



Revolutionary Time and Regeneration

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in 1789 and escalating in intensity into at least 1793, a new temporal schema took shape in which revolutionary time pulverized the foundations of the old order. Revolution came to mean rejecting the past, introducing a sense of rupture in secular time, maximizing and elongating the present in order to turn it into a moment of personal and collective transformation, and shaping the future in accordance with the discoveries made in the present. Time ceased being a given. It became a medium of endless potential for change that could be willed, that is, enacted by conscious choice.

In the opening lines of his report to the National Convention on the new republican calendar, P.F.N. Fabre d'Églantine explained the logic of the revolutionary reform of time: «The regeneration of the French people, the establishment of the republic, have necessarily led to the reform of the common era [l'ère vulgaire]. We can no longer count the years in which kings oppressed us as a time in which we have lived». A new calendar, he argued, would produce a new people: «it is therefore necessary to replace these visions of ignorance with the realities of reason and priestly prestige with the truth of nature»¹.

The «realities of reason» and «truth of nature» required a rational calendar divided into twelve equal months of 30 days each. The

¹ P.F.N. Fabre d'Églantine, *Rapport fait à la Convention nationale dans la séance du 3 du second mois de la seconde année de la République française, au nom de la Commission chargée de la confection du calendrier par P.F.N. Fabre-d'Églantine*, Imprimé par ordre de la Convention, Paris 1793, pp. 1-2.

months were named after a seasonal element: Germinal, for instance, connoted germination of seeds, while Floréal stood for the month of flowering. Each month had three ten-day divisions called *décades* («a common numerical name») and days called *primidi*, *duodi*, etc. up to *décadi* in order to eliminate any trace of extraneous imagery². At the end came five days (six in leap years) of ‘sans-culottides’ devoted to uplifting festivals.

The calendar was doomed for many reasons. It reset time at the foundation of the French republic ensuring that it would never be used outside of French-controlled territories or be embraced by opponents of the republic within France. Because it began in the third week of September, the months did not coincide with Gregorian calendar months, making any translation between the two calendars all the more difficult. The abolition of Sunday as a day of rest and of religious observance once every seven days in favor of *décadi* every ten guaranteed resistance in the working classes and among the Catholic devout. Despite all these obstacles, the republican calendar regulated official communication for more than a decade³.

Although the reform of the calendar failed to take root in the way that the metric system eventually did, the experiment with the calendar captures in the most dramatic fashion the revolutionary obsession with time. This preoccupation took many forms ranging from the most general to the very specific. It was fueled by the conviction that revolutionaries could institute a rupture with the past and in the process recast the political consciousness of the citizenry. The desire for rupture first drew on and then propelled forward a startling rejection of many past practices from the determination of the Third Estate’s deputies to the Estates General not to meet

² *Ibidem*, pp. 9-10.

³ M. Shaw, *Time and the French Revolution: The Republican Calendar, 1789-Year XIV*, The Royal Historical Society and The Boydell Press, Rochester (NY) 2011; S. Bianchi, *La bataille du calendrier ou le décadi contre le dimanche. Nouvelles approches pour la réception du calendrier républicain en milieu rural*, «Annales historiques de la Révolution française», 312, 1998, pp. 245-264; S. Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France: Perceptions of Time in Literature, Culture, Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012.

separately from the other two estates in May-June 1789 to the tearing down of royal statues in 1792, the renaming of streets and squares and even cities, the introduction of new secular names for children (Brutus, Tell, Tricolore, etc.), and the preference for the use of *citoyen[ne]* rather than Monsieur or Madame in common speech⁴.

To truly break with the past, regeneration had to be achieved as quickly as possible. The calendar was meant to be a public statement of an already accomplished rift. As Gilbert Romme, its main architect explained, this was «one of the most important operations» undertaken toward «the progress of the arts and the human spirit», an undertaking that could only succeed «in a time of revolution» [un temps de révolution]. By its very existence, the calendar effaced eighteen centuries of fanaticism; now «time opens a new book of history» that will capture «the annals of regenerated France»⁵.

Romme was not alone in speaking of ‘revolutionary time’ as something very different from what had come before. From the very beginning of the French Revolution, in July 1789, commentators searched for ways of expressing their sense of the compression and therefore acceleration of time. The newspaper *Révolutions de Paris* referred in its second issue to «the innumerable multiplicity of events these last eight days [...] a thousand pens would not suffice to trace all the details». That third week in July 1789 seemed «a week that was for us six centuries»⁶. Every unexpected turn of events had the same effect. After the king’s attempted escape in June 1791, Jeanne-Marie Roland wrote, «we are living through ten years in twenty-four hours; events and emotions are jumbled together and follow each other with a singular rapidity»⁷.

⁴ L. Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1984, pp. 52-86; S. Bianchi, *Les ‘prénoms révolutionnaires’ dans la révolution française: un chantier en devenir*, «Annales historiques de la Révolution française», 322, 2000, pp. 17-38.

⁵ G. Romme, *Rapport sur l’ère de la République: séance du 10 septembre 1793*, Imprimé par ordre de la Convention Nationale, Paris 1793, pp. 1-2.

⁶ *Révolutions de Paris, Dédiées à la Nation*, vol. 2 (Du samedi 18 au 25 juillet 1789): pp. 1 and 7.

⁷ C. Perroud (éd.), *Lettres de Madame Roland*, vol. 2: 1788-1793, Imprimerie nationale, Paris 1902, p. 325, Letter to Henry Bancal, 11 July 1792, Paris.

Within weeks of the fall of the Bastille, it became customary to identify this quickening of time with revolution. The fact that Louis-Marie Prudhomme named his paper *Révolutions de Paris* from its first appearance on 18 July 1789 gives some hint of this. On the evening of 6 October 1789, Jacques-Pierre Brissot dashed off his first account of the ‘October Days’ (5-6 October 1789) for his newspaper *Le patriote françois*: «The events that have taken place right in front of us appear almost like a dream [...]. We cannot give a detailed account today of this astonishing Revolution»⁸.

Contemporaries clearly sensed that something momentous was happening from July 1789 onward, but the significance of revolutionary time did not congeal all at once. After all, calendar reform was not proposed until the fall of 1793. Keith Baker argues that a change in the meaning of revolution occurred sometime in the second half of 1789, probably around the October Days. When Prudhomme first published his paper in July, revolution still meant an unexpected and dramatic event. But as one event became a succession of them, participants and observers, such as the journalists associated with *Révolutions de Paris*, began to detect a distinctive rhythm, a special revolutionary dynamic, and the emergence of an entirely new epoch that was separating itself from the ‘ancien régime’⁹.

The term ancien régime changed in tandem with revolution. It had been used infrequently before 1789 to refer to former regimes, such as the Gauls before Clovis or the way an abbey was run before it was combined with another¹⁰. Starting in the spring of 1789, during the quarrels over voting by head, pamphleteers who opposed voting by order used it to refer to the previous dominance of the privileged orders: «Suivant l’ancien régime, la noblesse & le clergé, qui ne sont

⁸ «Le patriote françois», No. 63, Mercredi 7 octobre 1789, p. 3.

⁹ K.M. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, p. 221.

¹⁰ *Répertoire universel et raisonné de jurisprudence civile, criminelle, canonique et bénéficiale*, vol. 13, Chez Panckoucke, Paris 1777, p. 302; and vol. 48, Chez Panckoucke et Dupuis, Paris 1781, p. 13.

pas ensemble que la trentième partie de la nation, ont chacun séparément une force égale à tout le reste des citoyens»¹¹.

Before long, though it is difficult to say exactly when, the ancien régime became the former regime, that which had been superseded. In a 1789 tract on the rights and obligations of a 'free people' (a phrase that in itself signified that a transformation had occurred), the author urged his fellow citizens to vote carefully because «L'Égoïsme, qui sous l'ancien régime pouvait tout, et menait à tout, causerait aujourd'hui la destruction générale»¹². By 1790, at the latest, Jean-Paul Marat regularly fulminated against those, such as Necker, whom he suspected of trying to maintain or restore the ancien régime: «Aujourd'hui même il sollicite l'assemblée de lui accorder de grands, de prompts secours, sous prétexte d'empêcher la dissolution de l'état, de régénérer les finances, mais uniquement pour affermir l'administration, pour le mettre en état de perpétuer l'ancien régime»¹³.

Thus bit by bit, beginning in 1789 and escalating in intensity into at least 1793 if not 1794, a new temporal schema took shape in which revolutionary time pulverized the foundations of the old order. In a rather innocuous pamphlet from January 1790 on the subject of scarcity of cash in Paris, the author clearly distinguished «un temps de révolution» as one of crisis and uncertainty while people were waiting for «a new political system» in which «former abuses would be reformed»¹⁴. Revolutionary time occupied the gap between old and new; a time of revolution served as a hothouse in which the remaining weeds from the past could be dug up while the shoots of the new took root. A pamphlet on military recruitment published in 1789 opined that «il faut éprouver quelque temps la révolution que

¹¹ *Motion faite par un citoyen dans l'assemblée du district de Saint-Germain-des-Prés, le 21 avril 1789: suppression de tous privilèges pour les élections*, NP 1789, pp. 5-6.

¹² F.-A.-E. de Gourcy, *Les droits et devoirs d'un peuple libre ou Le triomphe de la liberté française*, Chez Dupain, Paris 1789, p. 48.

¹³ J.-P. Marat, *Dénonciation contre Necker*, in Ch. Vellay (éd.), *Les pamphlets – 1790*, Libr. Charpentier et Fasquelle, Paris 1911, p. 92.

¹⁴ *Motion faite au district des Recollets, le 14 janvier 1790, sur la situation allarmante de la capitale, relativement à la rareté extrême du numéraire*, De l'imprimerie de P. Fr. Didot jeune, Paris 1790, p. 4.

fera la Constitution dans les esprits; elle doit avoir une grande influence sur l'agriculture, le commerce et l'esprit militaire»¹⁵.

For those living in 1789 and the years following, revolution came to mean rejecting the past, introducing a sense of rupture in secular time, maximizing and elongating the present in order to turn it into a moment of personal and collective transformation, and shaping the future in accordance with the discoveries made in the present. Time ceased being a given. It became a medium of endless potential for change that could be willed, that is, enacted by conscious choice.

This new relationship to time was arguably the most significant innovation of the French Revolution. It established both revolutionary time (and therefore revolution as a future choice) and modern time (the sense that modernity represented a break with tradition). Revolutionary time and modern time are not the same thing, yet the French Revolution played a crucial role in setting both into motion. As a result, it has occupied an important place in recent considerations of the operation of historical time¹⁶.

Modernity, the idea that modern time is distinctive, has roots that reach further into the past than 1789, but the French Revolution helped shape its meaning in the nineteenth and twentieth century. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, modernity is, among other possible definitions in English, «An intellectual tendency or social perspective characterized by departure from or repudiation of traditional ideas, doctrines, and cultural values in favour of contemporary or radical values and beliefs (chiefly those of scientific rationalism and liberalism)»¹⁷. The French Revolution made it seem possible to consciously depart from the past and even repudiate it altogether precisely because it was contrary to the principles of

¹⁵ *Second rapport du comité militaire, par M. Dubois de Crancé, secrétaire de l'Assemblée Nationale, sur l'établissement des milices nationales et le recrutement de l'armée*, Chez Badouin, Paris 1789, p. 17.

¹⁶ It comes up repeatedly, for example, in the work of R. Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, Engl. transl. by K. Tribe, Columbia University Press, New York 1985.

¹⁷ <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/120626?redirectedFrom=modernity#eid>> (Consulted 13 November 2012).

reason and national sovereignty, in other words, ‘scientific rationalism and liberalism’.

Partisans of modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth century did not necessarily consider themselves followers of the French Revolution or adherents of revolution more generally. Yet they subscribed, whether consciously or not, to elements of the temporal schema put into place by the French Revolution. In that schema, those in the present would constantly endeavor to create something new, modern, up-to-date and future-oriented. The past would no longer serve as a reservoir of exemplars for present behavior; the past would be what had to be overcome in order to make a better future.

Revolutionary time and modern time intersected in various ways. The most momentous of those intersections was the significance attributed to the very passage of time. Abbé Sieyès already sensed this development in early 1789. In his pamphlet, *Qu'est ce que le tiers état?* he presciently established the connection between revolution, time, and the hidden dynamic of events: «On fermerait en vain les yeux sur la révolution que le temps et la force des choses ont opérée; elle n'en est pas moins réelle. Autrefois, le tiers était serf, l'ordre noble était tout. Aujourd'hui le tiers est tout, la noblesse est un mot»¹⁸. Fate, the pressure of circumstances, ‘la force des choses’ now clearly had a dynamic of its own that was revealed by time’s passing.

As events cascaded after July 1789 those who lived through them felt there must be hidden meanings that had escaped their notice. For many, even among the educated classes, that meaning was provided by conspiracies. What else but intrigue and collusion could explain the constant jolting of expectations? From the fall of the Bastille onward fear of conspiracy was in the air. Jean-Paul Marat was far from alone in denouncing ‘l’horrible complot’ or ‘l’affreuse conjuration’. Only the march of time could reveal the truth by eventually tearing off the veil of criminal plotters¹⁹. Revolutionary

¹⁸ E.J. Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le tiers état?*, éd. par E. Champion, Au siège de la Société [de l’Histoire de la Révolution Française], Paris 1888, p. 79.

¹⁹ L. Hunt, *The World We Have Gained: The Future of the French Revolution*, «The American Historical Review», 108, 2003, pp. 1-19.

time was locked in mortal combat with what Robespierre called in 1790 «les temps d'intrigues et de factions»²⁰.

Despite this conviction that events were being secretly controlled by plotters who were acting in full consciousness of their aims, the understanding of time's passage as revelatory of an inner significance also opened the way to a new kind of determinism. Bertrand Barère, leading member of the Comité de Salut Public, and thus one of the architects of the Terror, retrospectively excused his actions as the product of his time: «I did not at all shape my epoch, time of revolution and political storms [...]; I only did what I had to do, obey it. It [*l'époque*] sovereignly commanded so many peoples and kings, so many geniuses, so many talents, wills and even events that this submission to the era and this obedience to the spirit of the century cannot be imputed to crime or fault»²¹.

This view of time's deterministic quality opened the way to social explanations and ultimately to social science as a systematic study of the force of circumstances. It is perhaps not surprising that Sieyès was the first to use the term *social science* [«science sociale»] and that it occurred in that same pamphlet on the Third Estate. The circle around Condorcet began using the term in 1791, Condorcet himself took it up in 1792, and his disciples played a key role in establishing various clubs, societies and finally a section of the new Institut national (1795) devoted to 'science sociale et législation'²².

Foremost among these disciples was Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy, who played a central role in giving the term currency. In his *Mémoire sur la faculté de penser* of 1798, for example, Destutt de Tracy explicitly linked science sociale to the deterministic side of time: «on peut dire que la science sociale méritera à peine le nom de science, tant qu'elle n'aura pas des principes reconnus et systématisés,

²⁰ M. de Robespierre, *Réponse de M. de Robespierre ... à une lettre de M. Lambert, contrôleur général des finances*, De l'imp. de L. Potier de Lille, Paris 1790, p. 5.

²¹ S. Luzzatto, *Un futur au passé: La Révolution dans les Mémoires des Conventionnels*, «Annales historiques de la Révolution française», 278, 1989, pp. 455-475, quote 469.

²² R. Wokler, *Saint-Simon and the Passage from Political to Social Science*, in A.R. Pagden (ed.), *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, pp. 325-338.

à l'aide desquels nous puissions expliquer et même prédire le bonheur et le malheur des diverses sociétés, et ne les voir que comme des conséquences nécessaires et constantes de lois démontrées»²³. The goal of the new social science was to explain and even predict the future of societies by getting at the laws that determined their development. Destutt de Tracy influenced, as much as anyone, the subsequent emergence of sociology in France from Benjamin Constant to Auguste Comte and beyond²⁴.

Determinism was the other side of the coin of voluntarism – the idea that humans could shape their future. Determinism, especially insofar as it gave rise to social science, was the explanation for why humans had fallen short of controlling their future. Deputy Henri Grégoire, who was often one of the first to grasp the significance of unfolding events, put his finger on the voluntaristic aspect of revolutionary time: «Le peuple français a dépassé les autres peuples; cependant le régime detestable dont nous secouons les lambeaux nous tient encore à grande distance de la nature; il reste un intervalle énorme entre ce que nous sommes et ce que nous pourrions être. Hâtons-nous de combler cet intervalle; reconstituons la nature humaine en lui donnant une nouvelle trempe». Not surprisingly, Grégoire said this as part of a discussion of elementary education²⁵. The Terror itself sprouted from the effort to ‘fill this interval’, ‘to reconstitute human nature’, or in other words, to accelerate the effects of time.

Ironically, even though revolutionary time was meant to erase what Grégoire termed ‘le régime detestable’ of the past, the study of the past, history, gained a new significance. Peter Fritzsche argues that

²³ *Mémoire sur la faculté de penser* [1798], ARTFL Electronic Edition, 2009, p. 26, <<http://artflsrv02.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.1356:2:6:0:29.frantext0513.172648.172656>>.

²⁴ M.S. Staum, *Minerva's Message: Stabilizing the French Revolution*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal 1996.

²⁵ *Rapport sur l'ouverture d'un concours pour les livres élémentaires de la première éducation, par Grégoire (Séance du 3 pluviôse an II)*, in M.J. Guillaume (éd.), *Procès-verbaux du Comité d'instruction publique de la Convention nationale*, vol. 3, Imprimerie nationale, Paris 1897, p. 365. The sense of a ‘mythic present’ of regeneration is discussed in Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*.

history writing gained a larger role around 1800 because the new emphasis on disconnection from the past – the past no longer served as a guide to the future – led to a kind of cultural melancholy²⁶. The past turned opaque and thus required more serious scholarship. At the same time history began to appeal to more and more people; the French Revolution brought the people on to the stage of politics, and historians therefore had to pay attention to them in their writing. The genres of historical writing proliferated, with the historical novel being one of the striking examples. The writing of history was thus profoundly influenced by the French Revolution's reframing of time.

It is here, in the aftermath of the French Revolution, that modern time takes over from revolutionary time even while incorporating some of its most fundamental assumptions and paradoxes. Without the French Revolution, Hegel would not have seized upon the idea of codifying the meaning of time's passage, much less finding in history a secular teleology of the consciousness of freedom and the progressive realization of reason²⁷. The French Revolution played an even more central role in Marx's thinking about history because it enabled him to make revolution the central hinge in the historical development of class struggles. Both Hegel and Marx seized upon the notion that the passage of time itself could be analyzed for its inner significance. They therefore helped cement the complicity between modernity and history writing suggested by Fritzsche and before him by Reinhart Koselleck. By reconfiguring the past, the very positing of modernity opened up a new role for history.

Koselleck's account of this development has been deeply influential and is still being developed in present day considerations of time, history, and modernity. Over the course of the early modern period [*frühen Neuzeit*], Koselleck argues, history was 'temporalized' as it became 'singular' and superior to preceding times. It becomes singular in the sense that it ceased being a repository of repeatable

²⁶ P. Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2004.

²⁷ Hegel was also deeply influenced by the Enlightenment and by the need to incorporate and surpass it in his philosophical system. L.P. Hinchman, *Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment*, University of Florida Press, Gainesville (FL) 1984.

exempla and became instead a nonreplicable progression. At the end of this process «there is the peculiar form of acceleration which characterizes modernity». Koselleck traces the experience of acceleration to the French Revolution, for its leaders unconsciously secularized the eschatological expectations of Christians²⁸.

Koselleck focuses on the period 1750-1850 as the period in which the philosophy of history and the disciplinary practice of history both emerged; they were connected by a new notion of time, not by individuals who practiced both forms. In his view the Enlightenment as much as the French Revolution (he refers to «the second half of the eighteenth century») created *neue Zeit* or modernity. «Time is no longer simply the medium in which all histories take place», he maintains, «it gains a historical quality». As a consequence, «history no longer occurs in, but through time. Time becomes a dynamic and historical force in its own right»²⁹.

When Koselleck traces the emergence of this new conception and experience of time, he looks for it in historical and philosophical writings for the most part. The French Revolution comes up again and again but rarely alone or with much specificity. Thus, for example, when speaking of the transformation of time from a religious apocalyptic framework to a secular one of historical hope, he says, «This subjective anticipation of a future both desired and to be quickened acquired an unexpectedly solid reality, however, through the process of technicalization and the French Revolution». Technology plays an apparently equal role. Similarly, when speaking of the use of the history of revolutions by different political ideologies, he references Kant, Mazzini, Marx and Proudhon even while recognizing the influence of the revolution of 1789: «In 1789 a new space of expectation was constituted whose perspective was traced out by points which, at the same time, referred back to different phases of the past revolution». As a result, «According to party or position, the categories of acceleration and retardation (evident since

²⁸ Koselleck, *Futures Past*, pp. 5, 47.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 246. See also the excellent review by J. Zammito, *Koselleck's Philosophy of Historical Time(s) and the Practice of History*, «History and Theory», 43, 2004, no. 1, pp. 124-135.

the French Revolution) alter the relations of past and future in varying rhythms»³⁰.

For Koselleck, then, the French Revolution is pivotal, though not just on its own. This is no doubt fundamentally correct, for new conceptions and experiences of time must have intellectual roots and intellectual consequences as well as political, cultural, and even social, economic, technological and demographic ones³¹. The brief history recounted in this essay is not offered as a critique of Koselleck; his reflections on historical time have deeply influenced my own. The account given here aims to get at how the French Revolution altered the conception of time so that time gained ‘an historical quality’, that is so that time became revelatory of some inner essence. The closer look at the evidence presented here shows that this change in the conception of time did not happen all at once but rather took shape in bits and pieces in the years after 1789.

Although historical antecedents for this transformation of time can be traced back to the middle of the eighteenth century, there can be no denying that 1789 shocked the system so much that it set in motion a change that would most likely have been unimaginable otherwise. No one at the time understood the process as it was occurring and few grasped it even in the decades or generations afterward. Koselleck, after all, did not publish his thoughts on the subject until well into the twentieth century. We are only just beginning to get a handle on the epochal transformation that took place at the end of the eighteenth century. It may well be that the current interest in past conceptions of time grows out of our own sense that our current ones need rethinking too.

Since French revolutionaries of the 1790s only dimly glimpsed the process in which they found themselves engaged, explaining why, as opposed to how, the French Revolution altered the conception of time must remain somewhat speculative. The focus on time in the French Revolution seems to follow from the experience of revolution

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

³¹ W.M. Nelson, *The Weapon of Time: Constructing the Future in France, 1750-Year I*, Ph.D. dissertation, UCLA, 2006. Id., *Making Men: Enlightenment Ideas of Racial Engineering*, «American Historical Review», 115, 2010, no. 5, pp. 1364-1394.

as a period of acceleration. Acceleration in turn was fueled by the sense that the French were reliving, at least implicitly, the primordial moment of social contract. They were beginning anew and had to rush to fill that interval described by Grégoire between what they were and what they could be. They had to accelerate time.

Although Jean-Jacques Rousseau bequeathed many notions about the social contract to the revolutionaries, he said almost nothing about the actual experience of it. For him, the social contract was a mostly hypothetical notion, being a convention that had few real time points of reference. His only historical examples were Sparta, Rome after the Tarquins, and Holland and Switzerland in modern times. Rousseau did describe these as moments of regeneration: «L'état, embrasé par les guerres civiles, renaît pour ainsi dire de sa cendre et reprend la vigueur de la jeunesse en sortant des bras de la mort. Telle fut Sparte au temps de Lycurgue, telle fut Rome après les tarquins, et telles ont été parmi nous la Hollande et la Suisse après l'expulsion des tyrans»³². Yet Rousseau clearly saw this as renewal and recovery rather than as a leap into the future, and he focused on the meaning for the state rather than for individuals.

For the revolutionaries, in contrast, the moment of forging the social contract was something they came to know firsthand. Émile Durkheim captured the essence of the experience nearly a century later, no doubt because the French Revolution occupied a pivotal position in his own thinking about society and the sacred:

There are periods in history when, under the influence of some great collective shock, social interactions have become much more frequent and active. Men look for each other and assemble together more than ever. That general effervescence results which is characteristic of revolutionary or creative epochs. Now this greater activity results in a general stimulation of individual forces. Men see more and differently now than in normal times. Changes are not merely of shades and degrees; men become different. The passions moving them are of such an intensity that they

³²J.-J. Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, éd. par B. De Jouvenel, C. Bourquin, Geneva 1947, p. 235.

cannot be satisfied except by violent and unrestrained actions, actions of superhuman heroism or of bloody barbarism³³.

Durkheim goes on to compare this to religious experience; this effervescence is what he calls the fundamental form of religious life, which becomes in the modern era the basis of social life itself. The French Revolution, then, is the moment when people discover the social roots of their being, when sacredness, in Durkheim's terms, is transferred from religion to society.

This transfer of sacredness has been analyzed most convincingly by Mona Ozouf. Revolutionary festivals, funeral processions, relocations of remains to the Pantheon of revolutionary heroes, and inaugurations of busts all contributed to this transfer of the sacred. The swearing of oaths occupied such a central place in the festivals, she argues, because «it rendered visible the act of contracting, conceived as the fundamental characteristic of sociability»³⁴. Thus the moment of swearing an oath constituted the literal enactment of the social contract; it was the moment at which the sacred was transferred to society, to the social bond. The oath was one of the ways by which society could be rendered sacred.

The imagined return to the origins of social and political life was repeatedly reenacted in France: in the heady days of challenging the ancien régime in 1789, in the Festival of Federation of 1790, in the drafting of a first written constitution for the sovereign nation, and in the decision to depose and then execute the king and establish a republic. In fact, it was not so much a question of certain decisive political acts as much as it was a constant re-stimulation, or at least attempted re-stimulation since the feeling was far from unanimous, of that 'general effervescence' that constituted the direct experience of the social bond.

This ceaseless re-enacting of the social contract – repeated over time and across the space of France – gave democracy both an

³³ É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Engl. transl. by J. Ward Swain, Macmillan, New York 1915 (original French version: 1912), p. 241.

³⁴ M. Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire, 1789-1799*, Gallimard, Paris 1976, p. 337. The title of her concluding chapter is *La fête révolutionnaire: un transfert de sacralité*.

immediate and an unstable foundation. The oaths, for example, signaled a willingness to begin anew from that very instant, yet precisely because this re-enactment of the social contract relied on an instantaneous feeling of adherence, it was susceptible to an equally abrupt rejection or at least reluctance to join in a new social bond whose parameters would remain shifting and uncertain. Still, thousands, perhaps millions, of people – and not just French people – now felt that the scales were falling from their eyes. They spoke repeatedly of having been blinded by the habits of despotic authority; they were awakening to a new day, a new time. As one newspaper wrote about the execution of the king, the French had discovered «that great truth which the prejudices of so many centuries had stifled; today we have just convinced ourselves that a king is only a man»³⁵.

The attempt to reset time failed in the 1790s in the sense that both the revolutionary calendar and the republic with which it was associated failed to endure. At the same time the new conceptions of temporality that emerged from that quest succeeded in unimaginable ways. Revolutionary time and modern time have shaped the lives of people all over the world for more than two centuries. It may be time now to re-evaluate them and perhaps even move on to another understanding of time's influence, another 'regime of historicity'³⁶. Yet there is no denying that the French Revolution set in motion dynamics that structure our experience of politics and social life to this day. Understanding those dynamics still presents a challenge that endures and an enigma that demands our attention.

³⁵ «Journal des hommes libres de tous les pays», No. 82, 22 January 1793.

³⁶ F. Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: présentisme et expériences du temps*, Seuil, Paris 2003. On the differences between Hartog and Koselleck, see G. Lenclud, *Traversées dans le temps*, «Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales», 61, 2006, pp. 1053-1084.