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The French Revolution: The Origins of a Modern Liberal Political Culture?

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Article abstract

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The French Revolution: The Origins of a Modern Liberal Political Culture?

JAMES A. LEITH

Résumé

Recently it has been argued that the chief legacy of the French Revolution was that it provided a prototype of a modern liberal political culture. This paper argues that, while some of the features of such a political culture did appear during the revolutionary decade, the revolutionaries never discarded an ancient conception of sovereignty which insisted that political will had to be unitary and indivisible. This led to rejection of political parties, legitimate opposition, and pluralism. The debates in the Constituent Assembly already reveal these illiberal tendencies. The Declaration of the Rights of Man, with its apparent emphasis on individual rights, might seem to have counterbalanced these tendencies, but two clauses inserted at the insistence of Abbé Sieyès vested sovereignty in the nation and asserted that law must be the expression of the general will. These clauses transformed the rights of the individual into the rights of the Leviathan.

The insistence on a unified will was revealed in the allegorical figures, symbols, and architectural projects of the period. The figure of the demigod Hercules, which came to represent the People, conveyed a monolithic conception of the citizenry in complete contradiction to the conception of them in a pluralistic liberal democracy. Also the fasces, the tightly bound bundle of rods with no power to move independently, suggested a conception of the body politic at odds with that of a variegated liberal society. If such unity did not exist, it was to be created by the rituals performed in Temples décadaires every tenth day, the republican Sunday. Those who would not join this vast congregation would be excised or coerced.

Moreover, throughout the decade there were various theories of revolutionary government at odds with liberal ideals: the unlimited power of a constituent body, the concentration of power in a tribune or dictator, or the dictatorship of a committee. Such notions, too, were important for the future.

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Il a été proposé, récemment, que l'héritage le plus important de la Révolution française serait celui d'un prototype de culture politique moderne et libérale. Le présent essai tente de démontrer que si certains éléments d'une telle culture politique sont apparus au cours de la décennie révolutionnaire, les révolutionnaires eux-mêmes n'ont jamais abandonné une conception plus ancienne de la souveraineté selon laquelle la volonté politique se doit d'être unique et indivisible. Cette croyance les a amenés à rejeter à la

fois partis politiques, idée d'une opposition légitime et pluralisme. Les débats de l'Assemblée Constituante font déjà entrevoir ces tendances. Et si la Déclaration des Droits de l'Homme, aux accents de droits individuels, a pu sembler offrir un contrepoids à ces tendances, deux de ses clauses, insérées à la demande expresse de l'abbé Sieyès, établirent que la souveraineté réside dans la nation et que la loi était l'expression de la volonté générale. Ces dispositions transformaient les droits de l'individu en droits du Leviathan.

La croyance en une volonté unifiée s'exprimait aussi bien dans les symboles, personnages allégoriques et projets architecturaux de l'époque. Le personnage du demi-dieu Hercule, qui en vint à représenter le peuple, donnait l'impression d'une conception monolithique de l'ensemble des citoyens, à l'opposé de la conception que s'en ferait une démocracie libérale et pluraliste. De plus, le faisceau, cet assemblage de tiges liées de façon si serrée qu'elles ne peuvent bouger séparément, suggérait une idée du corps politique bien éloignée de celle que détiendrait une société libérale bigarrée. En outre, au cas ou une telle unité n'aurait pas existé pas dans la réalité, les révolutionnaires entreprirent d'en assurer la création, par la promotion de rituels collectifs, ceux des "Temples décadaires", tenus tous les dix jours, lors du dimanche républicain. Ils menacèrent de coercition, voire de suppression, ceux qui ne voudraient pas se joindre à ces grands rassemblements.

Finalement, la décennie vit naître plusieurs théories du gouvernement révolutionnaire à l'encontre des idées libérales — du pouvoir illimité d'une assemblée constituante, à la concentration du pouvoir aux mains d'un tribun ou d'un dictateur, en passant par la dictature d'un comité. De telles notions allaient, elles aussi, devenir importantes dans le futur.

The place of the French Revolution in modern history has been the subject of debate among scholars since the time of the event itself. For a long time, historians on the left — Mathiez, Lefebvre, Soboul, Vovelle, and others — have argued that its main significance is that it represented a stage in the rise of the bourgeoisie who, with the support of elements of the lower classes, destroyed the remnants of feudalism, thus opening the way to the further development of capitalism. This "orthodox" interpretation has been challenged by historians who have pointed out that it was not a commercial or manufacturing bourgeoisie which dominated the Revolution, but a congeries of lawyers, petty bureaucrats, and professional men.[1] The Committee of Public Safety, for example, was made up of eight lawyers, two military engineers, a former playwright, and a former Protestant minister and sea captain. Such historians have also pointed out that the Revolution did not produce a rapid development of capitalism, may in fact have retarded its growth and strengthened the role of the landowning classes. They argue that the rapid expansion of capitalism and the growth of an industrial economy did not come until the third quarter of the nineteenth century under the Second Empire. Moreover, other European countries developed capitalism without a revolutionary upheaval.

1. A good summary is provided by Joseph I. Schulim, "The Continuing Controversy over the Etiology and Nature of the French Revolution," in a collection of his articles, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. Studies on the Era of the French Revolution and Napoleon* (New York, 1989), 129-57.

Since Tocqueville, other historians have argued that, whatever their intentions were, the main accomplishment of the revolutionaries was that they completed the work of French kings, creating a much more centralised bureaucratic state ruling over a country with uniform administrative units. The way was prepared for this, early in the Revolution, by the replacement of the old provinces, with their varied privileges, by new departments sharing identical institutions. This centralisation did not, however, come until the emergence of the *gouvernement révolutionnaire* in the autumn of 1793, created to organise the war against a formidable coalition, to crush counterrevolutionaries within France, and to cope with grave economic problems. "The law of 14 Frimaire [Year II], it is hardly too much to say," wrote Robert Palmer, "had as permanent significance as the Declaration of the Rights of Man."[2] The ground was thus laid for the centralisation of power in France, exercised in the departments through prefects established by Napoleon a decade later. Some historians have compared this modernisation of the state with similar developments in later revolutions,[3] but other countries centralised and modernised their governments by reform rather than revolution.

Recently, however, some historians have argued that the real contribution of the Revolution was not that it opened the way for capitalism or created a more centralised bureaucratic state, but that it gave birth to a more modern political culture. Lynn Hunt has argued that the Revolution had various strands and diverse consequences — capitalism, socialism, the rule of notables, a strong central state, and democratic republicanism. "At the core of the revolutionary experience was the last of these," she argues, "despite its unforeseen novelty and despite its failures and weaknesses."[4] A similar conviction inspired a series of three conferences to mark the bicentenary of the Revolution which produced three large volumes entitled *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*.[5]

Obviously a case can be made that the Revolution created some of the elements of a modern republican political culture — the election of representative assemblies, the encoding of human rights, the use of the media to appeal to public opinion, the appearance of new rhetoric and symbols, and the eventual eradication of the monarchy. Despite these features, this paper will argue that, from the very beginning, even in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, there were central elements in the Revolution contrary to a modern liberal political culture. This argument will be supported in two ways, by analysing the political discourse of the period, and by examining certain architectural projects, allegorical figures, and symbols.

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2. Robert R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: the Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (1941, rep. New York, 1958), 128.
3. For example, Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, 1968) and Thida Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge, 1979).
4. Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984), 234.
5. *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* in three volumes: *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, ed. Keith Baker (Oxford, 1987); *The Political Culture of the French Revolution*, ed. Colin Lucas (Oxford, 1988); and *The Transformation of Political Culture 1789-1848*, eds. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Oxford, 1989).

One basic reason why the Revolution could not create a modern liberal political culture was that it never discarded an ancient notion of sovereignty which was inconsistent with such a culture. When we speak of sovereignty in the twentieth century, we usually think of it as the right of a state to be free from interference in its internal affairs by other states, but in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries it connoted the undivided authority of the ruler.[6] The idea had been first formulated by Bodin in the late-sixteenth century and then elaborated on over the next two hundred years. Afraid of the anarchy posed by the Religious Wars in France, Bodin insisted that sovereign power had to be exercised by a single will unanswerable to any other human authority.[7] Such sovereignty could be exercised by an aristocracy or by all the people, but unity of will was most likely in the hands of a prince. Such a prince was limited by divine laws, the laws of succession, and the traditional laws of the kingdom, but subjects had no right to enforce these limits. Bodin, however, had a rather static view of the state: the ruler's chief function was to protect the rights of the various estates, corporations, and orders, and to keep order among them.

Following Bodin, theorists of absolute monarchy shifted the emphasis within this constitutional theory. In the reign of Louis XIV, Bishop Bossuet used Scripture rather than French tradition to defend the absolute power of the king, giving him a sacred status above the various estates, corporations, and orders which made up society. According to Bossuet, kings were not just lieutenants of God on earth; they were little gods themselves, enjoying something like divine independence. Moreover, it was the king who, by his single will, gave unity to all the diverse elements of society.[8]

In the eighteenth century, the conception of the ruler became more dynamic: not only had he the duty to uphold the social order, he had the right to transform it for the general good. The effort to modernise the state and expand its tax base provoked a number of opposing theories. The magistrates in the high courts argued that the king had to conform to ancient traditions of the kingdom which they enforced. Some polemicists argued that ultimately any important innovation required the consent of the nation expressed in the Estates-General.[9] Despite these countervailing theories, the idea persisted that the king alone could decide *la chose publique*, what we would call public policy. When Necker argued in 1781 that the king in council should rule in conformity with enlightened public opinion, Vergennes reminded the king in a letter of his sovereign power: "The Monarch speaks, everyone else belongs to the people which obeys."[10]

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6. There is a good brief overview of the idea of sovereignty in Keith Baker, "Sovereignty," in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, eds. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).
7. Jean Bodin, *Six livres de la république*, eds. Christina Frémont et al. (Paris, 1986). First published in 1576, this is a reprint of the tenth edition, initially published in Lyon in 1593. See especially Livre I, chapitre 10, "Des vrayes marques de souveraineté," 295-341.
8. Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, "Politique tirée de l'Ecriture sainte," *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Abbé Guillaume (10 vols., Lyon, 1879), 8: 338-457.
9. Keith Baker, "French Political Thought at the Accession of Louis XVI," *Journal of Modern History* 50 (1978): 279-303, summarises some of the principal constitutional theories.
10. Jean-Louis Soulavie, *Mémoires historiques et politiques du règne de Louis XVI. . . .* (6 vols., Paris, an X-1801); the quotation is on 4: 153.

In his *Contrat social*, published in 1762, Rousseau turned the theory of royal sovereignty upside-down. He placed sovereignty, not in the person of the king, but in the theoretical person of the collectivity of citizens. Each individual surrendered himself simultaneously with other individuals to the collective will. The citizen was theoretically free and equal because, like all others, he was subject only to the general will to which all citizens contributed. In relocating sovereignty, however, he left it with all the attributes with which monarchical theorists endowed it. It was absolute and inalienable. It could not be delegated or represented. Rousseau was just as opposed to representation as he was to absolute monarchy; each particularised the will which belonged to the citizenry acting as a whole.[11] It is difficult to find out how many revolutionaries had read and understood Rousseau but, insofar as they did, his thought reinforced the ancient idea that the sovereign will had to be unitary. This ruled out the acceptance of political parties, the legitimacy of what in the British tradition is called "loyal opposition" and, in the end, modern parliamentary politics.

We can already see the relocation of the traditional conception of sovereignty in some of the pamphlets which poured out in the wake of the government's call on 5 July 1788 for public discussion of the forms to be followed in the convocation of the Estates-General for the first time in 175 years. Especially revealing is the dramatic inversion of political power in the most famous of these pamphlets, the Abbé Sieyès' *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers Etat?* Sieyès made the historical nation, without any of the constitutional restrictions dear to the parlementarian theorists, into the absolute sovereign will. According to Sieyès, a nation comes into existence when a considerable number of individuals decide that they wished to unite but, once the nation has come into existence, it exists before everything and is the source of everything. Individuals no longer count for anything: "considered separately, their power is nonexistent. It rests only in the collectivity. The community must have a common will; without unity of will it will not succeed in becoming a willing and active whole. Certainly too this whole has no right which does not belong to the common will."[12] Whatever his intentions, Sieyès not only relocated, but reinforced, the idea that sovereignty had to be unitary and indivisible.

The implications of the ancient conception of sovereignty became evident as soon as the Estates-General transformed itself into a Constituent Assembly. The electors who chose the delegates of the three orders had been authorised to draw up *cahiers de doléances*, lists of grievances, which some deputies interpreted as mandates. When such deputies opposed certain measures because they went beyond these "mandates," they were on rather shaky grounds because the *cahiers* had not authorised the merging of the three orders into one assembly. The moral qualms of these deputies, however, raised the question of where the locus of sovereignty lay. Was the assembly limited by the instructions of the voters? Talleyrand tried to solve the problem by arguing that, once the deputies had debated an issue and arrived at a decision, that represented the general will. The electoral bodies thus no longer expressed the general will as they were subject

11. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat social*, eds. Bertrand de Jouvenel and Constant Bourquin (Geneva, 1945), esp. Livre Premier, Chapitres 5, 6, and 7; and Livre Deuxième, Chapitres 1, 2, and 3. On his rejection of "Associations" or political parties, see 212-13.

12. Emmanuel Sieyès, *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers Etat?*, ed. with an intro. and notes by Roberto Zapperi (Geneva, 1970), 178.

to it.[13] Rousseau's insistence that the general will could not be delegated or represented was ignored. Even moderate deputies such as the Count de Lally-Tollendal came to the support of Talleyrand. He argued that sovereignty now was in the hands of the assembly, which in practice meant the majority. A minority which refused to comply with a majority was, in effect, rebelling against the nation. He even denied the minority the right of continuing to protest against a measure it had originally opposed.[14]

From early in the Revolution, deputies of various ideological hues clearly transferred sovereignty with all its attributes to the majority of the assembly, not only from the King, but from the voters themselves. Barère went even further. He was a barrister formerly connected to the *parlement* in Toulouse, currently the editor of the newspaper *Le Point du jour*, an active member of the Constituent Assembly, and a future member of the Committee of Public Safety. He argued that, in overriding binding mandates, the deputies were not exceeding their powers. It was the constituents who had bypassed their authority by trying to dictate to the assembly: "It is up therefore to the constituted power, which has become the legislative power," he continued, "to remedy the abuses of the constituent power and to inform it that it has infringed on the legislative power of the nation represented by the gathering of its deputies."[15] This idea — that the majority in the assembly had the right to reprimand and correct the voters — was a notion which could be extended in certain circumstances, as Barère himself was to do later on.

Some might argue that this conception of sovereignty was counterbalanced by the guarantee of individual rights in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen approved by the Constituent Assembly just six weeks after the storming of the Bastille. Two clauses, however, were added at the insistence of Sieyès which had a very different thrust. Articles 3 and 6 vested sovereignty in the nation and asserted that law must be the expression of the general will. As Conor Cruise O'Brien has pointed out, these clauses transformed the rights of the individual into the rights of the Leviathan.[16] At least one artist seems to have sensed this fact (Figure 1). He shows a huge figure of Hercules, evidently representing the People, standing next to the Declaration. He had overthrown the tyrant whose boots alone stand atop the pedestal. Little putti have planted a pike and Liberty Bonnet where the tyrant once stood. The tyrant's body lies broken at the base of the pedestal.[17] One powerful giant, representing the collective power of the People or the Nation, had replaced another. The central problem of revolutionary politics was, who was to speak for this new Leviathan?

Early in the Revolution, there was one check on the expression of the general or national will by a majority of the assembly: the suspensive veto by the king. This was based on the possibility that the majority in a particular assembly might not have genuinely articulated the will of the nation, which should be unitary and indivisible, but the will of particular representatives. It also accepted the fact that the king still in part

13. *Archives parlementaires*, Vol. 8, 7 July, 200-03.
14. Ibid., 204-05.
15. Ibid., 205.
16. Conor Cruise O'Brien, review of *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* in the *New York Review of Books* 37:46 (15 February 1990).
17. Bibliothèque nationale, Estampes, collection de Vinck, t. 25, no. 4221.

Figure 1
Anon., "Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citroyen. Aux Français libres et à leurs amis." (*Bibliotèque nationale Estampes, Coll. de Vinck, t. 25, No. 4221.*)

represented the will of the nation by giving him the power to hold back legislation. Under the Constitution of 1791 it was assumed, however, that if three successive legislative assemblies approved a particular law, then it did indeed represent the will of the nation. Unfortunately for him, Louis XVI came to be perceived to be using the veto to impose his personal will over that of the nation. The overthrow of the monarchy removed any check on the national will expressed by the assembly, the new Convention. National sovereignty theoretically became popular sovereignty. The Convention, however, repeatedly violated the results of the elections by purging minorities rather than defeating them by normal parliamentary procedures. The expulsion and arrest of the so-called Girondins on 2 June 1793 set a precedent for the excision of other individuals and groups — Hébertists, Dantonists, and Robespierrists.

The rejection of parties and of legitimate opposition in the legislature and elsewhere was clearly articulated by Robespierre in defending the law of 22 Prairial Year II, with its alarmingly broad definition of counterrevolutionary activity and its suppression of any means by which the accused could defend him or herself. Couthon, who proposed the law, argued that the only delay in punishing the enemies of *la patrie* should be the time required to identify them. One deputy proposed an amendment that would have allowed the accused the right to call witnesses. Other deputies called for postponement of any decision. Robespierre opposed any amendment or delay on the grounds that it was imperative to annihilate all those who conspired against the Republic. He could not conceive of any acceptable division among the supporters of liberty,

> for be assured of this, citizens, whenever a line of demarcation is established, whenever a division is perceived, then there is something that threatens the safety of the Fatherland. It is not natural that there be any separation among those equally devoted to the public good ... This severity [of the law of those 22 Prairial] is terrible only for the enemies of liberty and humanity.[18]

This rejection of any legitimate divisions in the body politic and insistence on a single will was not only expressed in such rhetoric, but in the symbols and architectural projects of the period.

The way the People were depicted at the peak of the Revolution is very revealing. We have already seen the People depicted as a giant figure in the guise of Hercules, a veritable Leviathan, associated with the Declaration of Rights of 1789. At the peak of the Revolution Hercules-the-People became a familiar figure. His first conspicuous public appearance was at the fourth station of the great Festival of Unity and Indivisibility, orchestrated by Jacques-Louis David on 10 August 1793 to mark the first anniversary of the overthrow of the monarchy. There he appeared on the esplanade of the Invalides atop a symbolic mountain where he was portrayed about to destroy a serpent, representing the Federalist revolt, which is trying to undo the fasces, the symbol of unity (Figure 2).[19] Three months later David proposed a colossal figure of Hercules-the-People for the promontory of the Île de la Cité next to the Pont Neuf. This colossal figure was to be portrayed holding up figures of Liberty and Equality in his right hand and trampling

18. *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre. Discours*, eds. Marc Bouloiseau and Albert Soboul (5 vols., Paris, 1965), 5: 485.
19. Bib. Nat., Estampes, Qb1 août 1793.

Figure 2
Fourth Station of the Festival of Unity and Indivisibility, 10 August 1793.
(*Bibliotèque nationale Estampes*.)

on smashed sculpture from Notre Dame, representing the superstitions of the past.[20] This gigantic statue was never built, but it inspired the seal (really a stamp) at the end of the *Bulletin des lois* (Figure 3). He was depicted with his massive club resting on broken symbols of monarchical power and the two goddesses standing atop an orb held up in his right hand.[21] During the Terror, Hercules-the-People appeared frequently on engravings of all sorts, in churches converted into revolutionary temples, and on festival grounds.

There has been much debate recently about the significance of the prominence of Hercules-the-People during the radical period of the Revolution. One historian has argued that David intended to suggest that he was a rather unintelligent brute who needed

Figure 3
Stamp at the End of the *Bulletin de Lois*.

20. Jacques-Louis David, *Convention Nationale. Discours prononcé . . . dans la séance du 17 brumaire l'an II de la République* [7 novembre 1793] (Paris, n.d.).
21. The seal, which is really a printed stamp and is not to be confused with the seal of state used to authenticate the original copies of laws, appeared in the new *Bulletin des lois* commencing in Prairial an II.

to be guided by his superiors in the revolutionary government.[22] Such an interpretation is contradicted by the words which the artist proposed be inscribed on his colossal figure: LUMIÈRE on his brow, NATURE and VERITÉ on his chest, all key words of the Enlightenment. Nor were the words FORCE and TRAVAIL, to be inscribed on his arms and hands, intended to suggest that he was a dumb brute, since there was an effort at the time to emphasise the value and dignity of the work of ordinary people.

The same author has argued that the giant male figure was intended to supersede the moderate female figure of Liberty, who represented a stage of the Revolution now past.[23] At first this argument seems plausible since the male members of the *gouvernement révolutionnaire* had just closed down women's clubs, but the argument is contradicted by all the evidence. The Committee of Public Safety used a female figure of Liberty (or the Republic) on its letterhead, proposed a huge statue of Liberty for the Place de la Révolution, and did nothing to change the seal-of-state where Liberty held the rudder of the ship of state. All this discussion of the intelligence and gender of Hercules-the-People misses his real significance: that the people were conceived of as a single monolithic figure, a conception in complete contradiction to the conception of the people in a pluralistic liberal democracy.

Unlike Hercules-the-People, there was another very conspicuous symbol during the Terror which has not received the attention which it deserves: the fasces, a symbol which also dated back to classical antiquity. It consisted of a bundle of rods tied closely together by thongs and usually enclosing an axe. The fasces was carried by lictors in front of a Roman magistrate to signify his power, but it was more than just a symbol. After a condemned person was sentenced by the magistrate, the rods could be untied and used to beat him. Moreover, the axe in the centre could be used to decapitate the person when a capital sentence had been imposed. Throughout western history the fasces has been used to signify state power.[24] Early in the Revolution, it appeared frequently on engravings, on flags of the National Guard, and on designs for monuments. At the peak of the Revolution, however, it became even more conspicuous and took on a special significance: it became the dominant symbol of the *République une et indivisible*. The idea was no longer that the rods could be unbound to serve as an instrument of punishment; rather, so long as they remained bound together, the power of the Republic could

22. Lynn Hunt, "Hercules and the Radical Image of the French Revolution," *Presentations* 1:2 (Spring 1983): 95-117: "On his brow was to be inscribed 'light' (a rather weak reference to intelligence) . . ." and "'work' on his hands became yet another sign of the giant's status as a dumb force" (106-07).

23. Ibid.: "The *distant*, feminine statue of Liberty represented a moderate Republic now *repudiated*," and "But they [the male revolutionary government] were almost certainly attracted to the masculinity of the figure [Hercules] since they had already *rejected* the female goddess of Liberty" (103 and 105). Hunt repeats this statement in her book *Politics, Culture, and Class*: "However they were almost certainly attracted to the masculinity of the figure since they had already voted to *replace* Liberty on the seal" (103; italics added). The Convention never, in fact, voted to replace the figure used to certify the original copies of laws. They did vote to use Hercules-the-People on the stamp of each *Bulletin des lois*, a stamp replaced with a more moderate one under the Directory.

24. Anthony J. Marshall, "Symbols and Showmanship in Roman Public Life: the Fasces," *Phoenix* 38:2 (1984): 120-41.

Figure 4
Guyot, "Déclaration des droits de l'homme et di citroyen," detail.
(Bibliotèque nationale Estampes.)

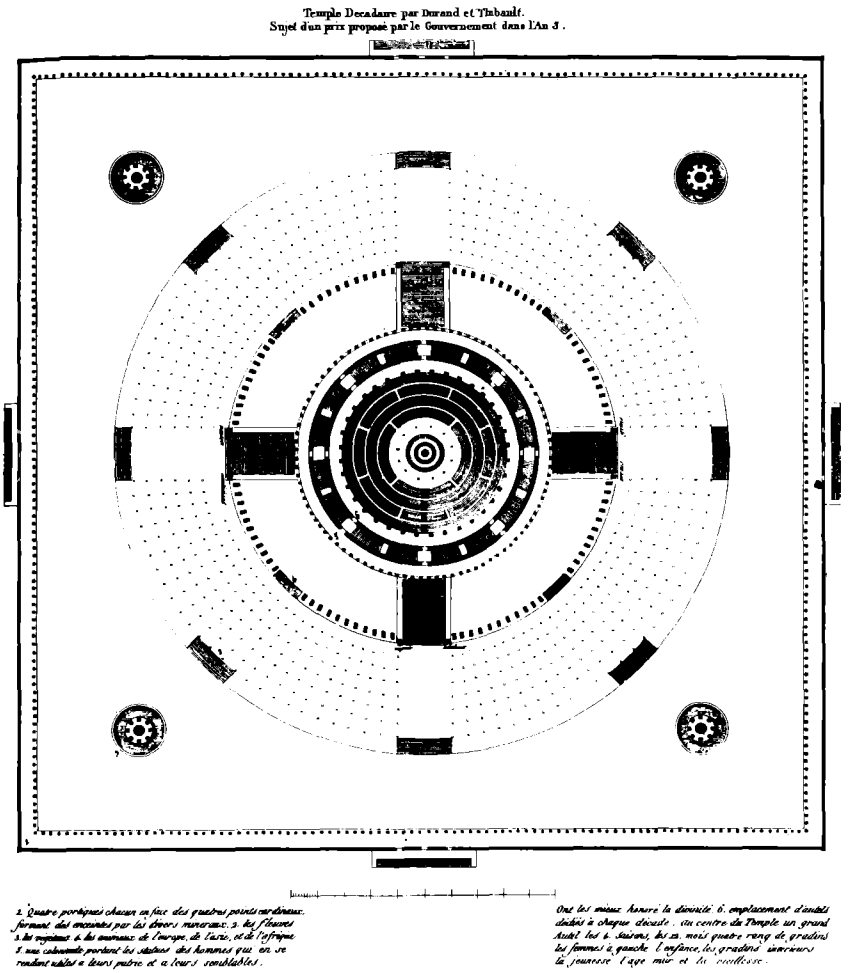
not be broken (Figure 4).[25] Thus, for the revolutionaries the fasces took on some of the meaning it had for the Fascists in our own century, as a symbol of the corporate unity of the state. Used in this way, the identical rods, lacking the power to move independently, also suggested a conception of the body politic at odds with that of a variegated, liberal society.

The architectural projects for the Contest of Year II are also very revealing. This competition was the result of a series of decrees in the spring of 1794 calling for designs for monuments and public buildings. These included David's colossal figure of the People for the promontory of the Île de la Cité, a statue of Nature Regenerated for the Place de la Bastille, a huge statue of Liberty for the Place de la Révolution, a Temple of Equality for a garden adjacent to the Champs-Elysées, primary assemblies, city halls, revolutionary theatres, *Temples décadaires*, courthouses, and jails. To mark the bicentennial of the Revolution, the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris organised an exhibition and published a lavishly illustrated catalogue entitled *Les Architectes de la Liberté* in which most of the surviving designs were published.[26] The theme of the exhibition reinforced the image of the Revolution which its official propagandists such as Michel Vovelle wished to propagate. Some of the projects on display were, indeed, examples of the architecture of liberty, but others exemplified conformity, exclusion, and coercion. These are features which those directing the commemoration of the bicentenary were anxious to gloss over.

Particularly significant are the projects for *Temples décadaires* which were to be built throughout France. The intention was that all citizens would unite at the same time every tenth day, the replacement for Sunday, to participate in identical republican rituals such as the singing of revolutionary hymns, the preaching of civic homilies, the reading of recent laws, the recitation of the Rights of Man by an outstanding student, the swearing of oaths by newly elected officials, and perhaps a republican marriage or baptism.[27] Virtually all the surviving designs for such temples featured a similar internal arrangement, a circular auditorium intended to engender unity among the citizens. The prize-winning designs for a large temple of this kind had an Altar of the Fatherland in the centre, a ring of four lesser altars around it, and thirty-six altars around the rim of the auditorium. There was thus a principal altar for the whole year, smaller ones for four seasons, and others for every *décade* (Figures 5 and 6).[28] In place of the myriad of privileged corporations in the Old Régime, the revolutionaries hoped to create one huge corporation of citizens sharing a similar ethic. Those who would not participate would be excluded from the body of citizens, and those who actively opposed the civic cult

25. The decoration at the top of one Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (Figure 4) shows Hercules trying in vain to break the fasces so long as it is tightly bound together: Bib. Nat., Estampes, Coll. de Vinck, t. 25, no. 4232.
26. *Les Architectes de la Liberté 1789-1799* (Paris, 1989).
27. See the discussion of the *Temples décadaires* in James A. Leith, *Space and Revolution: Projects for Monuments, Squares and Public Buildings in France 1789-1799* (Montréal, 1991), 153, 181-86, 201, 268-70, and 309.
28. The original design of the large *Temple décadaire* by Durand and Thibault is in the Musée Carnaualet, T.G.C. Arch., I, D8208; engravings of it are in A. Détournelle, *Recueil d'architecture nouvelle* (Paris, an XIII), pls. 52 and 53.

Figure 5
Durand and Thibault, "Project for a large *Temple décadaire*," Ground Plan.
(*Musée Carnavalet.*)

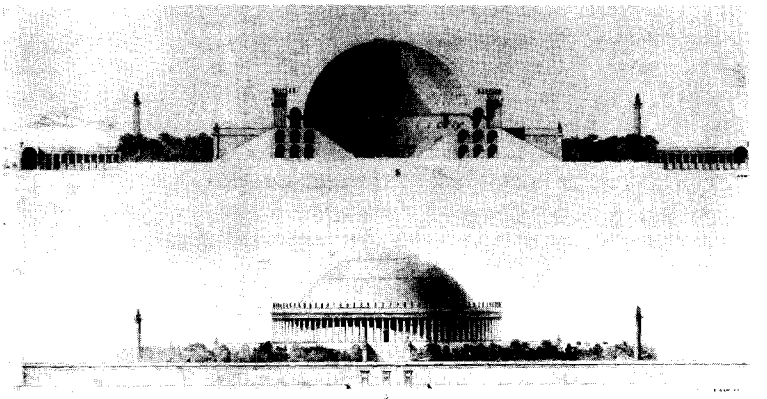


would be excised from the community. It was significant that the Contest of Year II had no less than five programmes for courthouses, detention centres, and prisons.[29]

The rejection of party politics and legitimate opposition proved fatal under the Directory. The Constitution of Year III tried to prevent the excesses of the Terror by having two legislatures, one to propose laws and the other to approve them, both elected indirectly by the well-to-do. Executive power was given to five Directors who would

29. Leith, *Space and Revolution*, 309.

Figure 6
Durand and Thibault, "Project for a large *Temple décadière*," Cross Section and Elevation. (*Musée Carnavalet.*)



take turns in presiding and one of whom would retire each year. The advocates of this moderate Republic, however, refused to form a centrist party to uphold the regime. The Directors spent money and sent out agents to support certain candidates, but refused to organise a party. They also stamped out networks of clubs organised by different varieties of royalists on the right and Jacobins on the left. Parties still were considered unacceptable because they represented only part of the national will. When money and agents failed to get the desired results, the Directors purged the unacceptable deputies. Towards the end of the Directory, some Jacobins began to defend themselves explicitly as a political party. The journal *L'Ennemi des oppresseurs de tous les temps* argued that patriots who were united in support for a certain form of government could quite naturally divide into parties because they differed over the persons and actions of those who govern.[30] These Jacobins were arguing for a loyal opposition, but this idea appeared too late. The Directory died, not just because of a general on horseback, but because much of the public and many of the politicians had lost faith in parliamentary politics.

One could point to other features of French revolutionary political culture which were incompatible with normal liberal republican politics (or a political culture where the king or queen was a mere figurehead). The *Temples décadaires* and other temples

30. This position was developed in a series of articles entitled "Quelques définitions à l'ordre du moment," 11-13 Vendémiaire, Year VIII, just a couple of months before the forth coup under the Constitution of Year III brought the Directory to a close.

mentioned earlier were only one sign of an intense religiosity which was conspicuous at the peak of the Revolution.[31] Elements of religious zeal have occurred from time to time in liberal political cultures, but nothing comparable to that of Year II of the French Republic. By that time, the Revolution had produced all the ingredients of a substitute religion. There were dogmas — the Rights of Man and the Republican Constitution; there were rituals — processions through the streets, civic oaths, and communal feasts; there were martyrs — the trinity of Lepeletier, Chalier, and Marat; there were religious handbooks — republican catechisms, civic manuals, even political commandments and precepts; and there were sacred symbols, gods, and goddesses. This pervasive religiosity had profound consequences. It was invaluable in legitimising the new order in a country where power had been in the hands of a consecrated ruler, king by the grace of God. Unfortunately, there also emerged a Manichaean view of politics which inhibited toleration of opposition and the possibility of compromise that are part of normal democratic politics.

The Revolution also generated several versions of the idea of revolutionary government whose relationship with liberal democracy is tenuous at best. One was the notion put forward by Sieyès of an assembly embodying constituent power, that is an assembly of deputies of the nation with unlimited power to refound its institutions. This was the dominant idea during the Constituent Assembly and the early period of the Convention. Jean-Paul Marat, distrustful of many of the deputies, put forward a different idea, that of a tribune or dictator with a short-term mandate to eradicate traitors and put the Revolution back on track. "If I were tribune of the people and backed by a few thousand men," he wrote in *L'Ami du peuple* on 26 July 1790, "I guarantee that in six weeks the constitution will be perfect, the well-organized political machine will function at its best." During the Terror another version appeared, as the power of the Committee of Public Safety evolved into the dictatorship of twelve men whose mission was to rule unconstitutionally until the conditions for constitutional government could be created. Still later, Babeuf and his fellow conspirators conceived of an insurrection directed from the centre by a small secret committee. After the insurrection, there was to be a revolutionary dictatorship to prepare the people to exercise their sovereignty. Exactly how long this dictatorship was to last was not clear, but it was the progenitor of Blanqui's idea of a *putsch* and Marx's conception of a dictatorship of the proletariat.

In conclusion, it seems that the claim that the French Revolution saw the birth of a modern, liberal, republican political culture is dubious. From the very beginning, the concept of sovereignty inherited from the Old Regime and the notion of the general will elaborated by Rousseau militated against the acceptance of political parties and the legitimacy of opposition. At the peak of the Revolution, the rhetoric and the symbols suggested monolithic unity rather than pluralism. The architecture and rituals were intended to create such unity, if it did not already exist. In addition, the intense religiosity of the Revolution bred intolerance of differences. Finally, the various forms of dictatorship advocated throughout the decade left a legacy very important for the future, but

31. James A. Leith, "On the religiosity of the French Revolution," *Culture and Revolutions: Cultural Ramifications of the French Revolution*, ed. George Levitine (College Park, Maryland, 1989), 171-85.

one at odds with liberal democracy. Out of the Babouvist conspiracy came the professional revolutionary, a new figure on the historical stage. He was the founder of a revolutionary apostolic succession — Blanqui, Bakunin, Lenin, Mao, Castro, and many others. Many of these life-long revolutionaries have been willing to countenance some sort of temporary, or not-so-temporary, dictatorship to prepare for the ideal society. This tradition, too, came out of the political culture of the French Revolution.