commit an act as irrevocable as execution against a “vanquished and powerless” prisoner, no matter how criminal. Indeed, “these scenes of death ordered with such aplomb are nothing but cowardly assassinations, solemn crimes, committed not by individuals but by whole nations with legal forms.” Robespierre’s conclusion was unequivocal: in societies where the death penalty is both acceptable and a national act, “the legislator is nothing but a master who commands slaves and, following his whim, punishes without pity.” Robespierre’s speech solicited a warm burst of applause.¹

Thomas Paine would later refer to this speech “with infinite satisfaction” during the trial of Louis XVI to try to save the deposed king’s life.² But he now brandished it against Robespierre himself, whom Paine believed had reversed course

¹ Maximilien Robespierre, Speech to the Assembly, 30 May 1791, in *Archives parlementaires de 1789 à 1860, première série (1787 à 1799)*, edited by M. J. Mavidal and M. E. Laurent, 82 vols. (Paris: Librairie administrative de P. Dupont, 1862-1913), vol. 26, pp. 622-3. *Archives parlementaires* henceforth cited by volume and page number.

² Thomas Paine, Speech to the Convention, 7 January 1793; printed in Michael Walzer, ed. *Regicide and Revolution: Speeches at the Trial of Louis XVI*, trans. Marian Rothstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 208-14, at 213.

in the intervening months. By the late autumn of 1792, Louis was a captive of the Assembly, imprisoned in an old stone tower called the Temple, and forced to eat without a knife to prevent him from taking his own life before the nation could. The king now cut the figure of a vanquished prisoner facing execution by society's justice. And yet, taking the podium once again on 3 December 1792, Robespierre not only called for Louis's death, but denied him the law's protection: "Louis must die because the nation must live."³

If Robespierre's horror of the death penalty conceded to extralegal violence because of "the force of circumstance," his arguments did not suggest it.⁴ Undoubtedly, the everyday demands of revolutionary politics often forced his optimism to cede to sober strategic maneuvering. Between abolishing the monarchy, founding the first French Republic amid continental war, drafting a constitution, and containing social conflicts, these months testified to the force of historical constraint. However, in the face of the practical matter of Louis XVI's fate, Robespierre did not appeal to tactical prerogatives to deny Louis a trial and endorse capital punishment. Instead, he reached for a special language of violence, one that identified the monarch's swift, extralegal death with popular redemption: "the salvation of the people, the right to punish the tyrant," he argued, "are all the same thing."⁵ In this view, "the salutary terror of the justice of the people" possessed a higher moral purpose. As he remarked at the Jacobin club in February 1793, "the people must rise

³ Maximilien Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792; printed in Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, 130-8, at 138.

⁴ John Laurence Carr, *Robespierre: The Force of Circumstance* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973).

⁵ Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792, 133.

up, not to collect sugar, but to bring down the tyrants.”⁶

Robespierre was not alone in reaching for this language of violence. Warning fellow deputies that “the spirit in which the king is judged is also the spirit in which the Republic will be established,” Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just followed his older colleague’s lead: “I can see no mean: this man must reign or die.”⁷ The young deputy from Aisne had also once advocated for the death penalty’s abolition. The language infused the Parisian popular sections, at times becoming synonymous with their civic agency. “The holiest duty, the most cherished law / Is to forget the law, to save the *patrie*,” the Mauconseil section announced to the Legislative Assembly on 4 August 1792.⁸ The Jacobins of Auxerre put it more starkly three months later: “Nations are awaiting the judgment you have rendered for Louis XVI’s crimes: that [this judgment] is terrible, that it is prompt, that it makes tyrants of the earth tremble, and that the blood of the most wicked conspirators expiate his crimes without delay.”⁹ Far from a capitulation to lethal justice’s necessity, revolutionaries everywhere were laying claim to its moral and redemptive power outside the law.

Why would revolutionaries claim redemptive violence as a vocabulary for the popular will? What did this violence provide that competing languages of agency could not? Contemporary scholars have often observed that this language during the trial signaled a new, heightened importance for violence in the revolution. Arno

⁶ Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792, 138; Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 146.

⁷ Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, Speech to the Assembly, 13 November 1792; printed in Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, 120-6, at 125, 123.

⁸ *Archives parlementaires* 47:458. This unattributed couplet, which opens the section’s address to the Assembly, is originally Voltaire’s.

⁹ Albert Soboul, *Le Procès de Louis XVI* (Paris: Julliard, 1966), 87.

Mayer, for example, has claimed that it is here in the trial that we see Robespierre “shift from a ‘negative’ to a ‘positive’ construction of revolutionary terror,” while Dan Edelstein has suggested that Robespierre’s gradual acceptance of capital punishment “may well be read as a synecdoche of the French Revolution.”¹⁰ At the same time, understanding the appeal of this language of violence remains difficult.¹¹ The challenge lies partly in what Mayer has described as “the ethical and epistemic difficulty of conceptualizing and theorizing violence without justifying, absolving, or condemning it.”¹² Faced with such a dilemma, some scholars have focused on describing this violence at the cost of explaining it, as Patrice Gueniffey does when concluding that, because of their “obsessional hatred” of kings, “republican discourse contains an element of irrationality that defies analysis.”¹³ Susan Dunn similarly wonders how the revolutionaries could not have realized its senselessness: “Strangely they seemed to ignore that revolutionary violence hardly produced ‘revelations’ or ‘eternal truths,’ but only drowned the king, the Revolution, and the Revolution’s leaders in a sea of blood.”¹⁴ Jonathan Israel simply brackets the problem by denouncing it as “an interruption” in the true trajectory of the revolution.¹⁵

¹⁰ Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 102; Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 128.

¹¹ Another common trope is to construe regicide as “sacrificial violence,” as in Jesse Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) and Antoine de Baecque, *Glory and Terror: Seven Deaths Under the French Revolution*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Routledge, 2001; first published 1997).

¹² Mayer, *The Furies*, 73.

¹³ Patrice Gueniffey, “Cordeliers and Girondins: the prehistory of the republic?” trans. Laura Mason, in *The Invention of the Modern Republic*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 86-106, at 93.

¹⁴ Susan Dunn, *The Deaths of Louis XVI: Regicide and the French Political Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 36.

¹⁵ Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from The*

It is telling, for instance, that the only study of the trial and execution of Louis XVI by a political theorist—Michael Walzer’s 1974 *Regicide and Revolution*—is a study in the impotence of the Jacobin language of violence and, in turn, a defense of proceduralism. In that text, Walzer honed in on the former’s shortcomings: “Jacobin theory may serve to justify revolutionary action against the king,” he argued, “But when a helpless man is dragged to the scaffold and placed into the hands of the executioner, more arguments are required than the Jacobins provide.” That is because “it is not enough to say...that the people and the king fought, the king lost, and therefore he is a traitor.” Denying him a trial and killing him outright “leaves open the question of right.”¹⁶ And without settling the question of right, the Jacobin language of violence could not destroy its object. In the absence of a legal trial, revolutionary violence forfeited the only instrument capable of reaching the deeper “mysteries of kingship” which lay behind the person of Louis Capet:

Given the mysteries of kingship, the only way to bring Louis to justice was through adversary proceedings in which the whole court was in effect the adversary of the king or at least of kingship. For such a court, legality is no doubt only a form of self-restraint, but it is important nonetheless because that restraint suggests as nothing else can do that the principles being established are at least potentially principles of justice... revolutionary justice is defensible whenever it points the way to everyday justice. That is the maxim that marks off morally legitimate trials from proscription and terror.¹⁷

Walzer’s argument stands as the most devastating critique of the Jacobin language of violence. It acknowledges that unless regicide was grounded in right, unless it was an act of justice, kingship would outlive Louis XVI’s death. And justice, in the end, was

Rights of Man to Robespierre (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 27.

¹⁶ Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, 70-1.

¹⁷ Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, 78-9.

precisely what Jacobin violence could not provide. At the same time, emphasizing the impotence of Jacobin violence on matters of right does not point the way towards understanding why the language was so compelling. Indeed, it only makes it more puzzling why political actors and thinkers believed the prospect of regicide demanded a moralizing conception of extralegal violence at all.

Thus, this chapter returns to the trial and execution of Louis XVI to reconsider the purpose and meaning of revolutionary redemptive violence. It argues that Robespierre and others reached for this violence to answer a different question from that of right, one they believed was arguably more fundamental to founding a republic: how could the social body be reconstituted after its revolutionary disintegration and the execution of its unifying principle, the person of the king? References to violence as expiation, salvation and regeneration provided a means for asking after the quality of the social bond in democracy, its specific vision of cohesion. Indeed, if the legalistic arguments of the Gironde more satisfyingly answered questions of right, they almost completely ignored this latter problem. It was a problem that took on urgency as the development of the revolution made regicide increasingly plausible. Regicide raises, in ways few other political acts can do, the need to discover a new principle of national belonging, a vision of society that can explain why democratic citizens, and not royal subjects, ought to live together. We do not have to endorse Jacobin violence to concede that, more than any others during the trial, Robespierre and his allies acknowledged this fact. It was why they joined their revolutionary realism to a democratic language of redemptive violence.

The chapter begins by analyzing Girondin interpretations of the philosophical problems raised in judging an inviolable king. It shows how beneath their disagreements over the proper judicial procedures for the occasion lay a common interpretation of the problem at hand, namely, locating the source of right. Emphasizing how the Gironde remained enthralled with the origins of right brings into focus the contrasting Jacobin interpretation of the trial and the problems it posed. For Robespierre and St Just, the trial and anticipated execution of Louis XVI raised the urgent need to supplant the ancient corporatist vision of society with a new, republican alternative. The chapter then describes one of the solutions the Jacobins developed to found that new republican social body: the language of redemptive violence. By lifting regicide out of classical theories of tyrannicide and re-embedding it in Enlightenment discourses of nature, this ideology imbued “the people” with nature’s own regenerative agency while casting regicide as a site for reconstituting society’s moral fabric. Moreover, in groping for a new interpretation of how violence could produce social cohesion, Robespierre and his allies figured popular sovereignty as spontaneous, unmediated by legal forms, natural and moral—that is, as lightning. Popular agency appeared as an extension of nature’s own activity, and regicide was to become a means of realigning the orders of nature and society, morality and law.

Although Robespierre’s political and moral prescriptions would not carry the day—the king was tried and guillotined under the sign of the law—the theoretical force of the Jacobin argument outlasted the trial. Without understanding the problems which motivated their violence, either by dismissing it as defying analysis or judging

it impotent, we lose the opportunity to understand redemptive violence's enduring appeal. Walzer may be right that "Proscription is final only with regard to its victim, but not with regard to the political community itself which still waits upon some determination of what is just and what is unjust."¹⁸ But at issue in founding republican democracy is not only the determination of justice, but of peoplehood and the specifically democratic language of violence that can found it. Grasping why this is so recasts the regicide as an episode in a longer debate over the place of violence within French democratic political culture. It brings into view enduring problems at the heart of democratic theory in France, a fact Jean Jaurès acknowledged at the end of the nineteenth century with his conclusion that with Louis XVI's death, "Kings might briefly return, but they would henceforth be nothing but ghosts. France, their France, is eternally regicide."¹⁹

The Argument Over Inviolability

As the members of the National Convention debated whether to put Louis on trial in the autumn of 1792, revolution had already been reshaping France for three years. A slew of decrees had already destroyed feudalism and its society of orders. In an emotional legislative session on the night of 4 August 1789, deputies redefined property in individualist terms, abolished tithes and venal offices, and suppressed seigniorial privileges. In November, they nationalized church property and auctioned it off to support France's first fiat currency, the *assignat*. In the following summer of

¹⁸ Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, 71.

¹⁹ Jean Jaurès, *A Socialist History of the French Revolution*, trans. Mitchell Abidor (London: Pluto Press, 2015; first published 1901-1908), 138-9.

1790, the Assembly adopted the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, a measure that subordinated the church to civil authority and compelled priests to swear an oath of loyalty to the state. The privileges of the nobility were abolished that same summer. Jews were emancipated in September 1791. Civil marriage and divorce were instituted in November. The corporate guild system, too, was broken with the adoption of the Le Chapelier Law of 14 June 1791.

These reforms rendered much of the old regime obsolete within the span of months. In place was now the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and, thanks to Jacques-Pierre Brissot and the revolutionary Gironde during the spring of 1792, continental war on its behalf. Among the features of the old regime under pressure, however, the figure of the king remained a confusing and stubborn problem. Many political leaders were reluctant to confront the question of the king directly, a fact notoriously dramatized in the wake of the king's flight to Varennes on 20 June 1791. In one of the revolution's first major crises, Louis fled Paris with his family towards the border with the hope of rallying the court and royalism from afar. Upon leaving Paris, he also left a written statement repudiating the revolution. The statement was discovered as he and the royal family were caught at Varennes and escorted back to Paris. Radicals and republicans interpreted the flight as overt abdication by the monarchy. Larger segments of the population, too, increasingly questioned the viability of a constitutional monarchy.²⁰ And yet political leaders chose to defer the problem: to explain the king's flight, the legislature fabricated the fiction that Louis was kidnapped under an émigré's plot. Louis, in turn, accepted the new constitution

²⁰ Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 179-202.

and, with it, earned inviolability and a suspensive veto.

Many radical democrats found this course of action bewildering. Paine, for one, could not understand why Louis was allowed to remain king, and an inviolable one at that. As one petition circulated afterwards put it, “A great crime is committed. *Louis XVI flees*. He shamefully abandons his post; the empire is on the verge of anarchy.” And yet, the petitioners complained, “you have decided in advance that he is innocent and inviolable... Legislators! This was not the wish of the people.”²¹ Why, republicans wondered, should Louis be rewarded for betraying the nation with the new office of constitutional monarch?

Undoubtedly, part of the reason lay in institutional inertia and the vertigo of abandoning the monarchy. Louis also remained popular until as late as 1791, and many critics of the old regime continued to aspire for a constitutional monarchy rather than a republic. Nevertheless, by the summer of 1792, the Parisian popular sections were prepared to take action into their own hands. “Representatives of the people, listen again to their cries of sorrow,” a deputation of fédérés pleaded to the legislative assembly in July.

Weeks have passed since you declared the patrie in danger, and you indicate to us no means of saving it. Can it be that you still do not know the cause of our ills, or the remedies? Well then, legislators, we citizens of the 83 departments... we shall show you the remedy. We say to you that the source of our ills is in the abuse that the head of the executive power makes of his authority... Spare your country a universal upheaval, use all the power confided to you, and save the *patrie* yourselves.²²

The deputation warned that if legislators did not depose Louis, “There would only

²¹ “Petition to the National Assembly, Drawn Up on the Altar of the *Patrie* (17 July 1791),” in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, ed. Keith Baker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 275-6.



[fig 1: Jacques Bertaux, *Prise du palais des Tuileries, 10 août 1792.*]

remain one recourse for the nation, that of deploying all of its force to crush all its tyrants.”²³ The sections of Paris made good on that promise in the next month. Cumulative frustrations over food, the war situation, and Louis’s conspiracy against the revolution reached its climax on the morning of 10 August 1792 [fig 1]. In what observers called the “second” Revolution, Paris’s armed sections attacked the Tuileries as the royal family fled to the nearby Legislative Assembly. Sheltered in the *logographie* room reserved for journalists, Louis was arrested by the Assembly and the municipal government, the Commune. As a result, the question of what to do with the king could no longer be deferred. Three years after the revolution began, leaders would finally have to put the king on trial and judge him.

²² *Archives parlementaires* 47:69-70.

²³ *Archives parlementaires* 47:70.

* * *

Political leaders and convention members immediately confronted two major obstacles in judging the king. First, no preexisting adversarial procedures existed for such a trial and, except for the English case of Charles I in 1649, few available scripts existed for regicide. As Jean-Paul Marat was compelled to remind his legalistic opponents, “It is not at all here a question of an ordinary trial.”²⁴ Second, Louis was legally inviolable, and not by dint of divine right but positive law. He received his schedule of legal immunities by virtue of the 1791 Constitution, not royalist ideology, and no trial would be possible until a way around that fact could be found.

As the convention members searched for ways to circumvent royal inviolability in the following months—from roughly October 1 to December 6, a period often called “The Instruction”—the popular sections continued to experiment with new idioms of collective agency. And without doubt, extralegal violence had emerged as the privileged medium for popular voice. As Jean-Marie Roland, Minister of the Interior, explained to Louis before the August 10 insurrection, the Parisian sections were already leaning towards extralegal violence as their preferred vocabulary for popular sovereignty: “The revolution is achieved in their minds; it will be completed at the cost of blood, and will be cemented by it, if wisdom does not prevent misfortunes that can still be avoided.” If Louis continued his obstruction tactics by blocking legislation with his suspensive veto, Roland warned, “the departments will be forced to substitute for it, as they do everywhere, with violent

²⁴ *Archives parlementaires* 55:15.

measures,” while “the angered people will supplement [the law’s] absence with excesses.”²⁵ Although the sans-culottes “never saw in their right to insurrection a theoretical or formal affirmation of their sovereignty,” Albert Soboul concedes, “they were naturally receptive to its exercise” after the August insurrection.²⁶ The storming of the Bastille and the women’s march on Versailles had suggested popular agency and violence were linked. But it was the “September Massacres” that drove the point home. This *journée* saw Parisian crowds murder thousands of prisoners in fear that they would join the invading European armies as a fifth column. These *septembriseurs* placed the trial against the backdrop of bloody, extralegal popular violence.

It was against this backdrop that Jacobins first discovered redemptive violence as a language of democratic agency. But before turning to the commitments which comprised that redemptive violence, it is important to understand that it was neither the only language of popular agency in the trial to be invoked nor the most persuasive. Some royal sympathizers, for example, took inviolability at face value and reasoned accordingly. After all, the law was not completely silent on Louis’s guilt. Inviolability was not invincibility. Because the king’s legal immunities were themselves the gift of constitutional law, even if Louis exercised royal discretion in his executive power, it was still the case that, as the 1791 Constitution put it, “only in the name of the law may he exact obedience.”²⁷ To be beyond the law was not to be a law unto oneself, and Louis was acutely aware of this fact. In response to Bertrand Barère’s opening

²⁵ *Archives parlementaires* 45:163-4.

²⁶ Soboul, *Le Procès*, 18-19.

²⁷ John Hall Stewart, ed. *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), 240.

prosecutorial statement on December 11 that “Louis, the French people accuse you of having committed a multitude of crimes, of establishing your tyranny by destroying their liberty,” Louis gave the careful reply: “There were no laws which stopped me.”²⁸ His was a condition of legal inviolability along with clear conditions for abdication: if Louis refused to take the oath to the constitution, if he led an army against the nation, or if refused to disavow foreign armies fighting against the nation in his name, then as the Constitution specified, he would be stripped of inviolability, reduced to a citizen, and made culpable for any future treasonous actions.

This legal context guided Charles-François-Gabriel Morrison when he asked in a November 13 speech, “Can Louis XVI be judged?” A deputy from the Vendée with royalist sympathies, he drew the most straightforward conclusion: under a strict interpretation of the constitution, a trial was impossible and unnecessary. Although “a sovereign people have no other rule than its supreme will,” there are intrinsic limitations to that will. *Ex post facto* justice was one such limitation. “When a nation has promulgated a law,” Morrison explained, “although that nation have the right to change the law at will, nevertheless, that changed law cannot have a retroactive effect.” To insist otherwise was to commit “injury to the most basic principles of justice,” to forfeit principles “unknown only to tyrants.”²⁹ Even if we must concede to “the plenitude of [the people’s] sovereignty,” Morrison concluded that to the question of what was to be done, there was nothing else to be done. Their duty as legislators

²⁸ Soboul, *Le Procès*, 114-5.

²⁹ Charles-François-Gabriel Morrison, Speech to the Convention, 13 November 1792; printed in Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, 110-20, at 111-13.

was to apply the penalty prescribed by the letter of the law without qualification. Since Louis had already been reduced to a citizen as prescribed by the constitution, neither trial nor further action was necessary. The revolution could “avoid a monstrous and interminable trial, perhaps with untoward results.”³⁰

Condorcet, for his part, also accepted Louis’s inviolability. It led him to erect a baroque argument to circumvent inviolability while maintaining fidelity to procedural justice. To the question, “Can the former king be judged?” he argued that there were two distinct questions at stake: does the constitution allow the king to be guilty? And does the constitution specify the means of judging that guilt? To the first question, Condorcet answered affirmatively. “The impunity of the king was not decreed by the Constitution” because it clearly specified conditions for abdication. But as to the second question, Condorcet had to concede that the Constitution did not provide the means for judging that guilt. Yet the silence of the law in this case ought not be a legal obstacle, because according to Condorcet, although justice demands that a previously promulgated law punish a crime, it did not demand the same for the procedures of determining guilt. Thus, although the Constitution remained silent on how to judge a king, that did not imply that no judgment could be made: “It is time to teach kings,” he proudly claimed, “that the silence of the laws about their crimes is the ill consequence of their power, and not the will or reason of equity.” And because France would benefit from knowing the extent of Louis’s betrayal, “even if one gives constitutional inviolability a force most contrary to reason and to justice, it remains true,” Condorcet

³⁰ Morrison, Speech to the Convention, 13 November 1792, 119.

insisted, that “the nation has the right to judge him.”³¹

Condorcet essentially decouples the determination of guilt from the prescription of punishment. Inviolability, he wants to say, protects Louis from punishment but not from guilt. He ought to be legally condemned for his actions, but he cannot be punished for them without committing *ex post facto* justice. Once guilt and punishment are uncoupled in this way, it is possible to draw the correct conclusions: Louis XVI can be judged guilty but not punished, whereas Louis Capet is both culpable and punishable.

Both Morrison and Condorcet’s arguments were powerful examples of legal and constitutional reasoning. Neither bothered denying the king’s guilt. The king’s behavior had made that impossible. In particular, the discovery of incriminating documents in an iron safe in the Tuileries (the *armoire de fer*) revealed that Louis was collaborating with foreign powers to subvert the revolution. The documents, signed by Louis and compiled into a dossier for the Convention by Dufriche-Valazé, made the king’s guilt undeniable.³²

And yet Morrison and Condorcet’s arguments persuaded few deputies. The victorious position—one that was much more theoretically ambitious—was exemplified by that of Jean-Baptiste Mailhe, a lawyer from Toulouse and whose report on royal inviolability to the convention opened up the trial in earnest. In that report, he appealed to a new and revolutionary extralegal entity: the nation. For Mailhe, a

³¹ Marquis de Condorcet, Pamphlet from 3 December 1792; printed in Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, 139-58, at 140, 146, 148.

³² Soboul, *Le Procès*, 83-7.

faithful application of the law led to counter-intuitive conclusions about the nature of royal guilt and popular sovereignty. He admitted that “in no case could the king be judged by the other constituted authorities, since he was their superior.” “It did not follow,” however, that the king “could not be judged by *the nation*, since to come to such a conclusion would be to claim that by virtue of the Constitution, the king was superior to the nation or independent of the nation.”³³ Such an inviolability, Mailhe claimed, would have entailed the nation alienating its sovereignty. As everyone who read Rousseau knew, that was impossible.

Mailhe’s appeal to “the nation” leaned on precedents in prerevolutionary France. By the late eighteenth century, the various *parlements* were already presenting themselves as the body of the nation. And in the lead up to the convocation of the Estates-General in 1789, the meeting was anticipated by French leaders as one between the nation and its executive authority. The nation, in other words, had already been invoked as a site of sovereignty distinguished from the executive branch of government. However, references to the nation prior to the revolution referred above all to a judicial entity. The *parlements*, after all, were courts, staffed by judges, and comprised of judicial and administrative instruments meant to represent the nation to the king on behalf of the people. They represented the nation *qua* legal subject. It was not this judicial subject that Mailhe had in mind when he claimed that, “No, the nation was not bound by royal inviolability, nor could it be,” because “There was no reciprocity between the people and the king.” Whereas Louis received his kingship

³³ Jean-Baptiste Mailhe, Speech to the Convention, 7 November 1792; printed in Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, 93-110, at 98.

from the constitution, “the nation was sovereign regardless of constitution or king. Its inalienable sovereignty proceeds from nature alone.”³⁴

Mailhe’s appeal to nature here is remarkable given that he was neither a radical nor a Jacobin. Although a revolutionary, in the Convention he was associated with the moderate majority unaffiliated with any specific political club. Nevertheless, he invoked the revolution’s most radical claim: the nation named a preexisting repository of sovereignty that preceded all legal forms. In some respects, it aligned with Sieyès’s famous doctrine of constituent power. But unlike Sieyès’s category, which served largely as a formal presupposition for his theory of representation, Mailhe did not speak here of a legal fiction but a force of nature. In his speech, the people were asleep, but as they “awake” to their sovereignty and power, they recover their “instincts,” especially that of revenge and self-defense. As a natural existence, they are governed by laws which precede positive law and “are as old as society itself.” Indeed, “did not the nation itself have an undying right, rooted in nature, to call [tyrants] before its tribunals and to cause them to suffer the punishments due to oppressors or brigands?” As a pre-political entity, the nation did not depend on positive laws because it was not a positive existence. Before its agency, “all the difficulties disappear: royal inviolability might never have been.”³⁵ Since the nation bestowed Louis his inviolability, it was within its powers to discard it and to judge Louis as an ordinary citizen on trial. And so, because the Convention was a “perfect” representation of that nation, Mailhe believed it was an adequate judge. To say

³⁴ Mailhe, Speech to the Convention, 7 November 1792, 98.

³⁵ Mailhe, Speech to the Convention, 7 November 1792, 97, 100-1.

otherwise would be “to reject the nation” and “to attack the basis of society.”³⁶

These arguments of Morrison, Condorcet and Mailhe were grounded in different threads of revolutionary political culture. Although they arrived at different conclusions about how best to engage royal inviolability, they each accepted the principle of popular sovereignty. The point is important, because it suggests that regicide was not an intrinsic feature of revolutionary ideology nor entailed by the principle of popular sovereignty. Even as late as April 1792, Robespierre agreed. Writing in the opening editorial of his *Le Défenseur de la Constitution*, he skeptically asked, “It is in the words *republic* or *monarchy* that an answer resides to the great social problem?”³⁷ If Robespierre and his Jacobin allies subsequently charted a different path by advocating for regicide outside the law, it was, I want to argue now, because the prospect of regicide led them to adopt a different perspective on what was fundamentally at stake in founding a republic. For despite all that divided Morrison, Mailhe and Condorcet, these leaders actually shared a common interpretation of the problem inviolability posed: the ultimate source of right. If Morrison denied there was a source of right higher than the constitution, Mailhe claimed to have found exactly that: “there is no Constitution which could prevent you from calling down upon [an enemy’s] head the censure of divine and human laws: rights and duties of nature are of an order higher than human institutions.”³⁸ They both approached the question in terms of the final grounds of right and disagreed where that ground was located: the

³⁶ Mailhe, Speech to the Convention, 7 November 1792, 107.

³⁷ Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes de Maximilien Robespierre, Tome IV*, ed. Gustave Laurent (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1939), 9.

³⁸ Mailhe, Speech to the Convention, 7 November 1792, 103.

Constitution or the Nation? It was also why Condorcet's argument became so convoluted. He wanted a trial, but he refused to invoke a higher extralegal authority like the nation to sanction it. He was thus compelled to decouple guilt from punishment to remain philosophically consistent. Despite his revolutionary ambitions, Condorcet always believed that "you [France] owe to yourselves, you owe to mankind, the first example of the impartial trial of a king" where the legal proceedings approximated as closely as possible ordinary justice.³⁹

Jacobins found this debate tedious. "Those who attach any importance to the just punishment of a king will never found a Republic," St Just argued in his first speech to the Convention.⁴⁰ It all amounted to exasperating "constitutional logic-chopping" as far as Robespierre was concerned.⁴¹ What frustrated these Jacobin leaders were not the details of their opponents' legal reasoning. After all, like Mailhe, they too would appeal to the law of nations to circumvent inviolability.⁴² Instead, they were frustrated with the overriding presumption that, at bottom, the trial was about the final ground of legal right. It was as if monarchy was illegitimate merely because it placed those grounds in the wrong body. Indeed, if all it takes to found a republic is shifting the grounds of right from the court to the people, and if regicide is essentially supplanting a treasonous king with the rule of law, than we would have to concede to the Gironde leader Pierre-Victurnien Vergniaud's claim that "the Constitution," could

³⁹ Condorcet, Pamphlet of 3 December 1792, 156.

⁴⁰ St Just, Speech to the Convention, 13 November 1792, 122.

⁴¹ Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792, 135.

⁴² In his first speech to the Convention, St Just argued that "The forms of judicial procedure here are not to be sought in positive law, but in the law of nations." Robespierre later followed suit, arguing "You confuse the rules of positive and civil law with those of the law of nations." See St Just, Speech to the Convention, 13 November 1792, 121; Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792, 132.

be, and was, the “basis of civil society,” or Condorcet’s belief that, suitably adjusted, positive law might be enough to bridge the revolutionary gap.⁴³ That was a point even Marat conceded, and unlike the Jacobins, he advocated for a trial (although he was confident the outcome needed to be swift death).

But Robespierre and his allies gradually discovered that affixing the source of law to “the people” was inadequate for founding a republic. Redefining the basis of right might curtail the arbitrary personal authority of the king. It might even place ordinary justice within the reach of the people. But the ideology of royalism in France was never primarily a doctrine about the nature of justice or the source of right. It was an entire ideology of “the social,” and to found a republic, a specifically republican vision of society had to take the place of the old regime. Without a persuasive democratic vision of society, France could achieve a republican regime in law, but not a republican people. And so when the Jacobins turned to the laws of nature to overcome inviolability, they did so for different reasons than their critics. Their appeal to the “terror of the justice of the people” sought to reframe regicide as an act of terror against an external enemy rather than the fulfillment of justice. If regicide could be construed as an expression of democratic terror, perhaps it could reassert the moral bases for social cohesion, enact “the people” as an agent capable of extralegal action, and pave the way for defining a new republican social body.

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⁴³ Pierre-Victorien Vergniaud, Speech to the Convention, 31 December 1792, printed in Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, 194-208, at 195.

We can observe the Jacobin critique of the legalistic interpretation of regicide in at least two places. The first is in their insistence that the trial did not present a judicial proceeding, but a scene of war. In his 13 November 1792 speech, St Just attacked Morrison and Mailhe's opinions as "equally false." Rather than respecting inviolability (Morrison) or judging Louis as a regular citizen (Mailhe), "the king ought to be judged according to principles foreign to both." Applying old ideas to a new situation, the two misconstrued the task at hand. "The single aim of [Mailhe's] committee was to persuade you that the king should be judged as an ordinary citizen," St Just claimed. "And I say that the king should be judged as an enemy; that we must not so much judge him as combat him; that as he had no part in the contract which united the French people, the forms of judicial procedure here are not to be sought in positive law, but in the law of nations."⁴⁴ For St Just, appealing to the law of nations did not mean appealing to a higher law to judge an inviolable king. A legal judgment was not at stake. Instead, he appealed to the law of nations for the rules of combat. The king was an enemy in an international arena, a figure outside of the polity, a "brigand," "the lowest class of humanity," "outlaw," and a "rebel."

Some men search for a law which would allow the punishment of the king. But in the form of government from which we come, he was indeed inviolable with respect to each citizen. Between the people as a whole and the king, I do not however recognize any natural bond... The social contract is between citizen and citizen, not between citizen and government. A contract affects only those whom it binds. As a consequence, Louis, who was not bound, cannot be judged in civil law... All these reasons should lead you to judge Louis, not as a citizen, but as a rebel.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ St Just, Speech to the Convention, 13 November 1792, 121.

⁴⁵ St Just, Speech to the Convention, 13 November 1792, 123.

Condorcet, Mailhe and others had mistakenly applied domestic principles of law into a scene of war between a nation and its enemy. They sought to apply principles of justice to an enemy outside of the polity that sought to destroy that very justice. “To judge is to apply the law; law supposes a common share in justice; and what justice can be common to humanity and kings? What has Louis in common with the French people that they should treat him well after he betrayed them?” It was evidence of how poorly revolutionaries understood the nature of the revolutionary break, St Just suggested, that French leaders believed legal justice was the criterion for success.

Robespierre agreed. In early December, he wrote, “Citizens, the Assembly has unwittingly been brought far from the true question. There is no trial to be conducted here.” That was because “Louis is not an accused man. You are not judges. You are, and you can only be, statesmen and representatives of the nation.” As representatives of the general will, “You do not have a verdict to give for or against a man, but a measure to take for the public safety.” And unfortunately, “the character of the deliberations hitherto goes directly against this latter aim.”⁴⁶ Robespierre conceded that the confusion between a trial that “punishes a public official while keeping its form of government” with a revolution that “destroys the government itself” stemmed from the unprecedented nature of the historical break: “We apply ideas with which we are familiar to an extraordinary case dependent upon principles which we have never put in practice.”⁴⁷ The difficulty of seeing the proper task at hand was further exacerbated by France’s long enslavement, which had so thoroughly distorted men’s

⁴⁶ Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792, 131.

⁴⁷ Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792, 132.

moral intuitions that regicide seemed to be illegal, even immoral. The correct path forward, nevertheless, was one in which “the National Convention declares him [Louis] from this moment a traitor to the French nation, a criminal towards humanity,” and if this seemed difficult to accept, that was evidence of how corrupt the moral compass of the social body had become.⁴⁸

Like St Just, Robespierre saw the situation to be one of war against an external enemy. He, too, concluded that Louis possessed no civil status whatever: “Those who make war on a people to arrest the progress of liberty and annihilate the rights of man should be pursued...as murderers and rebellious brigands,” he later wrote in his draft Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. Read aloud to the Jacobin Club on 21 April 1793 in the lead up to the creation of France’s first republican constitution, that draft declaration condemned kings as “slaves in revolt against the Sovereign power of the Earth, which is the human race, and against the legislator of the universe, which is nature.”⁴⁹ Robespierre repeated the point in a 5 December 1793 declaration, written in response to William Pitt’s announcement of the European alliance against the French Revolution’s “immorality.” There, he addressed the monarchs as a member of the Committee on Public Safety: “Slaves in revolt against the sovereignty of peoples, do you not know that this blasphemy [of calling republicans rebels] can only be justified by victory? See then the scaffold of the last of our tyrants... that is our answer.”⁵⁰

These Jacobin references to kings as rebels, slaves in revolt, and outlaws served the

⁴⁸ Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792, 138.

⁴⁹ “Draft Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” (24 April 1793), in Maximilien Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 2007), 66-72, at 72.

⁵⁰ Maximilien Robespierre, “Response of the National Convention to the Manifestos of the Kings Allied Against the Republic” (5 December 1793), in Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*, 90-97, at 93.

rhetorical purpose of accepting monarchy's own self-presentation as beyond the social contract while reversing its valuation. Both the slave in revolt and the king lacked civil status and were, from the standpoint of the revolution, analogous figures. And if kings were nothing but slaves in revolt, then it would indeed be a sort of legal promotion to grant them a trial before their execution, because it would readmit them back into the political community in the form of citizenship. In the eyes of St Just and Robespierre, that was nonsense. A democratic revolution is not a legal trial but a war to be won.

The second place we see Jacobins object to the Gironde's legalistic framing of the trial lay in their focus on repairing social cohesion. Unlike the citations to the law of nations, this argument reached into an alternative strand of French thought that was concerned with questions of "the social." Before the Jacobins ever raised the question of the social body in the trial, eighteenth century French thinkers had already recognized social cohesion as an important problem that was distinct from the phenomenon of political cohesion. The latter concerned the bonds connecting royal subjects and, later, free and equal citizens united by common law and shared government. Long thought to be sustained by collective subjection to or participation in an undivided sovereign will, political unity became during the revolution a special type of relation achieved by disavowing the heterogeneous social bonds that coordinated men and women in relations of hierarchy and subordination. As Sieyès put it on the eve of the revolution, "All the relations between citizen and citizen are founded on the basis of freedom and equality," which were superior to the "two great

principles of action in society...*honour* and *emolument*.”⁵¹

In contrast to political unity, the cohesion of “the social” referred to customary relations of interdependence. Before the social theorists of the Third Republic formalized it, eighteenth century thinkers had already given shape (although not a name) to this phenomenon. As Daniel Gordon has argued, they did so as a response to absolutism. Within a context where court life in Versailles monopolized the domain of politics, ordinary French men and women were compelled to search for alternative, non-political modes of association that could possess their own autonomy. “The invention of the social as a distinctive field of human experience,” however, “required a demonstration that some meaningful activities are self-instituting; that in some situations human beings can hang together of their own accord; that humans, in short, are sociable creatures.”⁵² That demonstration, as Karuna Mantena has suggested in the British case, often came from anthropological histories of non-Western cultures (their systems of kinship and the customary bases of their institutions), and indeed French political thinkers made much of Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748), Denis Diderot’s *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* (1772), and new ethnographic and archaeological studies on “the golden age.”⁵³

⁵¹ Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, “An Essay on Privileges,” in *Political Writings*, ed. Michael Sonenscher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003; first published 1788), 69-91, at 82-3.

⁵² Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 4-5.

⁵³ Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 56-88; Edelstein discusses the relevance of ethnographic studies on the myth of the Golden Age, especially for the trial of the king. He writes, “In the French context, the political importance of this social theory would be felt during the constitutional crisis of 1793: If the Jacobins could so easily suspend their own Constitution, it was thanks in part to this alternative model of a society without formal government, regulated only by the laws of nature,” in *The Terror of Natural Right*, 109.

French thinkers also had other resources available for theorizing the social. They had, for example, the theme of natural *sociabilité* in Baron d’Holbach and Rousseau and which enthralled elite salon circles. Another was the ongoing invention of the science of society. Coined by Condorcet, the new “social science” promised to import the procedures of the natural sciences into the social field, and to render its distinctive features in the new authoritative language of scientific appraisal. For ordinary people, however, the most obvious source for understanding the social was prerevolutionary France’s corporatist society and which consisted in overlapping bodies such as the family, the city, and the guild. Far from being seen as arrangements of convenience, each body was understood to be an autonomous moral entity. Trade guilds, for example, had their own patron saints, holidays, mutual aid mechanisms, and rituals of moral improvement and economic cooperation.⁵⁴ And just as every *corps* was cohered by its *esprit de corps*, *société* at large was bound together by *la morale*. As the Montesquieu enthusiast Louis de Jaucourt put it, *la morale* did not involve “knowing the essence of real substances.” Instead, it concerned the relations between men and their conduct with one another. To see *la morale*, Jaucourt explained, “it is only necessary to compare with care certain relations among human actions and a certain rule.” On this account, morality is about the collective activity of moral regulation as much as it is about maxims of conduct. It is what makes society more than a collection of individuals, and it is why “*la Morale* is the proper science of man; because it is a general knowledge proportioned to their natural capacity, and

⁵⁴ William Sewell, *Work & Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

from which depends their greatest interest.”⁵⁵ Although moral relations between men are fixed and unchanging, they are nevertheless relational rather than essential. They describe not natural, but social laws governing men of reason.

And yet, part of the reason eighteenth century French thinkers discussed the social at all was because its cohesion was entering into crisis. Corporatism in particular came under attack from a series of reform movements in the years leading up to the revolution. Led by ministers and politicians allied with the philosophes and the physiocrats, these reformers sought to resolve the monarchy’s looming debt crisis by dismantling the corporate privileges which interfered with increasing taxation. As Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot had put it, “Public utility is the supreme law,” and in the face of that law, “particular corporate bodies do not exist of themselves, or for themselves; they have been formed for society, and they must cease to exist immediately after they cease to be useful.” Reduced to an instrumental arrangement, Turgot, a champion of the scientific reform of government and Condorcet’s idol, denied corporate bodies their moral standing in order to exalt the abstract individual and aggregate social utility: “Citizens have rights” which, he insisted, “exist independently of society.”⁵⁶ It was a revolutionary stance that provoked outrage from the *parlements*, the nobility, and trade associations. After issuing a series of *laissez-faire* reforms in 1776 known as Turgot’s Edict, his program finally lost the support of

⁵⁵ Louis de Jaucourt, “Morale (Science des moeurs),” in Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.*, University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, ed. Robert Morrissey. Vol. 10, pp. 699-700.

⁵⁶ Jacques Turgot, “On Foundations,” in Baker, ed. *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, 89-97, at 96; for a broader discussion of Turgot’s reforms, see Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 283-90.

fellow ministers and Louis dismissed him as Controller-General of Finances.

Turgot's Edict was a prelude to successive attempts at atomizing the corporate structure of the old regime's social body. The revolutionary institution of civil marriage and divorce provided another attempt. Given the unique role families played in constituting the social—they bonded generations across time and lineages across space—tampering with the familial bond meant redefining the broader purpose of “association.”⁵⁷ Sieyès remarks typified the new attitude. After proudly announcing that “those millions of men now piled together without any plan or order, have begun to allow themselves some feeling of hope... and can see at last that the moment is at hand when we can become a *nation*,” he added the qualification that the family had to be “set aside” to properly grasp the individual whose will constituted the elemental unit of the nation.⁵⁸ The Third Estate's bid for national representation, too, can be seen in this light. “Since it belongs only to the verified representatives to take part in forming the national will,” the Third Estate announced, “it is also indispensable to conclude that it belongs to it [the Third Estate], and it alone, to interpret and present the general will of the nation; there cannot exist between the throne and this assembly any *veto*, any negative power.”⁵⁹ This was a statement that denied political voice to intermediary bodies between the nation and the king. It repudiated the schedule of privileges allotted by *corps* because those intermediary bodies foreclosed the

⁵⁷ Daniel Roche, *France in the Enlightenment*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 521-2; Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 20-5.

⁵⁸ Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, “Views of the Executive Means Available to the Representatives of France in 1789,” in *Political Writings*, 1-67, at 5, 10.

⁵⁹ *Archives parlementaires* 8:127.

formation of a united body politic. After all, Sieyès wrote, if social ascriptions were not suppressed, the formation of a national representation would be futile: “They would still remain three types of heterogeneous matter [the three Estates] that it would be impossible to amalgamate.”⁶⁰

The aggressive means by which the revolution sought to atomize the social body came to a point with Le Chapelier’s Law. Proposed by Isaac-René-Guy Le Chapelier in response to strikes in Paris in the spring of 1791, the measure decreed “association” between workers to be “unconstitutional” and “in contempt of liberty and the Declaration of the Rights of Man.” Indeed, any associations that obstructed “the free exercise of industry and labor” were to be criminalized as “seditious assemblies.”⁶¹ Underwriting this law, which remained in effect until its repeal during the Third Republic, was the revolutionary ideology that disintegrating “the social” of the old regime was a prerequisite for founding a polity of free and equal citizens.

Amid these successive attacks on prerevolutionary corporate order, the social came to be seen as an anthropological given, established from time out of mind, but now under threat. That anthropological pretension to naming a timeless dimension of human sociality was ideological, for it naturalized an historically specific way of conceptualizing human interdependence. Thinking about pre-political association in terms of the social was a recent development and rooted in the conflicts between the old regime’s institutional patterns and new political reforms. This is important because

⁶⁰ Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, “What is the Third Estate?,” in *Political Writings*, 92-162, at 128.

⁶¹ The text of the law is reprinted in Stewart, *A Documentary Survey of the French Revolution*, 165-6; for a description of the law’s reception, see Sewell, *Work & Revolution in France*, 90-1.

it reminds us that “the political/social” is a distinction drawn from within Enlightenment and later revolutionary republican political thought. “The secular conceptions of the political and the social,” Dipesh Chakrabarty insists, is historically specific to modern European political thought and particular to “the idea of modernity” itself.⁶² Whereas many revolutionaries took the existence of *société* as a concrete given, and therefore believed they were “abstracting” from it to ground legal equality, in reality they were themselves instituting *société* as an independent existence by devising a set of rules and expectations for the process of political abstraction.⁶³ What made one’s trade, sex or religion “concrete” and social rather than “abstract” or political was the rise of an idiom of abstraction, itself historically specific, that reified nature as concrete and *société* as a repository of given moral relations. As Gary Wilder argues, that is why taking republicanism “one-sidedly as universalism” obscures republican citizenship’s contradictory “dual universal-particular character,” its structural need to depoliticize forms of interdependence as “concrete” or “social” to stabilize the contradictions of its political universalism.⁶⁴

As thinkers across the spectrum discovered “the social” as an object of theoretical concern, it came to define a pre-existing space where sociable humans (rather than abstract citizens) could be articulated into a non-political order. The concept implied that although free and equal citizens might constitute a polity, as

⁶² Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6, 15-16.

⁶³ David William Bates, *States of War: Enlightenment Origins of the Political* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Brian C. J. Singer, *Society, Theory and the French Revolution: Studies in the Revolutionary Imaginary* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986).

⁶⁴ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude & Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 16.

citizens they do not automatically constitute a society. As Montesquieu had taught, the latter requires concrete men and women, replete with their own customary means of affiliation and kinship, their own moral character shaped by the vicissitudes of geography, climate and history. Society was irreducible to the individuals who made it up because it pointed to this underlying layer of association, one which bound people together in common life not by prudential considerations or historical contingency but by the moral thickness of their social bond.⁶⁵

If the problem of social cohesion was emerging as an especially pressing problem in French thought, so, too, had the king presented a special type of solution to it, and for two reasons. Unlike the family or guild which presented an autonomous moral *corps* consisting in several persons, the king was a *corps* unto himself. And whereas the former mediated relations between the individual and the state, the *corps* of the latter *was* the state. (“L’État, c’est moi,” Louis XIV is to have famously proposed.) These attributes of royal embodiment partake in aspects of the well-known doctrine of “the king’s two bodies,” a key feature of royalism with origins in medieval jurisprudence and Christian thought (but with “a post-Christian appeal,” Walzer adds).⁶⁶ Better known in the context of English political thought and exemplified by the cry, “The King is Dead, Long Live the King!” the doctrine portrayed the king as in possession of two bodies, one eternal and another temporal. When this ideology held its greatest sway in France during the days of absolutism, the king was thought to

⁶⁵ Jean Terrier, *Visions of the Social: Society as a Political Project in France, 1750-1950* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

⁶⁶ Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, 22.

incarnate in his person the eternal *corpus mysticum* of the nation, the essence of the real nation and from which the dispersed temporal instances of the body politic acquired a higher unity. Thanks to it, the king held in his person a transcendental guarantee of national unity, and the mere fact of his embodiment answered the problem of social cohesion.

However, like corporatism generally, developments in French intellectual and political culture corroded this political theology by the time of the revolution. During Louis XVI's reign, new theories of representation and decades of Enlightenment criticism had hallowed out the ideology of the king's two bodies. The former was evident in what Paul Friedland has described as the shift from thinking about representation as making-present to representation as approximation or delegation in mid-eighteenth century France,⁶⁷ and it was exemplified in the displacement of the royal *corpus mysticum* by the *parlements* of France, then the Estates-General, and finally the National Assembly as the incarnation of the nation's body. Sieyès gave this transformation its canonical formulation in his pamphlet "What is the Third Estate?": "a nation is made *one* by virtue of a common system of law and a common representation."⁶⁸ The breakdown of the strict separation between the sacred and profane wasn't helped by the fact that Louis's kingship began under the sign of procreative embarrassment. Years of failed attempts at consummating his marriage with Marie Antoinette meant that, until the birth of their first daughter, popular

⁶⁷ Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 47-50; see also Keith Michael Baker, "Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France," *The Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 1 (2001): 32-53.

⁶⁸ Sieyès, "What is the Third Estate?" 99.

presses regularly caricatured Louis's paternal power, undermining the ideology of the royal body with public amusement at his impotence.⁶⁹

Yet despite royalist ideology's softening grip, most French subjects still described the king as the head of the body politic which otherwise consisted in the three estates. When the *cahiers de doléances* in the lead up to the Estates-General addressed Louis as the father of the French, it was both pious deference to *paterfamilias* and a reaffirmation of this vision of society wherein the father-king clinched together the "real" national body with its myriad temporal instances. Even after the revolution began, most subjects still held a deep seated belief that what formed a nation was the unity of its will, and that as a consequence, only the king could give to individuals the form of "the nation" by identifying the national will with his own. The king provided the transcendental organizing principle of society, a guarantee that society was not only real, but also more real and durable than the mortal individuals that made it up.⁷⁰ So long as his royal body remained intact, France was in possession of its unity even if it altered its social organization and institutions.

For that same reason, however, calling into question the royal body and its majesty described an unprecedented act of violence, for it was a direct attack on the idea of society itself. This explains why St Just and Robespierre returned, time and again, to the question of the moral basis of "society" during and after the trial of Louis XVI. In his 13 November 1792 speech, St Just attacked Mailhe's report for

⁶⁹ Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770-1800* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997; first published 1993).

⁷⁰ Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 227-51; Friedland, *Political Actors*, 31-2.

succumbing to an empty legalism: “The committee fell into forms without principles.”⁷¹ Robespierre echoed this exact point the next month: “We invoke forms because we lack principles.”⁷² By prioritizing procedural justice over concrete morality, St Just believed political leaders had forgotten that founding a republic entailed more than setting new standards of right. It also demanded “an example of virtue which would be a bond of public spirit and unity in the republic.”⁷³ That “bond of public spirit” consisted not only in a common share of justice, but a common sentiment of vengeance, a collective participation in moral righteousness that authorized extralegal revolutionary justice to supersede the ordinary justice of the law. Indeed, it was moral order itself. As St Just put it later in December, “What do you call a Revolution? The fall of a throne, a few blows levied at a few abuses?” Although his Gironde critics carried on as if the answer was yes, for St Just, the revolution posed the more demanding task of reconstructing *la morale*. “The moral order is like the physical,” he insisted, and so even if “abuses disappear for an instant, as the dew dries in the morning, and as it falls again with the night, so the abuses will reappear.”⁷⁴ Moral order is something that must be concretely institutionalized and sustained. To have a modern revolution, it is not enough to create news laws. The revolution would fail unless the king’s trial was interpreted in light of that fact. That was why Mailhe’s argument was so mistaken.

It is not sufficient to say that in the order of eternal justice, sovereignty is

⁷¹ St Just, Speech to the Convention, 13 November 1792, 121.

⁷² Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792, 133.

⁷³ St Just, Speech to the Convention, 13 November 1792, 122.

⁷⁴ St Just, Speech to the Convention, 27 December 1792, printed in Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution*, 166-77, at 176.

independent of the existing form of government and thence to infer that the king should be tried. [i.e. Mailhe's argument—KD]. Natural justice and the principle of sovereignty must be extended to the spirit in which the trial is conducted. We will have no Republic without these distinctions which permit all the parts of the social order their natural movement, just as nature creates life from a union of elements.⁷⁵

Again, Robespierre echoed this point. To reforge the republican social body, there would need to be active coordination between the principles of nature and those of society. And for that, existing constitutional law was inadequate. After all, having entered into war with the king, "It is too great a contradiction to suppose that the Constitution might preside over this new order of things. That would be to suppose that it could outlive itself. What laws replace it? those of nature, which is the basis of society."⁷⁶

Robespierre drove the point home in a speech given on 2 December, just days before Louis was set to appear at the bar of the Convention for the first time. Convention members had just listened to a report on a subsistence crisis in the Eure-et-Loir, where the people demanded fixed bread prices to respond to food shortages. In his response to the report, Robespierre took the opportunity to expound on "the social law" and its normative implications for the revolution. "What is the first object of society?" he asked. "It is to maintain the imprescriptible rights of man. What is the first of those rights? The right to life." If the primary purpose of society is to maintain life, then "the first social law is therefore the one that guarantees all members of society the means to live; all the others are subordinate to that one." From these agreed upon principles, however, Robespierre concluded that "it is not true that property can

⁷⁵ St Just, Speech to the Convention, 13 November 1792, 126.

⁷⁶ Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792, 133.

ever be in opposition to human subsistence.” Viewing property as an economic commodity, something expressing value unto itself, amounts to defining property as the “right to despoil and assassinate [man’s] fellows.” Moreover, if property is subordinated to life’s maintenance, then by analogy, it ought to circulate in the social body as if it were the blood in the human body that preserves our biological life.⁷⁷

Circulation is that which puts the essential foodstuff within reach of all men, and carries abundance and life into humble cottages. Does blood circulate when it is congested in the brain or in the chest? It circulates when it flows freely through the body; subsistence is the blood of the people, and its free circulation is no less necessary to the social body than that of the blood to the life of the human body.⁷⁸

Hoarders, monopolists, merchants who withhold goods from circulation are not only economically malfeasant, then, but murderers of the social body, “assassins of the people.”⁷⁹ Robespierre’s point was to use the notion of “circulation” to communicate a description of the social body as vitalized by the circulation of goods according to social and moral laws, not economic ones. Unlike Turgot and Condorcet, Robespierre and St Just’s vision of the revolutionary social body was not reducible to individual consent and aggregate utility. Rather, it called for the corporatism of the old regime to be displaced by a society modeled on the normative patterns of nature. “We will have no Republic,” the latter insisted, if the revolution did not also reconstitute society, if “the social order” was not returned its “natural movement,” just as nature produces life when it is left to its own devices.

These two objections to the Gironde interpretation of the trial—that it was an

⁷⁷ Maximilien Robespierre, “On Subsistence,” in Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*, 49-56, at 51-2.

⁷⁸ Robespierre, “On Subsistence,” 53.

⁷⁹ Robespierre, “On Subsistence,” 54.

act of war, not a judicial proceeding, and that it needed to produce not “a few blows levied at a few abuses” but “moral order”—amounted to a claim that if the revolution engaged Louis as a citizen rather than an enemy of mankind, there would only be a regime change rather than a revolution. “Citizens, did you want a revolution without a revolution?” Robespierre asked.⁸⁰ “If you declare the king a citizen” as the Gironde advocated, “he will slip from your grasp,” St Just warned.⁸¹ The “he” in question did not refer only to the person of the king, but also to his mystical body and the corporatist vision of society which that body clinched together. It was why Robespierre and St Just demanded Convention leaders to go beyond redefining the ground of public authority. Jacobins hoped to strike Louis in both his person and as a representation. And executing that representative body required the revolution to posit a robust principle of social cohesion in place of the old corporate order. Leaving the moral bases for that republican cohesion unspecified was simply not an option. Citizens born into an established liberal political culture today might endorse legalistic or prudential considerations as the basis for the polity’s unity. They might even accept a type of “constitutional patriotism.”⁸² But such an orientation was simply unrealistic in 1792. Republican democracy was taking root among a people whose sense of collective belonging had never been construed as essentially political, and it would have been—and was—ahistorical to insist that it suddenly be otherwise.

⁸⁰ Maximilien Robespierre, “Answer to Louvet’s Accusation” (5 November 1792), in Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*, 39-48, at 43.

⁸¹ St Just, Speech to the Convention, 13 November 1792, 125.

⁸² Jan-Werner Müller, *Constitutional Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007); Jürgen Habermas, “Constitutional Democracy: A Paradoxical Union of Contradictory Principles?” *Political Theory* 29, no. 6 (2001): 766-781; Craig Calhoun, “Imagining Solidarity: Cosmopolitanism, Constitutional Patriotism, and the Public Sphere,” in *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002): 147-71.

The Jacobins, supposedly ensnared in “abstract” reasoning, were the ones who most appreciated this fact. Condorcet and Sieyès, on the other hand, vastly underestimated the importance of “the social” for republican democracy. (When Turgot was dismissed for attacking the corporate structure of the social in his edicts, Condorcet was shocked, evidently not understanding why Turgot’s edicts might have been so unpopular.) If the revolution was to yield a new vision of peoplehood, it would also need to produce a new vision of society with which to supplant the royal *corpus mysticum*. That is why, according to the Jacobin argument, regicide must do more than cancel the past. It is incumbent on it to produce a new social body cohered by moral principles which are not yet widely accepted. Therein lies the central challenge posed by the trial for revolutionary democracy.

From Tyrannicide to Redemptive Violence

This interpretation of the trial’s challenge was itself revolutionary. It was therefore unclear how regicide was supposed to answer it. After all, earlier regicides did not believe they were forming new societies with their violence. As Camus has observed, “Kings were put to death long before January 21, 1793, and before the regicides of the nineteenth century.” But all of those earlier regicides “were interested in attacking the person, not the principle, of the king. They wanted another king and that was all. It never occurred to them that the throne could remain empty forever.”⁸³ As Robespierre himself reflected,

⁸³ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Vintage, 1956), 112.

If we had not had a greater task to fulfill, if all that was at issue here were the interests of a faction or a new aristocracy, we might have been able to believe...that the plan for the French Revolution was clearly written in the works of Tacitus and Machiavelli, and looked for the duties of people's representatives in the history of Augustus, Tiberius or Vespasian, or even that of some French legislators; for...all tyrants are alike.⁸⁴

There was, however, a “greater task” at hand on which the classical texts of political theory remained silent: democratic revolution. And Louis was not just a tyrant. Thanks to royalist ideology, he was also the transcendental guarantee of social cohesion. If the Jacobins believed that at stake was nothing less than killing kingship itself and founding a new society, then how was regicide supposed to fulfill this unprecedented historical task?

As the legal trial proceeded in spite of Jacobin protests, Robespierre and his allies reshaped the meaning of regicide by transposing it from classical republican theories of tyrannicide into newer Enlightenment discourses of nature. Specifically, they employed two concurrent lines of argument: they sacralized the violence of the people, and they naturalized their democratic agency.

Jacobins repeatedly described regicide in sacralized, expiatory, and redemptive terms. Regicide was not simply the removal of a king, but a “sacred cause” with a “sublime outcome.”⁸⁵ It was analogized to biblical moments of absolution like the great flood.⁸⁶ The blood shed by the revolution “is the expiation we offer the world,” the revolutionary “cause is holy,” and indeed in the case of regicide, “Honouring the

⁸⁴ Maximilien Robespierre, “On the Principles of Political Morality That Should Guide the National Convention in the Domestic Administration of the Republic” (5 February 1794), in Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*, 108-25, at 109.

⁸⁵ Robespierre, “Answer to Louvet’s Accusation,” 44.

⁸⁶ See, for example, the passages from Maximilien Robespierre, “Report on the Political Situation of the Republic” (17 November 1793) [date corrected from 18 November 1793 by author], in Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*, 80-90, at 88-9.

Divinity and punishing kings are the same thing.”⁸⁷ Spurning atheism as anti-republican, this language of redemptive violence affirmed the salvation of “the people” as “the holiest of all laws.”⁸⁸ Indeed, it is worth recalling that the Jacobins were among the most consistent enemies to the revolution’s de-Christianization efforts. Atheism was just as immoral as royalism. As Robespierre quipped, “The scapular-wearing fanatic and the fanatic preaching atheism have many similarities... sometimes red bonnets are closer to red high heels than one might think.”⁸⁹ Societies, even secular ones, needed their own sources of the sacred.

It is possible to interpret this redemptive rhetoric as a return to the past. After all, its Edenic sentimentality and its allusions to “golden age” myths resembled prerevolutionary understandings of moral order, even a reactionary “deification of violence,” as Ferenc Fehér has called it.⁹⁰ But in the context of 1792-3, such invocations of redemption and restoration actually functioned as claims to historical rupture. As Mona Ozouf and Lucien Jaume have shown, revolutionary discourses of regeneration functioned in Janus-faced ways. Calls to redeem the corrupt and fallen state of man functioned as much to encourage revolutionaries to leap into the future as to return to the past.⁹¹ In this sense, what the Jacobins sought to do was not unlike

⁸⁷ Robespierre, “Response of the National Convention to the Manifesto of the Kings” (5 December 1793) in Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*, 91-7, at 93, 95, 97.

⁸⁸ Maximilien Robespierre, “On the Principles of Revolutionary Government” (25 December 1793), in Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*, 98-107, at 100.

⁸⁹ Robespierre, “On the Principles of Revolutionary Government,” 100; see also McPhee, *Robespierre*, 174-5.

⁹⁰ For an analysis of the golden age myths in revolutionary republicanism, see Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right*; Ferenc Fehér, *The Frozen Revolution: An Essay on Jacobinism*.

⁹¹ Mona Ozouf, *L’homme régénéré: Essais sur la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); Lucien Jaume, *Le religieux et le politique dans la Révolution française: L’idée de régénération* (Paris: PUF, 2015).

what the Puritans did before them. For both, the pursuit of moral redemption incited revolutionary political action.⁹² Redemption served as a weapon to sever the present from the past.

It would also be a mistake to construe this sacralization of violence as a return to preceding cognates in prerevolutionary penal ideology. Since at least Michel Foucault's study of modern punishment, scholars have been familiar with the idea of capital punishment as a productive, restorative ritual of wounded sovereignty. "The public execution," Foucault argued, was "a ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereignty is reconstituted. It restores that sovereignty by manifesting it at its most spectacular."⁹³ But it is unlikely that revolutionaries had this image of violence in mind, because decades before 1789, spectacular capital punishment was publicly rejected as anachronistic by nearly all proponents of enlightened, reformed government—including the future leaders of the revolution. Especially after Cesare Beccaria published his 1764 *On Crimes and Punishment* and the Abbé Morellet translated it into French, the abolition of spectacular capital punishment was a *cause célèbre* of leaders from Thomas Jefferson and Catherine the Great to Marat, Brissot, Mably, and Robespierre. Reforming or abolishing capital punishment became a widely agreed upon tenet of pre-revolutionary political thought. That was why Robespierre entered the revolution as a proud advocate of capital punishment's abolition. It seems unlikely that the execution of the king was arranged and understood in terms of an

⁹² Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

⁹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995; first published 1975), 48.

ideology of violence that virtually all significant French political thinkers had repudiated for a generation.⁹⁴ Robespierre, for his part, never recanted his arguments for the death penalty's abolition. He insisted that its abolition was compatible with endorsing regicide, implying that the latter was an altogether different type of sacralized violence from the old regime's ceremonial, spectacular executions.

The Jacobin ambition to naturalize the agency responsible for regicide proved more challenging. It involved portraying the agent of regicide, "the people," as an extension of nature's agency rather than a lone assassin or a coup by a vanguard. We see this strategy at work in the images of natural catastrophe employed by Jacobins to communicate their interpretation of regicide. Those images connected regicide's violence to the widely esteemed discourses of nature's catastrophic agency and ecological self-regulation.

For sure, a belief in "the unifying significance of nature" was not limited to France. That belief was already at work in the American revolutionary "romance of nature" as well.⁹⁵ But in France, the Jacobins drew their cult of nature, not from Puritanism, but the latest scientific theories of nature as monist, dynamic, and self-correcting. These naturalizing metaphors helped coordinate "the people" with the newly discovered immanent moral authority of nature, thereby granting them nature's unity and agency beyond the law.⁹⁶ By linking popular agency to the moral authority

⁹⁴ Paul Friedland, *Seeing Justice Done: The Age of Spectacular Capital Punishment in France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 204-17.

⁹⁵ Michael Rogin, "Nature as Politics and Nature as Romance," *Political Theory* 5, no. 1 (1977): 5-30.

⁹⁶ Lorraine Daston, "The Morality of Natural Orders: The Power of Medea," and "II. Nature's Customs versus Nature's Laws," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. Grethe B. Peterson (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, vol. 24, 2004), 371-411.



[Fig 2: Engraved by Benjamin Duvisier. A medallion in memory of 10 August 1792 assault on the Tuileries and the fall of the monarchy.]

of nature, the violence of “the people” became more than a negative veto on the past. It was also an active agent of moral reconstitution consistent with new scientific theories of nature as generative and regenerative.

In particular, Jacobins and fellow revolutionaries modeled redemptive violence and popular agency after natural disasters. “The majestic movements of a great people, the sublime force of virtue” was, according to Robespierre, “like the eruptions of a volcano.”⁹⁷ Images of floods, earthquakes, and storms became pervasive metaphors of democratic agency. Especially common was the image of the people’s agency as lightning,⁹⁸ something we can observe in the medallion commemorating the August 10th uprising at the Tuileries [fig 2].

On the left is an image of Liberty crushing royalist symbols under her foot. In

⁹⁷ Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792, 132.

⁹⁸ For a history of sovereignty as lightning, see Mary Ashburn Miller, *A Natural History of the Revolution: Violence and Nature in the French Revolutionary Imagination, 1789-1794* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 72-103.

her raised hand is a dagger spewing lightning bolts. This depiction of Liberty striking down royalism with lightning neatly visualizes Robespierre's most important speech during the king's trial. On 3 December 1792, Robespierre described the redemptive violence of the people as the antithesis of the law by arguing, "A people does not judge as does a court of law. It does not hand down sentences, it hurls down thunderbolts; it does not condemn kings, it plunges them into the abyss."⁹⁹ It was a point he reiterated in his famous speech on political morality on 5 February 1794: "The revolution's government is the despotism of liberty over tyranny... And are not thunderbolts meant to strike vainglorious heads?"¹⁰⁰ And again, he invoked lightning in his famous speech on the pedagogical purpose of republican festivals.

The world has changed, it should change again... Man has conquered lightning and diverted lightning from heaven... Everything has changed in the physical order; everything should change in the moral and political order. Half the world's revolution is already complete; the other half should be accomplished.¹⁰¹

To appreciate the meaning of Robespierre's claim, we have to read it in connection to the special significance lightning acquired in late eighteenth century French scientific culture: it made manifest nature's capacity to destroy and purify simultaneously. This was the position that emerged, for example, among revolutionary scientists like Jean-Paul Marat. Marat was a journalist and one of the legendary leaders of the revolution. Although he is primarily known for his bloodthirsty endorsement of discretionary popular violence, before the revolution, he studied lightning in a 1782 study entitled *Recherches physiques sur l'électricité*. In that text,

⁹⁹ Robespierre, Speech to the Convention, 3 December 1792," 133.

¹⁰⁰ Robespierre, "On the Principles of Morality," 115.

¹⁰¹ Miller, *A Natural History*, 73.

Marat outlined the regenerative, purifying effects of lightning for the atmosphere. He built his analysis upon the work of popular naturalists like the Comte de Buffon, who portrayed lightning in the *Histoire naturelle* as a spontaneous manifestation of the earth's universal heat and energy.¹⁰²

Marat's scientific studies aimed to intervene in a fad sweeping Paris in the 1780s: Mesmerism. Franz Mesmer, a wildly popular pseudo-scientist and spiritualist, had opened up clinics which were controversial for their healing practices. Besides hypnotism, he was especially known for his claims about the "refreshing" and purifying power of electricity. According to Mesmer, lightning struck whenever the composition of the atmosphere was out of balance. The heat from the lightning would spontaneously restore atmospheric equilibrium. Lightning was, in other words, part of nature's self-regulation, its capacity for self-correction. Mesmer tried to draw from his studies on lightning an account of social harmony. Just as lightning manifested a spontaneous reaction in a chaotic atmosphere to restore equilibrium, social upheavals occurred spontaneously to restore social harmony.

This connection between lightning's "refreshing" power and social regeneration was shared many Jacobin deputies. It was immortalized by one of their most infamous deputies, the Marquis de Sade. In the conclusion of his 1791 libertine novel, *Justine*, lightning figures as a *deus ex machina* that strikes down the novel's protagonist as an ironic act of Providential moral rectification.¹⁰³ The mayor of Paris,

¹⁰² Miller, *A Natural History*; Susan Dunn, *Sister Revolutions: French Lightning, American Light* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1999).

¹⁰³ Madame de Lonsange cries after Justine has been struck down by a "flash of lightning" whose "thunderbolt has entered her right breast," "Oh, my friend! The prosperity of crime is but a trial that Providence wishes virtue to undergo. It is like a thunderbolt whose deceptive fires embellish the skies



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

[fig 3: Allégorie sur la journée du 10 août 1792, unknown provenance. Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie.]

too, ascribed to lightning the power of atmospheric regeneration. In March 1792, a few months before the trial began, Jérôme Pétion observed that,

There exists in the social order, as in the political order, laws whose imposing effect is felt only in memorable times. When the atmosphere that surrounds us is charged with wicked vapors, nature can only break free with a lightning bolt; in the same way, society can only purge itself from the excesses that trouble it with an impressive explosion; and after these great blows are struck, everything is reborn in hope and happiness.¹⁰⁴

The trope of the people as a natural disaster was explicitly connected to violence's sacralization in an allegorical painting from 1792 [fig 3]. In its tableau, a thunderbolt dissipates the obfuscating clouds from the interior of "the Mountain." A mechanical structure conducts the lightning downward while also drawing it towards frogs and

for an instant, merely to plunge the wretch they have dazzled into the chasms of death," in Marquis de Sade, *Justine: or the Misfortunes of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; first published 1791), 263.

¹⁰⁴ Miller, *A Natural History*, 41.

snakes, who represent “the Swamp”—that is, Girondin moderates. Atop the mountain stands Zeus, who it turns out is a Jacobin. He clutches in his hand a pike adorned with a Phrygian cap.

The scientific pretensions of this image of democratic violence suggest that it would be a mistake to interpret the idea of “the people” as a natural disaster as merely figurative. Revolutionary leaders were searching for a new vocabulary of collective, democratic agency, and they found it in the esteemed discourses of nature which saturated French scientific culture. These depictions of nature’s catastrophic agency appeared to capture the felt experience of popular sovereignty. From the storming of the Bastille, to the women’s March on Versailles, to the attack on the Tuileries, popular agency truly did appear like lightning: a spontaneous flash of popular power that reasserted morality against social disequilibrium.

It is worth lingering on the visual emphasis on lightning’s *conduction*. Below is a 1793 illustration of a Jacobin conducting lightning from the sky to strike frogs and snakes [fig 4]. On the right is Benjamin Franklin [fig 5]. Every revolutionary knew Franklin had taught men how to conduct lightning, including Robespierre: before the revolution, Robespierre made his name in the legal profession in a case involving a lightning conductor. As a young lawyer in Arras, Robespierre took on a widely watched legal case defending Charles Dominique de Vissery de Bois-Valé. Dominique had affixed a lightning rod to his home. Fellow townsmen believed the rod summoned lightning into the village rather than directing it safely to the ground, and they asked that it be removed. Robespierre defended Dominique with arguments for the progress



[fig 4: “Sans Union Point de Force” (1793).]¹⁰⁵

[fig 5: Benjamin West, “Benjamin Franklin Drawing Lightning from the Sky,” (c. 1816)]

of enlightenment, the eradication of superstition, and the cause of science. Most importantly, he viewed the lightning rod as a triumph for mankind because, with the lightning rod, man had learned to channel nature’s agency towards his own ends. What formerly struck arbitrarily could now serve human needs and ends. Upon winning the case, Robespierre wrote to Franklin on 1 October 1783, describing to him how the case “presented to me the occasion to plead...the cause of a sublime discovery, to which mankind is beholden to you.” Defending the lightning rod provided an opportunity for “the uprooting of prejudice” and promoting human progress.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Illustration from Miller, *A Natural History*, 89.

¹⁰⁶ Maximilien Robespierre, Letter to Benjamin Franklin, 1 October 1783. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Yale University; see also Jessica Riskin, “The Lawyer and the Lightning Rod,” *Science in Context* 12, no. 1 (1999): 61-99.



[fig 6: Gardens of Versailles, author's photo.]

Lingering on the Jacobin fascination with lightning conduction draws the contrast to absolutism's approach to nature in the eighteenth century. The latter is famously visualized at Versailles's outdoor gardens [fig 6]. Its horticultural style beautifully illustrates absolutism's approach to nature in the eighteenth century. Absolutism viewed nature as raw material to be molded in conformity with rational patterns, like geometry. If nature needed to be clipped, trimmed, and shoved into geometric shapes to prove it, then so be it. But this was a far cry from the Jacobin approach, which was less inclined to dominate nature through abstractions. Instead, Jacobins hoped democratic agency would become a *conductor* for nature's agency.

We should understand Jacobin attempts to ground social cohesion in a cult of

nature as part of their attack on absolutism. If absolutism approached nature as material to be molded into baroque, geometric shapes, the revolution would be more scientific. Instead of waging war *on* nature, it would wage war *with* nature's agency. It would found a republic that drew its cohesion from nature's moral unity and redemptive agency. Their sustained involvement with eighteenth century scientific culture helps explain why Jacobins—many of whom were scientists themselves—refused to accept regicide as the outcome of a legal trial. Because the people's agency extended that of nature's, their agency naturally took the form of extrajudicial, spontaneous violence. Their will manifested, not through the law, but as a regenerative natural disaster—a flood, volcanic eruption, or lightning strike. Hence, if the king were to die under the sign of the law, it would be evidence that he was killed by something other than the true people

The drama of the trial of Louis XVI was therefore also a drama about the nature of democratic agency. What does action by “the people” actually look like? What is its proper form of expression? Jacobins answered that the people's agency manifested as an instance of nature's agency. That belief shaped their answer to the philosophical dilemmas raised in the trial. It led them to approach regicide through the sciences of nature rather than the procedures of the law. “Everything has changed in the physical order,” Robespierre had explained, and “everything should change in the moral and political order.” If Jacobins subsequently crafted an elaborate choreography of republican political culture (festivals, dress, oaths) to achieve the task of aligning nature and society, in the trial of Louis XVI, the solution was discovered in the

lightning strike of regicide. Regicide as redemptive violence suggested a philosophical solution to the death of the royal *corpus mysticum* and the need to reassert a republican alternative. “We want,” Robespierre admitted, “to fulfill nature’s wishes.” Fulfilling nature’s wishes meant transforming France into “the model for all nations, the terror of oppressors.” And “In sealing our work with our blood,” Robespierre reverently claimed, “we may at least glimpse the dawn of universal felicity.”¹⁰⁷ This ideological constellation describes what I am calling the Jacobin language of redemptive violence.

Conclusion

On 11 December, Louis finally appeared before his prosecutors at the bar of the Convention. In preparation, the Commune was declared permanently in session. All of the popular sections took up arms. To communicate the world-historical significance of the day’s proceedings, Barère addressed the audience as the session president: “Representatives, you are going to exercise the right of national justice... Europe observes you. History records your thoughts, your actions. Incorruptible posterity judges you with an inflexible severity... The dignity of your session must answer to the majesty of the French people. Through your body, it will give a great lesson to kings and a useful example to the liberation of nations.”¹⁰⁸ Upon Louis’s seating, Jean-Baptiste Robert Lindet read to him the *acte énonciatif*, or prosecutorial statement. Lindet’s statement, compiled with a committee of twenty-one, described the king’s various crimes committed at each of the revolution’s stages. It was damning.

¹⁰⁷ Robespierre, “On the Principles of Morality,” 110.

¹⁰⁸ Soboul, *Le Procès*, 113.

Rhetorically, Lindet chose to present the *acte énonciatif* in the form of a history of the revolution with “the people,” and not the Assembly or the Convention, as its protagonist. Louis was asked to comment on each charge. He denied each one. After the frustrating appearance, the Convention gave Louis and his lawyers—Lamoignon de Malesherbes (great-grandfather to Alexis de Tocqueville) and François Denis Tronchet, as well as the young Raymond de Sèze—two weeks to prepare his legal defense.

When the roll call vote finally occurred on 15 January 1793, convention members were presented with three questions. The first question concerned Louis’s culpability. It asked, “Louis Capet, former king of the French, is he guilty of conspiring against liberty and attacking the safety of the state? Yes or No.” Of 749 convention members present, 691 voted yes. Another 27 made various speeches which were tallied as abstentions. In the end, there was never any question as to Louis’s guilt and the sovereignty of “the nation.” The center of the trial’s gravity lay elsewhere.

The second question concerned the appeal to the people. It asked the following: “The judgment which will be rendered to Louis, will it undergo a ratification by the people united in their primary assemblies? Yes or No.” Whereas many convention members offered long qualifications or accounts of why they voted one way or another, St Just, in his famously crisp, direct style, simply said, “If I did not retain from the people the right to judge the tyrant, I would hold it from nature. *No.*”¹⁰⁹ Of the 749 convention members present, 287 voted in favor of the appeal to

¹⁰⁹ Archives parlementaires 57:90.

the people, 424 against, with 12 abstentions. It was a major victory for the Jacobins and marked their triumphant ascendance in the Convention over the Girondins.

The final question on the agenda had to be asked the next day, and it took so long that the roll call voting lasted until the morning of 17 January. The question asked, “What punishment will Louis, the former king of the French, receive?” Here, answers did not always observe party lines or ideological expectations. Marat answered “Death in 24 hours.” Robespierre and Danton simply said “Death.” But so did Gironde leaders like Vergniaud. On the other hand, radical republicans like Thomas Paine voted against death, though with qualifications. The exact vote tally here has been a matter of dispute among historians because of the challenges with interpreting certain votes. But there was a straightforward majority plus one who voted death with no qualifications or amendments. Vergniaud announced the results: “I declare, in the name of the national Convention... that the punishment that is pronounced against Louis Capet is that of death.”¹¹⁰ Except for his two appearances before the Convention’s bar—to hear the *acte énonciatif* and to watch De Sèze read his legal defense—Louis had spent the entirety of the trial’s duration imprisoned in the Temple with his family. There, he had given his son daily geography lessons while reading a copy of *The Imitation of Christ* at his bedside. But on 21 January 1793, he was marched to the scaffold where Sanson, the executioner of Paris, guillotined him. At the fall of the blade, the crowd shouted *vive la nation* and *vive la république* while a few cut their own throats. Depending on the account, the crowd either cheered or

¹¹⁰ Soboul, *Le Procès*, 216.

groaned as Louis the Last's head plopped into the basket. Onlookers snatched up scraps of the king's bloodied shroud, souvenirs of monarchy's end.

It is not possible to conclude what conception of peoplehood actually triumphed. Although a trial was held, a loss for the Jacobins, they were nevertheless victorious in defeating the appeal to the people. Moreover, the practical result—Louis's death—was compatible with several lines of reasoning offered during the trial, and the votes reflected that fact. His death presented the convergent outcome of several democratic theories that otherwise conflicted. It happened to be the case that they intersected at the point of Louis's death. The fact that regicide was consistent with several normative conceptions of peoplehood meant that Louis's execution was unable to adjudicate between them. The Jacobins, on this score, again failed in their avowed task. Louis died, but without leaving in his wake a clear vision of republican peoplehood with which to replace royalist ideology. As a result, much of postrevolutionary French thought through the nineteenth century would be saddled with the same sets of issues, questions, and problems that were opened up in the trial and which regicide failed to close.

Chapter II

From Glory to Terror in Algeria

A diplomatic kerfuffle provided the French a pretext for invading Algiers in 1830: a couple years earlier, the dey of Algiers had swiped the French ambassador with a flywhisk. Behind this flimsy excuse lay the fact that a powerful liberal opposition threatened the Restoration government. Legitimists hoped the conquest of Algiers would repair the monarchy's reputation in time for national elections. Their gambit failed. Within months, a revolution replaced the Restoration government with "Citizen-King" Louis-Philippe's July Monarchy, a liberal regime which promised to synthesize popular sovereignty with royal rule.

Despite its liberal credentials, the July Monarchy did not return Algiers. On the contrary, it claimed ownership over the Bourbon conquest, appropriating it as a monumental achievement for the French nation instead.¹ In 1840, the regime embarked on its twin quests of total domination and settler colonization in earnest. Political leaders appointed a new Governor-General to Algiers, Thomas Robert Bugeaud. They also reorganized the army around light mobile columns, the better to terrorize the local population. French soldiers razed, pillaged, massacred, and raped the tribal communities. Thanks to General Bugeaud's new and controversial style of "total war," the local population dwindled. During the next decade and a half, France's celebrated *Armée d'Afrique* exterminated almost half of the local population. Their numbers fell from 4 million to 2.3 million. It would take a half century for the

¹ Jennifer E. Sessions, *By Sword and Plow: France and the Conquest of Algeria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 47-65.

Algerian population to return to pre-1830 levels.²

Alexis de Tocqueville met with Bugeaud and his staff during his first visit to Algeria in the summer of 1841. During a lunch in Philippeville, Colonel Jean Baptiste Simon Arsène d'Alphonse explained to the French *rapporteur* that

Nothing but force and terror, Gentlemen, succeeds with these people. The other day, I carried out a *razzia*. I'm sorry you weren't there... Nothing but force and terror, Gentlemen, succeeds with these people. The other day a murder was committed on the road. An Arab who was suspected of it was brought to me. I interrogated him and then I had his head cut off. You can see his head on the Constantine gates.³

Tocqueville was probably alert to the irony of a French officer mimicking the “barbaric” practice of mounting decapitated enemy heads for display. The guillotine notwithstanding, mounted heads served as a common representational convention for Arab barbarism under the July Monarchy [fig 7]. Tocqueville expressed dismay with the Colonel’s candor towards terror, but even so, he was keen to excuse it. Upon returning to France, Tocqueville would write, “I have often heard men in France whom I respect, but with whom I do not agree, find it wrong that we burn harvests, that we empty silos, and finally that we seize unarmed men, women, and children.” Although he found such actions regrettable, Tocqueville nevertheless insisted that, “For myself, I think that all means of desolating these tribes must be employed.”⁴

² Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, “Guerre coloniale: guerre totale? Brèves remarques sur la conquête de l’Algérie,” *Drôle d’Epoque* 12 (2003): 59-73; Mahfoud Bennoune, *The Making of Contemporary Algeria, 1830-1987: Colonial Upheavals and Post-independence Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 41-2.

³ Alexis de Tocqueville, “Notes on the Voyage to Algeria in 1841,” in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, ed. and trans. Jennifer Pitts (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 56.

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria” (October 1841), in Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 59-116, 71.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

[Fig 7: “Expédition de Constantine,” Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie]

On occasion, Tocqueville’s excuses for Bugeaud’s terror extended beyond reluctant apologies to silent, tacit approval. In June 1845, the Armée d’Afrique chased a tribe of over 650 into the caves of Dahra.⁵ The fleeing families believed the caves provided sanctuary and divine protection. Pressed for time, Colonel Aimable Péliissier commanded his soldiers to block the cave entrance with pyres, asphyxiating and melting the families inside with their livestock. Fellow officers like Colonel Saint Arnaud mimicked the tactic in the following months “on grounds that salutary terror would hasten the pacification” of locals.⁶ When the violence at Dahra publicly broke

⁵ William Gallois, “Dahra and the History of Violence in Early Colonial Algeria,” in *The French Colonial Mind, Volume 2: Violence, Military Encounters, and Colonialism*, ed. Martin Thomas (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2012), 3-25.

⁶ Cheryl B. Welch, “Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Evasion: Tocqueville on Algeria,” *Political*

in France, it provoked widespread criticism of Bugeaud's tactics within the Chamber of Deputies and across Europe. No doubt aware of the outcry, Tocqueville—France's foremost expert on the Algerian question—nevertheless chose to remain silent in the Chamber and in his private letters.⁷

It is now commonplace to acknowledge Tocqueville's support for the domination and colonization of Algeria. Political theorists foreground his colonial writings as part of their wider appreciation of liberalism's constitutive entanglements with global imperialism.⁸ Isaiah Berlin's proud claim that the paradigmatic French liberal "opposed paternalism and colonialism...no matter how benevolent" has yielded to a new consensus that, in Jennifer Pitts's words, Tocqueville "embrace[d] imperialism as a kind of national salvation" because it provided a source of greatness, and for Tocqueville, "Greatness and liberty were mutually necessary."⁹ If Tocqueville's "susceptibility to the notion of national glory as a substitute for political virtue" contradicted other cardinal values he held, it was nevertheless consistent with the overriding importance he placed on politics.¹⁰ His belief that "European nations could escape from the selfishness of individualism only by undertaking great tasks," Melvin Richter argues, meant that "his argument for colonialism was essentially

Theory 31, no. 2 (2003): 235-64, at 237.

⁷ Welch, "Colonial Violence," 253-4; Melvin Richter, "Tocqueville on Algeria," *The Review of Politics* 25, no. 3 (1963): 362-98, at 390.

⁸ For a review of the recent turn in political theory towards imperial studies, see Jennifer Pitts, "Political Theory of Empire and Imperialism," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010), 211-35.

⁹ Isaiah Berlin, "The Thought of de Tocqueville," *History* 50 (1965), 199-206, at 204; Jennifer Pitts, "Empire and Democracy: Tocqueville and the Algeria Question," *Journal of Political Philosophy* 8, no. 3 (2000): 295-318, at 297, 311.

¹⁰ Pitts, "Empire and Democracy," 298; Cheryl B. Welch, "Tocqueville's Resistance to the Social," *History of European Ideas* 30, no. 1 (2004): 83-107.

political, rather than economic.”¹¹ It was in the name of political liberty at home that Tocqueville solicited a “higher politics of patriotic grandeur” abroad.¹² Imperial politics offered an antidote to bourgeois society’s pettiness and mediocrity by vivifying public interests and consolidating a democratic political culture. During the 1840s, Tocqueville would insist on this claim like a catechism.

Given how frequently scholars have observed Tocqueville’s attachments to glory, it is surprising that they have yet to connect that attachment to the form violence took in Algeria: total war. To be sure, scholars have acknowledged that Tocqueville’s surprising assent to colonial violence is rooted in his obsession with glory. But rather than explaining how that obsession shaped the form that violence took in the colonies, they have instead puzzled over whether Tocqueville’s liberalism is compatible with his nationalism. Textual justifications for violence are marshaled as evidence that, when forced to choose between the two, Tocqueville “placed nationalism above liberalism; the interests of ‘progressive’ Christian countries above the rights of those that were not.”¹³ As a consequence, Tocqueville’s justifications of violence are described as motivated by contextual factors, more “apologetics” than “objective argument,” and a regrettable means to the higher ends of national interest.¹⁴

However, what is so striking about Tocqueville’s colonial writings is not that he justified violence. A wide range of strategic justifications were readily available for

¹¹ Richter, “Tocqueville on Algeria,” 381, 385.

¹² Welch, “Colonial Violence,” 247.

¹³ Richter, “Tocqueville on Algeria,” 364.

¹⁴ Welch, “Colonial Violence,” 240; Margaret Kohn, “Empire’s Law: Alexis de Tocqueville on Colonialism and the State of Exception,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 2 (2008): 255-78.

that. What calls for explanation is instead a more specific and troubling problem: how could the demands of glory justify total war and exterminationist violence? How could the realities of Bugeaud's terror be praised by Tocqueville as "a war conducted ably and gloriously"?¹⁵ After all, the path connecting a normative justification of colonialism to total war was anything but self-evident during the 1840s. The agrarian, property-based settlerism preferred by the French was designed as an "enlightened" alternative to colonialism based on chattel slavery. Settlerism proposed to break the necessary link between colonialism and institutionalized violence as was practiced in, say, the French Caribbean. That was why liberals like Tocqueville saw no inconsistency in advocating for slavery's abolition while defending colonization in North Africa. Even more, when settlerism turned out to demand its own patterns of violence, it did not involve the traditional conflicts that generated glory, namely, two armies fighting on behalf of sovereign nations equipped with equivalent claims to right. That classical image of warfare bound martial glory to "humanizing combat as much as possible, minimizing its destructive force, and treating the defenseless—women, children, and disarmed enemy combatants—generously."¹⁶ But as Tocqueville was well aware, French military leaders discarded these familiar conventions in the African war theater. From the outset of France's pursuit of total domination in 1841, Bugeaud implemented "a new theory of war."¹⁷ This new framework called for attacks

¹⁵ Tocqueville, "First Report on Algeria" (1847), in Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 129-173, at 129.

¹⁶ Jennifer Sessions, "'Unfortunate Necessities': Violence and Civilization in the Conquest of Algeria," in *France and Its Spaces of War: Experience, Memory, Image*, eds. Patricia M. E. Lorcin and Daniel Brewer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 29-44, at 39.

¹⁷ Thomas Rid, "Razzia: A Turning Point in Modern Strategy," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 21, no. 4 (2009): 617-35; see also William Gallois, *A History of Violence in the Early Algerian Colony*

against enemy combatants as well as civilians and the environment which sustained them. There was nothing self-evidently glorious about such violence. The fact is that in the early years of Algerian colonization, there was no obvious path connecting the pursuit of redemptive glory to total war. That path had to be paved by new theoretical arguments. This chapter aims to unearth Tocqueville's contributions to those arguments by bringing his justifications of colonial violence to the fore. It seeks to understand how his liberal defense of democratic liberty could be linked to the specific shape violence took in French Algeria—environmental, terroristic, exterminationist and pitiless.¹⁸

By revisiting Tocqueville's Algerian writings, I argue that the link connecting Tocqueville's glory to Bugeaud's terror was rooted in the specific ways he and other French intellectuals conceived popular glory in postrevolutionary France. For the generation that came of age during and after Napoleon—“the savior of the Revolution”—glory was best exemplified in defensive public action. After all, national memory had immortalized the revolutionary wars of liberty (1792-1802) as defensive struggles on behalf of the *peuple* and the *patrie*. Even if that conceit was a transparent alibi for expansionary ambitions, the commemorative odes to collective glory they inspired were sincere. Revolutionary glory lived off of a national fantasy of persecuted republican universalism, under siege by a tyrannical world. In that fantasy, terror was always justified through a defensive framing of popular agency. As

(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁸ The description of colonial terror as exterminationist has been argued by Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison, *Coloniser, Exterminer: Sur la guerre et l'État colonial* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

Robespierre had argued, “We should strike terror not into the hearts of patriots or unfortunates, but into the dens of foreign brigands where the spoils are shared and the blood of the French people is drunk.”¹⁹ The salutary effects of the Terror and the wars of liberty were therefore linked to the belief that “the people” could only find salvation if they concentrated their agency in a mighty act of defense on behalf of family, nation, and universal liberty. There was no greater glory—indeed, no greater claim to sovereignty—than that.

For imperial aggression to appear glorious within the terms of this revolutionary legacy, colonialism in Africa would somehow need to be construed as an example of republican defense. It would need to be considered as much a protective maneuver for France as a cruel exercise of its state prerogative. Tocqueville’s writings on Algeria sought to offer just such a description. In his essays and policy memoranda on colonization, Tocqueville blurred the line between a war of imperial aggression and a patriotic defensive war by portraying the entire Arab people, including their environment and their mores, as culpable for the war’s initiative. What the French confronted in the Regency of Algiers, Tocqueville suggested, was not a foreign army, but an enemy population. In so claiming, Tocqueville encouraged readers to focus on war’s inevitability and heroic agency of the professional soldiers who endured it. These rhetorical strategies helped reimagine colonial aggression as republican self-defense. They implied that by simply being in Africa, the Armée d’Afrique was “vulnerable” to barbaric Arabs roaming the desert, decapitating virtuous French

¹⁹ Maximilien Robespierre, “On the Principles of Revolutionary Government” (1793), in Maximilien Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror*, trans. John Howe (New York: Verso, 2007), 98-107, at 105.

citizen-soldiers willy-nilly. Just as Jacobins imagined the first Republic's territorial expansion in continental Europe as a defensive battle against the tyrannical world, Algiers could be imagined as an oasis of civilized liberty caught in a defensive battle amid a desert of barbarism. For all of its shortcomings—and Tocqueville believed there were many—the colony's mere existence expressed a struggle to protect the French nation against obsolescence and oblivion.

Yet once the pursuit of national glory invited Tocqueville to imagine the Algerians and their environment as an omnipresent enemy combatant, French exterminationist violence found a convenient justification. Bugeaud could defend his terrifying “seas of fire” in realist terms, as pragmatic and strategically compulsory: “Gentlemen, you don't make war with philanthropic sentiments. If you want the end, you have to want the means.”²⁰ In this way, the qualities that made glory a source of public liberty in Tocqueville's eyes also helped justify terror in Algeria. The paragon of French liberalism was driven to excuse colonial violence, not only by contextual pressures, but also by the demands of glory. It was a view of glory, Tocqueville argued, without which democratic atomization in France could not be checked.

The chapter begins by explaining why glory appealed to Tocqueville. Against prevailing interpretations, it argues that Tocqueville's passion for glory should be seen, not as an aristocratic anachronism, but as a product of postrevolutionary scientific debates over voluntarism. In these debates, the passion for glory, grandeur, and greatness pointed to the human capacity to transcend utilitarian reasoning for the

²⁰ Rid, “Razzia,” 621.

public interest. For that reason, Tocqueville appealed to glory as a psychological antidote to the July Monarchy's decadent social state and democracy's atomizing effects on the French social body. After describing how Tocqueville turned to national glory to provide a vector for modern social cohesion, the chapter turns to his colonial writings to analyze how he believed "we shall be able to raise a great monument to our country's glory on the African coast."²¹ By describing what I gloss as "the demands of glory," I describe how Tocqueville worked to blur the lines between a lopsided, terroristic war in Algeria and a defensive war on behalf of liberty, property, and civilization. I focus in particular on the way his call for an African monument to national glory enjoyed the corroboration of key historical allusions to classical antiquity and the Napoleonic wars of liberty. I conclude by drawing out the implications of Tocqueville's rhetorical strategies for the form violence took in the Maghreb, especially the infamous *razzia*.

It can be easy to assume that the appeal to a language of redemptive, regenerative violence was the provenance of the French left. Millenarian revolutionary violence is often seen as the exclusive possession of Jacobinism and its sequels in 1830, 1848 and 1871. However, by attending to the surprising ways that a French liberal like Tocqueville, too, appealed to such violence, we can begin to understand the extensive appeal such violence held across ideological divides. How can "the people" be constituted with a social cohesion that transcended the mere aggregate of individuals, the prerequisite for society to rule itself? Tocqueville obsessed over this

²¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, "Second Letter on Algeria" (1837), in Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 14-26, at 24.

question and appealed to violence as means of social reconstitution, underscoring how fundamental this problem was in postrevolutionary France. Republicans of all stripes—whether Jacobin, socialist, or liberal—would turn to terror to refound society in the age of democracy.

The Psychology of Social Disintegration: Tocqueville's Diagnosis in Context

Tocqueville's diagnosis of his democratic age grew out of a liberal republican tradition forged in post-Terror France. From Benjamin Constant to the Doctrinaires, that tradition found itself responding to society's dissolution in the age of democratic revolutions. Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, a leading Doctrinaire and mentor to Tocqueville, would popularize this diagnosis as the "atomization" of society in a speech to the Chamber of Deputies in 1822.²² In many ways, liberals in France confronted the same problem encountered by Jacobins in 1792. As I argued in chapter one, the French revolution had abolished "the social" because eighteenth century intellectuals had identified its corporatist form as an obstacle to individual liberty. Social obligations imposed by family, church, and guild conflicted with the rights of man and his capacities for improvement. For the Jacobins, this revolutionary attack on the social spurred them to refound the social bond on new, modern grounds (nature) and to design a language of popular agency appropriate to those grounds.

To be sure, liberal republicans had no taste for the Jacobin answer to atomization. Yet they did not draw from the Terror the conclusion that a robust

²² Aurelian Craiutu, "Rethinking Political Power: The Case of the French Doctrinaires," *European Journal of Political Theory* 2, no. 2 (2003): 125-55, at 135.

conception of “the social” was incompatible with modern liberty, as their physiocratic predecessors had once claimed. Instead, they distinguished between ancient and modern liberty to remap the relationship between politics and society. Their efforts drew on contemporary developments in French scientific thinking: the rise of sociological and anthropological theories of kinship; the ascendance of the comparative historical method; new organic conceptions of society which displaced the probabilistic conceptions of the eighteenth century; and the displacement of natural law theory by psychology and political economy as the premier sciences of society. In other words, the postrevolutionary origins of French liberalism intersected with the invention of modern social theory, and that fact stamped the former with an abiding scientific interest in society’s holism and its mechanisms of self-reproduction like kinship, education, habits, and moral regulation.²³

As *liberal* republicans, thinkers like Sieyès, Germaine de Staël, and Benjamin Constant prioritized modern liberty. Andrew Jainchill explains that such a commitment entailed “the conviction that ‘the social’ took precedence over ‘the political.’ ‘Society,’ ‘commerce,’ ‘public opinion,’ or some other such figuration of the social would come first, and thus politics would reflect, rather than shape, a prior social reality.” Yet as liberal *republicans*, they believed that modern social cohesion

²³ Karuna Mantena, “Social Theory in the Age of Empire,” in *Empire and Modern Political Thought*, ed. Sankar Muthu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 324-50; Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 56-61; Robert A. Nisbet, “The French Revolution and the Rise of Sociology in France,” *American Journal of Sociology* 49, no. 2 (1943): 156-64; Lorraine J. Daston, “Rational Individuals versus Laws of Society: From Probability to Statistics,” in *The Probabilistic Revolution, Vol. 1: Ideas in History*, eds. Lorenz Krüger, Lorraine J. Daston, and Michael Heidelberg (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987), 295-304; Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

nevertheless depended on “an active commitment to politics itself, or ‘the political.’”²⁴

Unlike Anglo-American liberalism which exchanged social cohesion for the equilibrium of conflicting private interests, liberals in France maintained that there could be no “people” without a common interest to unite them. It was why the liberal paper *Le National* could complain that “Deprived of all moral unity, profoundly indifferent to the general interest, broken up and reduced to powder like the sand of the seas by the most narrow egoism, the French people is a people in name only.”²⁵ In the French political tradition, peoplehood depended on individuals identifying with the general interest. At times, that belief would lead liberals to endorse nationalism. Constant would in fact become an early supporter of Napoleon Bonaparte; Sieyès would help engineer the latter’s coup d’état. If Bonapartism’s reality soured their attitudes to the First Empire, liberals in France nevertheless believed that they, too, needed to produce an account of social cohesion appropriate to modern democratic France. French liberalism therefore has to be seen as a tradition responding to the democratization of the social.²⁶

²⁴ Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics After the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 12.

²⁵ Roger Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 46.

²⁶ Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics After the Terror*, 108-40; accounts of “the social” in nineteenth century French liberalism abound. See Pierre Rosanvallon, “Political Rationalism and Democracy in France,” in *Democracy Past and Future*, ed. Sam Moyn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 127-43; Aurelian Craiutu, *Liberalism Under Siege: The Political Thought of the French Doctrinaires* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books, 2003); Cheryl Welch, *Liberty and Utility: The French Idéologues and the Transformation of Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Welch, “Tocqueville’s Resistance to the Social”; Stephen Holmes, *Benjamin Constant and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); both Rosanvallon and Jacques Donzelot distinguish the French liberal program by its commitment to “produce the social,” in Pierre Rosanvallon, *L’État en France de 1789 à nos jours* (Paris: Seuil, 1990) and Jacques Donzelot, *L’invention du social: essai sur le déclin des passions politiques* (Paris: Fayard, 1984).

Like others liberals of his generation, Tocqueville was also anxious about these transformations. His visit to America with Gustave de Beaumont in 1831 provided him his first major occasion to diagnose democratization's causes and consequences. In *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840), he joined other engaged intellectuals in observing that the rising equality of conditions brought with it *égoïsme* or *la société en poussière*. Since the Restoration, socialists like Saint Simon had identified egoism as an anti-social, acquisitive disposition fostered by industrialism and market competition. For them, egoism pointed to the breakdown of social solidarity, or what was often glossed as "the social question." Tocqueville also understood that material forces were partly responsible for contemporary social atomization. As an aristocrat, he was particularly preoccupied with the abolition of primogeniture which altered the form of the social in observable ways. Large traditional estates had been dissolved into ever smaller ones, the link between the family and its property had been severed, a "constant state of flux" appeared in lieu of stable social reproduction, and "the bond that ties generation to generation [was] loosened or broken" (*DA* 55-57, 484). *Democracy in America* studied how this new democratic social state reshaped American political culture and institutions. It aimed to identify the transformations such a democratic state engendered, and to educate modern democracies so as to preserve liberty and avoid democracy's excesses.

In *Democracy in America*, social fragmentation's most conspicuous symptom was the tendency for individuals to retreat into the private sphere. In that private sphere, Tocqueville saw man "withdrawn into himself" and living "virtually [as] a

stranger to that of all others.” In that state, the connection between individual self-interest and the public good was broken. Self-interest was reduced from a vector for social cohesion (“self-interest rightly understood”) to “petty and vulgar pleasures.” With the ties between private and general interests snapped, men may live “alongside [his fellow citizens] but does not see them. He touches them but does not feel them.” Possessing only narrow self-interest, “He exists only in himself and for himself” (*DA* 818). His mind becomes “nothing more than intellectual dust, blown about by every wind and unable to coalesce into any fixed shape” (*DA* 487), or alternately, the “shifting, impalpable dust, on which democracy rests” (*DA* 54).

The measure of egoism’s dangers depended on context. In his writings and private correspondence, Tocqueville observed that the consequences of equality in France differed from those he witnessed in America. Tocqueville’s discussions of egoism in *Democracy in America* had been surprisingly qualified. He lamented the atomizing conception of self-interest, but believed that mediocrity for all was preferable to excellence for the few. Although the equality of conditions enabled two unprecedented forms of domination—the tyranny of public opinion and democratic despotism by “an immense tutelary power”—he also suggested that, in America at least, equality’s effects were self-limiting in practice. Americans were led by petty self-seeking legislators, but those legislators were mediocre and less dangerous; there was less cultural genius, but more overall education to help cultivate the practical arts; religious passion was attenuated, but its importance to American social life was axiomatic.

Yet when his eyes turned to France, Tocqueville's evaluation darkened. If narrow self-interest presented a self-moderating condition in America, it was leading to national decline in France. Thus, in an 1837 letter to Royer-Collard, Tocqueville despaired of "the sorry intrigues to which our society is delivered in our day, the despicable charlatans who exploit it, the almost universal pettiness that reigns over it and above all the astonishing absence of disinterestedness and even of personal interest."²⁷ Most notoriously, in an 1841 letter to John Stuart Mill written while France was embroiled in the Eastern Question, Tocqueville bemoaned the impotence and degeneration of France.

I do not have to tell you, my dear Mill, that the greatest malady that threatens a people organized as we are is the gradual softening of mores, the abasement of the mind, the mediocrity of tastes; that is where the great dangers of the future lie. One cannot let a nation that is democratically constituted like ours and in which the natural vices of the race unfortunately coincide with the natural vices of the social state, one cannot let this nation take up easily the habit of sacrificing what it believes to be its grandeur to its repose, great matters to petty ones; it is not healthy to allow such a nation to believe that its place in the world is smaller, that it is fallen from the level on which its ancestors had put it, but that it must console itself by making railroads and by making prosper in the bosom of this peace, under whatever condition this peace is obtained, the well-being of each private individual. It is necessary that those who march at the head of such a nation should always keep a proud attitude, if they do not wish to allow the level of national mores to fall very low.²⁸

Readers familiar with the traditional portrait of Tocqueville as a moderate liberal, keen on protecting individual liberty from the extremes of revolution and nationalist chauvinism, may be surprised to read such bellicose words. Mill was certainly caught off guard. He chided the Frenchman for his immature attachments to inflated notions

²⁷ "Letter to Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, August 20, 1837," in Alexis de Tocqueville, *Selected Letters on Politics and Society*, ed. Roger Boesche, trans. James Toupin and Roger Boesche (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 118.

²⁸ "Letter to John Stuart Mill, March 18, 1841," in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 150-51.

of national pride. Yet in his private correspondence, Tocqueville was a consistent advocate for nationalism. “National pride,” Tocqueville wrote to Royer-Collard in 1840, may be “puerile and boastful,” but it “is still the greatest sentiment that we have and the strongest tie that holds this nation together.”²⁹ This nationalism was as sociological as it was political. The traditional, elitist valuation of great action had yielded to trivial concerns about security and well-being in France. Individualistic interests had displaced the passion for the common good, threatening liberty. Liberty was “a holy and legitimate passion of man,” and as Tocqueville explained to Jean-Jacques Ampère in 1841, “The further away I am from youth, the more regardful, I will say almost respectful, I am of passions.”³⁰

* * *

Tocqueville’s theoretical portrait of *la société en poussière* is one that places the accent on the psychic ramifications of the democratization of the social. For all the analytical importance he placed on power and property’s centrifugal dispersion, it was its impact on the psyche that captured his attention. In Tocqueville’s view, France had finally seized economic prosperity, but that prosperity concealed moral and spiritual stagnation. Its citizens were isolated, adrift, and deprived of the inner fortitude that genuine moral conviction conferred. Nor was Tocqueville immune to these effects himself. He complained bitterly about his loneliness and isolation, and believed himself born “too late,” having missed the era of great statesmanship.³¹ The heights of

²⁹ “Letter to Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, August 15, 1840,” in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 144.

³⁰ “Letter to Henry Reeve, March 22, 1837,” in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 115; “Letter to Jean-Jacques Ampère, August 10, 1841,” in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 153.

³¹ Boesche, *The Strange Liberalism of Alexis de Tocqueville*, 27.

political passion, such as they were known in the age of Robespierre and Napoleon, had been supplanted by trivial commercial interests. No wonder that in Tocqueville's eyes, political life under the July Monarchy was "no more than a game in which each person seeks only to win," a game populated by "actors not even interested in the success of the play, but only in that of their particular roles."³² For all of its benefits, the equality of conditions had cheapened the meaning of politics.

In foregrounding equality's consequences for the self, Tocqueville was adapting a major motif of his intellectual context: that moral and social development were mutually constitutive, and that social fragmentation called for a psychological antidote. Philosophically and institutionally, elite French intellectuals were in the midst of a revolt against the passive sensationalist epistemology of Locke and Condillac. Locke had famously critiqued the existence of "innate ideas" in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). He claimed that all knowledge derived from sensory experience, which language organized and indexed for the purposes of drawing logically consistent inferences. Although Locke's argument would ground the empiricist British political tradition, its trajectory was quite different in France. Whereas the British (and Voltaire) viewed the *Essay's* argument as a triumph of reason over prejudice, in the 1730s, a Lockean-inspired Newtonianism appeared in the French academies that stressed a different aspect of Locke's critique of innate ideas: reason's inadequacy.³³ If all knowledge is based on sense perception, it is not reason

³² "Letter to Gustave de Beaumont, December 14, 1846," in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 181-2.

³³ Stephen Gaukroger, *The Collapse of Mechanism and the Rise of Sensibility: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1680-1760* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 11-16, 162-86, 387-420; John C. O'Neal, *The Authority of Experience: Sensationist Theory in the French Enlightenment* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

but sensation which grounds knowledge, and if this is true, then emotions, moods, and irrational experiences can participate in the formation of scientific knowledge. This insight led to the doctrine of “sensationalism” in France, and it justified elite anxieties over disorders in the popular imagination: virulent masturbators, women who read novels, and workers no longer hemmed in by trade corporations.³⁴

Tocqueville was involved with the critique of sensationalism by both intellectual temperament and personal filiation. He was acquainted with Victor Cousin, the foremost French philosopher of the mid-nineteenth century and sensationalism’s greatest critic. A *normalien* (unlike the socialists of the Ecole polytechnique), Cousin had been recruited to the circle of Doctrinaires by Royer-Collard. He eventually succeeded the latter as a philosophy professor at the University of Paris. Cousin was institutionally powerful. He served on the Council of Public Instruction under the Restoration, and with his supporters, he set the agenda for philosophical research and curricula for generations of students. Moreover, his lectures on the history of philosophy were considered major events among the French educated public. His influential program of “eclecticism” would provide the major precursor to the political Bergsonism of the 1890s.³⁵

Cousin criticized Locke’s sensationalism for yielding a conception of the psyche that was fragmented and passive. As a tabula rasa limited to receiving sense impressions, the Lockean self resembled an inert vessel reproducing within the mind

³⁴ Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self*, 21-102.

³⁵ Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self*, 182-232; George Boas, “Bergson (1859-1941) and His Predecessors,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 20, no. 4 (1959): 503-14.

fragmentary sensations impinging from without. “It is certain,” Cousin conceded, that “upon the first examination of consciousness, we perceive a succession of phenomena which, decomposed into their elements, may be traced back to sensation.”³⁶ He insisted, however, that “if everything in man is reduced to sensation, then everything is reduced to enjoyment and suffering; avoiding pain and pursuing pleasure would be the sole rule of our conduct... This system is that of the Sensual school.”³⁷ Criticizing sensationalism was no mere philosophical quibble for Cousin. Sensationalism posed a problem for liberty because it unraveled the notion of a volitional self. Its portrait of the psyche (passive, fragmented, ruled by sensations) analogized to the social fragmentation brought about democratic modernity. There was a reciprocal relation, in other words, between the psychic and the social: sensationalism was a philosophy of mind adequate to an age of democratic disintegration.

For these reasons, a philosophical critique of the Lockean subject in the name of a new philosophy of personhood was needed to repair French social cohesion.³⁸ Cousin sought to provide this new postrevolutionary self by “demonstrating that personality, the ‘me’ is eminently free and voluntary activity; that this is the true subject, and that reason is no less distinct from this subject than sensation and organic impressions.”³⁹ Cousin proposed to rescue the rational, volitional self from sensationalism by demonstrating that certain experiences like the inner will “clearly

³⁶ Victor Cousin, *Fragmens Philosophique, Seconde Edition* (Paris: Ladrang Libraire, 1833), xiii.

³⁷ Cousin, *Fragmens Philosophique*, xiii.

³⁸ Goldstein writes, “the specter of a society without corporations effectively problematized the self for contemporaries.” Political stability” therefore “required a different psychology, which would in turn undergird—and create—a different kind of self,” in *The Post-Revolutionary Self*, 8-9, 11.

³⁹ Cousin, *Fragmens Philosophique*, xvii.

had no source in perception.” They were instead “volitional facts,” essentially psychological, and “which sensation by no mean explains.”⁴⁰ Thus, one needed to deduce a pre-social self, an *a priori moi*, defined by its willing activity. By discovering this voluntarist *moi* as the starting point of psychology, philosophy could offer a new psychic anchor—the unified, voluntarist self—for modern democratic societies.

Nothing less than liberty itself was at stake. As he explained in *Fragmens*

Philosophique,

Retain the will within itself, let it act without any external manifestation; let its free determinations not depart from the inward sanctuary; do not seek to mark your volition by sensible effects, and you will then be wholly enfranchised from the material world; your life becomes completely spiritual; you have ascended to the source of true activity... To place ourselves beyond the conditions of sense, to will, without regard to the consequences of our will; to will, independently of every antecedent of every consequent; to rest our determinations upon themselves; this is true liberty, the commencement of Eternity...⁴¹

Cousin’s point was that Lockean sensationalism had robbed philosophy of its capacity to conceive of the “moral personality,” the inner will without which moral agency would not exist. Since there were good reasons to reject sensationalism, Cousin believed that French philosophy now had to reconstruct the links between reason, sensation, and experience in ways that brought back the possibility of a unified moral personality. At a broad level, these claims intersected with the French liberal belief that “the power of the people was above all a sociological and moral power, not an institutional one.” As Lucien Jaume has explained, liberal republicans believed society

⁴⁰ Cousin, *Fragmens Philosophique*, xii-xiv.

⁴¹ Cousin, *Fragmens Philosophique*, 210.

was “a moral personality” rooted in a set of unexamined and widely shared beliefs.⁴²

Tocqueville was acquainted with Cousin and his work. He was only a degree removed from Cousin and his associates. He also held Cousin’s writing in high esteem. Years later, he would chastise Arthur de Gobineau for not appreciating the intellectual achievements of his contemporaries, asking, “what better writer than Cousin” was there in France?⁴³ It is thus not surprising that in the second volume of *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville dedicates several sections to explaining skepticism’s deleterious consequences on social cohesion. After all, besides defending the voluntarist *moi* or *personalité*, Cousin was preoccupied with denouncing the ways sensationalism led to skepticism (“To limit philosophy to observation [of sensations] is, whether we know it or not, to place it in the path to skepticism”).⁴⁴ In those sections, Tocqueville identified the sensationalist epistemology of the seventeenth century as a force that “destroyed the empire of tradition, and overthrew the authority of the master” (DA 485). If individuals believed only what their senses revealed to them, they would lose access to “a certain number of ready-made beliefs” without which “men may still exist, but they will not constitute a social body.” (DA 490). For society to exist, it needed to be “held together by certain leading ideas,” drawn “from the same source,” and which gave it a distinctive moral personality. Without shared moral commitments “there is no such thing as society, for what is a group of rational

⁴² Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013; first published 2008), 64.

⁴³ “Letter to Gobineau, September 16, 1858,” in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 376; see also George Armstrong Kelly, *The Human Comedy: Constant, Tocqueville and French Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 134-67.

⁴⁴ Cousin, *Fragmens Philosophique*, vii-viii.

and intelligent beings held together solely by force?” (DA 272). Readers of *Democracy in America* would have had little trouble connecting Tocqueville’s discussion of skepticism to wider debates over sensationalist epistemology’s socially disintegrating effects.

More than Cousin, it was François Guizot who taught Tocqueville that reconstituting the social depended on a psychological antidote.⁴⁵ Guizot was an esteemed historian, Doctrinaire, and Minister of the Interior under Louis-Philippe. In a series of lectures on the history of European civilization in 1828—the same year as Cousin’s famous Sorbonne lectures on the history of philosophy—Guizot developed an influential theory of government and historical progress. Known for advocating “liberalism through the state,” Guizot and Cousin were close.⁴⁶ Together with Royer-Collard, the two intellectuals were involved in the circle of Maine de Biran, a philosopher dedicated to theorizing voluntarism. They worked together as the principal voices of the journal *Le Globe* before it transferred to Saint-Simonians. Importantly, Guizot also taught Tocqueville: from 1828 to 1830, the latter travelled from Versailles to Paris each week to attend the historian’s lectures on European civilization. In fact, Guizot’s *History of Civilization in Europe* was the only book Tocqueville requested upon landing in America. He and Beaumont carried it with them as they travelled, using its categories to frame their observations.

In these lectures, Guizot offered an historical version of Cousin’s argument. He

⁴⁵ On Tocqueville’s adaptations of Guizot’s notion of the “social state,” see Melvin Richter, “Tocqueville and Guizot on Democracy: From a Type of Society to a Political Regime,” *History of European Ideas* 30 (2004): 61-82.

⁴⁶ Jaume, *Tocqueville*, 64; Lucien Jaume, *L'Individu effacé: Ou le paradoxe du libéralisme français* (Paris: Fayard, 1997); see also Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le moment Guizot* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

claimed that societies in stagnation could possess material prosperity without civilizational progress. That was because civilization was much more than a collection of social facts. It consisted, rather, in “two elements,” social progress and moral development.

it [civilization] subsists on two conditions, and manifests itself by two symptoms: the development of social activity, and that of individual activity; the progress of society and the progress of humanity. Wherever the external condition of man extends itself, vivifies, ameliorates itself; wherever the internal nature of man displays itself with lustre, with grandeur; at these two signs, and often despite the profound imperfection of the social state, mankind with loud applause proclaims civilization.⁴⁷

Guizot was at pains to emphasize that the “social development and the moral development” of Europe must be seen as “closely connected together,” as possessing “so intimate and necessary a relation between them” that they “reciprocally produce” one another.⁴⁸ Even so, the two aspects were not always synchronized. Uneven development explained why even in societies riven by social instability, humanity could nevertheless “[stand] forth in more grandeur and power.” So long as there was moral progress, societies could produce grandeur through men who “live and shine in the eyes of world.”⁴⁹

In defining civilizational development along two interdependent axes, Guizot proposed a synthetic historical method. He explained progress through the interplay of the inner, moral life of individuals and their objective social conditions. Civilizations existed at the intersection of these two domains, just as men (according to Cousin)

⁴⁷ François Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, trans. William Hazlitt (New York: Penguin, 1997; first published 1828), 18.

⁴⁸ Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, 19-20.

⁴⁹ Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, 18.

“live...on the confines of two separate kingdoms [inner freedom and outward necessity], of which we form the mysterious union.”⁵⁰ For Guizot, that interplay made regeneration possible. Just as Christianity had “regenerated the moral man,” equality of conditions had “changed and regenerated society” as it now addressed itself “not to the internal man, but to his external condition.”⁵¹ In Guizot’s view, even socialists who critiqued liberalism because it “[did] not regenerate...the moral, the internal state of man,” were tacitly agreeing to his definition of civilization. From the standpoint of the providential movement towards equality, there was no doubting that “the regeneration of the moral man by Christianity” was bound up with “the regeneration of the social state,” namely democracy.⁵²

To a French intellectual listening to Cousin and Guizot in the late 1820s, two related implications would have stood out. First, as Guizot argued, if moral and social regeneration “reciprocally produced” one another, then social regeneration would have to pass through the regeneration of the people’s inner moral life. Second, as Cousin claimed, if that inner life was not the passive subject of sensationalism but a unified volitional power, then moral regeneration would require engineering contexts in which that volitional *moi* could be cultivated. The people would need to relearn how “to will, independently of every antecedent of every consequent.” Put simply, in the intellectual context in which Tocqueville entered politics, if a psychological antidote to *la société en poussière* suggested itself, it probably looked a good deal like glory.

⁵⁰ Cousin, *Fragmens Philosophique*, 209.

⁵¹ Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, 18-19.

⁵² Guizot, *The History of Civilization in Europe*, 21.

* * *

Tocqueville's taste for glory, greatness, and grandeur were well known. It was a motif sustained across decades of writing. In an 1840 letter to Beaumont, he reminded his friend, "You know what a taste I have for great events and how tired I am of our little democratic and bourgeois pot of soup."⁵³ Sixteen years later, he would paraphrase Guizot in lamenting that however "wealthy, sophisticated, attractive, even impressive" a democratic society might be, without freedom, it would not have "great citizens, still less a great nation."⁵⁴ Tocqueville was so keen on greatness that, despite his antipathy to despotism, he came to respect Napoleon. He extolled to Paul Clamorgan the emperor's grandeur, calling the general "the most extraordinary being...who has appeared in the world for many centuries."⁵⁵ In an unfinished study of the French Revolution, he would add in praise that Napoleon knew how "to direct enthusiasm" to "[make] people die in battle." Unlike Tocqueville's own effete generation, Napoleon understood that "high passion [was] always needed to revivify the human spirit, which otherwise decays and rots. It would have never occurred to [Napoleon] to make hearts and spirits concentrate merely on their individual welfare."⁵⁶

Tocqueville's critics and biographers have characterized this obsession with glory as an anachronistic predilection, an antique attachment "transferred" to France's

⁵³ "Letter to Gustave de Beaumont, August 9, 1840," in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 143.

⁵⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the French Revolution*, trans. Gerald Bevan (New York: Penguin, 2008; first published 1856), 14.

⁵⁵ "Letter to Paul Clamorgan, April 17, 1842," in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 158.

⁵⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The European Revolution & Correspondence with Gobineau*, trans. John Lukacs (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 149-50.

nascent democratic society.⁵⁷ This characterization suggests that Tocqueville's attachment to greatness was foreign to his liberal republicanism. It also implies that Tocqueville sought to transplant glory into democracy wholesale. Yet both insinuations are misleading. Reducing Tocqueville's pursuit of glory to an anachronism participates in a familiar strategy of disavowal, recently criticized by historians of French colonialism, that "effectively protects an idealized republicanism [or liberal republicanism] by pointing to its supposed violation rather than exploring its actual operation."⁵⁸ It posits glory as intrinsically premodern, vindicating liberalism of national chauvinism and its consequences by definitional fiat. Similarly, to suggest Tocqueville transplanted glory into democracy wholesale misunderstands the nature of his attachment to it. Tocqueville never suggested that *aristocratic* glory could coexist with the equality of conditions. Aristocratic glory was tied to individual feats of heroism, to which democracies were disinclined by nature. Although Americans appreciated it when the occasion arose, the sentiment did not come easily.

Rather than invoking a defunct notion of aristocratic heroism, Tocqueville appealed to a new type of glory adapted for the democratic social state. This glory was collective, republican, and rooted in the pursuit of the general interest. Its magnitude reflected the people's capacity to expand their sense of self-interest to encompass that of the public weal, an act Tocqueville sometimes called a "rational form of patriotism" (*DA* 269-70). It was an expression of the people acting as a collective moral

⁵⁷ Roger Boesche, "The Dark Side of Tocqueville: On War and Empire," *The Review of Politics* 67, no. 4 (2005): 737-752; Boesche calls it "an active relic from his aristocratic heritage" in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 137; Jaume calls it a "transfer" in *Tocqueville*, 7.

⁵⁸ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude & Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 6.

personality rather than a collection of private individuals. As I will soon suggest, it was also surprisingly Bonapartist.

Tocqueville described some of the features of democratic glory in his analysis of public monuments in America. Comparing the public monuments of old Europe with those in America, he observed that American monuments differed from the former's in both form and function. "Nowhere do citizens seem more insignificant than in a democratic nation. Nowhere does the nation itself seem greater or make a vaster impression on the mind." Thus, where aristocratic monuments drew attention to the heroic individual or courtly grandeur, democratic greatness found its subject in the people *qua* the state: "In democratic societies man's imagination shrinks when he thinks of himself and expands without limit when he thinks of the state." That was why Americans who were otherwise self-seeking nevertheless "nurse[d] gigantic ambitions when they turn[ed] their attention to public monuments" (DA 536). Just as Rousseau's citizens rediscovered their natural liberty in civic form through the state, Tocqueville believed modern citizens bereft of individual heroism could rediscover their greatness in the state's monumental reflection. If public monuments were decorative or ornamental accoutrements to royal power under absolutism, in democracies, public monuments were essentially pedagogical instruments of self-awareness. They provided a means for the people to glory in their own agency. In memorializing the state, they paid homage to themselves.

Tocqueville acknowledged that this expansive, public, and collective glory could threaten the local liberties he prized. A culture of public monumentality is only a

short step away from unfettered statism. Yet Tocqueville believed the risk for democratic glory had to be taken. In times of democratic and social disintegration, “we must make up our minds and dare to choose between the patriotism of all and the government of a few” (*DA* 272). Discovering occasions for the people to exercise their political will was pressing. For France to weather democratization’s atomizing effects, its natural inclinations needed to be guided towards values “immaterial to a certain degree” and passions that “[raise] souls above contemplation of private interests.”⁵⁹

Tocqueville convinced himself that French liberals could fulfill this pedagogical project. The coming of democracy was like a great biblical flood. The task of modern liberalism was not to dam that flood, but to pave a path to salvation and redemption. “Democracy!” he wrote in his preparatory notes for *Democracy in America*, “Don’t you notice that these are the waters of the flood? Don’t you see them advance constantly by a slow and irresistible effort?... Instead of wanting to raise impotent dikes, let us seek rather to build the holy ark that must carry the human species over this ocean without shores.”⁶⁰ Tocqueville therefore did not pursue glory because he was an aristocrat (though he was). He pursued it because he was a modern. He was a student of the latest philosophical and scientific debates in French intellectual life, and those debates shaped his attachments to glory. Like a catechism, he juxtaposed his attachment to regenerative glory to modern instrumental reasoning. He detested French socialism’s “rehabilitation of the flesh,” which amounted to

⁵⁹ “Letter to Louis de Kergorlay, October 18, 1847,” in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 192.

⁶⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique*, 4 vols., ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010; first published 1835, 1840), 12.

Lockean sensationalism run amok.⁶¹ He complained of utilitarianism, writing “Is it not obvious to you that belief everywhere is giving way to reasoning and sentiment to calculation?” (DA 274). Speaking of slavery’s abolition, he called for it to “be seen as the product of passion and not the result of calculation.”⁶² He fulminated to Royer-Collard that “Reason has always been for me like a cage that keeps me from acting, but not from gnashing my teeth behind the bars.”⁶³ This recurring voice belonged to a liberal searching for emancipation from cramped bourgeois interests by a passion for public liberty.

If equality of conditions was a providential flood, then we can read Tocqueville’s appeals to glory as his holy ark. Modern liberty thereby became dependent on the pursuit of glory. In his marginalia on public monuments in America, Tocqueville scribbled that “in democracies the State must take charge of large and costly works not only because these large works are beautiful, but also in order to sustain the taste for what is great.”⁶⁴ His prescription was clear. If democratic citizens were to overcome psychological withdrawal, the state would need to foster a taste for glory, even if doing so was economically imprudent, maybe even *because* it was economically imprudent. For the sake of man’s inner regeneration, the French state needed to provide an opportunity for its citizens’ utilitarian self-interest to grow into a volitional self capable of great public acts. In between the publication of *Democracy*

⁶¹ “Letter to Arthur de Gobineau, October 2, 1843,” in Tocqueville, *The European Revolution & Correspondence with Gobineau*, 207.

⁶² Alexis de Tocqueville, “The Emancipation of Slaves (1843)” in Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 199-226, at 209.

⁶³ “Letter to Pierre-Paul Royer-Collard, September 27, 1841,” in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 157.

⁶⁴ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition*, 795, fn. c.

in *America*'s two volumes, Tocqueville nominated one such opportunity: "The future seems to me to be in our hands, and I shall tell you sincerely that with time, perseverance, ability, and justice, I have no doubt that we shall be able to raise a great monument to our country's glory on the African coast."⁶⁵

The Glory of the Armée d'Afrique

There were already hints that Tocqueville might turn to colonization in pursuit of French glory. In *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville observed that the greatest public monument to the people was the one illuminated by the fires of war and combat.

...a man facing urgent danger rarely remains as he was: he will either rise well above his habitual level or sink well below it. The same thing happens to peoples. Extreme peril does not always impel a nation to rise to meet it; it is sometimes fatal... In nations as well as individuals, however, it is more common to see the very imminence of danger act as midwife to extraordinary virtues. At such times great characters stand out as a monument hidden by the dark of night will stand out in the illumination of a blaze. Genius no longer shuns the light, and the people, struck by the perils they face, forget for a time their envious passions (*DA* 228)

An allusion to the anachronistic ideal of chivalrous glory through combat? Perhaps. But in light of Tocqueville's claim that "the same thing happens to peoples," contemporary readers should consider whether such allusions are really so intrinsically aristocratic. Political theory in the age of democratic revolutions was just as susceptible, if not more so, to linking violence to regeneration, war to social cohesion, as early modern thought.⁶⁶ More than any other activity, it was in war that people

⁶⁵ Tocqueville, "Second Letter on Algeria," 24.

⁶⁶ For one study of the link between war and social unity in the early modern law of nations tradition, see David William Bates, *States of War: Enlightenment Origins of the Political* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

could feel their freedom, not as atomized individuals, but as a people. Tocqueville certainly believed this to be true. If only the French were “struck by the perils they face,” they could reawaken to their own collective agency seemingly forgotten in the face of decadent economic self-satisfaction.

Tocqueville’s suggestion that the people’s greatness might be disclosed in the face of urgent danger, just “as a monument hidden by the dark of night will stand out in the illumination of a blaze,” connects him in surprising ways to what Nancy Rosenblum has called “romantic militarism” and whose exemplar was popular Bonapartism.⁶⁷ There was no question that Napoleon Bonaparte’s rule had been authoritarian and illiberal. That was why postrevolutionary liberals in France cut their teeth in opposing his First Empire. Yet as a political culture, Bonapartism articulated a different set of values. The latter grew out of the historical memories of the revolutionary and imperial wars of liberty. It functioned as a revolutionary political language that lionized the *volontaires*, soldiers who sacrificed their individual interests for the general interest of national salvation. Indeed, despite the coercive realities of military conscription, in the Bonapartist imagination, the *volontaire* was a subject defined by his free will. We might say that if the acquisitive, utilitarian person described the subjectivity adequate to philosophical sensationalism, the *volontaire* was

⁶⁷ Nancy Rosenblum defines “romantic militarism” as the “widespread European intellectual phenomenon that made its appearance at the time of the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the European reaction. It was the invention of romantic writers who were not always passionate about politics or inclined to real aggression but who wrote about war as *the* way to enforce justice and as *the* occasion for self-expression... Romantic militarism is neither a political philosophy nor a sentimental experience, but an imaginative invention and a psychological stance... It is anti-institutional and anti-bourgeois. It is unmistakably an imaginative alternative to both civilian routine and actual military establishments. Like pastoralism and the Golden Age, romantic militarism is at once a positive intellectual invention and an expression of despair,” in Nancy L. Rosenblum, “Romantic Militarism,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 43, no. 2 (1982): 249-68, at 249.

the analog for Cousin's definition of liberty ("to will, without regard to the consequences of our will"). As a voluntarist anchor for social cohesion, the *volontaire* pointed to an entire vision of the nation.

Although this political culture appealed most to outright Bonapartists, by the time of the July Monarchy, popular Bonapartism had grown into a generic language of political dissent that foregrounded popular virtue, egalitarianism, selfless sacrifice for the *patrie*, an expansive suffrage, and the glory of common, ordinary men. It became "a left-wing code word," even "a manifesto for political freedom and the elimination of privileges associated with the Ancien Régime."⁶⁸ Even if Bonapartism continued to name a specific party affiliation, its normative representation of democratic violence appealed across ideological divides because it offered something much more: "a renewable legacy and the basis of a truly national culture."⁶⁹

1840 provided an opportunity to assert just such a vision of the French nation. That year, France commenced its aggressive program of settlement and domination in Algeria. Tocqueville and Beaumont immediately made plans to visit Africa to study its society, much as they had already done in America. After some initial delays, Tocqueville finally left for Algiers with Beaumont from Toulon on 4 May 1841, landing in Algiers three days later. The two travelled the region for a month, interviewing General Bugeaud, his subordinates and local Arabists. They had planned

⁶⁸ Barbara Ann Day-Hickman, *Napoleonic Art: Nationalism and the Spirit of Rebellion in France (1815-1848)* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 116; see also Michael Marrinan, *Painting Politics for Louis-Philippe: Art and Ideology in Orleanist France, 1830-1848* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁶⁹ Todd Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire: Art in the Service of French Imperialism, 1798-1836* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 7.

to stay for another month, but Tocqueville was struck with dysentery, and the two returned prematurely to Toulon on the eleventh of June.⁷⁰

Already before his trip to Algeria, Tocqueville studied second hand reports of the Maghreb. He drafted a raft of essays that criticized contemporary anticolonial arguments and designed an argument for a French civilizing presence in the regency. However, after his trip with Beaumont in 1841, his attitude towards colonization hardened. Where he had once advocated for peaceful racial integration “to form a single people from two races,” after 1841 Tocqueville became a prominent proponent of differentiated legal systems and the violent conquest of indigenous populations.⁷¹ He turned his visit’s notes into a series of effective reports on all aspects of French colonial policy and Algerian society. Tocqueville would make a second investigative trip to Algeria again in 1846 as part of a delegation from the Chamber of Deputies. Again, he traveled with General Bugeaud and his officers. By the end of the 1840s, Tocqueville had become one of France’s foremost experts on “the Algerian question.” As a member of the government, he served on numerous parliamentary commissions which had a direct hand in guiding French foreign policy in the former regency.

From the beginning, Tocqueville saw the Algerian question as a question concerning national glory. With the withdrawal of the Ottomans in 1831, the various indigenous communities, from Moorish to Kabyle, fell into disarray. Algeria was like a “newborn society whose naturally unstable elements have a particular need to be

⁷⁰ André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, trans. Lydia Davis with Robert Hemenway (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988; first published 1984), 321-24.

⁷¹ Tocqueville, “Second Letter on Algeria,” 25.

held firm and stable.” This was especially true after a decade of haphazard French rule. If Algeria was to chart a different path from its Caribbean counterparts hollowed out by resource extraction, it would need a proper society. Alas, French rule had only made society in Algeria more arbitrary and disorganized. As Tocqueville complained, “the truth is that there does not yet exist in Africa what Europeans call a society. The men are there, but not the social body.”⁷²

When it came to proposing a solution, Tocqueville departed from the British ideology of indirect rule in India. Instead of conscripting metropolitan-educated natives to run the colonial government, Tocqueville recommended France “replace the former inhabitants with the conquering race.”⁷³ The technique for doing so was two-pronged: domination and colonization. Domination entailed systematic violence, the destruction of indigenous homes and harvest, and raids on Arab communities to disintegrate any preexisting tribal cohesion. Colonization named the “constructive” prong. Spearheaded by institutions like the *bureaux arabes*, the French state would consolidate the rule of law, centralize government, offer language instruction and professional advancement for civil administrators, regulate property titles, and provide basic capital for new settler families to plow their land. Where other French leaders recommended each prong separately or in sequence, Tocqueville insisted the two be pursued concurrently. “Colonization and war...must proceed together,” and only through this double approach could a reconstituted social body be forged.⁷⁴

⁷² Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 105.

⁷³ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 61.

⁷⁴ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 81.

Undoubtedly, a “realist policy” occasionally motivated Tocqueville.⁷⁵

Tocqueville did not believe domination was an end in itself. He simply accepted that it was impossible to settle French citizens without territorial expropriation, and that meant “domination is the necessary means we must use.”⁷⁶ Tocqueville admitted, almost as an aside, that he was “quite hostile to violent measures,” but reminded his readers that “we must recognize that we shall never manage to possess the land around Algiers without the aid of a series of such measures.”⁷⁷

At the same time, Tocqueville’s recommendations revealed a second voice. Domination was not only justified as a means for territorial expropriation. It also became a demand of glory itself, which became the overriding principle of French geopolitical expansion. Glory, national grandeur, and international prestige were first principles. They expressed values superior to and independent of economic desiderata, “great in themselves.”⁷⁸ The first sentences of Tocqueville’s 1841 memorandum on Algeria, written after he returned from his first trip, were unequivocal on this point.

I do not think France can think seriously of leaving Algeria. In the eyes of the world, such an abandonment would be the clear indication of our decline [*décadence*]... if France shrank from an enterprise in which she faced nothing but the natural difficulties of the terrain and the opposition of little barbarous tribes, she would seem in the eyes of the world to be yielding to her own impotence and succumbing to her own lack of courage. Any people that easily gives up what it has taken and chooses to retire peacefully to its original borders proclaims that its age of greatness is over. It visibly enters the period of its decline [*déclin*].⁷⁹

These claims anticipate the social theories of decadence and degeneration that would

⁷⁵ Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 318; see also Sessions, “Unfortunate Necessities.”

⁷⁶ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 65.

⁷⁷ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 87.

⁷⁸ Tocqueville, “First Report on Algeria” (1847), in *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 129-173, at 167.

⁷⁹ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 59.

preoccupy the liberals of the Third Republic. France could not abandon Algeria, irrespective of its material costs, for that would jeopardize its prospects for grandeur. Tocqueville was unambiguous in declaring this reason the “foremost in [his] view” for African colonization. In a remarkable admission, Tocqueville even conceded that if Algeria flourished, it would become a competitor to metropolitan markets. So much the worse, then, for bourgeois interests at home.

I know that metropolitan commerce and industry will protest that we are sacrificing them; that the principal advantage of a colony is to provide an advantageous market for the mother country and not to compete with it. All this may be true in itself, but I am not moved by it. In the current state of things, *Algeria should not be considered from the commercial, industrial, or colonial point of view: we must take an even higher perspective to consider this great question.* There is in effect a great political interest that dominates all others.⁸⁰

However peculiar these pronouncements may sound, they were not isolated polemics. Tocqueville reiterated these claims in his most famous speech as an expert on the Algerian question. Delivered during an 1846 debate over a special funding request for the colony, Tocqueville chastised his fellow parliamentarians for their fussy objections over Algeria’s enormous economic costs. Algeria, Tocqueville argued, was “the country’s greatest task,” an enterprise “at the forefront of all the interests France has in the world.” Yet “once I thought that the government, or rather the men in the government who put their hearts above their politics...would want to go abroad to create a great theatre for their glory.” “I believed it,” Tocqueville mourned, “and if this supposition was once founded, perhaps it still is... But, Gentlemen, what I once

⁸⁰ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 71; emphasis mine.

believed, I now doubt.”⁸¹

The subordination of economic concerns to the primacy of politics characterized Tocqueville’s entire approach to French colonization in North Africa. That approach ought to be seen as a kind of antidote to *la société en poussière* at home. France needed to create “a great theatre for [French] glory,” whatever the economic cost. It was a commitment so unconditional that he remarked that France could only abandon Algeria “at a moment when she is seen to be undertaking great things in Europe.”⁸² France would either find glory in Africa or in Europe, but under no circumstance was she to surrender the pursuit of glory altogether.

This voice in Tocqueville, keen on colonial domination’s regenerative effects, did not contradict his liberalism. It grew out of French liberalism’s emphasis on the reciprocal relation between the psychic and the social, the inner moral life of man and the social state of the people. Whereas social republicans would eventually weaponize that insight to construct a “social economics” of solidarity in the Third Republic, liberals like Tocqueville pursued the means to regeneration abroad. Only in conquering Algeria would France join the other European powers in partaking in the greatest source of glory in democratic modernity: “Something more vast, more extraordinary than the establishment of the Roman Empire is growing out of our times, without anyone noticing it; it is the enslavement of four parts of the world by the fifth. Therefore, let us not slander our century and ourselves too much; the men are

⁸¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, “Intervention in the Debate Over the Appropriation of Special Funding” (1846), in Tocqueville, *Writings on Empire and Slavery*, 127-8.

⁸² Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 59.

small, but the events are great.”⁸³ In creating “a vast theatre where [Frenchmen] will come to play out tragedy or comedy, according to the stamp of their character,” the French followed the British, for whom, according to Tocqueville, India provided a “sense of greatness and power...to the whole people” and “A flash of brilliance that reflects back on the entire nation.”⁸⁴ Like the public monuments of America, French citizens would be able to rediscover their collective agency, indeed their peoplehood, in the public monument that was Algiers, its glistening white edifices reflected in the African coastal skyline.

* * *

There was an obvious problem with Tocqueville’s desire to transform Algeria into a theatre for French glory: there was nothing at all glorious about exterminating indigenous peoples. He admitted as much, in both *Democracy in America* when he decried the extermination of Native Americans and in 1847 after the conquest of Algeria was an accomplished fact: “Let us not, in the middle of the nineteenth century, begin the history of the conquest of America over again.”⁸⁵

We might put Tocqueville’s problem this way. Tocqueville was committed to erecting in Algeria a monument to national glory as a matter of first principle. That commitment framed his observations and motivated his recommendations for colonial administration. But the conception of democratic glory passed down from the revolutionary wars of liberty—a conception to which he was compelled to speak as a

⁸³ “Letter to Henry Reeve, April 12, 1840,” in Tocqueville, *Selected Letters*, 142.

⁸⁴ Eugène Bodichon, quoted in Gallois, *A History of Violence*, 9; Jardin, *Tocqueville*, 341.

⁸⁵ Tocqueville, “First Report on Algeria,” 146.

political thinker—placed specific demands on war. Foremost among those demands was that war be waged in the name of national defense and on behalf of persecuted liberty. *Volontaires* did not fight wars of aggression motivated by chauvinistic self-interest. Instead, they fought defensive wars where citizens were called to protect the most general interest of all: national defense. It was only in the process of transcending individual interest for the *patrie en danger* that, in a rite of self-abnegation, men seized glory.

Within the terms of this romantic militarism, the realities of colonial warfare in Algeria could not have been considered glorious. Even the soldiers of the Armée d’Afrique acknowledged this fact. In the years following Bugeaud’s appointment in Algeria, many soldiers died from malnutrition, alcoholism, and exhaustion, but only upwards to a hundred or so soldiers actually died in combat in any given year. In contrast, the number of Algerians killed, often directly through massacres like those at the caves of Dahra, exceeded tens of thousands. The sheer mismatch in the scale of violence was so apparent and indisputable that to call colonial domination a “war” in the first place seemed farcical.⁸⁶ Thanks in part to the normalization of slaughter, rape, and looting, the Armée d’Afrique developed problems with suicide. Jean-de-Dieu Soult, the French Minister of War and Guizot’s colleague, became sufficiently concerned with the poor optics of French colonial terror that he worked diligently, if to futility, to redact the violence from the regular military bulletins published in

⁸⁶ Gallois, *A History of Violence*, 14; Gallois, “Dahra and the History of Violence in Early Colonial Algeria.”

metropolitan newspapers.⁸⁷

In such a context, how could French thinkers like Tocqueville square the practice of colonial warfare with the demands of glory? What could justify Tocqueville's description of Bugeaud's terror as an example of "a war conducted ably and gloriously"? Charles X's Restoration government had solved this dilemma by analogizing the conquest of Algeria to the Christian Crusades.⁸⁸ According to the King's addresses to the Chambers of Deputies on the eve of the 1830 invasion, conquering Algiers would be a victory for enlightened Christendom against oriental despotism. Ecclesiastical leaders echoed his claims. From the pulpit, they proclaimed the African invasion to be a Crusade against Muslim infidels, and they circulated short histories of the Crusades as propaganda.⁸⁹ The mobilization of the Crusades had a specific ideological aim: the allusions transformed imperial aggression into a source of glory by identifying aggression with Christian evangelism.

Tocqueville was unsympathetic to these royalist strategies. He had already criticized the proactive pursuit of military glory as an example of "the coldest, most calculating" spirit (*DA* 320). Thus, Tocqueville chose to square the realities of colonial terror with the demands of glory in a different way: he reimagined colonial aggression as a war of national defense. Specifically, he shifted the source of initiative to the

⁸⁷ Sessions, "Unfortunate Necessities," 33-4.

⁸⁸ Porterfield calls this the method of "historical modelling" that motivated imperial representational culture; the three most common models were ancient Egyptians, conquering Romans, and crusading Christians, in Porterfield, *The Allure of Empire*.

⁸⁹ Kim Munholland, "Michaud's *History of the Crusades* and the French Crusade in Algeria under Louis-Philippe," in Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Gabriel P. Weisberg, ed., *The Popularization of Images: Visual Culture under the July Monarchy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 144-165, at 154; Sessions, *By Plow and Sword*, 32-40.

indigenous population and away from French soldiers. The latter were thereby transformed back into heroic *volontaires* selflessly enduring harsh war conditions in Africa. Put simply, Tocqueville brought the realities of colonial war closer to the normative representation of violence provided by the French revolutionary tradition. He helped draw the attention of French readers to a defensive portrait of their collective agency, thereby meeting in more satisfactory ways the demands of glory.

Interpreting Tocqueville's colonial writings this way helps us reconcile otherwise conflicting expository strategies in his Algerian memoranda. Tocqueville's policy recommendations in Algeria, after all, justified colonial violence in two different ways. He would often blame colonial terror on Abd-el-Kader, "a sort of Muslim Cromwell" who was building an anti-imperial army among Arabs who were in principle capable of peaceful coexistence with the French.⁹⁰ Just as often, however, he would argue the opposite by blaming "Moslem civilization" itself for the war. Algerian culture was one driven ineluctably towards war by its religious zeal, against which the French were compelled to defend themselves.

These two justifications point to conflicting accounts of indigenous culpability for the war. But they both rhetorically reassign initiative to indigenous populations and away from French. They therefore imply that the Armée d'Afrique stood in a position of defensive retaliation. Cheryl Welch is surely correct to argue that Tocqueville's rhetorical mode in these memos is not methodical philosophical argumentation, but apologetics.⁹¹ But it is also important to see how these apologetics were not ad hoc.

⁹⁰ Tocqueville, "Essay on Algeria," 64.

⁹¹ Welch, "Colonial Violence and the Rhetoric of Evasion."

Instead, they shared the common rhetorical ambition to frame French military agency in defensive terms.

Let me turn to the first strategy concerning Abd-el-Kader. Tocqueville was well aware that the communities that populated Algeria were heterogenous and held conflicting interests and values. “Although the tribes that compose the Arab population of the Regency have a single language and fairly similar ideas and customs,” he admitted, “their interests differ prodigiously, and they are deeply divided by old hatreds.”⁹² If they possessed any unity prior to France’s invasion, it was a flimsy product of Ottoman rule, a “center where so many divergent rays met.”⁹³ According to Tocqueville, if Algeria had remained in this state of fragmentation, it might have been possible to minimize coercive violence or to peacefully colonize the region by developing shared interests between the two races. He wrote in one of his 1837 essays, for example, that the indigenous communities living in the mountains, the Kabyles, were “a prosaic and interested race who worry far more about this world than the other, and that it would be much easier to conquer them with our luxuries than with our cannon.”⁹⁴ In fact, after the French conquered the region a decade later, Tocqueville again proposed peaceful co-existence with with Arabs and Kabyles. Although full integration was implausible, a kind of bond between the French and Africans could be fostered a new “community of interests.”⁹⁵ In an extraordinary act of ideological misrepresentation, Tocqueville even suggested that a commitment to

⁹² Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 63.

⁹³ Tocqueville, “Second Letter on Algeria,” 17.

⁹⁴ Tocqueville, “First Letter on Algeria,” 7.

⁹⁵ Tocqueville, “First Report on Algeria,” 145.

private property provided one such shared interest. However different the two races might be, Arabs possessed a latent, almost secret belief in the sanctity of private property that could be uncovered through careful consideration of their rituals of ancestral worship and memorialization.⁹⁶

Why then was this peaceful route barred for much of the 1840s? According to Tocqueville, the ascendance of Abd-el-Kader had dashed the prospects for peaceful colonization. He was “convinced that before Abd-el-Kader’s power developed, it was possible” for the French to rule the region “without exactly waging war but only stirring up the Arabs’ passions and setting them against one another.”⁹⁷ But with Abd-el-Kader’s rise, waging war against the entire population had become compulsory. The emir had risen to power amid the social anarchy unleashed by the expulsion of the Ottomans. Deprived of the supports provided by “old habits of obedience” or “superstitious respect,” Abd-el-Kader found himself compelled to unite the warring Arab tribes through a Machiavellian process of emulating their religion passions (“he constantly hides behind the interest of the religion for which he says he acts”).⁹⁸

Although these unification efforts resembled that of Muhammad and the first caliphs, Tocqueville believed its true precedent lay in Europe’s own political development.⁹⁹

Such is the secret of his power; it is not difficult to understand, for what Abd-

⁹⁶ Tocqueville, “First Report on Algeria,” 140, 144-45.

⁹⁷ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 69.

⁹⁸ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 64: “In order to turn these people to advantage, one must either destroy the tribal divisions in their hearts or excite in all the tribes at once a common passion that will hold them together artificially and violently, despite the vices of their social organization that are constantly dividing them.”

⁹⁹ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 64.

el-Kader is attempting is not new in the world. These half-savage African countries are now undergoing a social development very much like that which took place in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. Abd-el-Kader, who has probably never heard of what happened in fifteenth-century France, is acting toward the tribes precisely as our kings, and in particular Charles VII, acted toward feudalism.¹⁰⁰

Abd-el-Kader's European semblance was one of Tocqueville leitmotifs. It implied that the emir's actions were in some way foreign to Muslim culture. The emir "gave [his] battalions a European organization, an organization powerless against our own, but that made him master of his countrymen." His method of nation building was "quite new among the Arabs... he is the first who took from his contact with Europe the ideas that would make his own enterprise similarly durable."¹⁰¹ By weaponizing European techniques of centralization, Abd-el-Kader "stands at the head of a united army that can fall on those who would betray him, at any moment and upon the least suspicion."¹⁰² Thus, the French were compelled to wage war. The hope of fostering a community of interest had to be deferred until the Muslim Cromwell was defeated.

This argument implies that culpability for the war lay, not with the French invasion, but with Abd-el-Kader's initiative. Without his Machiavellianism, indigenous tribes would be more receptive to creating a community of shared interests. The Armée d'Afrique, in turn, is tacitly portrayed as having been backed into a defensive position. No choice remained but to destroy Abd-el-Kader's unified army through terror. Only total war could persuade local communities to abandon Abd-el-Kader by raising the costs of allegiance to prohibitive thresholds.

¹⁰⁰ Tocqueville, "Essay on Algeria," 67.

¹⁰¹ Tocqueville, "Essay on Algeria," 67.

¹⁰² Tocqueville, "Essay on Algeria," 69.

This conclusion, however, pushes in the opposite direction of another argument Tocqueville makes to justify colonial violence: France could have adopted a peaceful method of colonization and racial integration. Unfortunately, unlike other colonial powers in Europe, the French were dealing with a region predisposed to violence for cultural and social reasons.

But it can be said nonetheless that for quite a long time—we cannot know how long—domination of the Arabs will be onerous. This is because of the social organization of this people, their tribal organization and nomadic life, something we can do nothing about for a very long time, perhaps ever. Very small, nomadic societies require great effort and expense to be held in an order that will always be imperfect.¹⁰³

In this scheme, total war was demanded, not by a Machiavellian prince, but by indigenous “culture” itself. The distinctive qualities of the Algerian social state made it impossible for the French to rule the region without domination. Indeed, Tocqueville even suggested that no matter who led the region, that leader would always be compelled to wage war on France for these cultural reasons.

Unlike the Kings of Europe, an emir does not rule over individuals who can be kept down by the social force at the prince’s disposal. Rather, he governs tribes that are completely organized little nations, which cannot normally be guided except in the direction their passions lead. But the Arab tribes’ passions of religion and depredation always lead them to wage war on us. Peace with Christians from time to time, and habitual war, such is the natural taste of the populations that surround us.¹⁰⁴

Thus, the enemy is not Abd-el-Kader, but something intrinsic to the social state of Arabs. Their zealotry places them beyond the bounds of reasonable discourse. Even if France had wanted to avoid war by creating a community of interests, Arabs would have never permitted them to settle in peace. For Arabs, war against the French is

¹⁰³ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 62.

¹⁰⁴ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 63.

expressivist rather than strategic. It articulates their values and religious orientation. Indeed, Arabs are not even retaliating against a French invasion. They are simply playing out their cultural *esprit*, their principle of peoplehood. As Tocqueville forced himself to conclude, “To flatter ourselves that we could ever establish a solid peace with an Arab prince of the interior would, in my view, be a manifest error.” That was because “the permanent state of such a sovereign would be war with us, whatever his personal inclinations might otherwise be, and whether he were as pacific by nature or as fanatical in his religion as one could imagine.”¹⁰⁵ Leaders of Algerian communities are simply ciphers of culture. They express, but cannot manipulate or redirect, the social state of those they rule. Ergo, the French must fight fire with fire. They must wage total war and destroy the enemy civilization, for as a matter of culture, Arabs will never surrender of their own volition. Since their barbarism stems from something below the level of politics or institutions, it is like a natural disaster that the French cannot prevent. “There is no way to know when the war will end,” Tocqueville admitted. “Domination over semi-barbarous nomadic tribes, such as those around us, can never be so complete that a civilized, sedentary population could settle nearby without any fear or precaution. Armed marauding will long outlast war itself.”¹⁰⁶ And so his prescription was domination without end, demanded by indigenous culture rather than French values.

Although Tocqueville put forward conflicting accounts of indigenous culpability for the war, we can make sense of his apologetics if we interpret them as

¹⁰⁵ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 63.

¹⁰⁶ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 81.

part of a larger effort to assign initiative to the conquered, and to deflect it, however partially, away from the conquerors. From the perspective of understanding why, exactly, the French must wage total war in Algeria, the two arguments pull in opposing directions. But from the perspective of assigning aggressive and defensive agency, or of assessing culpability for the war, they pull in the same direction: culpability lay with Algerians.

This defensive fantasy played out unvarnished in Tocqueville's diary entries of his visit. In them, he observes a harsh environment in which anyone, even a civilian like Tocqueville, could be at risk of decapitation. That may have been true. But it is hard not to notice that Tocqueville believed barbaric Algerians were at fault for this rather than the terroristic French presence. He lauds Algeria as "a promised land," only to add, "...if one didn't have to farm with gun in hand." He complained of his own anticipated beheading multiple times, observing the "Superb road...that one cannot follow more than three leagues without being beheaded," "blockhouses beyond which one could not walk without risking one's head," "Bougie. Very picturesque town...We are enclosed there as if in a sentry box, from which we can't stray even a rifle shot away without risking our heads."¹⁰⁷ In an almost tongue-in-cheek follow-up, Tocqueville remarked that "Still, in the past several months, two shipwrecked crews were not assassinated. They were returned for ransom, but after having been circumcised and raped."¹⁰⁸

It is unclear if Tocqueville was ever really in danger. It is more likely, as some

¹⁰⁷ Tocqueville, "Notes on the Voyage to Algeria in 1841," 37, 40-41, 52.

¹⁰⁸ Tocqueville, "Notes on the Voyage to Algeria in 1841," 52.

scholars have suggested, that like most colonists, Tocqueville's own travel experiences unfolded at both the level of reality and fantasy.¹⁰⁹ As Tocqueville travelled along the Barbary Coast, he was also traversing an imaginary geography sensationalized in the travel literature of early nineteenth century France. This was a fantasy of an environment intrinsically hostile to civilization, populated by Arabs murdering travelers without discretion, and in which a French citizen would only dare to explore if fortified with extraordinary courage. Even the grueling environment, heat, and desert conspired against the French. Indeed, one can almost hear in Tocqueville's personal journal mild angst over unwarranted persecution.

By shifting the sense of initiative away from the French army, Tocqueville invites his readers to reimagine French colonial aggression in defensive terms, just as the *volontaires* of the Revolution "defended" French republicanism against the retrograde monarchism of European powers—nevermind that it was the Republic, and not Europe, that instigated the expansionist revolutionary wars of liberty. If these apologetics amounted to sheer ideology, Tocqueville did not seem to mind. After all, as he once admitted, since in democracies "it is no longer possible to aim for greatness, one seeks elegance and and prettiness instead. One strives not so much for reality as for appearance" (*DA* 534).

* * *

Tocqueville's defensive portrait of colonial aggression drew on, and enjoyed the corroboration of, the larger political culture of French colonialism. If he was

¹⁰⁹ Gallois, *A History of Violence*, 16-19.

unique in his direct participation in colonial administration, his arguments nevertheless recapitulated familiar tropes of that culture. Indeed, French metropolitans were obsessed with the defensive nature of African war. Visual representations of the Algerian conquest, for example, were structured around Napoleonic motifs that emphasized the war's defensive character. Horace Vernet had portrayed the battle for Constantine in just that way in his *Première campagne de Constantine* (1837) [fig 8]. Vernet was one of the most preeminent painters of military battles under the Restoration and July Monarchy. A member of the official artistic establishment, his technique was known for its aspiration to scientific accuracy and visual realism. In *Première campagne de Constantine*, he used that realism to draw a contrast between the familiar defensive line formation of the revolutionary and Napoleonic armies and the guerilla combat of Arabs. In the painting, French soldiers are illustrated on the defense. Their shoulders are locked together as brothers in arms. Confronting them is an aggressive and guerilla melee force, attacking almost haphazardly. However, despite its "scientific" visual style, its image of colonial violence was enormously misleading by the 1840s: Bugeaud's war in Africa was itself a form of guerrilla war. The general's most important military innovation consisted in organizing the French army around "flying" mobile columns that contrasted sharply with Napoleon's slow-moving infantry units saddled with complex supply chains. Bugeaud's units were mobile, fast, and deadly. They did not need supply lines because they subsisted on the spoils of *razzias* against indigenous encampments. In other words, after 1840, Vernet's representation of the conquest of Constantine would have redirected the



[fig 8: Horace Vernet, *Première campagne de Constantine* (1837), Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, Brown University]



[fig 9: Pellerin Publishing House, Epinal Print, “Défense héroïque de Mazagran” (1840).
Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Estampes et photographie]

spectator’s attention away from the realities of Bugeaud’s techniques of total war by monumentalizing a defensive battle as if it were exemplary or generic.

Nor were these defensive tropes limited to the state’s official visual culture.

The most famous instance of “defensive” colonial war, of which Tocqueville was certainly aware, was the 1840 “Heroic Defense of Mazagran.” Metropolitan citizensoften viewed this siege as a founding legend of the Algerian war. The legend describes how thousands of Arab soldiers assailed a small detachment of 123 French soldiers under Captain Lelièvre at their outpost at Mazagran from February 2-6. Miraculously, “the 123” successfully endured the siege for four days until a sortie from Mostaganem rescued them.

It is unlikely that such an event really happened, or at least in the way that the

myth described. Nevertheless, reports of the “Heroic Defense of Mazagran” grew into a sensational craze in France. It became a familiar object of depiction in painting, verse, and print culture. Importantly, it also became the subject of the popular Epinal print series published by the Pellerin publishing house—the very publisher that played such a crucial role in recrafting Bonapartism into an egalitarian and democratic political culture [fig 9].¹¹⁰ Besides its apparent focus on national defense, the composition of Pellerin’s print of the Mazagran siege emphasizes the numerical difference between the two armies: thousands upon thousands of Arab soldiers attacking a single outpost protected with a mere 123 soldiers. This lopsided representation exaggerated and inverted the reality of French colonial warfare. More often than not, the thousands-strong attack forced raiding small settlements belonged, not to Arabs, but to the Armée d’Afrique. Jean Adolphe Beauce’s *Défense héroïque du capitaine Lelièvre à Mazagran* (1842) brings together these Epinal tropes with the classical line formation [fig 10]. Beauce’s subject, too, is defensive French glory: heroic *volontaires* enduring an attack by a numerically superior enemy force. In short, the “Heroic Defense of Mazagran” was cited, time after time, “as living proof that the warrior ethos of the Napoleonic era lived on in contemporary French men.”¹¹¹

The legendary status of the “Heroic Defense of Mazagran” escalated to such world-historic importance that the French public occasionally analogized Captain Lelièvre and the 123 soldiers to Leonidas and the Spartans at Thermopylae. As is well known, Leonidas the Spartan King led 300 soldiers to defend the small pass at

¹¹⁰ Day-Hickman, *Napoleonic Art*, 48-83.

¹¹¹ Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*, 155.



[fig 10: Jean Adolphe Beauce, *Défense héroïque du capitaine Lelièvre à Mazagran* (1842)]

Thermopylae in 480 BC. By sacrificing themselves to defend the pass against many thousands of Persians, the 300 created an opportunity for the larger Greek army to retreat. Leonidas and the 300, in other words, are the archetypal myth of glorious national defense on behalf of the people and the *patrie*. It communicates the belief that a volunteer army, even a tiny one, will always possess more strength than its mere numbers suggest. Unlike the barbaric Persian throngs led by Xerxes, Leonidas's Spartans are fortified with virtue, discipline, and the spirit of self-sacrifice.

In the early 1820s, the French were enthralled with Spartan example because of the Greek War of Independence. Thanks to the latter, a powerful philhellenic movement appeared in France, and it even involved prominent liberals like Benjamin



[fig 11: Jacques Louis David, *Léonidas aux Thermopylae* (1814)

Constant. It was a vicarious identification already beautifully illustrated by Jacques Louis David's painting of Leonidas at Thermopylae from 1814 [fig 11]. David was a Jacobin and a Bonapartist (the two affiliations shaded into one another). In *Léonidas aux Thermopylae*, he brought together his neoclassical painting style with Napoleonic visual motifs.¹¹² In the top-right corner, the worldly possessions of the Spartans are being carted away before the final battle; they will not be needed after the Spartan soldiers win immortal glory. In the top-left corner of the painting, a soldier is etching into the mountain pass Leonidas's final message: "Go tell the Spartans, traveler / That here obedient to their laws we fell." The 300's glory lay in surrendering their "natural" instinct for well-being to the sacrificial, "social" law of national salvation. For

¹¹² Nina Athanassoglou, "Under the Sign of Leonidas: The Political and Ideological Fortune of David's *Leonidas at Thermopylae* under the Restoration," *The Art Bulletin* 63, no. 4 (1981): 633-49.

Tocqueville's post-revolutionary generation, Leonidas's example offered a kind of civilizational and founding mythology that connected Sparta to France, Leonidas to Napoleon—and the Armée d'Afrique.

As if to fulfill Tocqueville's request "for a great monument to our country's glory on the African coast," the French state answered the Mazagran craze by proposing a public monument to commemorate the 123. The city of Algiers and Louis-Philippe's press opened a subscription to collect funds for the monument. Under a commission led by Marshall Gérard—a veteran of the Napoleonic wars—the government proposed to build the monument on the Champs Elysées, to complement other monuments to Napoleonic glory like the Arc de Triomphe and the Hôtel des Invalides. Marshall Gérard even modeled the monument's design after its Napoleonic precedents: it was to be a column, like the Vendôme, made of Roman ruins salvaged in Algeria. Although funding shortages led the state to scrap the enormous monument in favor of a smaller one at the site of Mazagran itself, the original proposal for the public monument suggested that France sought to "bring the symbols of French colonial domination to the heart of Paris and give material form to the analogies drawn between the Algerian and Napoleonic armies in popular culture."¹¹³

Tocqueville was therefore far from alone in performing the ideological work of reimagining the conquest of Algeria through historical allusions to antiquity and the Napoleonic wars of liberty. The memorialization of events like the "Heroic Siege of Mazagran" popularized precisely those imaginary historical links. It taught French

¹¹³ Sessions, *By Sword and Plow*, 156.

citizens—Tocqueville included—to imagine the war in Africa as a defensive war for civilization and against barbarism, not unlike the revolutionary wars of liberty. Together with colonial political culture, Tocqueville drew attention to a defensive portrait of French national agency that was more consistent with the revolutionary tradition than with the realities of Bugeaud’s total war. It is important to not lose sight of that reality. Total war in Algeria consisted of terroristic raids, pillaging small tribes and burning their harvests to starve them. In Pélissier’s case, war also meant asphyxiating indigenous tribes in caves by the hundreds. Tocqueville’s memoranda on Algeria may read like a sober, technical report analyzing a complex governmental project. In reality, it was a work of ideology. Tocqueville’s demand for an African monument to French glory ought to be read as a call to connect the new practice of war in Algeria to the normative representation of political violence inherited from the French revolutionary tradition: defensive, patriotic, and democratic.

Thus, in the end, it did not matter whether the war found its cause in Abd-el-Kader’s Machiavellian machinations or something intrinsic to Arab “culture.” It did not matter because the point was never to understand with much precision why war was necessary. At stake was something more important: identifying French colonial aggression as a defensive war on behalf of liberty and civilization. Rather than small, inconsequential tribes, the enemy was an implacable barbaric population. In the face of such an intransigent enemy, the French needed to muster all of its courage to defend every acre it conquered. In the wayward paths of liberal colonial ideology, Tocqueville’s defense of civic participation and “a rational form of patriotism” paved

the path to his own justification for terror in Algeria. To foster individual interest in public affairs at home, one needed a theater for glory abroad. To check democratic statism in France, one needed extraordinary projections of state power in Africa.

Conclusion: From the Science of Politics to the Science of War

In the 1841 “Essay on Algeria,” Tocqueville asked, “What type of war we can and must wage on the Arabs”? The French liberal, known for his defense of local liberties and his critique of despotism, answered that the only type of war appropriate for Arabs was total war. Since “the war cannot be won at one blow,” no choice remained but to undermine the conditions of life for indigenous communities.¹¹⁴ Specifically, France must “ravage the country...we must do it, either by destroying harvests during the harvest season, or year-round by making those rapid incursions called razes, whose purpose is to seize men or herds.”¹¹⁵ The *razzia* not only starved Abd-el-Kader’s army, but decimated the local population. It robbed them of their means of subsistence. In this war, civilians were fair game because nobody was only a civilian. All Arabs were culpable in some way for the war, whether as potential allies of Abd-el-Kader or as slaves to religious passions for war. Tocqueville admitted that his answer might shock European sensibilities, but he insisted that “If we do not burn harvests in Europe, it is because in general we wage war on governments and not on peoples.”¹¹⁶ In the history of political thought, this is an incredible admission.

Although the idea of waging war on populations may be cynically familiar to

¹¹⁴ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 68.

¹¹⁵ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 71.

¹¹⁶ Tocqueville, “Essay on Algeria,” 70.

contemporary readers, in early nineteenth century France, waging war on an entire people stood far outside the accepted conventions of war. Its main precedent was the first Republic's 1792 Edict of Fraternity in which France promised to "liberate" monarchical Europe through imperial expansion. Yet even here, Tocqueville radicalized that edict. What Tocqueville justified was a new application of democratic terror, forged in the crucible of the African theater, and which made war on an entire foreign people not only strategically compulsory, but glorious and regenerative.

Five years later, France had essentially reduced Abd-el-Kader to a weak guerilla force. Although resistance to French colonization would continue for generations to come, by 1846, Tocqueville believed Bugeaud's method of total war had been successful. Victory was fragile, but France had conquered the region through violence. Looking back with a measure of pride, Tocqueville tried to sum up France's accomplishments in the half decade since his first visit.

Today we can say that war in Africa is a science whose laws are known to everyone and that can be applied almost with certainty... First, we came to understand that we faced not a real army, but the population itself. The perception of this first truth soon led us to another: given that this population would be as hostile to us as they are today, in order for us to remain in such a country, our troops would have to be almost as numerous in times of peace as in times of war, for it was less a matter of defeating a government than of subjugating a people.¹¹⁷

"War in Africa is a science," Tocqueville wrote. The reader is reminded of his proclamation in *Democracy in America* that "A world that is totally new demands a new political science" (DA 7). It is as if the political science Tocqueville had been searching for since 1831 had finally reached its conclusion in Bugeaud's total war.

¹¹⁷ Tocqueville, "First Report on Algeria," 135.

France had learned “the true conditions of war in Africa.” The enemy was not “a real army, but the population itself.”¹¹⁸ They had learned, not only how to defeat Abd-el-Kader, but how to “subjugate a people” with a continuous application of violence that would not cease even in times of peace.

The implications of Tocqueville’s stance reach beyond his context.

Tocqueville had not only discovered in his science of war the means of dominating Algeria. He had discovered a link connecting the liberal conception of modern liberty to total, redemptive violence. David Bell has remarked that something unexpected, and decisive, occurs in early nineteenth century history concerning “western attitudes towards war.” That unexpected discovery was that “the dream of perpetual peace and the nightmare of total war have been bound together in complex and disturbing ways, each sustaining the other.” What Tocqueville therefore articulated was more than a set of cascading justifications for violence that concluded with colonial terror. What he reveals is a persistent theoretical link between liberalism’s anxieties over statism and an enthrallment with total war, or what Bell calls the “powerful tendency to characterize the conflicts that do arise as apocalyptic struggles that must be fought until the complete destruction of the enemy and that might have a purifying, even redemptive effect on its participants.”¹¹⁹ It has been easy for liberal historians of political thought to portray such inclinations as the exclusive possession of the left or of twentieth century totalitarianism. And yet, under the July Monarchy, France’s most

¹¹⁸ Tocqueville, “First Report on Algeria,” 135-36.

¹¹⁹ David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare as We Know It* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007), 3.

prominent and exemplary liberal succumbed to just that vision of war. As Tocqueville's commitment to the primacy of politics was forced to move through history, to be applied in the course of actual politics, that very commitment transformed him into a proponent of redemptive violence.

Chapter III

From the Ballot to the Barricade in the Paris Commune

In his study on the 1871 Paris Commune, Karl Marx had asked, “On the dawn of the 18th of March, Paris arose to the thunderburst of ‘Vive la Commune!’ What is the Commune, that sphinx so tantalising to the bourgeois mind?” During and after the event, its defenders answered that the Commune presented a breakthrough for democracy. Marx, for example, believed that among its many achievements, the Commune supplied the Republic “with the basis of really democratic institutions.” Unlike parliamentary republicanism, which had hitherto presented little more than a “joint-stock government,” the Commune’s “working existence” embodied the “tendency of a government of the people by the people.”¹ Friedrich Engels had called the Commune the creation of “a new and really democratic state.”² Marx’s daughter, Eleanor, claimed in her introduction to Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray’s 1886 *L’histoire de la commune de 1871*, “It is time people understood the true meaning of this Revolution, and this can be summed up in a few words. It meant the government of the people by the people.”³

Today, these interpretations are familiar, even self-evident. Republican national memory has memorialized the Commune as a monument to working class radicalism and a testament to the vitality of nineteenth century revolutionary

¹ Karl Marx, “The Civil War in France,” in *Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; first published 1871), 163-207, at 181, 192, 187.

² Friedrich Engels, “Introduction” to Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (New York: International Publishers, 1940), 21.

³ Eleanor Marx, “Introduction,” in Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871*, trans. Eleanor Marx (New York: Verso, 2012; first published 1876), 3.

democracy. In 1871, however, claims like those of Marx were still controversial. Undoubtedly, Communards viewed their own revolution as a democratic achievement. Louise Michel had claimed that “the eighteenth of March could have belonged to allies of kings, or to foreigners, or to the people. It was the people’s.”⁴ But claims like Michel’s were made at a time when the French state portrayed the Commune as a riot by a criminal minority and foreign provocateurs associated with Marx’s International Working Men’s Association.

They were not wholly unjustified in doing so. In the months following the September 1870 proclamation of the Republic, a numerical majority of Parisians often withheld support for the communal movement and the revolutionary socialist organizations which led it. Even as Paris radicalized under the siege and capitulation, the city’s revolutionary movements were defeated in elections, time and again, between September and March. Only a quarter of the electorate gave their support to the Republican Central Committee (the precursor organization to the Commune) in the November 3 plebiscite, despite Jacobin and Blanquist campaigns to convince Paris otherwise. A January 6 call to Paris to organize its Commune—the famous “red poster” proclamation—went unheeded. The February elections to the new National Assembly propelled monarchists and conservatives into power with the sanction of a national majority. Paris was virtually alone in electing radicals into the government, and even there, the left’s victory was uneven, concentrated in working class neighborhoods. In this context, Paris’s revolutionary socialist movements could not

⁴ Louise Michel, *The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel*, ed. and trans. Bullit Lowry and Elizabeth Ellington Gunter (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1981; first published 1886), 64.

presume to speak on behalf of “the people.” As Michel had once bitterly remarked, these “unthinking crowds” of Paris behaved like “the great herd that bares its back for the whip and holds out its neck to the knife.”⁵ If subsequent history has memorialized the Commune as a heroic example of popular insurrection, it has done so by eliding what was apparent to all at the time: its democratic credentials had to be earned rather than presumed.

How can an insurrection claim the mantle of “the people” when it has been refused accepted means of popular legitimation? If not through electoral means, on what grounds could the Commune have claimed to voice the will of the people? Historians and political theorists have long acknowledged that the Commune could not draw its democratic legitimacy from universal suffrage. Indeed, the Commune owes its lasting commemorative authority to its attempt to construct political authority outside the state’s channels. To explain how the Commune successfully secured its democratic credentials, however, scholars have generally turned to its associational, anti-statist, and participatory political culture. Like some communards themselves, these scholars attribute its democratic credentials to its street and club politics, at once below the level of the state and beyond parliamentary or electoral representation. The Commune’s clubs, lecture halls, vigilance committees and journals made up a rich political culture of direct, popular engagement independent of official venues of political participation. It is why the Commune remains an important historical focal point for conceptualizing participatory politics and popular sovereignty outside the

⁵ Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 54.

state and electoral fora.⁶

It is my contention, however, that the Commune's title to a democratic revolution cannot be fully explained by this associational political culture. After all, invoking it begs the question. In 1871, it was far from self-evident why a divisive movement could incarnate "the people" simply by rooting itself in direct action in the streets. Unlike prior revolutions which had tacitly spoken for a downtrodden national consensus against an aristocratic and economically powerful elite, the Commune could not even maintain that pretense. After 1851, that right was held by Napoleon's plebiscitary dictatorship. In the autumn of 1870, it transferred to the Provisional Government of National Defense. In early 1871, it passed again into the hands of Adolphe Thiers's national government.

For the Commune to nevertheless claim that it voiced the will of the people, it needed to depart from its predecessors' conception of a majoritarian revolution.⁷ As a result, even if the Commune drew its support from the popular classes and fostered a culture of direct action, more arguments are needed to explain why that could transform a minority movement into the will of the people. To explain the communal movement's democratic credentials by invoking its culture of insurrection and direct action, as many scholars have done, is to presuppose what was still unsettled for much of the nineteenth century: whether popular insurrections articulated the will of the

⁶ Martin Phillip Johnson, *The Paradise of Association: Political Culture and Popular Organizations in the Paris Commune of 1871* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996); John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune* (New York: Basic Books, 2014); Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (New York: Verso, 2015).

⁷ David A. Shafer, *The Paris Commune: French Politics, Culture, and Society at the Crossroads of the Revolutionary Tradition and Revolutionary Socialism* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 21.

people more faithfully than elections based on universal manhood suffrage.

This chapter claims that, in its search for a way to express the will of the people in ways more authoritative than elections, the Commune called upon the classical language of republican war to redefine who “the people” were. It moved beyond incarnating a local insurrection by linking Paris’s mobilization to the awakening of a mythic, martial national subject. That national subject was born in the French Revolution and personified by the revolutionary tradition as the most concrete, real, and felicitous manifestation of “the people” of all: “the people in arms.”

By “the people in arms,” I do not mean the repertoire of public contention familiar to scholars as politics “in the streets,” or direct action by the politically disenfranchised. Rather, “the people in arms” names an historically specific personification of spontaneous collective agency, inherited from the Year II, and which became a central motif of nineteenth century French republican thought.⁸ This collective subject was born on 20 September 1792 at the battle of Valmy, where it won a miraculous military victory against the united continental armies. Outnumbered and alone against an alliance of hostile European monarchs, it was nevertheless armed with the true sources of military strength: not numbers or strategic prowess, but republican unity and morality. Clad in the uniforms of the Universal Republic, “the people in arms” routed the nation’s enemies at Valmy against all odds. In so doing, they turned the course of the first revolution around, saving both the Great Revolution

⁸ Alan Forrest, *The Legacy of the French Revolutionary Wars: The Nation-in-Arms in French Republican Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron, ed., *The People in Arms: Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Invention Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

and the First Republic. Their glorious victory that day made it possible to hold the trial of Louis XVI in the following weeks. Indeed, they had been responsible for striking down his tyranny on August 10th with a flash of their catastrophic agency.

My argument is that construing the true people as “the people in arms” provided a way to solve the Commune’s central political dilemma, namely, how to speak on behalf of the people without an electoral or municipal mandate. Commune leaders had learned the all-important lesson of the French Revolution: revolutionary democratic authority is rooted not in right, but action. By grounding popular sovereignty in the communal movement’s “culture of violence” and the “duties of revolutionary action,” the Commune could claim to voice the will of the people outside official channels of popular acclamation.⁹ Their appeals to the moral authority of spontaneous action allowed Communards to credibly institute themselves as an authority superior to the state. Even more, as the spontaneous incarnation of the people at war rather than an electorate in possession of the franchise, the Commune could position itself as an expression of popular will even *more* direct than Bonapartist plebiscitary dictatorship. Cannons, chassepots, and petrol conveyed the people’s will in ways the ballot could never do. As long as the Commune’s clubs insisted on that fact, they could compete with the state’s sovereignty, their actual numbers notwithstanding. Far from being relegated to a minoritarian movement, then, the Commune’s ability to embody “the people” depended on waging war; that was the source of its democratic standing.

⁹ Johnson, *The Paradise of Association*, 282-3.

In this respect, it is conspicuous that recent scholars have analyzed the Commune's anti-statist political culture without acknowledging how the Commune was initially proclaimed as a war measure. Faced with a national government which refused to follow its 1793 predecessor in ordering the *levée en masse*, the proclamation of the Commune was foremost an anti-statist claim to Paris's right to armed self-defense and universal male conscription. Its culture of civic participation and voluntary self-organization updated republicanism as a language of patriotic warfare. In both its classical and French iterations, republicanism's veneration of civic virtue and public participation had always been inseparable from its commitment to an armed citizenry. Machiavelli had praised the armies of the Roman consuls as empowered by love of country while lamenting its occasional reliance on selfish foreign mercenaries.¹⁰ Rousseau famously insisted in his *Considerations on the Government of Poland* that every citizen should be a soldier, not by trade, but by duty.¹¹ During the French Revolution, Brissot linked the Republic's morality to war abroad: "War is actually a national benefit... our salvation lies that way, for strong doses of poison remain in the body of France, and strong measures are necessary to expel them."¹²

Yet despite this history, scholars like Kristin Ross have recently argued that the Commune "never really quite belonged to the French national fiction, to the heroic radical sequence of French republicanism, of which it was purported to be the last

¹⁰ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 113-4.

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Government of Poland* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 81.

¹² Quoted in David P. Jordan, *The King's Trial: The French Revolution vs. Louis XVI* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 30.

nineteenth-century spasm.” Ross traces the connections between the Paris Commune and communal movements abroad to show how, at bottom, the Commune generated new ways of thinking about democracy—cooperative, internationalist, and ecological—that broke with the national republican tradition which preceded it and which would eventually destroy it. Its political culture was therefore not an inheritance from French republicanism, but its repudiation. Similarly, Martin Breugh has recently argued that the Commune’s allusions to the revolutionary wars of liberty were antithetical to its radical democratic aspirations. When confronted with the Commune’s war measures—like its controversial decision to institute a Committee on Public Safety—he concludes, evasively, that such measures “betrayed” the Commune’s deeper, “plebeian” democratic ambitions.¹³

These prevailing accounts recuperate the Commune’s radical democracy by isolating it from French republicanism’s militarism. In so doing, they yield a portrait of the Commune as singularly preoccupied with attacking political authority. It is thus no surprise that, subsequently confronted with the Commune’s enthusiasm for war or its Committee on Public Safety, these scholars can only see a tragic betrayal of its democratic vision. Attending almost exclusively to the Commune’s anti-authoritarianism, they write as if communards were uninterested in the nature and origins of democratic authority. On the contrary: communard critiques of the state were motivated above all by the desire to construct alternative sites of popular

¹³ Ross, *Communal Luxury*, 4; Martin Breugh, *The Plebeian Experience: A Discontinuous History of Political Freedom*, trans. Lazer Lederhendler (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013; first published 2007), 173-200.

sovereignty. That was the reason they turned to the language of republican war in the first place. Communal democracy and republican war were reciprocally dependent on one another, and appreciating that fact changes our understanding of the conflict between Paris and Versailles in 1871. The civil war appears less as a battle between democracy and its critics than a battle between two conceptions of peoplehood: “the electorate” versus “the people in arms.”

My argument is thus more than an intervention in the historiography of the Commune. It aims to bring back into focus the historical entanglement between spontaneous democratic participation and the republican ideal of the citizen-soldier in France. As contemporary political theorists continue to search for ways to conceptualize popular sovereignty outside the arena of the state and electoral politics, they must also confront the fact that one of the most historically prominent solutions has been war. Especially in nineteenth century political thought, republican war led by “the people in arms” was the quintessential expression of popular sovereignty. In that militarism lay the Commune’s powerful appeal.

The chapter begins by rooting these appeals to “the people in arms” in the context of the industrializing 1840s, where socialists of all stripes pursued what they called “the Social Republic.” As the consummation of 1789’s historical trajectory, the Social Republic promised equality and popular sovereignty in the economic sphere. Even as it provided the orienting ideal for socialists from the 1840s through 1871, however, the means of achieving its promise of social harmony would shift in the intervening decades. In the lead up to 1848, French socialists hoped to win the Social

Republic through the weapon of universal manhood suffrage. Understood as the best answer to the social question, they cathected the suffrage with extraordinary religious, millenarian significance. Yet with another Bonapartist coup and political defeat, the suffrage receded as the accepted means of creating the Social Republic. Although freemasons, feminists, and underground republican networks continued to advocate for the vote, many anarchists and socialists returned instead to “the cult of the revolutionary tradition,” especially the historical memory of 1792-3.¹⁴

Disillusionment with the suffrage laid the ground for the 1871 communal movement to eventually forego, in the face of its own electoral defeats, the idea of the Commune as an elected government. To complete the work of the First Republic, Communards would forge the Social Republic by bypassing electoral politics with republican war. Against the state’s atomizing, quantitative conception of “the electorate,” communards would incarnate the cohesive, qualitative, and spontaneous subject, “the people in arms.” These conceptual reorientations would justify the revolutionary Commune, modeled after its 1793 antecedent, and which privileged a mobilized, armed citizenry over an electorate as the true body of the people. I look to the participant accounts of Louise Michel, Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, and Jules Vallès to unpack these claims.

By approaching the Commune through the notion of “the people in arms,” my aim is to try to think together two things which have often been treated separately: the Commune’s anti-statism, and its existence as a war mobilization effort. If the

¹⁴ Patrick H. Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition: The Blanquists in French Politics, 1864-1893* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

Commune sought to construct political authority outside the state, its success hinged on incarnating democratic terror's mythic agent: the morally virtuous, concrete, and spontaneous "people in arms." Lissagaray remarked after the fact that the Commune "was a barricade, not a government."¹⁵ That observation is the key to grasping why the Commune's politics of anti-statism was also a politics of war.

The Body of the People: The Electorate and 1848

When Parisians considered proclaiming the commune in the fall of 1870, they had in mind an elected government. Modeled after its 1792 precedent, the idea of the Commune was synonymous with Paris's claim to municipal autonomy, a right the city had been denied for the better part of the century. Yet by the following March, revolutionary socialists had redefined the Commune as a revolutionary government sustained by armed mobilization and whose authority was rooted in the extralegal, spontaneous agitation of the people.

In shifting from the ballot to the barricade, "the electorate" to "the people in arms," Paris's communal movement was both recapitulating a debate among French socialist republicans stretching back to the 1840s: whether universal manhood suffrage was capable of realizing the "social" revolution. As discussed in the previous chapter, French society entered into industrialization in earnest under the July Monarchy. Though it unfolded more slowly than its British counterpart, by the 1840s the rise of market competition and wage-labor had redrawn France's demographic and economic

¹⁵ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871*, 194-5.

patterns. Rural male workers in particular were migrating to France's urban centers, spurred by the need for temporary work in times of agricultural recession, exclusion from patrimonial inheritances, and family debt.¹⁶ These large-scale patterns of migration and social dislocation were also thought to be causally linked to urban squalor, sexual immorality, and poverty. France, in other words, saw the rise of "the social question."¹⁷

The social question was most often a question of poverty and inclusion. How can the poor be integrated into the social contract? French intellectuals gave competing accounts of its origins: psychological breakdown from political atomization, economic inequality and distributive injustice, the repression of human desire, a state that was too centralized, a state that wasn't centralized enough, collective moral enervation, and atheistic materialism. In turn, reformers also offered diverse, competing answers to the question: sexual liberation, the worship of androgyny, intentional communities, trendy mysticisms, state-led management, and economic cooperation outside the state.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gérard Noiriel, *Workers in French Society in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Berg, 1990; first published 1986), 40-41.

¹⁷ Jacques Donzelot, *L'invention du social: essai sur le déclin des passions politiques* (Paris, 1984); William Sewell, *Work & Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Andrew R. Aisenberg, *Contagion: Disease, Government, and the 'Social Question' in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Pamela Pilbeam, *French Socialists Before Marx: Workers, Women and the Social Question in France* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000); Denise Riley, 'Am I That Name?' *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History* (London: Macmillan-Palgrave, 1988).

¹⁸ Frank E. Manuel's *The Prophets of Paris* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Naomi J. Andrews, *Socialism's Muse: Gender in the Intellectual Landscape of French Romantic Socialism* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006); John Tresch, *The Romantic Machine: Utopian Science and Technology After Napoleon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Christopher H. Johnson, *Utopian Communism in France: Cabet and the Icarians, 1839-1861* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); K. Steven Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Pilbeam, *French Socialists Before Marx*; Sewell, *Work &*

For all these differences, however, most observers believed that the social question was, at bottom, a moral one. More often than not, they grasped it in psychological, subjective terms rather in light of a structural theory of society.¹⁹ We see this in their frequent appeals to a heterodox and primitive Christianity, like Auguste Comte's "New Religion of Humanity," Pierre Leroux's "Doctrine of Humanity," Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's early Christian socialism, Alphonse-Louis Constant's *La bible de la liberté*, Alphonse Esquiros's *L'Évangile du peuple*, and in popular representations of Jesus as a worker. Industrialism, these thinkers believed, was a moral crisis rooted in the disintegration of "the social," and it called for answers that were at once scientific and religious.

Henri de Saint-Simon, a wealthy aristocrat and avid social reformer, was the most prominent source for framing "the social question" this way. Enormously influential, Saint-Simon endorsed a dual technocratic and religious approach to the social question. On one hand, "the method of the experimental sciences should be applied to politics."²⁰ On the other, modern social theory had shown English liberalism's atomized conception of society to be empirically mistaken. The latter had powerfully misrecognized society's essentially corporate nature, which Christianity correctly grasped. "In every good national government," he explained, "the patriotism which is part of each individual changes into an *esprit de corps* or corporate will the

Revolution.

¹⁹ Andrews, *Socialism's Muse*, 6-7; Leo Loubère, "Intellectual Origins of Jacobin Socialism," *International Review of Social History* 4, no. 3 (1959): 415-431; Pilbeam, *French Socialists Before Marx*, 15-20.

²⁰ Henri de Saint-Simon, "On the Reorganization of European Society" (1814), published in Saint-Simon, *The Political Thought of Saint-Simon*, ed. Ghita Ionescu (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 83-98, at 87.

moment the individual becomes a member of it.” “This corporate will,” according to Saint-Simon, provided “the soul of government, which unifies all its actions and harmonizes all its movements.”²¹

This dual approach implied a repudiation of violence.²² It also implied that the reins of government—finances, law, the military, public functions—ought to be seized by educated elites. Most importantly, it called on social reformers to attend to “the part played by religious sentiment in society,” to acknowledge “the predominance of morality over the law,” and to proclaim “the great aim” of social policy to be “improving as quickly as possible the condition of the poorest class.”²³ Indeed, far from banishing the sacred, modern society needed primitive Christianity more than ever to repair its corroded social bond.

The more society progresses morally and physically, the more subdivision of intellectual and manual labour takes places... The result is that, the more society progresses, the more necessary it is that the form of worship should be improved; for the purpose of the form of worship is to remind men, when they assemble periodically on the day of rest, of the interests common to all members of society, of the common interests of the human race.²⁴

“Progress” did not replace religion with materialism; instead, it made the former more urgent. Answering the social question required a moral revolution that prioritized society and the common good. That belief led Saint-Simon to promote morality as the highest science of all: “there is a science much more important for the community than

²¹ Saint-Simon, “On the Reorganization of European Society,” 89.

²² Henri de Saint-Simon, “The Catechism of the Industrialists” (1823-6), in Saint-Simon, *The Political Thought of Saint-Simon*, 182-203, at 184.

²³ Henri de Saint-Simon, “New Christianity” (1825), published in Henri de Saint-Simon, *Social Organization, the Science of Man and Other Writings*, trans. Felix Markham (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 81-82, 87.

²⁴ Saint-Simon, “New Christianity,” 103.

physical and mathematical science—the science on which society is founded, namely ethics.”²⁵

Saint-Simon’s arguments persuaded an entire generation of reformers. His religious and technocratic approach to the social question attracted wealthy, elite citizens, and many of them entered into important governmental positions. Famously, they helped industrialize Algeria, develop foreign economic and commercial policy, and served as architects of the Suez and Panama Canal.²⁶ In public, the most enthralled members were identifiable by their uniforms: flamboyant, they zipped up in the back, which required another person’s aid and ritualistically enacted man’s social interdependence.

Like any decent left movement, Saint-Simonism devolved into sectarian factionalization, from Barthélemy Prosper Enfantin’s cult of sexual complementarity at Ménilmontant, Etienne Cabet’s “Icarianism” (named after Cabet’s famous 1840 utopian text *Voyage en Icarie*) to Charles Fourier’s phalanstères. For all of their differences, however, each of these splintering reform movements established their own paradigm of social regeneration. For Fourier, answering the social question was the key from evolving from “Civilization” to “Harmony” which was outlined in his “Table of the Progression of Social Movement, Succession and Relation of its 4 Phases and 32 Periods.” For Auguste Comte, “disorganization” would yield to the sacralization of society, “Humanity as the True Supreme Being” and the Positivist

²⁵ Saint-Simon, “New Christianity,” 114.

²⁶ Osama Abi-Mershed, *Apostles of Modernity: Saint-Simonians and the Civilizing Mission in Algeria* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

Church.²⁷ For Cabet, developmental progression was plotted through revolutionary history, from the English Civil war to the French Revolution. For Louis Blanc, the task was to transcend “concurrency” into “cooperation” under the state’s expert leadership. In Pierre Leroux’s eyes, the transition from egoism to social harmony entailed an acknowledgment of the progressive interrelatedness of all life forms, achieved as each person was reincarnated 405 times throughout history. Still others appealed to new visions of technological vitalism: steam power, energy conversion, printing presses, energetic matter and nature worship, and (again) Mesmerism. Michel Chavelier, the Saint-Simonian most involved with setting French commercial policy abroad, crooned that “the railroad [was] the most perfect symbol of *universal association*.”²⁸ He spoke on behalf of a generation: technological progress was to serve as a handmaiden for the repair of the moral, associative bases of social cohesion.

In many ways, the apocalyptic vision of social disintegration which underlay utopian proposals for moral and social regeneration analogized to Jacobin anxieties over the *ancien régime*’s disincorporation decades before. Just as in 1789, the social bond itself appeared on the cusp of dissolution, threatened by the abstraction inherent to contractualist economic citizenship. As Michael Behrent has argued, these thinkers “occupied a distinct ideological space on the French left, defined by the conviction that republicanism required a far denser conception of society than that which could be

²⁷ Andrew Wernick, *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-Theistic Program of French Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Comte also advocated for a gendered conception of the social, for a discussion see Mary Pickering, *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography, Vol. III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 61-2.

²⁸ Tresch, *The Romantic Machine*, 208.

elicited from the social contract or individual rights alone.”²⁹ Leroux, who coined the term “socialism,” put it like so: “We wanted it [the new government] to stand at the head of progress; and not to let society, momentarily united in heroic sympathy, scatter and dissolve again.”³⁰

* * *

Given the way reformers posed the social question in France, it might be surprising that socialists originally argued that universal manhood suffrage could fulfill these millenarian hopes for social regeneration. After all, the franchise—a single vote for a single citizen—seems to exemplify the atomism that utopian and republican socialists decried. However, up to and during the Second Republic, most French thinkers actually viewed the suffrage as a vector of socialization rather than of individuation. Unlike voting privately in a booth, which became common practice in the twentieth century, voting occurred publicly in assemblies in nineteenth century France. Presiding officers were nominated and selected, often by popular acclamation, at the beginning of electoral assemblies. Although voting happened by ballot, the public character of voting, and the assembly context in which it was conducted, gave voting an associational, even corporatist meaning. Voting was much more than a minimalist form of political participation. It involved articulating oneself into a collective body (the assembly), and to join one’s voice to its *esprit de corps*. In this perspective, voting was as much a qualitative and incorporating activity as it was a

²⁹ Michael C. Behrent, “The Mystical Body of Society: Religion and Association in Nineteenth-Century French Political Thought,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69, no. 2 (2008): 219-43, at 220.

³⁰ Andrews, *Socialism’s Muse*, 3.

quantifying and individuating practice.

This perspective on the suffrage appealed to figures across the spectrum of republican socialism. Alexandre Ledru-Rollin, editor of *La Réforme* and one of the most visible leaders of the left, endorsed the suffrage as key to social republicanism. An advocate for the right to work, Ledru-Rollin ran for the presidency in 1848 and would later briefly join the 1870 Provisional Government as its most left-leaning cabinet member. Louis Blanc, a statist like Ledru-Rollin and the most important republican socialist of the 1840s, agreed. For Blanc, the suffrage was indispensable for “double reform,” or the simultaneous pursuit of political and social reform. Outlined in his 1840 *L’organisation du travail*, which sold by the thousands and enjoyed five editions by 1848, Blanc called for the state-led reorganization of work to counteract competition’s punitive effects: individualism, familial breakdown, and civil war. Like Saint Simon, he believed “industrial reform” required “a profound moral revolution,” one that would “bring about in one day more conversions than all sermons of preachers and all speeches of moralists could in a century.”³¹ And yet Blanc, so resolutely technocratic, nevertheless defended universal suffrage as a means to the Social Republic. In an 1850 letter, he took his stand: “Universal Suffrage or civil war: that is the choice.”³²

To Ledru-Rollin and Blanc’s left were journals *Le représentant du peuple*.

Founded and initially edited by Charles Fauvety, *Le représentant du peuple*

³¹ Louis Blanc, *Organization of Work*, trans. Marie Paula Dickoré (Cincinnati: University of Cincinnati Press, 1911; first published 1840), 57.

³² Louis Blanc, Letter to M. Marie Escudier, 22 September 1850. Gustave Gimon Collection, Stanford University, Misc 482.

formulated its agenda around a revision of Sieyès: “What is the producer in today’s society? Nothing. What should he be? Everything.” (In the shadow of the June Days, this slogan was edited on August 9th to read: “What is the capitalist? Everything. What should he be? Nothing.”) Like utopian socialists before him, Fauvety dedicated the magazine “to you, O People! Universal producer!”³³ At the end of August, the journal was rebooted as *Le peuple*, and the editorship passed to Proudhon. It also added a new slogan, “Division of Functions, Indivisibility of Power.”

Fauvety and Proudhon despised Blanc. And yet, until 1848, they shared his enthusiasm for universal manhood suffrage. *Le peuple* published on 2 September 1848 “the Manifesto of the People.” In it, the editorial team reiterated their millenarian hopes attached to the suffrage. “The People have called for the democratic and social Republic,” the text proclaimed, and that meant calling for monogamous marriage (“inviolable and sacred”), the veneration of art and science (which were given “a new signification”), and the defeat of materialism and atheism. Readers needed to understand that the 1848 revolution was more than a change of government. It also disclosed the transcendent within man and the sacred within society.

Yes, we want revolution: but make no mistake. Religious, for us, is not symbolic: it contains within it the symbolic word. To discover the true religion, it is necessary to begin our exegesis, to show philosophically and with the aid of new social data, the supernaturalism in nature, heaven in society, God in man. That is when civilization will appear to us as a perpetual apocalypse, and history as a miracle without end.³⁴

³³ *Le représentant du peuple*, no. 3 (3 April 1848).

³⁴ “Manifeste du peuple,” *Le peuple*, no. 1 (2 September 1848)

This apocalyptic vision of social revolution, according to *Le peuple*'s editorial team, was perfectly consistent with, and even required, "the organization of universal suffrage: with royalty, this suffrage is merely a lottery." It was an extraordinary perspective on the suffrage's unifying and exalting power, dramatically echoed at a banquet on 17 October. There, the leaders of the French left gave toasts to their ideals. Leroux, Proudhon, and Cabet were all in attendance. At 4 o'clock and under a banner that read, "Democratic and Social Republic; Liberty, Equality, Fraternity; the Right to Work; Abolition of the Exploitation of Man by Man," a worker, Citoyen Charpentier, toasted to universal suffrage.

Citizens, friends and enemies know that the day when the right to the vote was acquired by all [men] was a grand day on earth and in the heavens. It was as if a divine trumpet had announced to tyrants that their reign had come to an end, and that the reign of God had begun... Brothers, let us be united; tighten our ranks; the end of the great drama approaches!...

To the universal vote, the image of heavenly lightning placed into the hands of men to pulverize and reduce all aristocrats into nothing!

To the universal vote, a living whip that servants have seized to hunt down their incapable and indignant masters!

To the universal vote, which permits us to clutch to our breasts this cry, symbol of the future:

Vive le République démocratique et sociale!³⁵

Charpentier was followed by Proudhon ("Greetings to you, Revolution! I serve you, as I have served God, as I have served Philosophy and Liberty, with all of my heart, all my soul, all my intelligence and all my courage, and never will any sovereign rule other than you!") and a Citoyen Morel ("Yes, citizens, to the family! But to the family perfected and purified of contamination! To the family based on love, on this pure and

³⁵ "Banquet de la République démocratique et sociale du mardi 17 octobre 1848" (1848). Gustave Gimon Collection, Stanford University, DC272 .A2 R47 F.

divine love which, spiritualizing man, elevates him to indefinable regions of felicity and happiness!”) One could be forgiven for confusing this revolutionary banquet toasting universal manhood suffrage for a religious revival.

* * *

The fate of 1848 is well known. The Second Republic was declared in February, and universal manhood suffrage extended the next month. With the franchise enlarged, the republic elected its first and only president, Louis Napoleon, handing him an enormous popular mandate. Immediately, his political repression of the left began in earnest with the conservative “Party of Order”: the President banned the Marseillaise, invited the clergy back into secondary education with the Falloux Laws, and intensified press censorship. Blanqui was jailed, and both Blanc and Ledru-Rollin went into exile. To break the power of the Left, the president briefly restricted the franchise again in May 1851, only to restore it with his coup d’état on December 2. It was a clever maneuver. Twelve days after universal manhood suffrage was restored, the president organized a national plebiscite which returned support for his government by ten to one. The following year, the Republic would officially be replaced by the Second Empire upon the president’s crowning as Emperor, to popular acclamation. The revolution was defeated by the politics of democracy itself.

The events were a turning point for the history of the French left. As Marx had bitterly remarked, “Universal manhood suffrage seems to have lasted just long enough to make its own testament in the eyes of the world and to declare in the very name of

the people: ‘What’s worth building is worth demolishing.’”³⁶ It is difficult to understate the philosophical defeat Bonapartist plebiscitary dictatorship presented for democracy in France.³⁷ Napoleon III’s coup not only brought down the Republic, but did so to popular enthusiasm. The Empire enjoyed its legitimacy from universal manhood suffrage and the democratic theory cultivated in the decades before 1848. Given the millenarian and redemptive power that socialists and republicans had assigned to the suffrage, Napoleon’s coup could only appear as a direct expression of popular sovereignty. His election appeared to transcend the mediation of political representation. As Marx put it, unlike individual representatives who “merely represents this or that party, this or that city, this or that outpost...*He* is the elect of the nation, and electing him is the trump card which the sovereign people plays once every four years.” As a result, his election embodied the height of direct democracy. Unlike the elected assembly which “stands in a metaphysical relation to the nation,” Marx lamented, “the elected president stands in a personal one...the president is the spirit of the nation incarnate. As opposed to the assembly, he has a kind of divine right, he is president by the people’s grace.”³⁸ As Marx understood, Bonapartism was a crisis for the left precisely because it was a democratic, even revolutionary phenomenon. Its world-historic precondition was the belief in “the people” as the ultimate source of political authority.

³⁶ Karl Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” in *Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; first published 1852), 31-127, at 36.

³⁷ Melvin Richter, “Toward a Concept of Political Illegitimacy: Bonapartist Dictatorship and Democratic Legitimacy,” *Political Theory* 10, no. 2 (1982): 185-214; Melvin Richter, “A Family of Political Concepts: Tyranny, Despotism, Bonapartism, Caesarism, Dictatorship, 1750-1917,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 4, no. 3 (2005): 221-48.

³⁸ Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,” 45.

With Bonapartist plebiscitary democracy, the redemptive promise of universal manhood suffrage no longer enjoyed widespread enthusiasm. The coup defeated both the republican regime as well as the political visions which had been gradually forged in the 1840s. Alongside the closing of Blanc's National Workshops, a grave defeat to the working class, the coup also defeated the millenarian meaning of electoral popular sovereignty. Social republicans were encouraged to abandon the terrain of electoral politics and to adopt "social" solutions to the social question. Blanc's famous argument for "double reform" no longer convinced.

As often happens in the history of political thought, conceptual innovation grows out of political defeat. In this case, it was Proudhon who forged in the crucible of 1848 the most powerful and influential critique of the suffrage. Although his arguments were modestly popular during the revolution, the experience of Bonapartism would popularize them as a credo for the French left on the eve of the Paris Commune. Prior to the revolution, Proudhon was famous for his 1840 text *What is Property?* (and its incendiary answer, "property is theft!"). In a sequence of texts published in 1848 and afterwards, however, he turned his critical energies towards the "mystification of universal suffrage."³⁹

Proudhon's critique of universal suffrage, or democracy—for much of the century, the two were the same thing—was given early articulation in places like his 1848 "Solution of the Social Problem," a collection of articles published at the end of

³⁹ Pierre Joseph Proudhon, "The Mystification of Universal Suffrage," originally published in *Le Représentant du Peuple* (30 April 1848); republished in Proudhon, *Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology*, ed. Iain McKay (Oakland: AK Publishing, 2011), 315-18.

March and which explicitly sought to evaluate whether the suffrage could answer the social question. In that text, Proudhon placed the question of “the People’s sovereignty” as “the starting point of the social sciences.” How is that sovereignty expressed? “We cannot take one step forward until we solve that problem.”⁴⁰ This problem resembled the theological question that concerned Christians, namely, how do we know when God is speaking? “It is the same with the People as it is with divinity: *vox populi, vox Dei*,” Proudhon complained. The stakes of the answer were high, because before we can accept the absolute authority of the will of the people, we must, Proudhon argues, make sure we are not being duped.⁴¹

Proudhon’s objections to universal suffrage were manifold and haphazardly expressed in “Solution of the Social Problem.” Broadly, he was concerned to show how socialists were mistaken to believe universal manhood suffrage voiced the will of the people. For one, since the people do not literally have a mouth, voting was an act of representation rather than immediate voice. It could only approximate the *vox populi* by producing a “personification, symbol or fiction of national sovereignty,” incarnated as the state.⁴² For another, the actual decisions reached by universal manhood suffrage were not universal at all, but majoritarian, a “disguised aristocracy.” How could we believe, Proudhon asked incredulously, that “this law, the expression of some bizarre will, is deemed the People’s will” when it could be decided arbitrarily by a single swing vote? Even worse, because most elections concerned representative

⁴⁰ Pierre Joseph Proudhon, “Solution of the Social Problem” (1848), in Proudhon, *Property is Theft!*, 257-80, at 279.

⁴¹ Proudhon, “Solution of the Social Problem,” 259-60.

⁴² Proudhon, “Solution of the Social Problem,” 261.

offices, the suffrage actually amplified the voice, not of the people, but of those socially powerful enough to get elected. Thus, “There is not and never can be,” Proudhon concluded, “legitimate representation of the People. All electoral systems are mechanisms for deceit.”⁴³

Nor did these arguments mean that Proudhon reviewed Rousseau’s general will favorably. He was impatient with the notion that popular sovereignty required procedures for abstracting away social ascriptions. Not only were women never included in the electorate in the first place, but “who does not see that deputies thus elected apart from all special interests and groups, all considerations of place and person, supposedly representing France, represent absolutely nothing, that they are no longer representative, but senators...?”⁴⁴ Representatives who claimed to speak on behalf of the general will were, in fact, “judges and referees of their constituents’ interests.” That was why “the most certain way of making the People lie,” he wrote, “is to establish universal suffrage.”⁴⁵

Of the scattershot criticisms Proudhon leveled at the suffrage, none were as devastating as his objection that the suffrage recapitulated the atomism that socialists were trying to ameliorate. It was an objection that held a special persuasive power in light of ongoing anxieties over social disintegration. According to Proudhon, voting was neither associational nor incorporating. Instead, it was individuating. Universal manhood suffrage merely aggregated preferences. It could never voice the

⁴³ Proudhon, “Solution of the Social Problem,” 267-8.

⁴⁴ Proudhon, “Solution of the Social Problem,” 270.

⁴⁵ Proudhon, “Solution of the Social Problem,” 274, 276.

qualitatively distinct will of the people, a kind of indivisible *esprit de corps*.

Universal suffrage is a kind of atomism through which legislators, who cannot make the People speak as a unit about their essence, invite citizens to express their opinions one-by-one... It is political atheism in the worst meaning of the word. As if adding up some quantity of votes could ever produce unified thought!”⁴⁶

Like his Saint-Simonian opponents, Proudhon believed that a thick form of social cohesion was the proper answer to the social question. Against the fractured conception of peoplehood normalized by industrialization and recapitulated by the suffrage (“political atheism”), the moral bases of social cohesion had to be reasserted.

Yet unlike most socialists of the 1840s, Proudhon denied the suffrage a place in that program of regeneration. It wasn’t only that the suffrage expressed a misguided will of the people—say, because they were uneducated or misled by oppression—but that it gave voice to the wrong conception of peoplehood in the first place: the electorate. “The individual vote, with regard to government, as a means of observing the national will, is exactly the same thing as a new division of land would be in the political economy,” he explained. “It is the agrarian law transported from the soil to authority.”⁴⁷ Universal manhood suffrage reproduced in politics what was occurring socially and economically: society’s disintegration and the corresponding subjection of the economy to the demands of wage labor, credit and debt. Nothing revealed that France had lost sight of “the actual formula for sovereignty” as clearly as the fact that socialists believed universal manhood suffrage could answer the social question.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Proudhon, “Solution of the Social Problem,” 275-76.

⁴⁷ Proudhon, “Solution of the Social Problem,” 276.

⁴⁸ Proudhon, “The Mystification of Universal Suffrage,” 316.

If not universal manhood suffrage, what then was “the actual formula for sovereignty”? For Proudhon, it was the opposite of democracy (the suffrage): the Republic.

In the republic, everyone reigns and governs; the People think and act as one person. Representatives are plenipotentiaries with the imperative mandate and are recallable at will. The law is the expression of the unanimous will: there is no other hierarchy besides solidarity of functions, no other aristocracy besides labour's, no other initiative besides the citizens'. Here is the republic! Here is the People's sovereignty!

Where democracy atomized, the Republic unified. Where the former embodied a fragmented people in subjection to the state, the latter expressed “the People...as one person” legislating for itself. The former yielded a unity abstractly represented through the calculus of votes; the latter produced a unity concretely expressed through the “solidarity of functions.”

We might say that Proudhon is explaining *Le peuple's* unusual headmast, “Division of Functions, Indivisibility of Power.” The problem with electoral representation in democracy, Proudhon wants to say, is that the subject of representation is the citizen. In the Republic, in contrast, *society*, especially its division of labor, is represented directly because representatives are bound by the *mandat impératif*. Not the general will, but the social division of labor is the object of representation. This produces a qualitative rather than quantitative unity. Just as the cooperation between husband and wife, artisan and peasant, or merchant and banker calls on their social particularity to thread together a social fabric, the republic expresses unity grounded in the “solidarity of functions.” That is why the Republic calls forth a real rather than artificial people.

With the fall of the Second Republic, Proudhon's ideas ascended in prominence. Proudhon's prescriptions for the Republic shaped what Communal leaders later proclaimed for themselves. The communal movement would repudiate the general will by reimplementing the *mandat impératif*, endorse the idea that popular sovereignty expressed "unity in power" achieved through complementary social differentiation, and denounce any gap between representative and represented. Unlike the democratic atomism of merely adding up votes, in the Republic everything would be "thinking and acting as a single man."⁴⁹ It would be a real rather than a symbolic or "insubstantial" collective subject.⁵⁰ Unlike representative democracy, the Social Republic is a society. As the editors of *Le Peuple* reminded their readers in September 1848, "Socialism is a science, politics is an art; Socialism has principles, politics has only fantasies; Socialism knows only humanity, politics knows only individuals."⁵¹ So much the worse, then, for political answers to the social question.

From the Electorate to the People in Arms

With the fall of the Second Republic, debates over the social question, industrial reform, worker emancipation, and education moved underground. Imperial censorship laws created a hostile environment for socialists to discuss the social question. Booming economic modernization also bolstered Napoleon's political

⁴⁹ Proudhon, "Solution of the Social Problem," 280.

⁵⁰ Pierre Rosanvallon calls this the distinction between "substantialist" and "symbolic" conceptions of the people in *Le Peuple introuvable. Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Sacre du Citoyen: Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

⁵¹ "Le Socialisme et la Politique," in *Le Peuple*, no. 3 (1848).

prestige, leading Marx to judge the Second Empire the best realization of the modern state's independence from society.⁵² This was the time of Paris as “the capital of the nineteenth century,” an era when French cultural expression defined European intellectual life.⁵³ In a context of imperial economic and cultural supremacy, it was up to underground networks of Blanquists and freemasons to preserve the historical memory of 1793 and February 1848.⁵⁴

The social question would not return to public prominence in France until economic contraction in the 1860s forced France into a depression. The glamour of Haussmanization, gas lamps, arcades, and bourgeois boutiques lining the Champs-Élysées appeared in unacceptable contrast to urban working class men and women scraping by on five sous dinner specials, purchased on credit. Together with press censorship, the economic contraction turned liberals against the Empire. Napoleon responded by liberalizing his rule, expanding the right to strike, freedom for the press, and legislative power for parliamentary bodies. But these reforms backfired. Rather than consolidating support for his regime, the partial restoration of the right to association and a free press empowered opposition groups. In particular, the relaxation of laws on public assembly in the late 1860s gave birth to a flourishing “public meetings” movement.

⁵² Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire,” 116.

⁵³ Walter Benjamin, “Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” *Perspecta* 12 (1969): 163-72; David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital: 1848-1875* (New York: Vintage, 1996; first published 1975).

⁵⁴ Philip Nord, “Republicanism and Utopian Vision: French Freemasonry in the 1860s and 1870s,” *The Journal of Modern History* 63, no. 2 (1991): 213-29; Pamela Pilbeam, *Republicanism in Nineteenth Century France, 1814-1871* (London: Palgrave-Macmillan, 1995); Sam Bernstein, *Auguste Blanqui and the Art of Insurrection*.

Amid these imperial reforms, the issue of the social question, revolution, and anticlericalism resurfaced. However, engaged workers and intellectuals did not return to the romantic socialism of 1848 uncritically. Although the enchantment of work, technological utopianism, faith in positivism and naturalism all reappeared, the millenarian hopes of electoral popular sovereignty were noticeably attenuated. Much of the revolutionary Left now appeared indifferent towards the suffrage and the political process. Within the vocabularies of dissent that prevailed in the Empire's final days, Charpentier's heavenly lightning of universal suffrage no longer provided a compelling weapon of revolutionary democracy.

Indeed, given its prominence in 1848, the disaffection from electoral popular sovereignty is striking. It would be easy to explain this by pointing to the fact that universal manhood suffrage existed under the Second Empire. But everyone knew its *de jure* existence was just that. The constitution stipulated the automatic reelection of Napoleon III after each of his ten year terms, and voting was constrained to a preordained plebiscitary function. Suffrage under the Empire did not amount to the fullness of electoral popular sovereignty pursued by earlier social reformers. And yet, rather than reclaim electoral popular sovereignty against plebiscitary dictatorship as liberal statesmen like Léon Gambetta did, many socialists abandoned the idea of the "political" republic wholesale. When the librarian and publisher Édouard Dentu surveyed "the wreckage of 1848" in the halls of the public meetings, he found "heroes of barricades, professors of social science, doctors of communism and the parceling of property, blue-stockings from the womens' clubs...all of the personnel of the Terror."

What he could not find was interest in electoral popular sovereignty. Socialists, he warned his imperial colleagues, were abandoning the rights of man and property for what amounted to a cornucopia of evil:

In these assemblies... Authority, whether it comes from heaven or earth, is denied and rebuffed; public morality, like religious morality, is outraged in all its forms. The family, paternity, marriage are covered with spit and insults. One proclaims there the abolition of property, the communism of goods, the suppression of proprietors, government, and religions. Finally, and it is a particular trait of demagogues today, after having proclaimed the abolition of all tyrannies, dogmas, constitutions, civil and penal codes, religion and government, they also abolish liberty as antirevolutionary and anti-popular.⁵⁵

These public meetings, Dentu warned, “prove[d] with the clarity of irresistible evidence that... the most applauded orators and audience members preach: ATHEISM, REGICIDE, CIVIL WAR, SPOLIATION, THE COMMUNALIZATION OF PROPERTY, THE ABOLITION OF THE FAMILY, at last, despotism through the suppression of all individual liberties and social superiorities.”⁵⁶

Louise Michel’s memoirs confirm Dentu’s horror. Michel, a schoolteacher in Paris involved in the socialist renaissance, recalls attending public meetings where lecturers prophesized a post-scarcity utopia of communal plenty. On the hither side of history, the downtrodden would enjoy “chemical mixtures containing more iron and nutrients than the blood and meat we now absorb” from the “putrefied flesh we are accustomed to eating.” Sensual self-making, as the young Marx had claimed, would provide the backbone of human emancipation. “We were all poets, a little,” even if imperial ideology had tried to make us forget it.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Édouard Dentu, ed., *Reunions publiques a Paris: 1868-1869* (Paris, 1869), 8. Hoover Institute, Stanford University. History of the Second Empire in France: Pamphlet Collection, Box 715, Fol 4.

⁵⁶ Dentu, *Reunions publiques a Paris*, 9.

⁵⁷ Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 54.

Just as Dentu observed, however, Michel believed politics had little, if any, role in the coming social revolution. Amid this talk of engineered food, public art, educational reform, there was no place for electoral politics. As she put it, “politics is a form of that stupidity” which causes worldly evils. It is thus “incapable of ennobling the race.”⁵⁸ Revolutionaries had learned that “the attempt to work through parliaments has been going on for a long while, but parliaments, standing as they do in the midst of rottenness, can no longer produce anything worthwhile.”⁵⁹ If Michel and her fellow revolutionaries had retrieved the 1848’s utopian program, the millenarian power of electoral popular sovereignty was left behind.

The absence of any significant role for the franchise in replacing the Empire with a Republic marked a mutation in mid-century republicanism, a break in the chain of identifications between the Republic, democracy, and universal manhood suffrage that prevailed on the eve of 1848. Even though the vote was still rightfully pursued by women who did not have it, Bonapartism had persuaded many men (and a few women) of its impotence for realizing the harmonious and equal society they craved. Rather than what communards called a “social society,” the suffrage produced atomization and statism. Something else, I now want to argue, took on the role of bringing about the Democratic and Social Republic, something anathema to Saint-Simonism but already celebrated in Proudhon’s political thought: republican war led by “the people in arms.”

* * *

⁵⁸ Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 52.

⁵⁹ Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 65.

I want to turn to three participant accounts of the Commune—Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray’s *L’histoire de la Commune de 1871*, Louise Michel’s *Memoires*, and Jules Vallès’s *L’Insurge*—to illustrate how “the people in arms” supplanted “the electorate” as the people’s true body during their quest for a social rather than political Republic. By focusing on “the people in arms,” I also mean to contrast the Commune’s militarism with that of the Empire’s. In 1868, active service for the imperial army was extended to five years. Although the reform sought to improve the wartime viability of conscripts, it confirmed that the imperial army stood apart from civil society as a professional cadre. In contrast to this hierarchically organized standing army, “the people in arms” were ordinary citizens culled from the commercial classes or skilled trades. Each soldier was equal to all others, no matter one’s trade, class, or social standing—and sometimes sex. “The people in arms” were therefore an example—maybe even the most important example—of what Marx identified as the Commune’s true achievement: the seizure by “society” of its original powers hitherto alienated in the form of the state. As an incarnation of society’s reclaimed power, “the people in arms” expressed an altogether different conception of collective agency than the Empire’s standing army: not the careerist ambitions of professional soldiers, but the spontaneous virtue and selfless sacrifice of republican citizens. By describing how each author narrates the Commune’s political history, my aim is to show how at crucial junctures, they each believed the communal revolution’s success depended on awakening this legendary collective agent of 1792.

RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

N° 260

LIBERTE — EGALITE — FRATERNITE

N° 260

COMMUNE DE PARIS

LE COMITÉ DE SALUT PUBLIC

Considérant que l'immeuble connu sous le nom de *Chapelle expiatoire de Louis XVI*, est une insulte permanente à la première Révolution, et une protestation perpétuelle de la réaction contre la justice du Peuple,

ARRÊTE :

Art. 1^{er}. La chapelle, dite *expiatoire de Louis XVI*, sera détruite.

Art. 2. Les matériaux seront vendus aux enchères publiques au profit de l'administration des domaines.

Art. 3. Le Directeur des domaines fera procéder, dans les huit jours, à l'exécution du présent arrêté.

Paris, le 16 floréal an 79.

Le Comité de Salut public,

ANT. ARNAUD, CH. GÉRARDIN, LÉO MEILLET,
FÉLIX PYAT, RANVIER.

[fig 12: Decree for the abolition of the Expiatory Chapel of Louis XVI by the Paris Commune's Committee on Public Safety. Broadside, no. 260. Stanford University, Paris Commune Collection, Special Collections & University Archives.]

Let me begin with Lissagaray's *L'histoire de la Commune de 1871*. Published five years after the Commune, it was translated into English in 1886 with the help of Karl and Eleanor Marx after Lissagaray escaped to London. Unlike Michel and Vallès, who both sought the meaning of the Commune through first personal accounts, Lissagaray chose to write a history. More than a chronological record of events, however, *L'histoire* narrates the transmission of popular sovereignty between various bodies after the fall of the Empire: first to the provisional government, then the mayors of Paris in competition with the Central Committee of the National Guard, then the elected Paris Commune in tandem with the National Guard, and finally the "revolutionary" Commune which, controversially, instituted a Committee on Public Safety, toppled the Vendôme column, and decreed the demolition of the Expiatory Chapel of Louis XVI [fig 12]. Each transfer of the baton of popular sovereignty represented a moment armed conflict and military turmoil.

Lissagaray's *L'histoire* opens with a charge: the provisional government formed in the Empire's wake had never intended to activate the people in arms. The Empire collapsed with the Napoleon III's military defeat to Prussian forces at the battle at Sedan on 2 September 1870. In Paris, a confused but enthusiastic republican movement took over the Hotel de Ville and proclaimed the Third Republic as a war measure against the invading army. And at first, that provisional government seemed to invoke the people in arms. On 5 September, Louis Arago, the mayor of Paris, exhorted that "Just as our fathers did in 1792, so I call on you today: Citizens, the fatherland is in danger!" With other republican leaders, he acknowledged that "To

save the *patrie en danger* they [the people] asked for the republic” and thus reminded his audiences that “The Republic was victorious in 1792. The Republic has once more been proclaimed... Citizens, watch over the polity that is confided in you: tomorrow, with the army, you will avenge the *patrie*.” Gambetta, now Minister of the Interior, echoed the mayor a couple weeks later, proclaiming that “today is 21 September. Sixty-eight years ago on this day our fathers founded the Republic and took an oath, faced with a foreign invader who defiled the sacred soil of the fatherland, that they would live in freedom or die on combat.”⁶⁰ These appeals to the people in arms encouraged the extraparliamentary left to cooperate with the provisional government. On September 6th, Blanqui joined his fellow conspirators Gustave Tridon and Émile Eudes in declaring his support. He also founded his magazine, *La Patrie en danger*. Its first issue called the extraparliamentary left to throw its support behind the provisional government.

In hindsight, Lissagaray sees that the rhetoric was merely that. “The people instinctively offered their help to render the nation unto herself” with Napoleon’s defeat at Sedan. Yet “the Left repulsed them, refused to save the country by a riot,” thereby allowing “the fettered nation [to sink] into the abyss in the face of its motionless governing classes.”⁶¹ Echoing by now familiar denunciations of parliamentary politics as mere chatter, Lissagaray reports that the parliamentary left “exhausts itself in exclamations.” When Gambetta cries “We must wage Republican

⁶⁰ Forrest, *The Legacy of the French Revolutionary Wars*, 118-21.

⁶¹ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 7.

war,” he promptly “sits down again,” unmoving.⁶² Jules Favre demands the formation of a Committee of Defense; he is rebuffed and concedes without argument. When Prussian forces defeat the French army at Metz—something the government denied but newspapers were reporting—no deputy rose to call for an inquiry into the discrepancy. Although the Prussian armies rapidly approached Paris, threatening the fledgling republic, no evacuation was implemented, no casting of cannon and ammunition systematically initiated, no earthworks and defense fortifications built.⁶³ Readers must conclude, Lissagaray insists, that from the beginning, the provisional government intended to capitulate. There was never a sincere war effort.

In Lissagaray’s view, the provisional government’s duplicitous war effort was damning given that “the people in arms” were lying within the city’s population as a dormant power awaiting reincarnation.

The necessary armaments might have been supplied in a few weeks, the cannon especially, everyone depriving himself of bread in order to endow his battalion with five pieces, the traditional pride of Parisians... in every Parisian mechanic there is the stuff of a gunner... Paris swarmed with engineers, overseers, foremen, who might have been drilled as officers. There lying wasted were all the materials for a victorious army.⁶⁴

The defeat of Napoleon’s imperial army merely represented a defeat of a professional *corps* that stood independently from society. It was not a defeat of the French *people*, and that was the decisive fact. Rather than drawing out and manifesting a latent “victorious army,” however, the national government “up to the last hour refused to utilize it.”⁶⁵ “Were they to give in,” Lissagaray cried, “their arms intact?”⁶⁶ With

⁶² Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 8.

⁶³ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 16-17.

⁶⁴ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 27.

⁶⁵ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 27.

capitulation to Prussian on January 28, after a humiliating half-hearted military resistance, the answer was apparently yes.

The first demands for a Commune arose in response to the state's inaction. Angered by its refusal to mobilize the National Guard and initiate the *levée en masse*, the Central Republican Committee, the Revolutionary Socialist Party and then later the Central Committee of the National Guard, demanded Parisian municipal sovereignty (the Commune) as a defensive war measure. Paris held the right to defend itself in spite of the provisional government's overtures towards capitulation.

As communards quickly learned, however, to proclaim Paris's autonomy and right to self-defense did not mean that Parisians wanted to invoke it. Committees and fellow-travelers of the Revolutionary Socialist Party organized continuously to bring the mass of Parisians to their program during the late autumn. But nothing demonstrated the latter's reluctance to form a commune more clearly than the communal movement's failed insurrections and electoral defeats. Lissagaray had already observed to his dismay that when Blanquists had earlier marched through Belleville to the cries of *Vive le République! Death to the Prussians!* "No one joined them. The crowd looked on from affair, astonished, motionless."⁶⁷ Even as the provisional government refused the *levée en masse* and fumbled in its defensive maneuvers on the battlefield, mass demobilization prevented the communal movement from successfully retrieving for itself the mantle of the people. If revolutionary authority is rooted not in right, but action, this popular demobilization meant that there

⁶⁶ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 30.

⁶⁷ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 14.

was no authority to be found under the Prussian siege. What existed was, instead, institutional inertia and empty parliamentary rhetoric. That was the meaning of communal politics under the siege:

All is silent. Save the faubourgs, Paris was a vast sick chamber, where no one dared to speak above his breath. This moral abdication is the true psychological phenomenon of the siege... If they [the parliamentary left] dread the giddy-headed, the fanatics, or compromising collaborators, why do they not take control of the movement into their own hands? But they confine themselves to crying, 'No riots now we are faced with the enemy! No fanatics!' as though capitulation were better than an insurrection; as though 10th August 1792 and 31st May 1793 had not been insurrections in the face of the enemy threat... And you, citizens of the old sections of 1792-94 who supplied ideas to the Convention and the Commune, who dictated to them the means of safety... do you recognize your offspring in these gulls, weaklings, jealous of the people, prostrating before the Left like devotees before the host?⁶⁸

At a time in which France needed the memory of 1793 more than ever, Paris's "moral abdication" frustrated Lissagaray. How could Paris concede to its elected representatives the revolutionary role only an armed people could fulfill?

As in virtually all accounts of the Commune, the turning point in *L'histoire* is the 18th of March. That morning, the French national government tried to disarm Paris by seizing its cannons, paid for by the subscriptions of the National Guard. It ordered its soldiers, dispatched under Generals Clément-Thomas and Lecomte, to reclaim the artillery from neighborhoods like Belleville and Montmartre. Short on horses, they struggled to cart the heavy weapons away. In an iconic episode of French revolutionary history, the neighborhood women rang the tocsin and shielded the cannons by climbing atop them or obstructing the path. When ordered to shoot the

⁶⁸ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 26.

gathering crowds, soldiers disobeyed by turning their rifle butts up. In the afternoon's chaos, the National Guard arrested Lecomte, who was soon executed by an angry crowd. Minutes later, crowds identified and killed Clément-Thomas as well. In response to these executions, Adolphe Thiers ordered the city abandoned. He withdrew Paris's functionaries, markets, telegraphs, and hospitals. With that retreat began the Commune, the civil war between Paris and the French national government.

Upon the government's withdrawal of "all the respiratory and digestive apparatus of the city to 1,600,000 souls," those in the streets who defended the cannons, ultimate symbols of Paris's sovereignty, filled the vacuum of authority. When members of the parliamentary left tried to ensure that General Lecomte was given a military trial, the crowds murdered him on the spot instead; when officers of the National Guard asked the people to "Wait for the Committee! Constitute a court-martial!" for General Clément-Thomas, they were answered with his immediate execution: "Twenty muskets levelled at him battered him down."⁶⁹ In short, on the 18th of March, "the people, so long standing on the defensive, had begun to move."⁷⁰

The Commune, Lissagaray is keen to stress, began as an instantiation of Parisian electoral sovereignty. Thus, when a majority of Paris voted to form a Commune in the municipal elections of March 26th, it was providing the Commune with an electoral origin (although by March, most well-to-do Parisians had already left for Versailles). And, it is true, the redemptive power of the vote here is consistent with the arguments made in 1848 where the vote was interpreted as a vector of social

⁶⁹ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 85, 68.

⁷⁰ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 69.

cohesion rather than individuation.⁷¹ However, even on its election day, Lissagaray suggested that the Commune's election presented a victory, not only for an electorate, but for the nascent republican army. As he described it, communards had only temporarily set aside their knowledge "that this was a life-and-death struggle." And far from manifesting Parisian unity, it revealed its divisions: not only bourgeois residents of the Right Bank, but also polytechnic engineers and university students in the 5th arrondissement voted against the Commune. Vallès, for his part, was even more explicit that the Commune's "election" was best seen as a military victory.

This clear, warm sun gilding the mouth of the cannon, this smell of bouquets, the ripple of the flags, the quiet sound of a revolution passing by, as peaceful and lovely as a blue river; these thrills, these lights, these brass fanfares, these bronze reflections, these flaming hopes, this perfume of honor, all intoxicating the victorious republican army with pride and joy."⁷²

Nor was Vallès and Lissagaray's portrayal of the electoral proclamation of the Commune as a quasi-military victory a stylistic quirk. The various proclamations of the Commune published on election day and afterwards echoed those sentiments unambiguously. On March 29, the elected Commune decreed the standing, professional army be abolished in favor of the National Guard, to which all French men were now asked to join. It echoed a call by the twenty arrondissements published in *le Cri du Peuple* on the March 26, where praises of Parisian municipal sovereignty were joined to a request for the organization of an autonomous National Guard as Paris's sole armed force. After all, it was thanks to their "spontaneous and courageous

⁷¹ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 74.

⁷² Jules Vallès, *The Insurrectionist (L'Insurge)*, trans. Sandy Petrey (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1971; first published 1886), 166.

effort” that the revolution of March 18th was successful.⁷³

These calls to abolish the professional standing army in favor of the supremacy of the National Guard, in turn, reiterated the program of the famous “Red Poster” of 6 January 1871. That flyer, which was the most important proclamation of the Commune under the Prussian siege, is worth citing at length:

To the people of Paris,
The Delegates of the Twenty Arrondissements of Paris,
Has the government charged on September 4 with national defense fulfilled its task? No!

We have 500,000 combatants, and 200,000 Prussians have us trapped! Who else is responsible for this if not those who govern us? Instead of casting cannons and manufacturing weapons they only thought of negotiating.

They refused the *levée en masse*.

They left the Bonapartists in place and arrested republicans.

They only decided to finally act against the Prussians after two months, after October 31 [when the Blanquists attempted to overthrow the government—KD]

By their slowness, their indecision, their inertia, they have brought us to the edge of the abyss; they didn’t know how to administrate or fight, even though they had at hand all possible resources, both in supplies and men.

[...]

If the men of the Hotel-de-Ville still have any patriotism, their duty is to retire from the scene and let the people of Paris themselves take care of their own deliverance. The Municipality or the Commune, whatever name we give it, is the sole salvation of the people, its only recourse against death.

[...]

Will the great people of ’89, which destroys bastilles and overthrows thrones, wait in inert despair while cold and famine freeze its last drop of blood in its heart – whose beats the enemy is counting? No!

The people of Paris will never accept this misery and this shame. It knows that there is still time, that decisive measures will permit the workers to live, and all to fight.

A general requisitioning, Free rationing, A Mass attack.

[...]

MAKE WAY FOR THE PEOPLE! MAKE WAY FOR THE COMMUNE!⁷⁴

⁷³ Jacques Rougerie, *Paris Libre 1871* (Paris: Seuil, 2004), 136-8; for other descriptions of the election, see Merriman, *Massacre*, 38-9; Donny Gluckstein, *The Paris Commune: A Revolution in Democracy* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006), 39-42.

⁷⁴ Rougerie, *Paris Libre*, 61-3.

Virtually all of the documents proclaiming the Commune recapitulate this poster. They do not focus on the ways the national government suppressed their participatory political culture (which it did). They objected, rather, to how that government refused the *levée en masse*, how they failed to mobilize the National Guard, how they failed to protect Paris, and how they did not throw the full brunt of popular power against the enemy. They failed to call the people in arms into being. That is why the Commune “or whatever name we give it” consisted in “A general requisitioning, free rationing, a mass attack.” To proclaim the *revolutionary* Commune was to proclaim a war measure. It was to make way for the people in arms, with cannon and chassepot in tow. That was the basis of its competing claim to popular sovereignty against the French state.

Lissagaray drives the point home when he recounts the Communal Council’s controversial decision to institute a Committee on Public Safety. At the end of a council meeting on 28 April 1871, Jules Miot, a veteran of 1848, called for the committee’s creation. He felt urged to do so in light of the ineffectual war effort. Communard sorties were disorganized and ended in embarrassing retreat. After losing the fort of Issy to Versailles at the end of April, Paris faced imminent invasion. For Miot, the time had come to create a Committee on Public Safety to defend the Commune and the Republic. The Commune needed a committee that could wield executive authority over its scattered, decentralized commissions. It needed a source of energy, initiative, and centralized action in place of paralyzing deliberation and legislative sessions.

The Council's majority eventually voted in favor of Miot's proposal on the first of May, but not before acrimonious debate among its members and fellow communards. Gustave Courbet worried that "We are reproducing to our detriment a terror that does not belong to our times."⁷⁵ Creating a new Committee on Public Safety amounted to an authoritarian betrayal of the Commune's professed ambition for a democratic and social republic. It trapped the communal revolution in the shadow of Robespierre, St Just, Hébert, and Babeuf. Raoul Rigault, in contrast, insisted that working within that shadow was the point. Rigault, the infamous head of the Commune's Prefecture of the Police, already believed himself to be the reincarnation of Hébert and the Commune a reincarnation of its regicidal 1793 antecedent.⁷⁶

The debate turned in large part on the nature of republican dictatorship. And in his recounting of it, Lissagaray chastised "the minority" like Courbet and Tridon for voting against the Committee on Public Safety. Though sympathetic to the minority on philosophical grounds, Lissagaray believed "these men could never understand that the Commune was a barricade, not a government." These men "strained the reaction against the principle of authority to the verge of suicide," jeopardizing the Commune's survival with their unconditional antiauthoritarianism.⁷⁷

Lissagaray's assessment is revealing. A Paris Commune that was afraid of authority, he wants to say, missed the point. The Commune was never just an anti-authoritarian experiment. Its mission was to reconstitute democratic authority outside

⁷⁵ Breugh, *The Plebeian Experience*, 189.

⁷⁶ The debate has been republished in Mitchel Abidor, ed., *The Voices of the Paris Commune* (Oakland, CA: PM Press), 27-50.

⁷⁷ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 194-5.

the state. That was why Miot's proposal highlighted stakes of the communal movement's political thought: is the Committee on Public Safety an acceptable way of concentrating communal power and energy outside bureaucratic or electoral channels? Although the committee was subordinated to the Communal Council, it nevertheless exercised broad discretionary executive and war powers. For Lissagaray, "the minority" that protested against it misunderstood the matter at hand: Communal democracy was a democracy at war.

Lissagaray is thus relieved to report that, despite the divisive debate over the Committee on Public Safety, members reunited over the most important value of all: "no one, even in the thick of the peril dared to utter the word capitulation."⁷⁸ Capitulation, after all, was more than a military concession. It was the defeat of the Social Republic by the Political Republic, the people in arms by the national electorate. That Lissagaray believed the Commune was first and foremost a barricade, not a government, meant that the sovereignty of the "social society" was born, not in the halls of representative government, but at its "smoking ramparts."

Do you at least recognize this Paris, seven times shot down since 1789, and always ready to rise for the salvation of France? Where is her programme, say you? Why, seek it before you, and not at the faltering Hôtel-de-Ville. These smoking ramparts, these explosions of heroism, these women, these men of all professions united... do they not speak loudly enough our common thought, and that all of us are fighting for equality, the enfranchisement of labour, the advent of a social society?⁷⁹

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Like Lissagaray, Louise Michel was a combatant of the Commune. An active

⁷⁸ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 196.

⁷⁹ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, 241.

participant of the public meetings movement, she was also a member of the Commune's Union de Femmes and the 18th arrondissement's vigilance committee. On the 18th of March, she marched with the crowds of Montmartre to protect the cannons. In her *Mémoires de Louise Michel écrits par elle-même*, published the same year that Lissagaray's *L'histoire* appeared in English, Michel similarly chose to interpret the day's significance as the reawakening of the people in arms.

On this day, the eighteenth of March, the people wakened. If they had not, it would have been the triumph of some king; instead it was a triumph of the people. The eighteenth of March could have belonged to the allies of kings, or to foreigners, or to the people. It was the people's.⁸⁰

Michel knew first hand that the 18th of March could not self-evidently speak for the people, either of France or Paris. She participated in the failed popular insurrections prior to March, including the October 30 takeover of the Hôtel de Ville (in response to the Government of National Defense's announcement of negotiations with Prussians) and the January 22 insurrection with the National Guard. The failure of the first led to Blanqui's arrest; the second saw Breton mobile guards kill several protesters in a crowd much too small to threaten the provisional government.

Like *L'histoire*, these failures of popular, spontaneous collective action led Michel to distinguish between two types of collective subjects. She denied that a demobilized or unarmed crowd belonged to "the people" at all. Recounting her indignation at Paris's refusal to spontaneously rise up, she writes,

One holiday I was going to Julie's when I encountered a vast multitude of people on the boulevard. With the hopes I held, I believed the hour had come, but it was a carnival, in the midst of which the old republican Miot was being

⁸⁰ Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 64.

taken to prison... It was a joyous crowd on a day of mourning, but they weren't really the people. They were the same crowd you see at public executions, but which you can never find when you need to rip up paving stones to build barricades. They are the same unthinking crowd that bolsters up tyrannies and cuts the throats of people trying to save them.⁸¹

Michel's claim that a demobilized crowd "weren't really the people" goes beyond distinguishing a pacific people with an armed one. It is not a matter of simply qualifying "the people" as armed or not. By excluding a demobilized crowd from "the people," Michel is suggesting that armed mobilization is essential rather than accidental to peoplehood. It is not one among many activities that they may choose to engage in. It is their defining activity. "The people," Michel says, enact themselves through a special kind of collective agency, and it is that agency that qualitatively distinguishes them from Bonapartism's electoral crowds, "the same unthinking crowd that bolsters up tyrannies." The true people's agency is expressed, not through the ballot but the barricade.

From this perspective, the significance of the 18th of March lay in the way Paris exchanged one kind of social interdependence for another. The electorate, an atomized body politic that sustained state despotism, yielded to the people in arms, an absorptive and spontaneous body erupting from beyond official institutional channels.

Nor was this moral reincarnation figurative or metaphorical. Despite Michel's direct participation on the 18th of March, her memoir describes the insurrection as the product, not of her own actions nor that of many others, but of a supra-personal agency. Reading Michel's larger account of the Commune, the reader is struck by how individual agency is continually disavowed. She fought behind barricades in

⁸¹ Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 54.

Montmartre during “the bloody week,” but she emphatically denies any role for her own personal qualities or capacities. Instead, she focuses on the experience of being articulated into a qualitatively superior collective actor.

Some people say I’m brave. Not really. There is no heroism; people are simply entranced by events. What happens is that in the face of danger my perceptions are submerged in my artistic sense, which is seized and charmed. Tableaux of the dangers overwhelm my thoughts, and the horrors of the struggle become poetry. It wasn’t bravery... It was beautiful, that’s all. Barbarian that I am, I love cannon, the smell of powder, machine-gun bullets in the air.⁸²

Michel’s courage was not sourced in personal will or moral conviction, but in her being “entranced” or “submerged” in the arresting experience of “the smell of powder, machine-gun bullets in the air.” “One person is nothing and yet part of that which is everything—the Revolution,” she reiterated.⁸³

We might say that although Michel’s account is autobiographical, she is not its protagonist. It is instead “the people in arms.” Individually, they were “nothing,” but in taking up arms, they entered into a larger revolutionary drama, not as themselves, but as the latest instance of a collective subject that predated their individual biological births.

Thus, as in Lissagaray’s *L’histoire*, when it came to the matter of the sovereignty of the people, the utopian imaginary of the 1840s had to give way to the master symbol of the Commune, the cannon. Michel was effusive about the lectures on physics, chemistry, law, and pedagogy that she attended in the months prior to the Commune. “We didn’t waste a minute, and our days were stretched to fit so that

⁸² Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 65.

⁸³ Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 51.

midnight seemed early.”⁸⁴ Nevertheless, as the Empire’s grip on sovereignty weakened, it was cannon fire that took center stage. “The Revolution was rising, so what good were dramas? The true drama was in the streets, so what good were orchestras? We had cannon.”⁸⁵

The last two years before 1871, the rue Hautefeuille was a hotbed of intellectual women... But prose and verse and music disappeared because we felt so near the drama coming from the street, the true drama, the drama of humanity. The songs of the new epoch were war songs, and there was no room for anything else.⁸⁶

Michel is not saying that war was more desirable than poetry, verse, and music. Her claim that “there was no room for anything else” but “war songs” was not a normative claim about the latter’s desirability. Rather, she was trying to communicate that this romantic culture could not fill the void of sovereignty opened up in the Empire’s final days. An associational political culture can make life under capitalism more livable, but it does not make the people *sovereign*. Only the poetry of revolutionary violence can do that. “The Russian revolutionaries are right,” Michel came to conclude, for “evolution is ended and now revolution is necessary or the butterfly will soon die in its cocoon.”⁸⁷ At a time in which the Empire was wracked with a legitimization crisis, the solution lay in being seized and charmed by machine gun bullets, not by the “prose and verse and music” which provided the warp and weft of utopian political culture. To forge the social republic, it is not enough for the Commune to pursue social harmony and economic cooperation. The people needed cannon.

⁸⁴ Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 47.

⁸⁵ Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 42-3.

⁸⁶ Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 51.

⁸⁷ Michel, *The Red Virgin*, 59.

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Like Lissagaray and Michel, Jules Vallès was a combatant in the Commune. A familiar critic of the Second Empire and editor of *Le Cri de Peuple*, Vallès was also a member of the Communal Council. His autobiographical recounting of the event, *L'Insurge*, actually bills itself as a novel. However, except for naming the main character Jacques Vingtras, the novel is barely fictionalized. It functions as the third installment of his autobiographical trilogy. *L'Insurge* recounts Vallès's life (as Vingtras) from the Second Empire to the fall of the Commune. Unlike Lissagaray and Michel, Vallès locates the origins of the Commune a bit earlier than the 18th of March—although, like them, he will identify that day as the moment of popular awakening.

According to Vallès, the incipient spirit of the Commune was discovered at the funeral of Victor Noir on 20 January 1870. Noir had been shot and killed in a duel with Napoleon's cousin, and his funeral became the focal point of a Blanquist conspiracy to start an uprising against the Second Empire. Unfortunately, armed soldiers successfully dissolved the thousands-strong procession.

Despite the insurrection's failure, Vallès believes that Noir's funeral signaled that the people were on the cusp of incarnating the people in arms. He describes the procession members as "fragments of an army seeking other fragments, shreds of a Republic stuck together by a dead man's blood...all held to the body by a single idea." Under the cloak of each worker was a weapon at the ready: "Their hearts were swollen

with the hope of battle—their pockets were swollen as well.”⁸⁸ They moved as an absorptive, organic unity. During the procession, a fellow journalist came up to Vallès to speak to him, presuming him to be the leader. The journalist was rebuked. “No one’s in command, get that straight! Not even Rochefort and Delescluze, who would soon be completely forgotten if some street orator produced a dazzling flash of lightning, even if he just made the sun break through the cloudy sky.” Moreover, although the insurrection failed, the Empire received its warning. In the face of the people’s nascent reawakening, the Empire “better hurry if they want to sap the fresh strength to escape through the cut, if they want...to drown the fire of the mob as the sound of thunder is a signal that the murderous electricity has died in the earth.”⁸⁹ Once the Empire hears the thunderclap, the people will have already struck.

Of course, Bonapartism threatened to mislead the people once again. With Napoleon III’s declaration of war against the Prussians, the Empire coopted this nascent energy of popular mobilization. It redirected the ire of the people against another nation rather than the state. Vallès was in despair. “But can’t you hear the ‘Marseillaise’?” someone asks him. He mentally replies, “I am appalled by your ‘Marseillaise’ and what you have made of it. It has become a State Hymn. It does not inspire volunteers, it leads flocks of sheep.” The juxtaposition of volunteers and sheep ought to be read as a juxtaposition between the people in arms, free and spontaneous, and the imperial army, hierarchical and professional. Stumbling on a group of soldiers preparing for war against the Prussians, a drill sergeant shouting “Left, Right, Left,

⁸⁸ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 91.

⁸⁹ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 94, 97.

Right!” Vallès scornfully remarks, “Do you think that men maintain the proper distance and wield bayonets like those metronomes when, after suddenly meeting the enemy, they find themselves in the heat of battle in some meadow, field or cemetery?”⁹⁰ This imperial army was no spontaneous and organic republican body, but a machine that moved without will or consciousness.

Fortunately, with the Empire’s collapse, the ideological fog lifted and the people instinctively sought the Social Republic. The day after the Third Republic is proclaimed at the Hotel de Ville, Vallès observes that “Everyone had come there out of instinct, no plans had been made.” In the rain, he and other artisans “[wandered] about, looking for one another and talking of the Social Fatherland, the only possible salvation for the Classical Fatherland.”⁹¹ It was time to arm the people and to defend Paris against the Prussian forces, to protect “the Social Fatherland.”

Like Lissagaray and Michel had also suggested, the social republic was no electoral product. In this alternative incarnation of the body politic, authority was not generated through institutional channels or bestowed from above. It was, instead, generated spontaneously from below. In direct repudiation of the millenarian vision of the suffrage that prevailed in 1848, authority was not conferred by the ballot but through collective armed struggle. Vallès was appointed as a commander to a battalion of the National Guard and given a military coat with epaulets to symbolize his authority. The guard members rebuffed him. Vallès quickly learned that conferral of an official rank in the guard diminished, rather than bestowed, authority. Authority

⁹⁰ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 99, 101.

⁹¹ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 118.

had nothing to do with rank; it was the product of combat. Realizing this, Vallès tore off his epaulets and reflected:

I quickly ripped off my four pitiful little stripes, faded, pinkish, cruddy...and I was free! Now I could be the real leader of the battalion. Oh, you must never accept regular commands in the revolutionary army! I thought rank conferred authority—it removes it. You're nothing but a cipher before the companies. You truly become a hero only in combat, when you're the first to leap into danger. Then, since you're in front, the others follow. And for that the baptism of the ballot is useless. All that counts is the baptism of fire.⁹²

Stripped of the symbols of rank, “he presided over the deliberations of every group without being the president of any.”⁹³

This scene stands in for the extraordinary distance travelled between 1848 and 1871. Blanc had proclaimed political and social reform as mutually constitutive weapons for creating the Social Republic. It followed that universal manhood suffrage was part of revolutionary democracy's arsenal, a vector for social harmony and regeneration. But in 1871, Vallès had discovered that the two had become disaggregated and staged as opposites. On one side now lay the state, the electorate, and the political republic built on bourgeois rights; on the other lay antistatism, the people in arms, and the social republic built upon the primacy of society. In the context of these conceptual realignments, it was futile for Gambetta, Favre, and other leaders of the Provisional Government to reassert parliamentary authority. According to Vallès, they were nothing but false prophets, men “who wanted to play the thundering Jupiter.”⁹⁴ As deliberators and lawmakers, they were alienated from the people as a natural disaster, the catastrophic manifestation of revolutionary,

⁹² Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 129.

⁹³ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 130.

⁹⁴ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 132.

redemptive agency.

Oh those who think that leaders control insurrections are incredibly naïve! Scattered, dispersed, torn, drowned—those are the words to describe what men call the general staff in the tumultuous movement of human waves. At the very most, the head of one of the leaders might emerge at some moment like the painted busts of women, carved in the prows of ships, which appear and disappear at the will of the tempest, at the roll of the waves.⁹⁵

In the weeks connecting the funeral of Noir to the 18th of March, Vallès would discover the violent sources of authority time and again. When he and Tridon drafted the Red Poster, the Provisional Government jailed them along with other signatories. Imprisoned, Vallès desperately sought to escape (“Who knows whether noises from the city would reach me, whether I would be able to see the flashes of lightning through the bars of my cell?”)⁹⁶ As he bided his time, he read Proudhon and Blanc with fellow prisoners. Although he does not list the specific texts, it is possible they read Proudhon’s 1861 *La Guerre et La Paix*, where Proudhon argued that “war [was] divine...primordial, essential to life and to the production of men and society.” For Proudhon, war was the origin “of morality itself” and a religious revelation, that action was “the principal condition of life, health and strength in an organized being,” and that death was the “noble end” for “the thinking, moral, free being.” Given the shift away from universal manhood suffrage and towards revolutionary violence after 1848, Proudhon’s identification of action with combat (“To act is to fight!”) would have resonated with the radical workers imprisoned with Vallès. It was probably easy for Proudhon’s readers to agree that war was the origins of the social, that it was “linked

⁹⁵ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 136.

⁹⁶ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 155.

at a very deep level...with man's sense of religion, justice, beauty and morality... War is the basis of our history, our life and our whole being. It is, I repeat, everything.”⁹⁷

Whether Vallès and the other prisoners read together *La Guerre et La Paix*, however, they had certainly learned its theses. Upon escaping, *Vallès* remarked, “In my retreat I saw no one and heard nothing. But I could feel the storm brewing nonetheless, I could see the horizon darkening. Let the people be made to lose patience—and let the first thunderbolt explode!”⁹⁸

Naturally, that thunderbolt exploded on the 18th of March: “two generals had their brains blown out this morning.” Upon hearing the news, Vallès shouts, “Well! It's the Revolution! So here it is, the moment hoped for and awaited.”⁹⁹ With the execution of Lecomte and Clement-Thomas, the people in arms had awakened. The Commune was no longer just a coalition of socialist committees and clubs; it was now also a sovereign power. Vallès regrets ever doubting—as he did after the funeral of Victor Noir and the Red Poster affair—that the people would take up arms against their enemies. “Cowards that we were,” he laments, “we were already talking of leaving you and going far away from your streets, which we considered dead. Forgive us! Fatherland of honor, city of salvation, bivouac of the Revolution! No matter what happens, even if we are to be conquered once more, even if we die tomorrow, our generation will have been consoled.”¹⁰⁰ The 18th of March redeemed their generation.

⁹⁷ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, “Writings from War and Peace” (1861) in *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon*, ed. Stewart Edwards, trans. Elizabeth Fraser (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1969), at 202-7.

⁹⁸ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 157.

⁹⁹ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 157.

¹⁰⁰ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 166-67; Vallès is here quoting his own essay published in 29 March's *Le Cri de Peuple*, reprinted in Rougerie, *Paris Libre*, 146-7.

Like their forefathers, they, too, would incarnate the legendary collective subject of the Year II.

His predictions proved true during the Bloody Week. As Versaillais breached Paris's gates, Vallès was thrilled to see that the people in arms with his own eyes.

Where was my head! I thought the city was going to play dead before being killed, and now women and children are doing their part... Fever everywhere, or rather health. No one shouting, no one drinking. Just from time to time a trip to the bar, and, quickly, lips are wiped with the back of the hand, and man gets back to business. 'We're going to do our damndest to put in a good day's work,' one of this morning's whiners tell me. 'You had doubts about us a while ago, comrade. Drop by when things get hot, you'll see who's a coward!' The poppy harvest is waving in the wind...they can die now.¹⁰¹

Here is Proudhon's "Republic." The social division of labor adds up to an organic unity in combat. Fraternity and equality materialize as citizen-soldiers cooperate on the barricade. Men, women, children, and workers of all trades cooperate in unison in preparation for battle. This is the legendary people in arms and whose agency had a restorative, regenerative effect on the social body. Not "fever," but "health," "a good day's work," everyone "doing their part"—this language, ordinarily reserved to discuss the moral education of the shop floor, is now the language of the barricade. This was not an electorate, but the people in arms.

Vallès was correct that, having been reincarnated, the people "can die now," for the French state had orders for systematic and exterminatory murder. Its invading forces were led by the veterans of the colonial theater; Joseph Vinoy and Patrice de MacMahon had both participated in the capture of Algiers. But Vallès, looking back on the Commune's final hours and watching them set fire to buildings in a desperate

¹⁰¹ Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 191-2.

bid to stall invading line troops, believed he glimpsed something immortal in the Commune: its redemptive image of spontaneous insurrection, “an invincible weapon...the tool no one can break, the tool rebels will from this moment pass on from hand to hand along the road to civil wars.”¹⁰² As Michel argued, the Paris Commune had created an alternative location of popular sovereignty to that of the state in its “war songs.” Such songs were what electoral politics could never provide.

Conclusion

Choosing to ground popular sovereignty in republican war rather than universal suffrage was not much of a choice. Besides the suffrage, few alternative languages of popular sovereignty had been passed down in the revolutionary republican tradition. Even if political thinkers had tried to invent a new idiom that was not modeled on republican war, it probably would have been unconvincing to a population whose pride and self-definition had become so entangled with the historical memory of its military achievements. Nor was more liberalism an option. After all, it was liberalism’s shortcomings—its unconvincing account of the social, its economic attacks on corporatism and the moral economy, its normalization of individualism—that motivated utopians and communards to pursue the Social Republic in the first place. Although the subsequent Third Republic would adopt this aim as a state imperative, until 1871, to answer the social question was, almost by default, to critique the state. If I have foregrounded communal democracy’s dependence on war, it is not

¹⁰² Vallès, *The Insurrectionist*, 203.

to criticize it. It is to draw attention to the constrained historical and conceptual space in which an unprecedented socialist achievement was compelled to do its thinking, and in which the inherited vocabularies of democratic action were limited to two: the ballot or the barricade.

Those constraints imposed real costs on the Communards. Substituting war for the suffrage meant forfeiting the commitment to non-violent revolution that characterized social republicans of the 1840s. It also placed communards in a uniquely disadvantageous position to respond to popular demobilization. When a political tradition designs its commitments to sovereignty around the moral authority of spontaneous collective action, it earns the right to claim popular sovereignty against the state's channels of legitimation. That is its weapon when it is speaking from the margins. At the same time, it compels its political thinkers to grow dependent on the fact of continuous mobilization when in power. As Lissagaray conceded, popular paralysis becomes interpreted, not as a lull in popular sovereignty, but its "moral abdication." Hence, generations of French socialists found that their aspirations for everyday egalitarianism created room for authoritarian instruments like the Committee on Public Safety, which appeared as a means to institutionalize popular insurrection in the face of spontaneity's inevitable exhaustion. Only a tradition that places this premium on spontaneity makes demobilization a crisis of popular sovereignty itself.

In short, my aim has not been to cheapen the significance of "the communal idea," the *mandat impératif*, workers' association, or the ideal of federative government. Those are surely at the heart of the Commune's prescriptions for a

repaired society. Instead, I have tried to show that for all that contemporary scholars justly defend that culture, they err in attributing the Commune's title to popular sovereignty to it. The politics of association and the primacy of work may have formed the normative heart of the communal movement, but it was not its warrant to usurp the state's own claim to electoral popular sovereignty.¹⁰³ That warrant came, rather, from the Commune's identification of "the people" with "the people in arms," its heroic conflation of republican citizenship and spontaneous armed insurrection. When it came to sovereignty, it was what the Commune did (wage war) and not who they were (workers) that counted.

As in the French Revolution and the postrevolutionary political culture of Bonapartism, "the people in arms" did not present a rhetorical figure, but the most concrete and naturalized manifestation of the people possible. The people appear spontaneously and unpredictably. Their activity of violence enacts their natural, undivided popular sovereignty. The "concreteness" of this conception of the people is not grounded in any demographic characteristics, but in the activity of insurrection itself. It was not bound by a physiological conception of the social body, but demarcated by participation in a specific vocabulary of extralegal action.

It would therefore be a mistake to understand the people in arms in terms of Sieyès's constitutionalist appeal to a *pouvoir constituant*, prior to any social or institutional particularization. That claim would have violated the deeply held belief

¹⁰³ See, in contrast, Johnson, *The Paradise of Association*, 162-3: "As the governments in question appeared increasingly incompetent or insufficiently revolutionary, clubs and committees became the vehicles for the assertion of direct sovereignty by means of association. In these circumstances association once again was employed, and it continued to be employed, to express and implement the revolutionary will of the sovereign people."

that the people were a collective subject readily describable within the positivistic social and moral sciences of the late Empire. Communards like Michel, Lissagaray, and Vallès were fully consistent with the prevailing orientation of nineteenth century French social thought in seeing “the people” as a natural and moral, rather than metaphysical and formal, collective subject. Indeed, that was why the appearance of “the people in arms” served a scientific function as much as a political one. Their appearance shattered the Empire’s false, stupefying ideological pretense to moral and industrial progress. Their agency was a force of demystification and progress.

Together with utopian political culture, the Paris Commune hewed closely to the tradition of 1792 in which the republic was not only an experiment in democracy, but a democracy at war with its enemy. The two threads were braided together. In positioning “the people in arms” as the protagonist of its democratic experiment, the Commune was invoking democratic terror’s most conspicuous element. With it, leaders hoped to overcome electoral or legal means of expressing popular sovereignty. That is why I think it is not enough to point to the participatory political culture of the Commune as the basis of its sovereignty. The spontaneous presence of “the people” was not best exemplified in associational culture, but rather in armed struggle. As Communards discovered, in the Social Republic, baptism by ballot is not enough for democratic authority. For that, one needed a baptism by fire.

Chapter IV

Irrationalist Violence on the Eve of World War I

On 22 January 1914, a few months before the outbreak of World War I, Jean Jaurès exhorted to an audience of students,

Today, you are told: act, always act! But what is action without thought? It is the barbarism born of inertia. You are told: brush aside the party of peace; it saps your courage! But I tell you that to stand for peace today is to wage the most heroic of battles...Defy those who warn you against what they call 'system'! Defy those who urge you to abandon your intelligence for instinct and intuition!¹

Condemning a deformed intellectual culture that he believed motivated the cries for war, Jaurès would spend the next six months organizing for diplomatic de-escalation to prevent war's outbreak. He fought a losing battle. Fellow political leaders across the political spectrum were increasingly convinced of the virtues of war against the German "hereditary" enemy, with the more bellicose seeking recompense for France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. Jaurès could not undo this overwhelming compulsion for revenge: on July 31st, he was assassinated at a café by Raoul Villain, a *revanchist* [fig 13, 14].

As Jaurès warned students of "those who urge you to abandon your intelligence" for "instinct and intuition," leading French intellectuals were urging them to do precisely that. On the right, Charles Maurras, leader of Action Française, and Maurice Barrès, a conservative novelist, were summoning young men to war in the name of the Republic. They did so despite the fact that both identified their nationalism as a form of anti-republicanism. As Maurras once put it bluntly: "The

¹ Frederick Brown, *The Embrace of Unreason: France, 1914-1940* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 13.



[Fig 13: “Jaurès assassiné,” *L’Humanité* (1 August 1914). Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Droit, Économie, Politique. Grand folio, Lc2-6139.]

[Fig 14: Jaurès’s funeral. Leaders from the left and right, including Jaurès’s critics from the Maurassian right, used it as an opportunity to praise the importance of French “unity” on the eve of war.]²

republicans can choose: the Republic, or the Country?”³ They were joined on the left by Charles Péguy, a fervent Dreyfusard who nevertheless dismissed the Third Republic in 1910 as a regime for “those who believe in nothing, not even in atheism, who devote themselves, who sacrifice themselves to nothing... And who boast of it.” When war was announced, Péguy enthusiastically volunteered to march for the republic he once condemned as “the sterility of modern times.”⁴ To the astonishment of many, Gustave Hervé, the leftist leader of French antimilitarism, could also be found pleading with authorities to conscript him after 1914. After defiantly announcing in his 1906 *Leur patrie* that if faced with war, “we [working class] shall not march, whoever be the aggressor,”⁵ the committed socialist was reborn a

² Photo from Brown, *The Embrace of Unreason*, 18.

³ Daniel Halévy, *Charles Péguy and the Cahiers de la Quinzaine* (New York and Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1947; first published in 1918), 134.

⁴ Charles Péguy, *Notre Jeunesse* (1910), republished in *Temporal and Eternal*, trans. Alexander Dru (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958; first published 1932), 22-3.

⁵ Gustave Hervé, *My Country, Right or Wrong?*, trans. G. Bowman (London: Jonathan Cape, 1910; first published 1906), 157.

nationalist, renaming his magazine *La Guerre sociale* to *La Victoire*.⁶

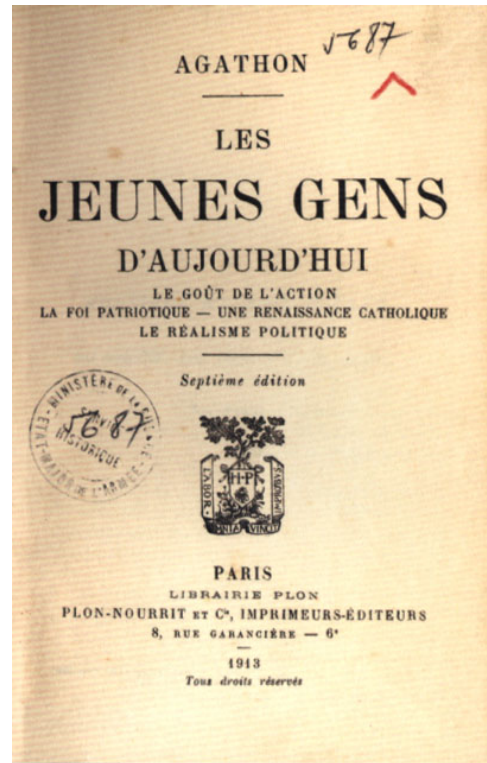
The trouble with “the generation of 1914” went beyond the fact that their ideological realignments depended on impending war.⁷ Jaurès was an historian of the French Revolution, and he would have been familiar with the ways war could bridge domestic political cleavages. What alarmed him, instead, was how French intellectuals folded something unusual into their calls for national unity: an irrationalist image of violence. Henri Massis and Alfred de Tarde, for example, had just called for a rejection of “intellectualism” and “rationalism” in favor of a “cult of action,” “national energy,” and the “classical spirit” in their infamous 1913 pamphlet, “Jeunes gens d’aujourd’hui” [fig 16]. Péguy had extolled the redemptive power of war in his 1913 poem “Eve”: “Blessed are those who die in great battles / Lying beneath the sun in the sight of God’s face. / Blessed are those who die in a high place / Surrounded by the trappings of great funerals.”⁸ Still others were contrasting war’s “immediate experience” to the moral abstractness and cowardly self-interest of antimilitarism [fig 15]. In short, French intellectuals were not citing geopolitical necessity or strategic utility to justify the war. Instead, they proclaimed their desire to repudiate the Third Republic’s intellectual culture—rationalist, positivist, secular, and seduced by a belief in progress.

As it happens, these were the years in which virtually every major intellectual program in Europe was concerned with the irrational sources of human motivation.

⁶ Paul B. Miller, *From Revolutionaries to Citizens: Antimilitarism in France, 1870-1914* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 201-12.

⁷ Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

⁸ Charles Péguy, “Ève,” *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* 15, no. 4 (1913).



[Fig 15: “L’Antimilitariste et le Tambour-Major,” *Le Petit Journal. Supplément illustré* (11 April 1909). *BNF*, Philosophie, Histoire, Sciences de l’homme, Fol-Lc2-3011. An illustration of an “anti-militarist” being mocked by a crowd for his antinationalism, and portrayed as a hooligan when compared to the nationalist drum major.]

[Fig 16: “Agathon” was the collective pseudonym for Alfred de Tarde and Henri Massis. “Jeunes gens d’aujourd’hui” (1913) was an influential study—and really a defense—of the new nationalism and the renaissance of a Catholic faith among France’s elite young men. It stressed a rejection of “rationalism” and offered an ode to Barrès’s cult of “national energy.”]

The study of crowd psychology, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, vitalism and “collective effervescence” found their origins between 1885 and 1914. So widespread was this cultural “crisis of reason,” a “revolt against reason,” or an “embrace of unreason,”⁹ that one scholar concluded that by 1914 “nothing remained of the proud structure of European certainties. The demolition was systematic, and covered almost every field of culture.”¹⁰ Jaurès was not exaggerating when he detected in the calls for

⁹ J. W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Irving Louis Horowitz, *Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason: The Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1961); Brown, *The Embrace of Unreason*.

¹⁰ S. P. Rouanet, “Irrationalism and Myth in Georges Sorel,” *The Review of Politics* 26, no. 1 (1964),

war an invitation “to abandon your intelligence for instinct and intuition.” For many French youth, marching for war meant participating in this generational intellectual reorientation. Their nationalism intersected with the vogue critique of reason in ways that, H. Stuart Hughes laments, combined “respect for authority with the cult of spontaneous creation.” It was why they “greeted the outbreak of the slaughter with enthusiasm.”¹¹

How did a claim to irrational violence unite otherwise conflicting political programs at the end of France’s long nineteenth century? What political problems did war—imbued with irrational, moral, even life-affirming qualities—promise to solve? Political theorists have long condemned this irrationalism as a romantic turn to anti-democratic chauvinism. The “mystique of violence” found in fin de siècle Europe, according to Raymond Aron, amounted to “invectives against democracy” in the name of an “aesthetic of existence” and a “degraded romanticism.”¹² Judith Shklar agreed: it was the product of “the romantic mood of that time,” the desperate search for a “substitute religion” driven by an “escapist motivation” to return to “the perpetual movement of reality.”¹³ Isaiah Berlin saw in these thinkers “the apotheosis of the romantic will.”¹⁴ Intellectual historians of the period have offered similar lines of

45-69, at 45.

¹¹ H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (New York: Knopf, 1958), 344; Eugen Weber, *The Nationalist Revival in France, 1905-1914* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*.

¹² Rene Avord (Raymond Aron), *Les Dictateurs et la mystique de la violence* (New Delhi: Bureau d’information de la France combattante, undated), 3, 13.

¹³ Judith Shklar, “Bergson and the Politics of Intuition,” *The Review of Politics* 20, no. 4 (1958): 634-56, at 635, 646.

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “The Apotheosis of the Romantic Will,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 575.

interpretation, with some deeming it a “romantic anti-capitalism” and an “alternative political tradition” to republican democracy altogether.¹⁵

This chapter argues that these claims to irrationalist violence held a more complex relationship to republican democracy. The rally to the Republic by many of its former critics was neither reducible to *realpolitik* nor a romantic escape from democratic politics. On the contrary, it was an effort to reconceive war as an answer to a perceived moral crisis of parliamentary democracy. It was under the Third Republic that mass political parties arose for the first time in modern France, and far from hailing that fact as an unequivocal step forward for democracy, many critics believed the consolidation of parliamentary politics frustrated it. Indeed, the difficulty of the matter is that many proponents of irrationalist violence believed they were asserting a more concrete and felicitous peoplehood against a corrupt and bureaucratic state. However perverse, Maurras, Barrès, and Péguy understood the nationalist revival as a continuation of the bottom-up, “democratic” sentiments that emerged in the Boulanger Affair of the late 1880s.¹⁶ Against the elitist cosmopolitanism and philosophical rationalism of the Third Republic, they juxtaposed a spontaneous, moral people grounded in the life and soil of the nation. As Péguy put it, they were searching for “the marrow” of France, everything that made up “the *tissue* of the people.”¹⁷ Their

¹⁵ Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909-1939* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le peuple introuvable: Histoire de la représentation démocratique en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998); Pierre Birnbaum, “Catholic Identity, Universal Suffrage and ‘Doctrines of Hatred,’” in *The Intellectual Revolt Against Liberal Democracy, 1870-1945*, ed. Zeev Sternhell (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1996), 233-51.

¹⁶ Maurice Barrès, “Les Enseignements d’une Année de Boulangisme,” *Le Figaro*, February 2, 1890; Weber, *The Nationalist Revival in France*.

¹⁷ Péguy, *Temporal and Eternal*, 21.

language therefore articulated something more than dissatisfaction with the Third Republic's political scandals. The cathexis of war in 1914 also radicalized available arguments about popular violence from the preceding century. Those arguments identified in popular violence something irreducible to utilitarian calculations or interest politics. That was why it offered a resource for reconstituting "the tissue of the people" in the face of parliamentary stasis and moral entropy.

The chapter turns to the most visible theorist of violence during this period, Georges Sorel, to better understand the redemptive power of irrationalist violence. Admired by Carl Schmitt and Mussolini, and retroactively mythologized as the intellectual "father of fascism," Sorel stood at the intersection of the intellectual networks that fostered this enthusiasm for irrationalist violence.¹⁸ His *Reflections on Violence* (1908) was enormously influential for intellectuals both in and beyond France. In it, he argued for proletarian violence's spiritual and morally reparative power. He also proposed that violence as a remedy for familiar problems with French republican citizenship: it was atomizing rather than associating, and it was leading France into moral decadence. In ways that echoed Victor Cousin in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville in the 1840s, and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon in the 1850s, Sorel identified the culprit to be bourgeois decadence. And nowhere was that decadence as clearly expressed as French intellectual culture's relentless rationalism, which was now simply condemned as "positivism."

¹⁸ Lawrence Wilde, "Sorel and the French Right," *History of Political Thought* 2, no. 2 (1986): 361-74; Mark Antliff, "Bad Anarchism: Aestheticized Mythmaking and the Legacy of Georges Sorel," *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies* 2 (2011): 155-87; Jack J. Roth, "The Roots of Italian Fascism: Sorel and Sorelismo," *The Journal of Modern History* 39, no. 1 (1967): 30-45; Shlomo Sand, "Legend, Myth, and Fascism," *The European Legacy* 3, no. 5 (1998): 51-65.

The “underlying philosophical support” for the Third Republic and something of a “semiofficial creed,” positivism inspired social theorists working under the sign of Durkheim to design statist, technocratic approaches to social progress and moral improvement.¹⁹ Sorel and his friends, however, came together under the sign of Henri Bergson to search for the sources of moral renewal and social regeneration in the spontaneity of “immediate experience.” Thus, rather than repudiating republican aspirations for social cohesion and moral improvement wholesale, they weaponized Bergson to develop an anti-statist alternative. With Sorel’s aid, French thinkers across the spectrum found that alternative in proletarian violence. In ways more forthright than earlier nineteenth century proponents of redemptive violence, Sorel argued that such violence could be a practice of moral transvaluation. It could bring a new “ethos” into a world inflicted with positivism and moral decadence.

Although Sorel initially believed that the working class held exclusive possession of redemptive violence, his arguments invited other intellectuals to extend that violence to the nation itself. As his arguments travelled from texts to contexts, it offered a pivot for critics of the Republic by both the left and right during the 1900s to converge on the cusp of war into a nationalist defense of it, in the name of the *patrie*, the embodiment of the “real” people as opposed to its abstract substitute posited by French parliamentarism. It helps explain why many intellectuals who were traditionally the first to attack the republic and its democratic institutions became on the eve of war its most strident nationalist defenders. In war, the “republic” and the

¹⁹ Michael Curtis, *Three Against the Third Republic: Sorel, Barrès, and Maurras* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 6.

“nation” could be reborn, not as two competing visions of the social body, but a single moral incarnation of the people.

The chapter begins by first describing how intellectual tendencies on the far Left and far Right in France worked out a shared critique of parliamentary democracy in the wake of the Dreyfus Affair. These tendencies—especially Hubert Lagardelle’s *Le Mouvement socialiste* and Péguy’s *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*—drew on Bergson to formulate an irrationalist response to republican statism and moral decadence. The chapter then reconstructs an interpretation of Sorel’s account of violence to chart how he formulated a voluntarist solution to this crisis: the cunning of violence. I argue that Sorel endorsed violence for its own sake, because it appeared to convey the will beyond the sphere of utilitarian reasoning. At the same time, this “subjective” repudiation of instrumental reasoning fulfilled behind its back the “objective” aim of national moral regeneration. Into a homogenous and utilitarian political culture, violence for its own sake injected an ameliorating moral fervor. In the final section, I point to how Sorel’s arguments were adapted as a conceptual fulcrum and alibi for the reorganization of strands of socialist, catholic, and scientific thought into an irrationalist nationalism by 1914—what Zeev Sternhell has called a political synthesis “neither right nor left.”²⁰ Sorel’s redefinition of the class struggle in mythic, aesthetic terms paved the way for the displacement of the working class as the revolutionary subject by the “nation” while binding the new nationalism to an irrationalist image of violence. As a result of its adaptations within and outside of France, Sorel’s

²⁰ Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996; first published 1983).

conclusion that a corrupt and decadent France could only be redeemed by either “a great foreign war, which might reinvigorate lost energies” or “a great extension of proletarian violence” that would induce “disgust with the humanitarian platitudes with which Jaurès lulls [the bourgeoisie] to sleep,” exemplified broader reorientations of French political thought at the end of the Belle Époque.²¹

What is at stake is showing how neither Sorel nor the claims to irrational violence that his *Reflections* helped shape should be dismissed as aberrations from the consolidation of a democratic political culture during the Third Republic.²² Rather, claims to irrational violence responded to a real contradiction contained within the latter’s republican ideology: its abstract vision of the social body could not bridge its conflicting commitments to political individualism and social cohesion. If the Third Republic sought to contain that contradiction through a modernizing state and a positivistic belief in progress, it nevertheless opened up the conceptual space for its supposed opposite, a militant nationalism based on a return to “concrete experience,” a “real” non-abstract people, and eventually a one-sided particularism. In that sense, the turn to irrational violence was a reverse image of the republican universalism of the Third Republic. It sought to form the cohesive people that the latter demanded as a requirement for a free democratic society. Rather than dismissing Sorel as an aberration from French republicanism then, he needs to be interpreted diagnostically.

He helps us see why the leading lights of French political thought, like so many in

²¹ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, ed. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; first published 1908), 72. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text as *RV*.

²² Eric Brandom, “Georges Sorel, Émile Durkheim, and the Social Foundations of La Morale,” *Proceedings of the Western Society for French History* 38 (2010): 201-15.

August 1914, found in war a means of bypassing those contradictions.

The Unlikely Bergsonian Alliance

Sorel's *Reflections* appeared at an inflection point in anti-republican politics under the Third Republic. Up until the wake of the Dreyfus Affair—a watershed event of French history, dividing the country over the fate of a Jewish military captain falsely accused of treason—disputes over the proper form of French government typically divided socialists and republican political thinkers against their Catholic and royalist counterparts. Despite Pope Leo XIII's 1892 encyclical calling for Catholic reconciliation with the republican regime, the divisions between the two continued to widen. Indeed, from the 1890s up until the publication of the *Reflections* in French in 1908, France enjoyed a steady intensification of its workers' movement. Waldeck-Rousseau's government finally repealed Le Chapelier's Law in 1884, legalizing trade unionism for the first time in almost a century. Working class militancy and anarchist violence swept through Paris, leading to the bombing of several judges and the assassination of President Sadi Carnot in 1894. Workers repeatedly went on strike, intensifying anxieties over a revolutionary general strike. Anxieties over this working class militancy grew to such an extent that for May Day in 1890, forty thousand members of the army and police were brought into Paris to contain it.²³

Escalating working class agitation coincided with the intensification of republican anticlericalism. These were the years that the Ferry Laws were passed,

²³ Susanna Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth Century France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 26.

establishing free, compulsory, and secular education in France. The Dreyfus Affair helped instigate the official separation of church and state in 1905, which further aligned republicans and socialists against royalism and Catholic reaction. By the mid 1900s, when Sorel joined revolutionary syndicalism, working class militancy had been growing for almost two decades. The year that the *Reflections* came out in Italy—1906—was the year that the Confederation Générale du Travail (CGT) adopted the Charter of Amiens, which announced the dominance of revolutionary syndicalism within the workers' movement.²⁴ During and after the days of the Dreyfus Affair, the affiliation between socialism and anticlerical republicanism seemed secure.

And yet, almost immediately after publishing *Reflections*, Sorel and his syndicalist companions on the left began to be solicited by the Catholic right. First George Valois (future founder of the ultra-nationalist Cercle Proudhon and then the Faisceau) and then Maurras (leader of France's largest nationalist organ, Action Française) approached Sorel about the latent filiation they detected between revolutionary syndicalism and the royalist, nationalist movement. A member of Action Française helped introduce Sorel's work to the broader right: Paul Bourget, a playwright and contributor to Andre Gide's *Nouvelle Revue Française*, based his 1910 play *La Barricade* on the *Reflections*. The acknowledgment of affinity did not go unreciprocated. In a letter to Maurras on 6 July 1909, Sorel thanked him for a copy of

²⁴ After trade unions were legalized, they were eventually brought together in the Confédération Générale du Travail in 1895. Alongside the CGT were to be the bourses du travail, spearheaded by Sorel's close friend in the syndicalist movement Ferdinand Pelloutier. Bourses du travail functioned as labor exchanges and places for political organizing. Although the mid 1900s were the height of syndicalist activism, major defeats exhausted its momentum and by 1909 support for a general strike had declined considerably. For a brief discussion, see Jeremy Jennings, *Georges Sorel: The Character and Development of His Thought* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 116-21.

his *Enquête sur la Monarchie*, writing, “It appears to me certain that your critique of contemporary experience well justifies that which you’ve wanted to establish... I have long been struck by the madness of our contemporary authors who ask democracy to do work that none but royalists, full of the sentiment of their mission, could approach.”²⁵

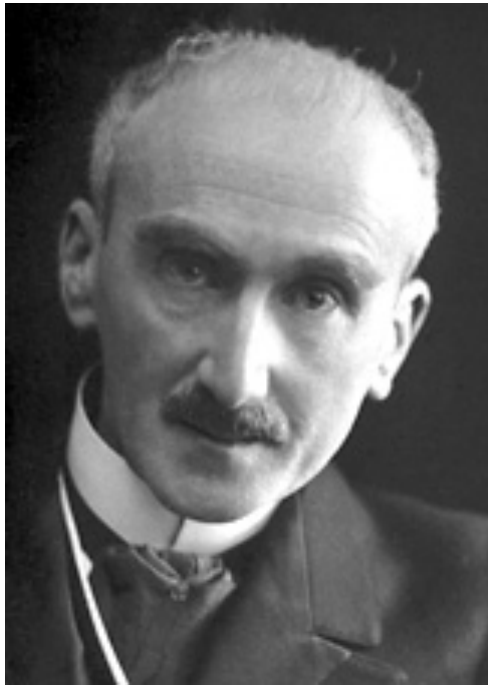
The reasons for this nascent alliance were not reducible to political convenience. Even if by 1908 the republican left had broken with the revolutionary working class movement, which was beginning to stall, that was by no means an obvious invitation for the far right to court the latter.²⁶ The pivot, rather, was substantive. It lay in a new shared idiom of anti-republicanism, one that critiqued the Republic, not only by calling on traditional platitudes of church and family, but also on contemporary work in French philosophy and psychology concerned with intuition, immediate experience, and the will. In particular, French intellectual life was being swept up in the charismatic influence of the philosopher Henri Bergson, whose lectures at the College de France became society events that spurred a vogue fascination with irrationalism and Catholic spiritualism [fig 17, 18].²⁷

The intersection of anti-republicanism with this broader intellectual

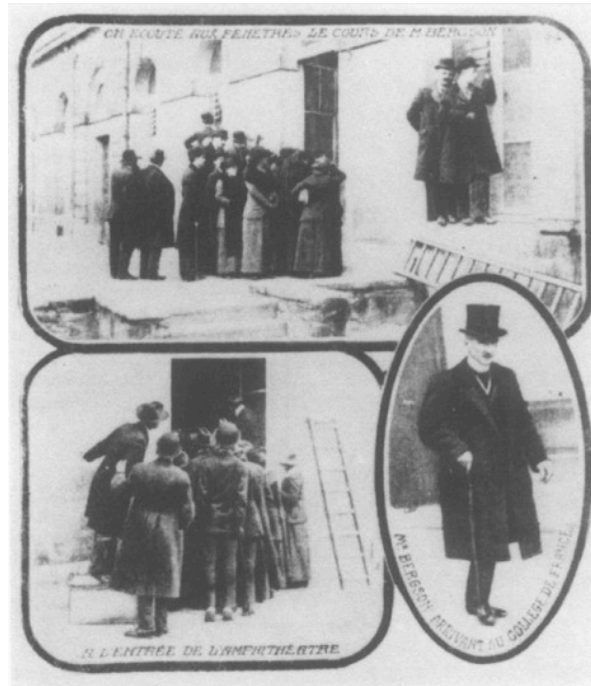
²⁵ Georges Sorel, “Lettre de Georges Sorel à Charles Maurras,” 6 July 1909; in appendix of Pierre Andreu, *Notre Maître, M. Sorel* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1953), 325-6.

²⁶ Gerald C. Friedman, “Revolutionary Unions and French Labor: The Rebels Behind the Cause; Or, Why Did Revolutionary Syndicalism Fail?” *French Historical Studies* 20, no. 2 (1997): 155-81; for a broader political account of this alliance, see Gabriel Goodliffe, *The Resurgence of the Radical Right in France: From Boulangisme to the Front National* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 115-96; David M. Gordon, *Liberalism and Social Reform: Industrial Growth and Progressiste Politics in France, 1880-1914* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 171-94.

²⁷ Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Malcolm Vout and Lawrence Wilde, “Socialism and Myth: The Case of Bergson and Sorel,” *Radical Philosophy* 46 (1987): 2-7



[Fig 17: Henri Bergson (1859-1941)]



[Fig 18: People lined up outside of Henri Bergson's lectures, 14 February 1914. Bergson's lectures were considered society events, extending his influence well beyond the confines of institutional and academic French philosophy.]²⁸

reorientation shaped an irrationalist anti-establishment discourse that questioned whether a positivistic political culture could successfully reconstitute the French social body. Its central thrust was two-fold: the Third Republic encouraged moral decadence, and it was unable to secure the cohesion of the social body without an ever-expanding statism. It was this irrationalist vocabulary of political dissent that helped bridge the anarchist syndicalist movement with royalist, nationalist tendencies, both of whom came to see their generation as living through a crisis episode in a moral epic. Hubert Lagardelle's *Le Mouvement socialiste* and Péguy's *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* stood at the forefront of developing this new idiom of political dissent. Sorel was involved with both, and together they provided the immediate context for the *Reflections*.

²⁸ Photo from Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*, 5.

* * *

Lagardelle's journal was one of the central organs for elaborating revolutionary syndicalism's political theory in France.²⁹ It was in its pages that Sorel's *Reflections* first appeared in French, serialized in its 1906 issues (after earlier appearing in its Italian analogue *Il Divenire sociale*). It thus provided the initial French audience for *Reflections* before the pieces were assembled into book form for publication in 1908 on his friend Daniel Halévy's encouragement.³⁰ *Le Mouvement socialiste* also provided a venue for Sorel's highly original work on Marxism during these years, which by the early 1900s established him as one of its leading authorities.

Sorel originally became involved with the journal in 1899 during the heyday of the Dreyfus Affair. Like others who answered Emile Zola's call for intellectuals to defend Dreyfus and safeguard the universal value of truth—even if it meant tarnishing the esteem of France's military—Sorel joined the Dreyfusard cause. He saw in it the sense of justice that he believed formed socialism's essence.³¹ However, after the Dreyfusard movement succumbed to petty electoral politics and virulent anti-clericalism, especially with "l'affair des fiches" and the separation of church and state in 1905, he abandoned it and parliamentary democracy generally.³² He was joined by other leading revolutionary socialist organizations, like Victor Griffuelhes's CGT and

²⁹ The program of the journal is described by Sorel in "Le syndicalisme révolutionnaire," *Le mouvement socialiste*, November 1905.

³⁰ Michel Prat, ed. "Lettres de Georges Sorel à Daniel Halévy (1907-1920)," *Mil neuf cent: Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 12 (1994): 151-223.

³¹ Georges Sorel, "Morale et socialisme," *Le Mouvement socialiste*, March 1899, 209-11.

³² "L'affair des fiches" was a scandal where efforts to "republicanize" the army and administration included using Freemasons to collect information on the religious activity of officers. It occurred discretely for years until it broke in 1904. Sorel's fullest statement on the collapse of Dreyfusism is in his *La Révolution dreyfusienne* (Paris: Rivière, 1909).

Hervé's *La Guerre sociale*. Disaffection from parliamentary politics was for many revolutionary socialists cemented when the former socialist-liberal alliance for republican defense turned on the working class: a violent repression of a miners' strike in May 1906 by Clemenceau, which left hundreds dead, was for many a point of no return.

Though its readership was comparatively small, and despite the role its contributors would play in the rise of French fascism in the coming decades, even its scholarly critics admit *Le Mouvement socialiste* was “one of the best [journals] that had ever existed in Europe, and the influence of its contributors on the development of the syndicalist left was considerable.”³³ The intellectuals who formed its core—Lagardelle, Sorel, Halévy, Griffuelhes, Marcel Mauss, Antonio Labriola—became known as the “nouvelle école” or new school of socialism. Under Lagardelle's editorial direction, the “new school” called for a rescue of the spirit of Marx from Marxism and for an autonomous workers' movement. They also disseminated revisionists like Eduard Bernstein and developed a reputation as the “Bergsonian Left.”³⁴

The journal was particularly well known for its antagonistic stance towards Jaurès's parliamentary socialism, which was seen as a capitulation to the Third Republic's representative democracy. As Pierre Rosanvallon puts it, Lagardelle's

³³ Sternhell, *Neither Right nor Left*, 16; Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 118.

³⁴ See the editorial board's “La Crise du Socialisme français,” in *Le Mouvement Socialiste* (August 1899): 129-31; Hubert Lagardelle, “Le Socialisme et l'Affaire Dreyfus,” in February 1899, 155-66 and May 1899, 285-99; Edouard Bernstein, “Démocratie et Socialisme,” trans. Albert Lévy, in April 1899, 321-37. On their self-understanding as the “Bergsonian Left,” see also Shklar, “Bergson and the Politics of Intuition,” 645-6; James Jay Hamilton, “Georges Sorel and the Inconsistencies of a Bergsonian Marxism,” *Political Theory* 1, no. 3 (1973): 329-40; Vout and Wilde, “Socialism and Myth.”

circle endorsed a “sociological socialism, derived directly from the activities of labor groups” against the doctrinal socialism “founded on a philosophical theory.”³⁵

Lagardelle himself had debated Durkheim over the compatibility between the two. He insisted that working-class consciousness was incompatible with support for the republic. Durkheim responded by accusing Lagardelle and his colleagues of leading an incoherent anti-social movement that threatened to abort any gains socialism might gradually achieve through institutional reform.³⁶

These theoretical conflicts intersected with the broader “crisis of Marxism” during these years. This crisis—can or should we modify Marx’s arguments in light of present conditions?—revealed geopolitical and nationalist anxieties. “Official” Marxism in France was sometimes seen as German in spirit and thus un-French. In recovering Marx from Bernstein-style social democracy in Germany and Jules Guesde in France, Lagardelle and his journal participated in a search for a distinctly French form of Marxism. To critique official Marxism—even if in the name of the true Marx—became a way of defending French exceptionalism.³⁷ It identified the spirit of Marx with the French revolutionary tradition and France as the true home of socialism. Hence why thinkers associated with both nationalism and revolutionary syndicalism also latched onto Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: aside from being a moralist, anarchist, and anti-capitalist, he was French.³⁸ And in many ways, Sorel’s encounter

³⁵ Rosanvallon, *Le peuple introuvable*, 223.

³⁶ Steven Lukes, *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1975), 542-5.

³⁷ Sorel actually makes this case in “Socialismes nationaux,” *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*, 3, no. 14 (1902): 53-4.

³⁸ Proudhon even appeared in a regular column of *L’Action française* entitled “Our Masters” in July 1902, praised for his pastoral turn of mind and prudish views on the family. Other “masters” included Fourier and Baudelaire. See “Nos maîtres: Proudhon,” *L’Action française*, July 15, 1902.

with Marx in the late 1890s was entwined with his encounter with Proudhon, and much of his return to “the spirit of Marx” during his days at *Le Mouvement socialiste* placed the accent on the latter.³⁹

Although the *Reflections* was published in *Le Mouvement socialiste*, many of its arguments were developed within the circle surrounding the poet and essayist Charles Péguy, editor of the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* [fig 19, 20]. The *Cahiers* was a vibrant, financially precarious publication that gathered together strands of Catholic, irrationalist and socialist thought. Some of its members overlapped with Lagardelle’s journal. Péguy started the *Cahiers* after failing his agrégation at the École Normale Supérieure (ENS) and opening up a bookstore in the Latin Quarter. The intellectuals and writers who gathered there—Sorel, Péguy, Halévy, Julien Benda, Eduard Berth, Romain Rolland, and many others—helped formulate an alternative political program to the official parliamentary socialism of Jaurès and Lucien Herr, the influential librarian at the ENS. As Halévy joked, Péguy’s bookstore became known as “a haunt of old Normale students more or less denormalized.”⁴⁰

The trajectory of Péguy’s circle was as politically heterogeneous as it was morally unbending. Like Sorel, its members began as committed Dreyfusards. But whereas Halévy and Sorel abandoned the Dreyfusard movement after its cooptation by parliamentary politics, Péguy remained committed to its “mystique,” even as he acknowledged that corrupt politicians had degraded it.⁴¹ Further conflicts within the

³⁹ Georges Sorel, “Essai sur la philosophie de Proudhon,” *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger*, 33 (1892), 622-9.

⁴⁰ Halévy, *Péguy*, 131.

⁴¹ The dispute within the circle came to a head over Halévy’s publication of *Apologie pour notre passé* (1910), which defended his disillusionment with Dreyfusism. It solicited in the *Cahiers* Péguy’s famous



[Fig 19: Charles Péguy, Editor of the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine*.]

[Fig 20: La Boutique des cahiers, 8 rue de la Sorbonne, Paris (5th), March 1902]

circle came over their attitudes towards Bergson. Sorel and Péguy adored Bergson, and it was with Péguy that Sorel began attending Bergson's lectures in 1900—"the traditional activity of the aspiring French intellectual," as Kaplan quips⁴²—each Friday afternoon.⁴³ Like many others, Péguy saw in Bergson "a new religious and philosophical inspiration for politics," indeed "the last hope of a desperate age."⁴⁴ Benda found the philosopher insufferable, attacking him in his unforgiving *Une philosophie pathétique* (1913).⁴⁵ A final divisive issue was Péguy's spiritual

reply, *Notre jeunesse* (1910). For Sorel's appreciation of Péguy's "mystique," see K. Steven Vincent, "Citizenship, Patriotism, Tradition, and Antipolitics in the Thought of Georges Sorel," *The European Legacy* 3, no. 5 (1998): 7-16, at 12.

⁴² Alice Yaeger Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: Fascism, Literature, and French Intellectual Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 63; Antliff, *Inventing Bergson*; Vout and Wilde, "Socialism and Myth"; Hamilton, "Georges Sorel and the Inconsistencies of a Bergsonian Marxism."

⁴³ Halévy, *Péguy*, 74. Bergson returned the praise. Eulogizing Péguy after the war, he wrote: "He had a marvelous gift for stepping beyond the materiality of beings, going beyond it and penetrating to the soul. Thus it is that he knew my most secret thought, such as I have never expressed it, such as I would have wished to express it," in Charles Péguy, *Basic Verities: Prose and Poetry*, trans. Anne and Julian Green (New York: Pantheon, 1943), 9.

⁴⁴ Shklar, "Bergson and the Politics of Intuition," 646, 635.

⁴⁵ Like Halévy's *Apologie pour notre passé*, Benda's essay solicited a defensive response by Péguy in

conversion to Catholicism in 1908, which alienated both readers and fellow contributors to the *Cahiers*. Sorel found it peculiar himself. With that conversion, the *Cahiers* assumed an idiosyncratic place among the French right, a Bergsonian conservatism nudged between the integral nationalism of Maurras's Action Française and the narcissistic cult of the *moi* promoted by Barrès in the *Echo de Paris*.

For all of the ideological bickering at the *Cahiers*, its visitors were united by their common interest in a moral interpretation of socialism. Their polemics unfolded against the backdrop of the Cartesianism and positivism championed in places like the École Polytechnique, where Sorel received his engineering training. In their eyes, Cartesianism was antithetical to the moral and epistemic worldview of producers. It was cold and sterile; it knew no pain. That was why it could imagine the world as simply an object of contemplation and rational cognition. Because the perspective of the worker entailed pain and forbearance, however, it could never adopt a strictly contemplative stance towards the world as “intellectuals” did. Instead, the workers’ epistemological perspective inclined towards philosophical naturalism.⁴⁶ It would never occur to them to wonder whether the external world “really” existed—the givenness of the pain of labor proved it beyond doubt. The fact that bourgeois

his *Note sur M. Bergson et la philosophie bergsonienne* (1914). Benda took an unusual place within the circle. Despite being the member who stayed the longest, Benda was also the thinker who fit the circle least; he was also a Jew, a committed rationalist, and intellectually incompatible with Péguy. It was a dispute over Benda's *L'Ordination* that led to Péguy and Sorel's eventual break.

⁴⁶ Georges Sorel, “Science and Morals,” in Georges Sorel, *From Georges Sorel: Vol 2, Hermeneutics and the Sciences*, ed. John L. Stanley, trans. John and Charlotte Stanley (New Brunswick: Transactions Publishers, 1990; first published 1900), 133: “pain is found in all manifestations of our activity... Perhaps we could better translate this observation by saying that pain is the primordial manifestation of life, the one that gives irrefutable proof (for our consciousness) of our immersion in the physical world and demonstrates our existence and the existence of the world simultaneously... Thus, the role of pain is very great in the world.”

intellectuals wondered aloud about such questions proved their decadence. It was the historical mission of the productive classes to clear this ideological clutter away, and to furnish a new value system for a modern industrial France. By embodying the virtues of men living “concretely,” rooted in industry, tradition, life and soil, producers provided a superior template for republican citizenship.⁴⁷

It was this insistence that socialism was as much a science of morality as a critique of liberal political economy that helped bring together Lagardelle, Sorel, Péguy and leaders of the CGT like Victor Griffuelhes and Émile Pouget. They believed that not only the terms of economic arrangement, but also the proper moral bases for a modernizing industrial society were at stake. After all, the positivism of the Third Republic could not provide them. “In vain are these philosophies adorned with a grand scientific apparatus,” Sorel wrote, “for they offer no help in constituting the morals of society.”⁴⁸ Or, as he again acknowledged in a letter to Benedetto Croce in 1907, “If I were to sum up the great concern of my entire life, it would be to investigate the historical genesis of morals.”⁴⁹

This moral interpretation of socialism bridged segments of revolutionary syndicalism and the royalist, nationalist movement, despite the fact that the value system of the former was explicitly proletarian. It could bridge them because, in portraying the social antagonisms of the Third Republic as above all moral struggles, it viewed society as a moral entity. Of course, Durkheim, Frederic Le Play, and

⁴⁷ Vincent, “Citizenship, Patriotism, Tradition, and Antipolitics”; Richard Vernon, ““Citizenship” in ‘Industry’: The Case of George Sorel,” *The American Political Science Review* 75, no. 1 (1981): 17-28.

⁴⁸ Sorel, “Science and Morals,” 133.

⁴⁹ Letter to Croce, 6 May 1907, in *Critica* 26, no. 2 (20 March 1928): 100.

Hippolyte Taine already acknowledged that fact. But their school stressed morality's conventionalism. It had in its canon, for example, Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* (1863), a text that sought to humanize, and so relativize, Christianity's origin. Renan's 1882 "Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?" lecture, which famously acknowledged the nation as constituted by shared mores and historical amnesia, did so to construct a theory of the nation that was emphatically contingent and constructed. Taine's equally famous claim that society was a product of the "race, milieu and moment" triptych was, beyond its conservatism, also an ode to a historicist and relativizing science of society.

This moral conventionalism was unacceptable to the political thinkers associated with both the royalist right and revolutionary syndicalism. They thought that conventionalism encouraged democratic statism and social fragmentation. The insistence on the conventionality of moral and political association both deprived France of genuine moral foundations and fragmented the social body, leaving it to be clinched together only "mechanically" through the state's artificial "top-down" instruments of integration like education and the family, civic nationalism, the standardization of a common language, and the creation of social security.⁵⁰ Indeed, Charles Gide, Le Play, Durkheim and others had largely abandoned the moral naturalism of revolutionary republicanism. These new architects of liberal republicanism had reconceptualized the state, instead, as an agent of progress in the name of which it could "produce the social." "Established elites, steeped in a

⁵⁰ Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); Eugen Weber, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976).

liberalism that counted Tocqueville and Guizot among its progenitors,” Philip Nord explains, had finally “shucked off the Jacobin legacy.”⁵¹ They forged in its place a republicanism that viewed “the social” as an artifact of state-sponsored instruments of cohesion, cementing together discrete social formations and transforming the state from a site of political sovereignty into an instrument of economic improvement and social harmony. The effect was that, as Jacques Donzelot has argued, state sovereignty was gradually redefined in terms of its role as guardian of social progress rather than an expression of popular will.⁵² Violence, in turn, was defined as barbaric and whose transcendence was a marker of a well-constituted social fabric. Indeed, the repudiation of violence formed a core component of national identity, one that became increasingly central to the self-understanding of French republican ideology.

Thus, although Sorel and his friends agreed with Durkheim that society was a moral phenomenon, they also believed that, far from promoting cohesion and morality as it promised, this rationalist republicanism actually amplified moral relativism, atomization and statism. Like Tocqueville and Proudhon, Sorel complained of the “egoism” it unleashed: “Egoism of the basest kind shamelessly breaks the sacred bonds of the family and friendship in every case in which these oppose its desire” (*RV*, 188). Indeed, because of that egoism, Sorel feared that “France has lost its morals” (*RV*, 216). For the implications, one had only to look to Barrès’s *Les Déracinés* or “The Uprooted” (1897), a popular novel, part of a trilogy on “national energy,” and which told the story of young Frenchmen from Alsace and Lorraine alienated from the

⁵¹ Nord, *The Republican Moment*, 4.

⁵² Donzelot, *L'invention du social*.

patrie by the pernicious influence of a Kant professor. Kant was a convenient stand-in for the political culture of the Third Republic: rational, cosmopolitan, universalistic, homogenous, an allergic-reaction—so Barrès thought—to life, instinct, immediate experience, individuality and everything “lived” and “concrete,” namely, *la France profonde*. Péguy was equally melodramatic. Influenced by Sorel’s early studies on the social origins of morality, he called in *Notre jeunesse* for a return to French republicanism “before the professors crushed it,” to recover “what a people was like before it was obliterated” by the scientific and statist point of view. He complained of “the *de-republicanization* of France”—the reduction of French republicanism into a relativist, parliamentary shell—“is essentially the same movement as the *de-Christianization* of France. Both together are one and the same movement, a profound *de-mystification*.”⁵³ The mystical Republic (Péguy), the lived experience of the *patrie* (Barrès), the “most noble sentiments” of concrete morality (Sorel): each represent related attempts to relate a story of national morality driven towards egoism and rationalism by the regime’s rationalistic republicanism. The “the new school” of socialism took upon itself the task of counteract these trends by “recognizing the necessity of the improvement of morals” in France (*RV*, 223).

What brought parts of revolutionary syndicalism and royalist nationalism into proximity, in other words, was their shared search for a morality not through the state, but—like the broader turn to irrationalism in European intellectual thought—in the immediacy of experience, particularly as it was available in the ethos of “ordinary”

⁵³ Péguy, *Temporal and Eternal*, 22-3.

workers. As the Dreyfus Affair made clear, so long as the socialist left had been affiliated with republican anti-clericalism, there could be no rapport between the two. But thanks to irrationalist politics forged by Péguy, Lagardelle and others, a political synthesis was possible on the basis of a reassertion of naturalistic morality, grounded in a vision of activity, industry and the normative family—a romantic radicalism grounded in what they called “life.”

Together, these tendencies downplayed the element of economic struggle in socialism and magnified its moral aspect, gradually recasting the class struggle as one between classes who were less defined by their place in the productive system than their moral convictions. It was out of this common ground that a shared critical diagnosis of parliamentary democracy was put forward. But such groundwork did not answer the all-important question of how the moral foundations of the social could be reconstructed. It did not yet offer an ameliorative practice that could enact and bring forth moral order from within a relativistic, skeptical, and utilitarian political culture. The political thinker who most vigorously worked out a solution was Sorel. His *Reflections*, which finally appeared in book form in 1908, was to make the case that collective violence could be a practice of freedom and an instrument of moral improvement precisely because it defied the constraints of the abstract.

The Cunning of Violence: The Argument of Sorel's Reflections

Sorel's *Reflections* appeared as many parliamentary socialists denounced revolutionary violence as irrational and “antisocial.” Despite the fact that a

reconceptualization of violence is the *Reflections*' chief intervention, however, there is virtually no in-depth analysis of what Sorel meant by it. This neglect is likely the consequence of the *Reflection*'s stature. Its canonical status has led recent scholars to ignore it in favor of his minor writings, particularly in the philosophy of science, to better account for his overall intellectual portrait.⁵⁴ The ironic result is that Sorel's *Reflections*, its view on violence assumed to be familiar and settled, has received disproportionately little conceptual formalization. But as Alice Kaplan wryly notes, despite its relative neglect by recent academic scholarship, "the book least worth reading was the book most often cited and probably the only book the fascists knew much about."⁵⁵

The neglect is evident in the way that scholars read the *Reflections* as

⁵⁴ Interpretative work on Sorel has occurred in roughly two waves. The first, classical interpretation of Sorel located him squarely in the prehistory of fascism and interpreted the *Reflections on Violence* extracted from his broader intellectual biography. Besides Sartre's infamous reference to Sorel's "fascist utterances" in his preface to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, this was the view of Isaiah Berlin and Hannah Arendt, as well as his scholarly interpreters like Jack Roth and later Zeev Sternhell, e.g. Isaiah Berlin, "Georges Sorel" in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 296-332; Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, 1970), 66-83; Roth, "The Roots of Italian Fascism"; Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left*; Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Revolution*, with Mario Sznajder and Maia Asheri, trans. David Maisel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994; first published 1989), 36-91; Horowitz, *Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason*; Hughes, *Consciousness and Society*; Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*; Curtis, *Three Against the Republic*. Recently, political theorists and historians have sought to correct this initial canonization as a proto-fascist by turning to his philosophy of science, especially his scientific conventionalism. The result is that he has been redescribed as a liberal pragmatist or a radical democrat: Jennings, *Georges Sorel*; John Stanley, *The Sociology of Virtue: The Political and Social Theories of Georges Sorel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); John L. Stanley, "Sorel's Study of Vico: The Uses of the Poetic Imagination," *The European Legacy* 3, no. 5 (1998): 17-34; Arthur L. Greil, *Georges Sorel and the Sociology of Virtue* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 1985). For a more subtle account of how to situate Sorel historically, see K. Steven Vincent, "Interpreting Georges Sorel: Defender of Virtue or Apostle of Violence?" *History of European Ideas* 12, no. 2 (1990): 239-57. The problem with these two waves of scholarship is that, by correcting for the long-standing interpretation of Sorel as a proto-fascist by turning to his philosophy of science, the problem of violence in his writings was not revisited.

⁵⁵ Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 61.

endorsing violence for its own sake. Shklar spoke for an entire generation of readers when she concluded that “what distinguishes [Sorel] from most other revolutionaries was that he was not at all concerned with a better future, or indeed with improving society in any way.” Strictly speaking, he could not even be classified as a political thinker.⁵⁶ This view has persisted among contemporary readers, and it is not altogether wrong.⁵⁷ Violence for Sorel *is* that—but only when viewed from the subjective perspective of the political actor. A more careful reading shows, however, that the *Reflections* builds its account of violence from two simultaneous perspectives. In addition to the subjective perspective on proletarian violence, Sorel describes it from a functionalist or Archimedean perspective. The point of the *Reflections*, after all, is to argue that we need violence to redraw lines of class conflict at a time in which parliamentary democracy is erasing them through “social legislation” and mixing everything into a “democratic morass” (*RV*, 78). Into that morass, proletarian violence injects moral and social differentiation. This is violence’s “objective” function. The trick is that for violence to accomplish this objective task, those who engage in it must do so in ignorance of this overall purpose; they cannot hold in their mind’s eye this “merely” instrumental goal. To do so—to engage in violence for utilitarian reasons—

⁵⁶ Shklar, “Bergson and the Politics of Intuition,” 648; Vincent, “Citizenship, Patriotism, Tradition, and Antipolitics.”

⁵⁷ Dominick LaCapra, *History and its Limits: Human, Animal, Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 97. This is by far the most prevalent view on Sorel. Three recent expositors are Corey Robin, who specifically characterizes Sorel’s myth of the general strike as action for action’s sake; Moishe Postone, who describes Sorel’s aimless violence as an escape valve from structural domination; and Martin Jay, who views it as a simple clarion call for revolutionary violence. See Corey Robin’s *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism From Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 217-45; Moishe Postone, “History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism,” *Public Culture* 18, no. 1 (2006): 93-110; Martin Jay, *Refractions of Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1.

would debase their morality by falling into the same utilitarian reasoning about violence that characterizes *raison d'état* or what Sorel called “force.” Rather than differentiating the classes, such violence would simply remake proletarians the image of their bourgeois enemies. Popular accounts of Sorel attend almost exclusively to its subjective, irrational side,⁵⁸ thus obscuring how Sorel built into his account of proletarian violence a distinction between its subjective and objective aspects: disavowing its function is how it fulfilled its function.

Thus, like Hegel’s cunning of reason, Sorel formulates something of a “cunning of violence” to serve as a motor for historical and moral development: “The striving towards excellence, which exists in the absence of any personal, immediate or proportional reward, constitutes the *secret virtue* that assures the continued progress of the world” (*RV*, 248). This “cunning of violence” prevents his endorsement of violence for its own sake from succumbing to subjectivism. Conceptually, it is constructed upon Sorel’s own interpretation of France’s political situation, which also consisted in an “objective” and “subjective” aspect: it tended towards decadence, and it extinguished the will. Formalizing Sorel’s conception of violence helps us see why Sorel believed his account of irrational violence was uniquely situated to regenerating the moral foundations of the social.

⁵⁸ From Raymond Aron, see his *Main Currents in Sociological Thought, Vol. 2: Durkheim, Pareto, Weber* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999; first published 1967), 167; or his pseudonymously published pamphlet, “Les Dictateurs et la mystique de la violence.” For Benjamin’s reading of Sorel as the emblem of “mythic violence,” which though a bit inscrutable is still action for its own sake, see “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986). An analysis of some contemporary readings of Sorelian violence can be found in Richard Bernstein, *Violence: Thinking Without Banisters* (New York: Polity, 2013).

In elaborating violence in its “objective” aspect, Sorel argues that proletarian violence counteracts the decadence brought about by parliamentary democracy’s pursuit of “social peace.” Traditionally, he claims, French political culture has been hostile to the class struggle because of the rights of man: “Judging all things from the abstract point of view of the *Déclaration des droits de l’homme*, they said that the legislation of 1789 had been created in order to abolish all distinction of class in law.” For this reason, legislation tailored to the conditions of the working class—social legislation—has been opposed because it “reintroduced the idea of class and distinguished certain groups of citizens as being unfit for the use of liberty” (*RV* 51). It enshrined in law a formal distinction that the revolution was supposed to have abolished.

With the founding of the Third Republic, however, social legislation became palatable because it was recast as republican, i.e. a means of integrating disenfranchised classes into modern citizenship and resolving “the social question” in universal, progressive terms. Policy programs like Léon Duguit and Léon Bourgeois’s “solidarism” had helped create a state-run system of social security and insurance that could fulfill the demands of “social right,” enact a “social economics,” and secure cross-class solidarity in the name of progress while regulating anomie via the family and the workplace.⁵⁹ It was this attempt to republicanize social conflict that Sorel disdainfully called social peace, and in the *Reflections* he attacks Jaurès and Bourgeois

⁵⁹ Donzelot, *L’invention du social*; J.E.S. Hayward, “The Official Social Philosophy of the French Third Republic: Léon Bourgeois and Solidarism,” *International Review of Social History*, 6, no. 1 (1961): 19-48; Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen*.

as its sophists.

According to the *Reflections*, solidarism's "social peace" has made parliamentary socialism effete and counter-revolutionary. Rather than standing firm in their convictions, socialist politicians seek compromises with the ruling class and become opportunistic. "Parliamentary socialism," Sorel observes with loathing, "feels a certain embarrassment from the fact that, at its origin, socialism took its stand on absolute principles" (*RV*, 68). Remade as realists, parliamentarians become hypocritical calculators and strategists. The pursuit of social peace, moreover, cannot help but recapitulate asymmetries of power. This point is important, for Sorel is arguing that what we conventionally understand to be rational deliberation aimed at generating consensus on questions of public good can, in practice, rarely realize the political freedom of the dispossessed under exploitative capitalist conditions. Liberal democratic politics, in a situation of unequal social relations, will stage social conflict as tacitly organized by the question of what concessions are needed from the bourgeoisie to appease the working classes: "Such a discussion presupposes that it is possible to ascertain the exact extent of social duty and what sacrifices an employer must continue to make in order *to maintain his position*" (*RV*, 56). It is thus reformist in essence; it rotates the seat of capitalist power without ever superseding it. Negotiations turn on questions of social "duty," where fulfillment of this duty allows the bourgeois benefactors to feel a "supposed heroism," one that is identified more accurately by its beneficiaries as barely concealed "shameful exploitation." By making the class struggle a question of the proper relation between the classes, of what the

ruling class owes the poor and what social legislation is therefore required by the state, such discussions cannot but take the form of special pleading. At its worst, it moralizes reformist politics so that its revolutionary counterpart appears not only practically unfeasible but morally repugnant, a violation of one's duty to cultivate a national consensus enjoyable by all democratic citizens. Hence why "parliamentary socialists no longer believe in insurrection...they teach that the ballot-box has replaced the gun," or why "parliamentary socialism does not mingle with the main body of the parties of the extreme Left" (*RV*, 49-50). By framing class struggle around civic harmony and duty, such struggles entrench exploitative social relations and on those grounds alone are to be rejected as counter-revolutionary (*RV*, 55-62, 107).

According to Sorel, this displacement of violent class warfare for the pursuit of social peace has ushered France into a state of decadence. On its face, this claim was not new. The concern with decline and decadence was a fixture of late nineteenth century European intellectual culture. Between conservative disciplines like crowd psychology⁶⁰ and criminal anthropology,⁶¹ "decadence" and "degeneration" were concepts in widespread use, organizing an array of social ills like the declining birth rate, alcohol consumption, criminality and sexual pathology within a common framework that analogized the compulsive repetition of France's revolutionary history to the intergenerational reproduction of the social body. Decadence linked biology and history together in a common national narrative of depletion, of vital life thwarted or

⁶⁰ Robert A. Nye, *The Origins of Crowd Psychology: Gustave Le Bon and the Crisis of Mass Democracy in the Third Republic* (London: Sage, 1975); Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors*.

⁶¹ Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c. 1848 - c. 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 42-73; Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 40-1.

suppressed.⁶²

Sorel was intimately familiar with this discourse.⁶³ Yet like Tocqueville, his understanding of decadence was psychosocial, not physiological. Drawing on his own studies of Vico and Proudhon, he portrayed decadence as a moral condition whose outstanding symptom was the substitution of intellectualism for heroism, and petty cleverness for physical violence (*RV*, 184-9, 211-2).⁶⁴ Indeed, earlier in Sorel's *Le Procès de Socrate* (1889), he had already insisted that philosophy ruined ancient Athens by destroying its spirit of heroism and the traditional family, replacing them with intellectualism and homosexuality. The former union of poetry and politics, and its enchanted understanding of nature, history, and the family, were supplanted by an enervating culture more interested in philosophical disquisition and pleasure than war and reproduction. Fatally, Athens had turned away from the egalitarianism of "life" for the hierarchies of "thought." Ancient Greeks before their decline, Sorel extols, were not unlike the captains of industry in America, muscular in their pursuit of collective self-interest. But now there is nothing but "bourgeois cowardice" in France (*RV*, 62). The ruling classes have surrendered their historical mission as "creators of

⁶² Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 59-62; Robert A. Nye, *Crime, Madness & Politics in Modern France: The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Donna Jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy: Négritude, Vitalism, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 8-9.

⁶³ Sorel discusses Le Bon often sympathetically but critically; see his reviews of Le Bon's work, compiled in Georges Sorel, "Sorel, lecteur de Le Bon: Huit Comptes Rendus (1895-1911)," *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle* 1, no. 28 (2010): 121-54; for his relationship to Lombroso and criminal anthropology, see Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 40-1.

⁶⁴ Besides Sorel's substantial "Etude sur Vico," published in 1896 in *Le Devenir sociale* and published now as *Etude sur Vico et autres textes* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007), see his preface to *Histoire des bourses du travail* by Ferdinand Pelloutier (Paris 1902), republished and translated by Richard Vernon as "On revolution without politics," in *Commitment and Change: Georges Sorel and the Idea of Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 93-110. See also Stanley, "Sorel's Study of Vico."

productive forces” for the pacific “noble profession of educators of the proletariat.”

The result is statism and the devaluation of heroic action. This is the objective situation and it is by all accounts a dim one.⁶⁵

This condition is expressed, subjectively, as a paralysis of our collective will.⁶⁶ Rationalism and its belief in progress, born in the Enlightenment and now the credo of the Republic, gives rise to an intellectual culture that denigrates the practical bases of knowledge and privileges abstract reasoning. And like Péguy’s claim in *Notre jeunesse* that all things begin as “mystique” and are debased into “politique,” Sorel sees in this culture a fall from intuition and feeling into abstract formalism and prediction. He occasionally calls this emergence of a utilitarian culture the rise of “probabilism.” This degeneration of the will—the subjective side of decadence—disempowers actors because it substitutes for the unconditional will a form of cognitive and moral reasoning fit only for deadened workers in capitalism, not citizens in a free society.⁶⁷ Why, after all, would people participate in a revolution if they predicted that their actions would likely fail, particularly if their opponent held the might of the state? “Theoreticians of democracy,” with their subsequent calls for reasonable and calculative action, “greatly restricted the field upon which this absolute

⁶⁵ “If... the bourgeoisie, led astray by the *nonsense* of the preachers of ethics and sociology, returns to the *ideal of conservative mediocrity*, seeks to correct the *abuses* of the economy and wishes to break with the barbarism of their predecessors, then one part of the forces which were to further the development of capitalism is employed in hindering it,” (*RV*, 76).

⁶⁶ “Many philosophers, especially those of antiquity, have believed it possible to reduce everything to a question of utility; and if any social evaluation does exist it is surely utility... the moderns teach that we judge our will before acting, comparing our projected conduct with general principles which are, to a certain extent, analogous to declarations of the rights of man; and this theory is, very probably, inspired by the admiration engendered by the Bill of Rights placed at the head of each American Constitution (*RV*, 25).

⁶⁷ Georges Sorel, “La Science dans l’éducation,” *Le Devenir Sociale* 2, no 2-5 (1896).

man may extend the action of his free will” (RV 262).

According to Sorel, Marx is the thinker who best grasps the consequences of orienting our wills towards prediction and calculation. A collection of free individuals maximizing self-interest will produce, in the aggregate, laws of social tendency, thereby dialectically transforming the sum of free actions into a determinate system governed by social compulsion. As Marx teaches us,

When we reach the last historical stage, the action of independent wills disappears and the whole of society resembles an organized body, working automatically; observers can then establish an economic science which appears to them as exact as the sciences of physical nature. The error of many economists consisted in their ignorance of the fact that this system, which seemed natural and primitive to them, is the result of a series of transformations that might not have taken place, and which always remains a very unstable structure, for it could be destroyed by force, as it had been created by the intervention of force... (RV, 168)⁶⁸

Though this phenomenon was familiar enough to nineteenth century political and economic thinkers, it reached a crisis point at the end of the century. At the same time that Sorel wrote his Reflections, for instance, Weber supplied this phenomenon its canonical formulation as the “iron cage” thesis. “The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so,” he laments in 1905, for the desire for economic well-being was “now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into

⁶⁸ Sorel makes this case earlier in an essay in *La Riforma Sociale*, reprinted in *Saggi di critics del Marxismo* (1902) and translated as “Necessity and Fatalism in Marxism” in Georges Sorel, *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy*, ed. John Stanley (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987; first published 1976), 123: “We should never lose sight of the fact that it is in the economic order and under the regime of free competition that chance furnishes ‘average’ results, capable of being regularized in such a way as to draw attention to tendencies analogous to mechanical processes; these average results can be suitably expressed in the form of natural laws.”

this mechanism...with irresistible force.”⁶⁹ The disenchantment of the world, Weber and Marx had argued, went hand-in-hand with the dialectical reversal of individual freedom into structural compulsion. It was a realization that alarmed an entire generation of European intellectuals, and many—as Sorel would—turned to vitalism as a metaphysical escape hatch.

For all of his dissatisfactions with French republicanism, Sorel is at his *most* republican when he defines French decadence as a crisis of the will. Sorel’s work in the philosophy of science originally led him to see determinism—understood not as fatalism, but as a simple statement about the regularity of natural phenomenon under conditions held constant—as something that expanded the jurisdiction of man’s will since it guaranteed the natural world’s experimental manipulability by industry and technology.⁷⁰ The more we understand the determinate regularity of natural phenomenon, the more we may subject the natural world to our will. But in modern democracies populated with atomized citizens keen on calculating rather than acting, humans became a part of determined nature rather than standing above it as its willful experimenter and producer (like, say, an engineer or a producer). Parliamentary democracy, where a self-interested politician jockeyed for votes as if at a Stock Exchange, was simply another instance of man despiritualized into determined nature. Party politics, like the market, resembled a machine that viewed each citizen as quantitatively interchangeable with any other (*RV*, 221-2). A remedy was thus needed

⁶⁹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Routledge, 1990; first published 1905), 123.

⁷⁰ Sorel adapts the notion of “determinism” from Claude Bernard, one of the leading philosophers of science in the Third Republic and an experimental physiologist. The best discussion of Bernard’s influence on Sorel’s early writings is Jennings, *Georges Sorel*, 45-9.

in the form of unmediated collective will, prior to both language and utilitarian reason, a will so primordial that it could not be captured by the mechanical reproduction of society. Man “must have in himself a powerful motive, a *conviction* which must dominate his whole consciousness, and act before the calculations of reflection have time to enter his mind” (*RV*, 206). Or as Sorel put it earlier in the preface to his friend Ferdinand Pelloutier’s *Histoire des bourses du travail* (1902), “Teaching the proletariat to will, instructing it by action—this is the whole secret of the socialist education of the people.”⁷¹

* * *

“It is here,” Sorel announces, “that the role of violence in history appears as of utmost importance” (*RV*, 77). Proletarian violence, “a very fine and heroic thing,” something “at the service of the immemorial interests of civilization,” appears “upon the scene at the very moment when the conception of social peace claims to moderate disputes.” That violence “confines employers to their role as producers and tends to restore the class structure just when they seemed on the point of intermingling in the democratic morass” (*RV*, 85, 78). Violence can undo the parliamentary rotation of power that cuts off revolutionary transformation. It can reverse the objective tendency towards decadence. “The danger which threatens the future of the world may be avoided,” indeed, violence “may save the world from barbarism” through an act of mass moral regeneration (*RV*, 85).

Sorel describes his turn to violence as an empirical discovery. The structure of

⁷¹ Sorel, “On revolution without politics,” 93.

exposition in the *Reflections* reflects this belief: the second half of the book is framed as a “test” of whether proletarian violence, which already exists as an accomplished fact, can ameliorate France’s present crisis. In reality, however, Sorel was subverting, by inverting, the prevailing presumption that violence was antisocial. Republican social theorists actually already believed that violence was irrational. But they often concluded from that fact that violence was therefore antisocial, because it undermined the conditions for social solidarity. But Sorel agreed with Durkheim and Mauss that society cannot be held together through reason alone. Like so many others before him in nineteenth century France, Sorel understood that contractualist solidarity could not actually form a cohesive society. But he therefore drew the proper conclusions that other republicans refused to own: it was precisely because violence was irrational that it might actually be social.

This latter point makes it difficult to simply dismiss Sorel as straightforwardly antirepublican. For Sorel accepted the major conclusions of Durkheim’s social theory, including the irrational qualities of violence, the centrality of “the sacred” and morality to social cohesion, and the all-important belief that society was an organism distinct from the aggregate of individuals that made it up. Even more, just as Durkheim saw a society-constituting function in moments of irrational collective effervescence, Sorel believed that morality depended on sources that delved below the registers of rational cognition. Where he departed from Durkheim was in seeing, with Bergson, liberty in ineffably voluntarist terms.

Indeed, it is the influence of Bergson that helps account for the path that the

Reflections takes away from Durkheim's basic insights. Drawing on the former's arguments that men returned to their free will by activating certain memories to return to "pure duration," Sorel argued that if proletarian violence could draw upon a myth—a powerful visual memory—such violence could reignite our faculty of collective willing, our shared powers of self-compulsion. These myths "are not descriptions of things but expressions of a will to act" (*RV*, 28). Specifically, they are "a body of images capable of evoking instinctively all the sentiments" of "war...against modern society," a mental visualization of an "artificial world" that we hold to be irrefutable, not because there is no evidence against it but because it is not something to which epistemic procedures of refutation are relevant: "A myth cannot be refuted since it is, at bottom, identical to the convictions of a group...unanalysable into parts which could be placed on the plane of historical descriptions" (*RV*, 118, 29). Myths are not empirical descriptions, or historical and sociological theses. Thus, "people who are living in this world of myths are secure from all refutation."

According to Sorel, the history of socialism in France has long shown the power of myths of revolution, especially that of 1789. Its reliance on these myths has "led many to assert that socialism is a kind of religion" (*RV*, 30). Yet simply because myths are "not astrological almanacs" does not mean they are religious, even as they remind us that what distinguishes religion from science is precisely the mythic element. The latter is what gives to religion its validity and binding compulsion, completely alien to modern positivistic reasoning and its withering skepticism. It was a fact neither Durkheim nor Renan could ever grasp no matter how much they sought

to demystify religion by writing their histories. Indeed, Marxism contained a mythic aspect too, and in Sorel's view the goal of revisionism was to recover that mythic core—the vision of catastrophe and revolutionary deliverance—from its disenchantment by the “scientific” Marxists of his day (*RV*, 122-9). After all, the falsity of myths “does not prevent us from continuing to make resolutions,” to *act* on their behalf (*RV*, 116). In short, violence sustained by myths can call into being a will *external* to the system of law-like regularity that characterizes modern capitalist society. It engenders the “sublime,” the moral and aesthetic quality of action that is proof of our freedom.

What is important to Sorel is not the true but banal claim that humans can be motivated by the irrational or the fictitious. What matters, rather, is the more fundamental issue of knowing whether we are free at all. When we act on mythic grounds, “our freedom becomes perfectly intelligible” (*RV*, 27). To act independently of rational or cognitive considerations is to come to know the deep psychology of our inner life, “our willing activity” and its “creative moment” that rationalist sciences obscure by viewing our actions instrumentally and retrospectively from the standpoint of completion (*RV*, 25-27). As he put in *Humanité nouvelle* around the same time, “to organize does not consist in placing automatons on boxes! Organization is the passage from order which is mechanical, blind and determined from the outside, to organic, intelligent and fully accepted differentiation; in a world, it is a moral development.”⁷²

⁷² Georges Sorel, “The Socialist Future of Syndicates,” republished in Georges Sorel, *From Georges Sorel: Essays in Socialism and Philosophy*, ed. John Stanley (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1987; first published 1976), 84. Originally appeared in *Humanité nouvelle* in March/April 1908.

The moral regeneration of society requires wresting a politics of will out of a deterministic and atomized social order. While Sorel draws this redefinition of freedom as an inner subjective experience, as willing and invention, largely on the basis of his reading of Bergson,⁷³ modeling freedom on creativity was also Sorel's way of insisting on the moral superiority of the productive classes over intellectual ones. Because creative production was a mystery of the interior life, it made sense that socialism had mythic elements since it was a doctrine for producers.⁷⁴

The classic examples of myths, according to Sorel, were the myths of deliverance that motivated Greek soldiers, the Jews and Christians of antiquity, and the leaders of the Protestant reformation (*RV*, 115-6). In each case, images of imminent catastrophe and redemption motivated the will of the persecuted, and no amount of empirical and worldly persuasion could touch their conviction. Such myths exaggerated every conflict, so that every struggle bore world-historic weight (*RV*, 58-63). The history of social movements teaches that all great historical transformations are motivated by such myths, and even if none of the myths are realized in their details, it does nothing to the accomplished fact that, moved by such myths, political actors have reshaped the world.

It is no accident that Sorel often associates myths with the religiously

⁷³ "Bergson, on the contrary, invites us to consider the inner depths of the mind and what happens during a creative moment: 'There are', he says, 'two different selves, one which is, as it were, the external projection of the other, its spatial and, so to speak, social representation. We reach the former by deep introspection, which leads us to grasp our inner states as living things, constantly in a process of becoming, as states not amenable to measure... But *the moments when we grasp ourselves are rare*, and this is why we are rarely free... To act freely is to recover possession of oneself, and to get back into pure duration.'" (*RV*, 26).

⁷⁴ Sorel explains, "Socialism is necessarily very obscure, since it deals with production, i.e. with the most mysterious part of human activity... No effort of thought, no progress of knowledge, no rational induction will ever dispel the mystery which envelops socialism" (*RV*, 139-40).

persecuted. After all, not any memory or motivating image becomes mythic. What makes a myth a myth is that action in its name produces an ethos. After all, if it were simply a matter of motivating men beyond their reason, fear would work just as well. Turning from Bergson to Nietzsche and Proudhon, Sorel puts the problem thus:⁷⁵

At the beginning of any enquiry on modern ethics this question must be asked: under what conditions is regeneration possible?... And if the contemporary world does not contain the roots of a new ethic, what will happen to it? The sighs of a whimpering bourgeoisie will not save it if it has forever lost its morality (*RV*, 224).

If political actors are to regain contact with their “willing activity,” but in a way that ameliorates degeneration and decline, they must be guided by myths that can furnish to the world a new system of valuation. They need myths that can isolate men from worldly considerations, and which allow them to act in ways exonerated from the demands of strategic or instrumental necessity. In other words, they need myths that can inspire “sublime” action, for “When working-class circles are *reasonable*, as the professional sociologists wish them to be,” Sorel scornfully remarked, “there is no more opportunity for the sublime than when agricultural unions discuss the subject of the price of guano with manure merchants” (*RV*, 210). Sublime violence is violence at once moralized and aestheticized, guided by images of catastrophe and redemption. It is conducted without traces of utilitarianism. It is at once voluntary and morally uplifting—precisely the type of behavior Sorel believes parliamentary democracy discourages with its emphasis on “social peace,” realism, compromise, and

⁷⁵ Approvingly leaning on Durkheim’s “La Détermination du fait moral” (1906), Sorel writes, “it would be impossible to suppress the *sacred* in *ethics* and that what characterized the sacred was its incommensurability with other human values” (*RV*, 205).

“reasonable” debate. Indeed, Sorel practically chokes with rage at the prospect of politicians joining a social movement, as happened in the Dreyfusard movement (“no more heroic characters, no more sublimity, no more convictions!”) (*RV*, 213).

Until the founding of the Third Republic, Sorel believed that the most significant modern myth was the French Revolution’s wars of liberty. That revolutionary myth, a memory and image of a newly sovereign people struggling to survive against a jealous Europe, motivated generations of soldiers while protecting them from base utilitarian considerations. Like the Christians of antiquity, the revolutionaries fought and died independently of the outcome: win or lose, their souls would be saved. This was, of course, the myth that inspired both Tocqueville’s writings in Algeria and the Paris Communards. But, alas, the historians of the Third Republic—especially Jaurès and Taine—have disenchanting the French Revolution (*RV*, 90-1). By writing its history, by rendering the Revolution as if it were any other event, they have destroyed its mythic element, revealing the revolution for what it was in fact: a “superstitious cult of the State” (*RV*, 99). “The prestige of the revolutionary days” has been badly damaged. They can no longer sustain free action.⁷⁶

With the myth of the revolution’s wars of liberty disenchanting and exhausted, a new myth is now needed to rekindle the mythic in society. That myth is the catastrophic general strike, the modern heir to the *mystique* of the French Revolution

⁷⁶ “There can be no national epic about things which the people cannot picture to themselves as reproducible in the near future; popular poetry implies the future much more than the past; it is for this reason that the adventures of the Gauls, of Charlemagne, of the Crusades, of Joan of Arc, cannot form the object of a narrative capable of moving anyone but literary people. Since we have begun to believe that contemporary governments cannot be brought down by riots like those of 14 July and 10 August, we have ceased to regard these days as having an epic character” (*RV*, 91).

and thus its latest iteration.⁷⁷ For democracy's disenfranchised, "the war of conquest interests them no longer. Instead of thinking of battles, they now think of strikes; instead of setting up their ideal as a battle against the armies of Europe, they now set it up as the general strike in which the capitalist regime will be destroyed" (*RV*, 63). The myth of the general strike "awakens in the depth of the soul a sentiment of the sublime," it inspires action undaunted by victory's implausibility and thus "brings to the fore the pride of free men" (*RV*, 159). It brings together the need for a collective will with a new system of values that repudiates the intellectualism and decadence of a dying France.⁷⁸ From its violence will arise an "ethic of the producers for the future" (*RV*, 224).

It is important to capture the dialectical structure of this account of violence. This mythic, sublime violence possesses an explicit objective, instrumental aim: the moral improvement of France and the generation of a new ethos. It is useful, and necessary, because of the decadent condition the French found themselves. But that aim cannot be realized if those who engage in this violence do so *for that reason*, for it would make their violence an example of "force" rather than an unconditional, spontaneous expression of absolute moral conviction. No wonder, then, that no matter how hard scientists and social theorists try to engineer a new morality for modern

⁷⁷ As Sorel explains, "We might, in fact, be led to ask if our official socialists, with their passion for discipline and their infinite confidence in the genius of their leaders, are not the authentic heirs to the royal armies while the anarchists and the adherents of the general strike represent today the spirit of the revolutionary armies who, against all the rules of the art of war, so thoroughly thrashed the fine armies of the coalition" (*RV*, 243).

⁷⁸ Again, Bergson is Sorel's influence. The general strike "groups them all in a coordinated picture... it colours with an intense life all the details of the composition presented to consciousness. We thus obtain that intuition of socialism which language cannot give us with perfect clearness - and we obtain it as a whole, perceived instantaneously" (*RV*, 118).

France, they can never succeed in regenerating its morality. For that, one needs the cunning of violence.

It was Sorel's hope that by refusing instrumental considerations, violence motivated by myths could produce behind its back an expressivist, spontaneous, and natural morality. This violence was moral, not because it was justified, but because it *produced* a morality. It took sustenance from an aesthetic ideal which, in virtue of being the self's inner creation, was untouched by reason's corrosive abstraction. It emancipated men from utilitarian calculations to pursue convictions as ends in themselves. Citing Nietzsche and Renan freely, Sorel believed his *Reflections* had effected a transvaluation of violence's value. No longer destructive, violence was productive; not nihilistic, it was value creating; the opposite of selfishness, it was a means of suppressing egoism for collective moral improvement: "it is the birth of a virtue, a virtue that the Intellectuals of the bourgeoisie are incapable of understanding, a virtue which has the power to save civilization" (*RV*, 228).

For a generation of Frenchmen in search of authentic individuality and the immediacy of fraternity, this intertwinement of the moral and the aesthetic became much more than an idiosyncratic intellectual synthesis. It provided the most sophisticated argument for why violence could be a fountain of "concrete" or communal values with which to overcome the determinism of an individualist society.

Conclusion: From Proletarian Violence to the Nation's Violence

Sorel states that "Proletarian acts of violence" are "purely and simply acts of

war; they have the value of military maneuvers and serve to mark the separation of classes” (*RV*, 105). Rather than acting from jealousy or a sense of self-regard, proletarian violence is dispassionate and soldierly. At the same time, such individuals are not dissolved into a collective like the state. They retain their individuality. “In the wars of Liberty,” Sorel suggests, “each soldier considered himself as an *individual* having something of importance to do in battle, instead of looking upon himself as simply one part of the military mechanism entrusted to the supreme direction of a leader.” During these wars, Sorel is struck by the contrast between the “*automatons* of the royal armies,” and the revolutionary army, a “collection of heroic exploits by individuals who drew the motives of their conduct from their enthusiasm” (*RV*, 240-1). What convinced the French revolutionary soldier of his irreducible individuality was the myth of the revolution, which guaranteed his vindication. He was not a machine following orders, interchangeable with any other as parliamentary democracy viewed each vote or capitalism viewed each worker. He was also not a utilitarian, a rational skeptic, a positivist or an intellectual. Instead, he was a qualitative individual who had moral conviction. His violence was perhaps the only way that the will could appear in the world prior to any mediation that would deaden it, making of him “an automaton.” The cunning of violence made this belief, not just a subjective wish, but an objective possibility.

Sorel’s redefinition of violence as a mythic, war-like practice connected the ongoing moral revisionism of socialism to a specific political practice. It was frequently appropriated by several movements both within and outside of France.

Amid these appropriations and adaptations, there was a clear pattern of displacing the revolutionary role the *Reflections* assigned to the working class with that of “the nation”—by Sorel himself included. Indeed, whatever popularity the *Reflections* enjoyed appeared intertwined with its adaptation into a nationalist idiom.

For example, members of Action Française invited Sorel and Eduard Berth—a regular at Péguy’s *Cahiers* and one of Sorel’s more dedicated followers—to found a magazine called *La Cité Française*. Its opening statement, which Sorel signed, stated that the group’s goal was to “liberate French intelligence” from the “ideologies which have taken over in Europe for the past century,” namely positivism. To that end,

It is necessary to awaken the conscience which the classes ought to possess themselves and which is presently smothered by democratic ideas. It is necessary to awaken the proper virtues of each class, and without which each will not be able to accomplish its historical mission.⁷⁹

The allusion to the *Reflections* was unmistakable, with its call for proletarian violence as a means of cultivating the ethos of the working class necessary for moral development. Yet the manifesto was immediately followed by Sorel’s own addendum that added a surprising clarion call “to restore to the French a spirit of independence” by taking the “noble paths opened by the masters of national thought [la pensée nationale].”⁸⁰ Nationalism, after all, had been thoroughly repudiated as chauvinistic self-interest in the *Reflections*.

After *La Cité Française* failed to take off, its participants took their “Sorelian royalism” into several splinter tendencies.⁸¹ Berth would help found the Cercle

⁷⁹ “Déclaration de la ‘Cité Française’” reprinted in Pierre Andreu, *Notre Maître, M. Sorel* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1953), 327-8.

⁸⁰ “L’ ‘Indépendance Française,’” reprinted in Andreu, *Notre Maître, M. Sorel*, 329-31.

⁸¹ Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism*, 65.

Proudhon. Founded by George Valois, a member of Action Française, the Cercle was an ultra-nationalist league whose 1912 manifesto declared democracy the greatest threat to the modern world, for democracy substituted “abstract” liberties for “concrete” ones. In so doing, it endangered the individual, the family, and society. The group was charged with “reawakening the spirit,” to defeat “the false science” underlying democracy and capitalism, and to resuscitate the *patrie* and its “laws of blood.”⁸² In its pages and in Valois’s speeches, Sorel was repeatedly referred to “our master.”

Jean Variot, an artist and journalist who first met Sorel at Péguy’s *Cahiers*, subsequently founded *L’Indépendance*, an intellectual outlet for Sorel where he published nationalist and anti-Semitic essays that alienated many of his former allies on the left while winning him new followers on the right.⁸³ In *L’Indépendance*, the former Dreyfusard now suggested that the affair was a Jewish conspiracy and repeated xenophobic platitudes long associated with the French right. In particular, his writings now focused on the Jew as “anti-artist,” revealing that his attempts to reinfuse politics with an aesthetic dimension was never neutral. Sorel’s redefinition of citizenship on the basis of productive labor (understood as the objectification of a mysterious, inner creativity of the will) served as an alibi for the political exclusion of those whose social ascriptions marked them as incapable of participating in this new sociality of instinct, intuition, and creative production. Sorel also published two essays in *L’Action française*: a review of Péguy’s book on Joan of Arc, praising it for its patriotism, and

⁸² Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon, “Déclaration,” *Cahiers du Cercle Proudhon* 1 (1912): 1-2.

⁸³ Wilde, “Sorel and the French Right.”

an essay critiquing parliamentary socialists and their complicity in state-led repression of strikers.⁸⁴

This move towards a militant nationalism was shared by many participants of the former “Bergsonian Left.” Lagardelle, disaffected by the failures of revolutionary syndicalism, would abandon his anti-patriotism and eventually become the minister of labor under Petain’s Vichy; Hervé, for his part, abandoned antimilitarism, discovered in national tradition a remedy for social division and fragmentation, and became a Mussolini enthusiast. Péguy’s fate was short-lived. As literary types are wont to do, he performed his own theory. Increasingly enchanted with death as a form of spiritual redemption and rebirth, he enthusiastically rushed into war in August 1914 only to die on September 4th with a bullet to the head.

The same adaptations occurred outside of France. In Italy especially, “Sorelismo” encouraged the reorganization of working class energy into nationalist forms of collectivism. The Italian futurist, Filippo Marinetti, published his infamous and widely read “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism” in the French literary magazine *Le Figaro* on February 20, 1909. It was a screed against history and the past, both deeply anti-establishment and ultra-nationalist. It exalted, among other things, the existential rebirth of a “new man” into the rebellious masses: “We shall sing of the great multitudes who are roused up by work, by pleasure, or by rebellion; of the many-hued, many-voiced tides of revolution in our modern capitals.”⁸⁵ Touched by

⁸⁴ Georges Sorel, “Le Réveil de l’âme Française,” *L’Action Française*, April 14, 1910; Georges Sorel, “Socialistes Antiparlementaires,” *L’Action Française*, August 22, 1909.

⁸⁵ Filippo Marinetti, “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism,” in *Critical Writings*, ed. Gunter Berghaus, trans. Doug Thompson (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux), 14.

Sorelismo, he would soon claim that war was “the sole cleanser of the world,” and that “I believe that a people has to pursue a continuous hygiene of heroism and every century take a glorious shower of blood.”⁸⁶ Marinetti was, moreover, only the most bombastic of those influenced by Sorelismo.⁸⁷ As Shlomo Sand explains, “Sorel’s presence in Italian culture from the end of the nineteenth century onward was too important to be ignored. The French friend of [leading Italian intellectuals] was known as an important philosopher, not only in syndicalist circles and not just on the political fringes, but also among an entire generation of university graduates in the second decade of the twentieth century.”⁸⁸ Sorel’s canonization as part of fascism’s intellectual pantheon was assured with Mussolini’s proclamation that “Who I am, I owe to Georges Sorel.” Finally, despite the fact that Sorel’s engagement with the right actually only lasted a few years, he was nevertheless mythologized as one of the intellectual forebears of fascism in France, too. Sorel was included by Vichy’s Information Services in a 1941 list of the political thinkers who constituted its pedigree: Sorel and Péguy stood aside Joseph de Maistre, Barrès, and Maurras.⁸⁹

The effortless displacement of the working class by the nation helps bring into view how, rather than representing alternative political programs, the irrationalist anti-republicanism of the mid-1900s and the nationalist, populist republicanism on the eve of war might be theoretically continuous. They shared a common way of thinking

⁸⁶ Marinetti, “Futurism: An Interview with Mr. Marinetti in *Comoedia*,” in *Critical Writings*, 19.

⁸⁷ For a study of Sorel’s influence, see Jack Roth, *The Cult of Violence: Sorel and the Sorelians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism*.

⁸⁸ Shlomo Sand, “Legend, Myth, and Fascism” *The European Legacy* 3, no. 5 (1998): 51-65, at 56.

⁸⁹ Eugen Weber, *Action Française: Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1962), 442.

about how war might inspire men to transcend their decadent, narrow self-interests and reach towards values as ends in themselves. Sorel himself approved of this “discovery” of the exchangeability between the social and the national. Originally enthusiastic about the rise of Mussolini, Sorel wrote that his genius consisted in discovering “the union of the national and the social, which I studied but which I never fathomed.”⁹⁰ War’s reconceptualization as an answer to the social question—because it drew out individuality, creativity, and moral uplift in ways compatible with social cohesion—itself transformed the meaning of the Republic. No longer the guardian of social harmony and economic progress that the elite social theorists of the Third Republic had defined it as, it was now a mythic source of authority and in the name of which a higher (and inward) freedom could be experienced. In obedience to the myth of the Nation, men would fight not for egoism or instrumental considerations, but civilization, morality, and “life” itself [fig 21].

This is not to deny that part of the broad conversion from anti-republicanism to enthusiastic nationalism was spurred by the weakening of syndicalism more broadly. After 1908, the revolutionary workers’ movement witnessed violent repression by the state and lost momentum. But the circumstantial reasons for this conversion also point to larger theoretical issues. The aestheticization of violence in this context explicitly invited the reorganization of working class energies into a larger politics of nationalism because it abandoned the economic interpretation of class struggle prominent elsewhere. Sorel’s notion of myths and sublime violence clearly gratified a

⁹⁰ Roth, *The Cult of Violence*, 186-7.

widespread urge on the eve of World War I for an intellectual orientation that could unite the political, the aesthetic and the moral in ways that answered the perceived crisis of France. Far from identifying that urge as antidemocratic and antirepublican, we should see that synthesis as answering a demand raised by French republicanism itself. For a generation searching for experiential grounds for social cohesion that were organic and spontaneous rather than procedural or mechanical, Sorel's arguments paved the way for war to be viewed as far more than security maneuvering. To enter into war with Germany was to return to a myth of the people in arms and regain one's political will.

For those swayed by Sorel's arguments, to defend mythologized authority in war was the condition of modern freedom. It was as if for Sorel and his generation, the Third Republic had suffocated the freedom of the will at the moment that democracy had finally triumphed over monarchism. If only the relativism and utilitarianism of French political culture could be overcome, we could finally have in our possession the proof of our freedom. That was the desire that the turn to intuition, "sublime" violent self-renewal intended to gratify. What violence supplied was not factual datum but psychological conviction in our freedom that the empirical world refused to yield through "rational" reflection. The regeneration of the moral foundations of the Republic thus depended on irrational violence.

LA GUERRE 1914-1915
EN IMAGES
Faits, Combats, Episodes, Récits

Le Dieu THOR la plus barbare
d'entre les barbares divinités de la Vieille Germanie

Composition de F. CLASQUIN
PELLERIN & C^{ie}, imp.-édit.
IMAGERIE D'ÉPINAL, N° 87



SON VIEUX **BONDIEU**

LE JOUR VIENDRA, HÉLAS! LES VIEILLES
DIVINITÉS GERMANIQUES SE LÈVERONT DE LEURS
TOMBEAUX FABULEUX ET-ESSUYERONT DE LEURS
YEUX LA POUSSIERE. **THOR** SE DRESSERA
SIEUR SÉCULAIRE AVEC SON MARTEAU
GIGANTESQUE ET DETRUIRA LES CATHÉDRALES
GOTHIQUES
1915 HENRI HEINE 1834

Car ce ne peut être que **CELUI-LA** que le **KAISER** ne cesse d'invoquer, si l'on en juge par les actes de pire vandalisme dont la Belgique et la France envahie portent le flétrissant témoignage.... **HENRI HEINE**, le poète allemand qui passa la dernière moitié de sa vie en France, avait, dès 1834, prévu, comme on voit, ce retour à la sauvagerie ancestrale.... En 1914-1915 le Kaiser commande et l'Allemagne applaudit!

[Fig 21: In this Epinal print in 1915, Thor—"the old Germanic divinity" and avatar of barbarism—is crushing the emblems of "civilization"—French churches. Besides seeing Germany as the hereditary enemy of France, it construes the battle for civilization not in the secular terms, but of a battle against paganism by the Church. Paris, BNF, Estampes et Photographie, Li-59 (17)-Fol.]

Conclusion

Democracy and the Return of the Social

With two world wars and the waves of violence that defined the twentieth century, European political development unraveled. The unprecedented scale of violence in the first half of the century—its trenches, its firebombing, its camps—seemed to defeat nineteenth century notions of humanism, civilization, and progress in irreversible ways. An estimated 1,400 people died at the height of the Jacobin Terror in the spring of 1794. But in the trenches of Verdun in 1916, over 70,000 soldiers were dying each month, with almost a million casualties by the year's end. The violence was of such a scale that observers in and beyond Europe openly doubted whether the political thought of the preceding century could grasp it. How could thought so blind to this coming historical mutation explain its significance?¹

In other words, many twentieth century observers surmised that the experience of world war not only introduced a break in the history of European political development, but also in its history of political thought. As George Kateb has recently put it, such are the “awful events” of the twentieth century that our inherited canon of political theory may not be able to “take in and comprehend” its dizzying catastrophe, comprised as it is of “World War I, World War II, the use twice of atomic weapons, their repeated threatened use by the United States, the theories of nuclear deterrence, the gulags, the Holocaust, induced famines, such American wars as the Korean War

¹ Élie Halévy, *L'ère des tyrannies* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914-1991* (New York: Vintage, 1996; first published 1994); Enzo Traverso, *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914-1945* (New York: Verso, 2016; first published 2006).

and the Vietnam War, and numerous massive massacres.”² Before so much death, what can political theory say? It was a state of confusion shared by a generation of European thinkers. From the Frankfurt school to cold war liberals, postwar journalists to newspaper critics, intellectuals everywhere cast the two world wars as a rupture in the nature of knowledge itself. Where there was once light and perspicacity in the Age of Enlightenment, after 1914, Ira Katznelson observes, there seemed to be only darkness and mystery.³

At the heart of this perceived rupture in European political thought lay revolutionary violence, for it, too, appeared to have evolved into something unrecognizable from the perspective of a St Just, a Michel, or a Péguy. For sure, revolutionary violence in the twentieth century continued to borrow the redemptive terms of its predecessors. It even continued to borrow the authority of the *peuple* and the *patrie* to authorize its illegality. But that all seemed to be beside the point. Technological transformations of violence had rendered these qualities accidental rather than essential. However regenerative Hitler viewed German expansion to be, it was its blitzkriegs and its gas chambers that made it what it was. Napoleonic France may have invented the theory of total war, but it was in the “bloodlands” of Eastern Europe where fourteen million people died between 1933 and 1945 that theory became practice.⁴ The Franco-Prussian war may have witnessed the ascendance of the *mitrailleuse*, but its gunpowder was nothing compared to the tanks, aerial strafing, and

² George Kateb, “The Adequacy of the Canon,” *Political Theory* 30, no. 4 (2002): 482-505, at 482-83.

³ Ira Katznelson, *Enlightenment and Desolation: Political Knowledge After Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

⁴ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

atomic bombs of World War II. It was the changed character of violence in the twentieth century that above all else broke the chains of tradition connecting nineteenth century political theory to its twentieth century successors. Confronted with that divide, what can a study of democratic terror in France teach us?

In this dissertation, I have tried to tell the story of redemptive violence's recurring role in the struggle for democracy in France. My aim has been to show how democratization in France invited political thinkers across the spectrum to appeal, time and again, to popular violence as a vocabulary of social repair. To show this, I have described how democratization was experienced as a process of disintegration, because it was perceived as a series of abstraction procedures imposed upon society: first, the procedures which produced the individual as the bearer of the rights of man, and later those which underlay the market, the electorate, and representative parliamentary politics. These procedures of abstraction were indispensable to the struggle for democracy in France, because they eroded the hierarchical corporatism of the *ancien régime* and pointed the way to a national sovereignty. At the same time, these procedures were unable to satisfy an equally important demand of republican democracy: the demand for a new type of social bond capable of binding together a self-governing people. Without a social cohesion that transcended a *modus vivendi*, France could have a republican government, but never a republican people. Hence, generations of thinkers on both the right and left found themselves fretting over the fact that France seemed to be realizing the ideal of "the people rule" at the cost of dissolving the people back into a fragmented multitude of atomized individuals.

Even if this dilemma had to be confronted in specific times and places, it was at bottom a theoretical impasse rooted in the wider historical experience of democratization. If the customary bases of association are no longer valid, then from what is the social bond made? How can a society of equals be created that transcends a quantitative aggregation of individuals? These questions were raised everywhere touched by democratic revolution, but it became most acute in postrevolutionary France. That was why the French struggle for democracy was never simply about replacing monarchy with republican government, subjects with citizens. It was also about rethinking the social bond.

French political thinkers quickly discovered that not all forms of violence were capable of reconstituting a social body. On the contrary, violence motivated by instrumental calculations exacerbated social disintegration. Nineteenth century thinkers often perceived a tight connection between the atomized individual and utilitarian reasoning. Indeed, it is hard to understate how much modern French thought developed its concern with the social in opposition to English liberal utilitarianism. Because of that defining opposition, French thinkers believed that instrumental or “realist” perspectives on violence conformed to rather than resisted contemporary forces of disintegration. What *could* regenerate social cohesion, they believed, were expressivist and non-instrumental types of violence which escaped the cut and thrust of interest politics or means-end rationality. Unlike the superficial opportunism of power politics or *raison d'état*, redemptive violence manifested the concrete moral principles that bind us together in society. In contrast to the mediated agency of the

law, it expressed the spontaneous unity and agency of the people. With redemptive violence, the people entered into history, not as an abstract ground of public authority, but a concrete agent of moral redemption.

If this solution to the demise of social cohesion looks anachronistic on this side of the twentieth century, the problem it hoped to solve should not. Redemptive violence might be an outdated source of social cohesion for republican democracy, but the contemporary alternatives put forward by liberal political theorists have not fared well either. The case of “constitutional patriotism” is a case in point. Designed by German intellectuals as a secular and post-national basis for postwar reunification, constitutional patriotism has come to attract the attention of liberals everywhere concerned with reinventing the normative bases for European integration. It promises to supply an alternative to racial or religious sources of social cohesion by emphasizing our shared attachments to procedural and institutional principles, often enshrined in a constitutional document.⁵ It holds out, Jan-Werner Müller explains, the hope that “another form of social cohesion is possible,” one nourished by a minimal moral universalism instead of the exclusionary national or ethnic creeds which marred the twentieth century.⁶

It is apparent to any student of European politics that constitutional patriotism

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “Constitutional Democracy: A Paradoxical Union of Contradictory Principles?” *Political Theory* 29, no. 6 (2001): 766-781; Jan-Werner Müller, *Constitutional Patriotism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Frank Michelman, “Morality, Identity and “Constitutional Patriotism”” *Ratio Juris* 14 (2001): 253-271; Patchen Markell, “Making Affect Safe for Democracy?: On ‘Constitutional Patriotism,’” *Political Theory* 28, no. 1 (2000): 38-63.

⁶ Müller, *Constitutional Patriotism*, 6; the case for constitutional patriotism as a form of moral minimalism is made in Jan-Werner Müller, “A European Constitutional Patriotism? The Case Restated,” *European Law Journal* 14, no. 5 (2008): 542-557.

has not been able to provide an effective source of social cohesion for postwar democracy. Where its vision of integration has proven successful, it has been in national contexts that have enjoyed demonstrable economic prosperity. Otherwise, the social cohesion forged through continental constitutional democracy has shown itself too fragile to withstand the combined assault of demographic diversification, economic crisis and dispossession, and suspicions that popular sovereignty has been usurped by impersonal technocratic rule. The ascendance of international governance has not fostered a transnational attachment to core constitutional procedures, but the resurgence of chauvinistic nationalisms that constitutional patriotism promised to make obsolete. The beneficiary of the new European order has not been a minimalist moral universalism, but reassertions of “the people” that resemble the “blood and soil” of Barrèsian conservatism.⁷

The contemporary difficulties of constitutional patriotism to cement the social bond in times of disintegration would not have surprised the thinkers studied here. Indeed, it was their keen sense of its limitations that drove them towards redemptive violence. As Jacobins and socialist republicans in France understood, neither constitutionalism nor natural law theory offered persuasive answers for why democratic citizens ought to share a life together. They may have provided a common source of right, but they offered unconvincing visions of the social. For individuals who have never understood themselves first and foremost as citizens, and for a people who have never seen their social bonds as essentially civic, it is ahistorical to simply

⁷ Françoise Gaspard, *A Small City in France*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995);

insist otherwise by normative fiat. Even liberals in nineteenth century France accepted that fact, despite contemporary liberal disavowals of social cohesion as a proto-totalitarian expectation.⁸ Third Republic liberals devoted decades to creating social cohesion by inventing a new republican political culture: the creation of a national education system, the standardization of the French language, the construction of modern railway networks, the expansion of the civil service, and the implementation of *laïcité*.⁹ This liberal pursuit of social cohesion was no more minimalist or nonviolent than that of the Jacobins and their mocked Festival of the Supreme Being. The Mur des Fédérés in Père-Lachaise ought to remind us of that fact. Adolphe Thiers was deluding himself when he conceded that “the Republic is the form of government that divides us the least.” As Sorel and Péguy soon countered (and the enthusiasm of war mobilization in 1914 confirmed), the Republic could never be reduced to a constitutional *modus vivendi*. And if contemporary liberals disavow the pursuit of social cohesion as illiberal, that is only because historical amnesia has concealed how hard they themselves had to work for it in the past.

A study of democratic terror in France’s long nineteenth century can teach us about the crucial role of the social in modern republican democracy. Democratic politics has never been reducible to a competition between principles of right. It has also involved, and will continue to involve, rethinking the social bond. Agreement on

⁸ Robert A. Nisbet, “Rousseau and Totalitarianism,” *The Journal of Politics* 5, no. 2 (1943): 93-114; David Ciepley, *Liberalism in the Shadow of Totalitarianism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); Duncan Bell, “What Is Liberalism?” *Political Theory* 42, no. 6 (2014): 682-715.

⁹ Eugen Weber, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976); Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

that fact connected liberals, socialists, Jacobins, anarchists, and even some Catholics in nineteenth century France as they each searched for a path to modern republican democracy. Once we understand their thinking, we can better appreciate the situation confronting contemporary critics: the challenge is to adjudicate between different prescriptions for the social rather than balancing individualism and social cohesion. The rising tide of European nationalism will not be resisted by discrediting the desire for social cohesion as irredeemably illiberal, but by putting forth a convincing democratic and egalitarian alternative. We do not need to endorse redemptive violence to appreciate how its history clarifies for us this demand left by the age of democratic revolutions and which modern democratic politics must still answer.

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