

# Liberty through Uniformity (The emergence of the nation-state in the French Revolution)

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**Abstract:** The fundamental hypothesis of the study is that the specific form of European statehood, which we still refer to today as the nation-state, emerged during the French Revolution. One of the earliest and most accurate descriptions of this form of statehood comes from Jean-Jacques Rousseau's younger compatriot, Benjamin Constant, a relentless critic of Jacobin terror: "the same code of law, the same measures, the same rules, and, if possible, gradually the same language: behold, this is called a perfectly organised society". Constant was probably right in saying that the essence of this form of statehood was uniformity, but his position needs to be supplemented insofar as it originally meant more than the legal, administrative, or even linguistic homogenization of contemporary French society: it also presupposed the introduction of a unified civil (or civic) religion. The study aims to investigate the ideological considerations behind these homogenization efforts, with particular emphasis on the ideological reasons behind the introduction of a civil religion. The basic assumption here is that the revolutionary effort to introduce a civil religion, and in connection with this, the organization of the feast of the Supreme Being during the revolution, reveals something not only about the nation-state, but also about the sentiment and way of thinking that legitimizes it, namely nationalism.

**Keywords:** French Revolution, nation-state, uniformity, Rousseau, Abbé Sieyès, Robespierre, cult of the Supreme Being

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**Rezumat:** Ipoteza fundamentală a studiului este că forma specifică a statalității europene, pe care o numim și astăzi stat național, a apărut în timpul Revoluției Franceze. Una dintre cele mai timpurii și mai precise descrieri ale acestei forme a statalității provine de la compatriotul mai tânăr al lui Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Benjamin Constant, un critic implacabil al terorii iacobine: "aceleași legi, aceleași măsuri, aceleași reguli și, dacă este posibil, treptat, aceeași limbă: aceasta este ceea ce se numește o societate perfect organizată". Constant avea probabil dreptate când spunea că esența acestei forme de statalitate era uniformitatea, dar poziția sa trebuie completată în măsura în care aceasta însemna deja la început mai mult decât omogenizarea juridică, administrativă sau chiar lingvistică a societății franceze contemporane: ea presupunea, de asemenea, introducerea unei religii civile (sau civice) uniforme. Studiul își propune să investigheze considerentele ideologice care au stat la baza acestor eforturi de omogenizare, cu un accent special pe motivele ideologice care conduceau la introducerea unei religii civile. Presupunerea de bază aici este că efortul revoluționar de a introduce o religie civilă și, în legătură cu aceasta, organizarea festivalului Ființei Supreme în timpul revoluției, dezvăluie ceva nu numai despre statul național, ci și despre sentimentul și mentalitatea care îl legitimează, adică naționalismul.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** Revoluția Franceză, stat național, uniformitate, Rousseau, Abbé Sieyès, Robespierre, cultul Ființei Supreme

### The ideal of uniformity in the French Revolution

Benjamin Constant was undoubtedly right when he wrote in 1806 in his work on the spirit of conquest (a text that would not appear until after the fall of Napoleon in 1814) that "it is somewhat remarkable that uniformity should never have encountered greater favour than in a revolution made in the name of the rights and the liberty of men". He was also the author of one of the first and most precise descriptions of the specific conception of the *state* that took shape during the French Revolution: "the same code of law", he wrote, "the same measures, the same rules, and, if possible, gradually the same language: behold, this is called a perfectly organised society".<sup>1</sup> If every

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Constant, "The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation and their Relation to European Civilization", in Benjamin Constant, *Political Writings*. Edited and translated by Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 44-167, citation on page 73.

individual has equal rights, this automatically implies that every individual has the *same* rights, and that these are guaranteed by the *same* laws in every corner of the republic, that is, in every administrative subdivision of it. So, what Constant called ‘uniformity’ undoubtedly characterized the French society that born with the Revolution, moreover, in many more ways than Constant’s diagnosis initially suggests. Because it meant the political, linguistic and religious homogenization of society at the same time – or at least the *demand* for all these together.

The *political* homogenisation of French society was a direct consequence of democratisation, and the extent to which this demand was popular in contemporary French society is already illustrated by the overwhelming success of Abbé Sieyès’ pamphlet in Paris, published in January 1789. One of its most important ideas, namely, that the Third Estate is the French nation *itself*, and that all the privileges are illegitimate, was put into effect by the National Constituent Assembly on 4 August 1789, when all the privileges (landlord’s rights, municipal, provincial, and corporative privileges, the tithe, in short, the whole old regime) were abolished in France. In this long, late-night session, aristocrats made patriotic statements amid tears and applause. Sieyès, who was himself a cleric, although he was elected to the Estates General as a deputy of the Third Estate, did not even in his pamphlet insult the Church, arguing that the priesthood was not an order but a “profession”.<sup>2</sup> Despite this (and Sieyès’ express opposition), the French Revolution soon abolished all the clerical privileges. This was the purpose (among other things) of the expropriation of the Church property (2 November 1789), the adoption of a Civil Constitution of the Clergy (12 July 1790), and the swearing-in of the clergy to the civil constitution (27 November 1790). With the establishment of the constitutional church, the priests, who took the obligatory loyalty oath, became paid state employees, and the clergy ceased to be a political force with its own material basis. Being a priest did become indeed a ‘profession’ in France, just not in the way Sieyès had originally thought.

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<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, “What is the Third Estate?”, in Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *Political Writings*. Edited and translated by Michael Sonenscher. (Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), 92-162, citation on page 96.

At the same time, on 4 August 1789, the Constituent Assembly also abolished the traditional administrative division of France, inherited from the 'old regime', which it considered 'tangled'. Sieyès' geometric plan (or rather that of the Constitutional Committee, of which he was a member) in September of that year to split up the territory of France in eighty *départements*, composed of regular squares, followed apparently only *electoral* reasons.<sup>3</sup> Thus, François Furet is certainly right to say that "as each representative of the people held his mandate not from his personal electorate but from the entire nation, the best equivalent of this wholeness of the nation was to have each part of it exactly equal to all the others".<sup>4</sup> But, as Edmund Burke already noticed in his book on the Revolution in France, first published on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1790, the Constituent Assembly did not follow only electoral reasons with its plan: the aim of Sieyès' proposal was the abolition of the old provincial privileges, customs barriers, linguistic diversity, etc. Whatever the case was, the plan did not meet with unanimous support: some, like Barnave, argued against it on the grounds of the importance of local 'usages', others, such as Mirabeau, advocated the creation of territories on the base of 'demographic equality'. The final division was an amalgam of rationalism and empiricism. "The new France was divided into *départements* of comparable size, mapped out by deputies in accordance with reason and history, and baptized by their natural elements, such as rivers and mountains; each of them was subdivided into districts, cantons and communes."<sup>5</sup>

However, the transformation of Sieyès' doctrines into political realities had begun earlier, in June 1789, with the transformation of the Estates General into a National Assembly. The facts are well known. The deputies of the Third Estate called the representatives of the clergy and the nobility to join them, but only a few representatives of the lower clergy did this (the number of which would gradually increase). On 17 June, on a motion by Sieyès, after lengthy debates, a resolution was adopted by 491 votes to 90, denying the division of society into orders and changing the name of the Estates General to the National Assembly. "The name of National Assembly is the only name appropriate to the Assembly in the current state of affairs, because the members

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<sup>3</sup> *Gazette Nationale, ou Le Moniteur Universel*, N° 65, du 29 Septembre 1789, 265-266.

<sup>4</sup> François Furet, *The French Revolution. 1770-1814*. Translated by Antonia Nevill. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 87.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

who constitute it are the only legitimately verified and publicly known representatives; because they have been directly dispatched by the near totality of the nation (*la presque totalité de la Nation*); and finally, because as representation is one and indivisible, no deputy, regardless of the order or community that has chosen him, has the right to exercise his functions separately from the present Assembly.”<sup>6</sup>

The deputies knew very well, of course, that such a decision would permanently deprive them of any possibility of a future compromise with the privileged orders. Jean-Joseph Mounier, who later defended the bicameral legislature against Sieyès, proposed that the assembly be defined as “a legitimate assembly of the representatives of the major part of the nation in the absence of the minor part”. Mirabeau, on the other hand, proposed that the Estates General should be renamed as the “representatives of the French people”.<sup>7</sup> But the word ‘people’ still carried a rather partial and inferior meaning at that time – that of the Roman *plebs*, as opposed to the more noble *populus*. The fear was that the people would be identified with the *canaille*. The decision was therefore taken to use the more appropriate term ‘Nation’, and although the king did not order the unification of the estates until ten days later, the lower priesthood, which was united by then with the third estate, made it known to its contemporaries as early as 17 June that a new, egalitarian society had been born.

But even if the Constituent Assembly succeeded in abolishing the orders in France and the old provincial privileges, in breaking down local usages and traditions, eliminating customs barriers, and introducing a uniform administration everywhere, the Revolution did not achieve the great goal of *linguistic* unification of the population of France. The intention was there, but the tools weren’t added. This intention is already very clearly shown by the research carried out in 1792 by Abbé Grégoire (i.e. Henri Jean-Baptiste Grégoire), the results of which he later (on 4 June 1794) presented to the National Convention on behalf of the Committee of Public Instruction, and

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<sup>6</sup> *The French Revolution. A Document Collection*. Edited by Laura Mason and Tracey Rizzo. (Boston – New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999), 59-60. See also: *Gazette Nationale, ou Le Moniteur Universel*, N° 9, du 16 au 20 Juin, 1789, 42.

<sup>7</sup> Etienne Dumont, *Souvenirs sur Mirabeau et sur les deux premières assemblées législatives* (Paris: Librairie de Charles Gosselin, 1832), 76. See also: *Gazette Nationale, ou Le Moniteur Universel*, N° 9, du 16 au 20 Juin, 1789, 41.

the title of which was already worthy of a minor declaration of war: *Report on the Necessity and Means to Annihilate the Dialects [les patois] and to Universalize the Use of the French Language*.<sup>8</sup> Although the threat to annihilate the dialects was not carried out during the Revolution, the report still provides an excellent insight into the specific revolutionary logic behind the planned language policy.

For example, it is quite obvious that for Grégoire, the linguistic diversity of France (barely half of the population spoke French at the time) posed a serious threat to the internal unity of the nascent republic. The major obstacle to the “political unification” (*l’amalgame politique*) required by the republic’s “expansion” (or, if you like, its understanding: *l’étendue*), he writes, is the many jargons (*jargons*), which is spoken in France, and which “makes thirty of one people” (according to his own research, the vast majority of people in France spoke one of 30 dialects).<sup>9</sup> For him, moreover, as will become clear later in the text, a single French language is not only a means of political communication required by democratic participation, but also the expression of the national *unity*. He also concludes that the linguistic homogenisation of French society is necessary because it is as much a condition for the existence of the unified nation as it is for the proper functioning of the “political machinery”. “All that we have said”, he writes, “leads to the conclusion that the crushing of all prejudices, the expression of all truth, all talent, and all virtues; the melting [*fondre*] of all citizens into the body of the nation, the simplification and facilitation of the political machinery, require the unity of language.”<sup>10</sup> The unity of language, he says, is therefore an “integral” (*intégrant*) part of the Revolution.<sup>11</sup>

Less militant in title, but perhaps even more harsh in wording, is the report of Bertrand de Barère, a lawyer from Toulouse, presented on 8 Pluviôse

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<sup>8</sup> Abbé Henri Baptiste Grégoire, “Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d’anéantir les patois et d’universaliser l’usage de la langue française”, in Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel, *Une politique de la langue. La République française et les patois: L’enquête de l’Abbé Grégoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 300-317. See also: *Gazette Nationale, ou Le Moniteur Universel*, N° 258, Octidi, 18 Prairial, l’an 2 de la République Française, une et indivisible (6 Juin 1794, vieux st.), 1050-1052.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 304.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

of the Year II (27 January 1794) on behalf of the Committee of Public Safety: *Report of the Committee of Public Safety on Languages*.<sup>12</sup> Barère was convinced from the outset that French was “the most beautiful language in Europe” (*la plus belle langue de l’Europe*), whose task was to “transmit to the world the most sublime ideas of freedom” (*transmettre au Monde les plus sublimes pensées de la liberté*). In his view, Occitan, the language of the troubadours, was gradually decomposed into a variety of local remnants that were mutually unintelligible and therefore should be abandoned in favor of the language of Paris. Accordingly, in his report, he first spoke about the “indestructible federalism”, “the basis of which is the lack of communication of ideas”. (It should be noted that under ‘federalism’ the revolutionary rhetoric meant those movements that opposed the centralization efforts of the Jacobin government.) “We have revolutionized the government”, he said, “the laws, the customs, the manners, the dress, the commerce, and the thought itself. It is time to revolutionize even the language, which is their daily means.”

In more concrete terms, his problem is that although the National Convention has ordered the laws to be sent to “all the communes of the Republic”, this “good deed” is immediately wasted in the departments where the population does not speak French. The “light” which the revolutionary government is trying at great expense to send “to the edges of the country” is thus extinguished as soon as it reaches them, “because there they do not even understand the laws”. It is precisely for this reason, he adds, that these departments, which cannot be won over to the cause of the Republic in this way, are also fertile soil of counter-revolutionary ideas. “Federalism and superstition speak in Lower Breton, emigration, and the desecration of the Republic in German; counter-revolution speaks in Italian, fanaticism in Basque.” “Let us destroy”, he adds “these instruments of error and destruction.” (*Caffons ces instruments de dommage et d’erreur*.)<sup>13</sup> – Although Barère distorts it somewhat here, because the Minister of Justice had already set up an office in December

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<sup>12</sup> Bertrand de Barère, “Rapport du Comité de Salut Public sur les idioms”, in Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia and Jacques Revel, *Une politique de la langue. La République française et les patois*, 291-299. See also: *Gazette Nationale, ou Le Moniteur Universel*, N° 129, Nonidi, 9 Pluviôse, l’an 2 de la République Française, une et indivisible (28 Janvier 1794, vieux style), 519-520.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 292-93.

1792 to translate laws and decrees into German, Italian, Catalan, Basque and Lower Breton, his report is nevertheless an accurate vision of the unifying efforts of the Jacobin government and the ideological considerations behind them.

It is quite obvious that for Barère the justification for linguistic assimilation is the propagation of the idea of *freedom*, that is, the idea of the republic. Uniformity is justified by universalism, assimilation by the demand for freedom. If it is true, therefore, that the republic is the only form of government that is consistent with the ideals of liberty and equality, and that equality is a condition of liberty, then man, as Rousseau said, can be “forced to be free” for his own sake, even by the elimination of his linguistic identity. The goal of linguistic homogenization is not cultural, but political, and is related to the need for political deliberation (and to make central administration more efficient). Thus, unlike the nationalists of our day, for Barère, a language or dialect different from that of the majority of the population is visibly not in itself irritating or destructive, nor should it be destroyed for that simple reason, but because language and communication have a *political* significance in the republic. The eradication of languages is therefore not done in the name of despotism, but on the contrary, in the name of freedom, which is why Barère can think that there is something deeply anti-despotic in monolingualism.

If Rousseau thought that in the republic the walls of the houses should be made of glass and that the citizens should learn what it means “to live under the eyes of their fellow citizens”,<sup>14</sup> then Barère assigns the same function to the common language. Monolingualism is antidespotic because it allows citizens to keep an eye on each other and at the same time to control the government. Despotism, writes Barère, preserves the diversity of languages, while in democracy, on the contrary, the “control” (*surveillance*) of the government is left to each citizen. In order to do this, everyone must know the government and, above all, must know its language.<sup>15</sup> The requirement of linguistic homogenization is thus simultaneously connected to the ideas of political equality and freedom, and therefore freedom and uniformity are

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Considerations on the Government of Poland and on Its Planned Reformation”, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 11. Edited by Christopher Kelly, translated by Judith R. Bush and Christopher Kelly (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2005), 167-240, citation on page 181.

<sup>15</sup> Bertrand de Barère, “Rapport du Comité de Salut Publique sur les idioms”, 296.

not mutually exclusive, but on the contrary: they appear to be mutually presupposing states.<sup>16</sup> Throughout in the text, Barère treats it as evidence that linguistic homogeneity of society serves the cause of freedom, because it enables the individual to fully experience citizenship.

However, it is not enough to declare the requirement of linguistic homogeneity, it must also be achieved, and the revolutionaries were not given the means to do so. For, as Burke has already observed, the best service to the linguistic unity of the nation during the Revolution was provided by the Parisian newspapers distributed everywhere in the country, which were the disseminators of both revolutionary ideas and the language of the Revolution, Parisian French. However, this instrument proved ultimately inadequate, and the time available to the revolutionaries too short to achieve their goal, and the linguistic unity of France was only achieved by the educational policy of the Third Republic almost a hundred years later, using extremely harsh methods. But even if the Revolution did not eliminate the linguistic diversity of France, it undoubtedly eliminated the French's *indifference* to the linguistic diversity of their country. All of this is ultimately proof that, historically speaking, the attempt to assimilate linguistic minorities is also a question of popular sovereignty and democracy, so it is understandable if it was raised with particular weight and significance in the gradually democratising European (and then Eastern European) countries. The linguistic diversity of France was not a problem until the rural masses and urban plebeians felt the urge to participate in democratic power. It became a problem with the introduction of republican government and the public recognition of the principle of popular sovereignty.

### **The religion of the nation and the cult of the Supreme Being**

Today we know that creating a nation, if we mean by nation a community of monolingual people, is a long and difficult process (it took nearly a hundred years in France as well), and rarely leads to complete success. The contemporaries of the French Revolution, who, unlike us, knew nothing about the so-called 'national education', could not even imagine that this novel idea of the nation would ever be the subject of a serious *emotional*

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

attachment. That is why Burke has already written that probably “no man ever was attached by a sense of pride, partiality, or real affection, to a description of square measurement”. “He never will glory in belonging to the Chequer No. 71, or to any other badge-ticket.” He had noticed, of course, that the revolutionaries were pursuing a kind of “geometrical policy”, and that, in the face of this *zèle révolutionnaire*, “all local ideas should be sunk”: “the people”, he wrote, “should no longer be Gascons, Picards, Bretons, Normans; but Frenchmen, with one country, one heart, and one Assembly”. But since he only knew the *patriotic* form of political loyalty rooted in locality, the feeling that is primarily attached to one’s family and homeland, he estimated that, as a direct result of geometrical policy, the inhabitants of France, instead of becoming all French, rather would totally lose their country. Since “we begin our public affections in our family”, he said, the inhabitants of the reorganized administrative areas “will shortly have no country”.<sup>17</sup>

Similar sceptic tone was adopted by Constant in his work on the spirit of conquest, even if in 1806 he had in principle a much better historical perspective than Burke in 1790. He criticises Napoleon in the first place, who tried to spread this revolutionary idea of uniformity throughout Europe, but he does not spare “demagogy” either, that is, the republican system, which originally developed this idea. The “spirit of system”, he writes, “was first entranced by symmetry”, and although patriotism exists only by “a vivid attachment to the interests, the ways of life, the customs of some locality”, the “so-called patriots” have declared war on all of these. They almost marked the cities and provinces with “numbers” and began to build by first “grinding and reducing to dust” the materials they could use. They “dried up”, as it were, this “natural source of patriotism”, and sought to replace it with some “abstract being”, some passion for a “general idea”, “stripped of all that can engage the imagination and speak to the memory”.<sup>18</sup> Constant thus remains sceptical, although, unlike Burke, he sees and describes convincingly the process by which the Revolution attempted to turn patriotism into *nationalism*.

Today, with more than two hundred years of historical experience behind us, and in the possession of the dubious wisdom of posterity, it is safe

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<sup>17</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 167.

<sup>18</sup> Benjamin Constant, “The Spirit of Conquest and Usurpation”, 73-74.

to say that the scepticism of both proved unfounded, and that this was one of the few occasions when his proverbial clairvoyance failed even Burke. As it turned out later, the English practice he cited as a counterexample is not at all conclusive. It may be true that in England public affections really develop in the family circle, but history suggests that a “cold relation” can also be a “zealous citizen” – sometimes even perhaps too zealous.<sup>19</sup> Patriotism is by no means the only possible form of collective political loyalty, for the modern times discovered, in the wake of the French Revolution, an equally effective, if not more effective, force of community cohesion: unconditional loyalty to the abstract idea of the nation. It may be that the idea of the nation, precisely because it is only an *idea*, or, as Constant called it: an “abstract being”, is not realistic, but the emotions radiating to it, according to the testimony of later ages, can be very *real*.

In any case, it is certain that with the idea of the nation, an alliance of political power and society was born, which was not known in the previous centuries. Parallel to the dismantling of the *ancien régime* and the emancipation of the bourgeoisie, a new idea of the ‘nation’ was born, and this new concept of community immediately became the sole basis of the legitimacy of political power, the “keystone of a political system”, as Lord Acton once wrote in his beautiful and clever essay on nationality.<sup>20</sup> But from a historical point of view, the nation’s self-identity, and its loyalty to itself, despite all political declarations, was born painfully slowly and in controversial circumstances. Since the revolutionaries saw the ultimate depository of sovereignty in the united and indivisible nation, and only the political body of the citizens had credibility in public life, it was imperative that it should appear as unitary and to not present social, regional, or linguistic differences. The problem was that the syntagm of the ‘French nation’ during the Revolution, despite the undoubted success of Sieyès’ pamphlet in Paris, was still nothing more than a senseless fiction for the rural peasantry, who made up much of the population of France. The French nation, beyond all the pompous declarations, had therefore to be properly *created*, and its loyalty to itself had to be brought to life.

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<sup>19</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 167.

<sup>20</sup> Lord Acton, “Nationality”, in Lord Acton, *The History of Freedom and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1907), 270-300, citation on page 286.

All of this seemed so unusual and challenging even at first sight that it is not surprising that contemporaries, who looked at the revolution from the outside, like Burke, had serious doubts about the success of the whole enterprise. Even more so because the problem revolutionaries were grappling with was not only real but also extremely pressing. Lord Acton was therefore certainly right when he wrote that as soon as the French people “abolished the authorities under which it lived, and became its own master, France was in danger of dissolution”. The dismantling of the whole edifice of the old regime, he said, had broken society down into its “natural elements” and threatened to “break up the country into as many republics as there were communes”.<sup>21</sup> The revolutionaries had only one response to the situation, albeit a very effective one, as it turned out later: the *festivals*.<sup>22</sup> Even at first glance, it is striking that during the French Revolution, the various celebrations became more and more frequent: the Feast of the Federation on 14 July 1790; the Feast of Liberty on 15 April 1792; the Festival of the Unity and Indivisibility of the Republic on 15 April 1793; the Festival of Reunion or Unity on 23 Thermidor of the Year I (i.e. 10 August 1793), the Feast of the Reason on 20 Brumaire of the Year II (i.e. 10 November 1793); the Feast of the Supreme Being on 20 Prairial of the Year II (i.e. 8 June 1794); and finally, the Feast of Jean-Jacques Rousseau on the 20 Vendémiaire of the Year III (i.e. 11 October 1794), when Rousseau’s remains were transported to the Panthéon.

Although these celebrations are obviously not of equal historical importance, and although we might be inclined today to attribute the greatest importance to the first, since it is the historical antecedent of the present French national holiday, yet if we are to look at the origin of national *feeling*, the feeling which emergence was so unlikely according to Burke, we must undoubtedly look more closely at the celebration of the Supreme Being. Far from being the cause of the French national feeling, as no holiday can obviously be the cause of it, this celebration is undoubtedly one of the first, most evident and most surprising manifestations of this feeling, and a brief recollection of it may help us to understand not only the nature of the national feeling, but also, curiously enough, its *origin*.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 276-277.

<sup>22</sup> The place and meaning of festivals in the history of the French Revolution is also discussed in detail by Mona Ozouf in her excellent, albeit controversial book: *Festivals and the French Revolution*. Translated by Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 1988).

The fact that Robespierre created this celebration specifically to counterbalance the Feast of the Reason, moreover, confirms one of Tocqueville's passing observations that even in the genesis of events of great historical importance there is something *contingent*. Its immediate cause was that in November 1793 the Commune attempted to introduce in Paris the "Cult of Reason". It closed the churches throughout the city, and after an anti-Christian meeting was held in the National Convention on November 7, during which the constitutional bishop of Paris, Jean-Baptiste-Joseph Gobel, solemnly renounced his faith and resigned his episcopal functions, it organized the Feast of the Reason at Notre-Dame on the 10th. The leaders of the movement included both Convention members and representatives of the Commune. Its first man was Jacques René Hébert, the deputy prosecutor of the Commune, and its organiser and promoter was the Paris Commune itself. Already on October 23, the General Council of the Commune decided "that all religious images in the various places of Paris should be removed" and called on the popular societies (*sociétés populaires*) to search for these "monuments of barbarism" (*les monumens de la barbarie*) and gave permission to the revolutionary committees (*Comités révolutionnaires*) to "totally destroy" them (*leur totale destruction*).<sup>23</sup>

The astonishing events that followed the Council's decision are recounted by a contemporary witness (although it would be more accurate to say an ear-witness, as he happens to be in prison at the time, incarcerated by Robespierre), Louis Sébastien Mercier, in his colourful but not entirely reliable book, *Le Nouveau Paris*. Soon, he writes, "fanciful celebrations were organized", in which Paris took the lead. The participants drank brandy sipped from the altar chalices, and "picked medlar from the wafer trays". Riding on donkeys dressed in vestments, with the sacrament in their hands, they "stood in front of the doors of the taverns", and the innkeeper "filled the ciborium for them three times". The procession was closed by mules laden with "crucifixes, holy water vessels and incense burners". Thus, in their "masquerade" of priestly vestments, they marched to the Convention, where they made welcome speeches and received a round of applause. In the courtyards of the houses, wooden statues of saints and crucifixes were burnt. The flames of the bonfires reached as high as the second floor, and from

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<sup>23</sup> *Gazette Nationale, ou Le Moniteur Universel*, N° 34, Le 4 du 2<sup>e</sup> Mois, L'An II<sup>e</sup> de la République Française, 134.

the windows they threw into the fire “the books condemned by Jacobinism”. “At the sight of these new orgies”, says Mercier, “the people came running in crowds, proud to have shaken off the yoke of their religion.” They laughed loudly, shouted obscenities and carried confessionals to the stake. “The whore showed her boyfriend the half-roasted image of the innocent Susanna; and the picture of the Lord’s Supper served as an eaves above a mending-shop”.<sup>24</sup> The “irreligious follies” (*folies irréligieuses*), as Mercier calls them, reached their peak on November 20, when an endless line of people, disguised in “dalmatics and vestments”, marched in front of the Convention, and developed into double lines; the wheelbarrows were filled with “chalices, ciboriums, and candlesticks”. The crowds, Mercier tells us, demanded to be rewarded for their offering by “dancing the carmagnole”. The Convention agreed, and some of its members, Mercier adds, “got down from their curule chairs”, grabbed girls in clerical garb around their waists and danced with the crowd.<sup>25</sup>

Robespierre, who hated atheism, after these events entered into a temporary alliance with Danton, and on 21-22 November both spoke out against anti-Christian actions. Robespierre, in a speech delivered on 21 November 1793 at the Jacobin Club, with the not so hidden aim of denouncing the atheist, Hébertist movement, confessed that, although he had been “a fairly bad Catholic” even in his schooldays (in his youth, Robespierre secured a scholarship at the prestigious Collège Louis-le-Grand, by the recommendation of bishop Louis-Hilaire Conzié), he had never been indifferent to the “fate of humanity”. He has always believed in the idea of the Supreme Being because it is a “humane idea”, and therefore the Convention cannot tolerate that the Prussian Baron Anacharsis Cloots, who preached the idea of a cosmopolitan republic, and the Hébertists who followed his doctrines, “under the pretext to destroy superstition, want to make a sort of religion out of atheism himself”. The National Convention, according to Robespierre, “rejects such a thing with abhorrence”. The Convention does not produce “books or metaphysical systems”, but it is also not only a political body whose sole function is to uphold the law. The Convention must also respect “the character of the French people” (*le caractère du peuple français*), Robespierre claims, and

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<sup>24</sup> Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris* (Paris: Louis Michaud éditeur, 168, Boulevard Saint-Germain, 1824 (?), 103.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

it was not in vain that it had already declared the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* in the presence of the Supreme Being.<sup>26</sup> – Already Robespierre’s speech makes it clear, therefore, that although the enactment of the mandatory cult of the Supreme Being (7 May 1794) and the organisation of its first celebration (8 June 1794) took place in a specific historical context, it is equally true that the idea of the Supreme Being accompanied the whole history of the Revolution.

It is probable that when he was protesting the atheist fervour, the image of the Vendée was also in Robespierre’s mind: he feared, rightly, that the pious rural population would again revolt against the Revolution. He also wanted to sideline his rival, Anacharsis Cloots, and the Hébertists. At the same time, however, we must also see in his speech a sincere conviction. Robespierre’s belief was, and he states this publicly on several occasions, that the Supreme Being was in some way an expression of the character of the French people. Many things met in this conviction. He thought the same of the Republic. For Robespierre, the Republic embodied the character of the people, that is, the essentially *virtuous* character of the people, and it was for this reason that he was almost completely unconcerned with the institutional *structure* of the Republic: for him, the Republic’s sole mission was simply to assert the character of the people, and since the people were good by nature, there was no need to fear its excesses of power. In this sense, the idea of the Supreme Being was a natural corollary of the idea of the Republic, a cultic manifestation of the virtue of the people. Atheism is aristocratic, says Robespierre, while “the idea of a Great Being” (*l’idée d’un grand être*) is entirely popular (*est toute populaire*):<sup>27</sup> “if God did not exist, he would have to be invented”, he quotes Voltaire (*si Dieu n’existoit pas, il faudroit l’inventer*).<sup>28</sup>

While it is true that the idea of the Supreme Being was a *locus communis* of the Enlightenment deism of the eighteenth century, and thus the idea of natural religion was not alien to Rousseau (see the Savoyard Vicar’s creed in *Émile*), Robespierre seems to borrow the idea of the Supreme Being more from Voltaire, as his speech testifies. (Rousseau’s natural religion was later revived in a coherent form by a cult called Theophilanthropy, founded by a Masonic bookseller, Chemin Despontès, in 1796.) But if not regarding natural religion,

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<sup>26</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes*, tome X, *Discours* (5<sup>e</sup> Partie) (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967), 196.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

Robespierre evidently follows Rousseau in his considerations regarding *civic religion*, who himself was a proponent of a kind of “civil religion”, as he put it in the last chapter of the *Social Contract* (Book Four, Chapter VIII). There he concludes, following Hobbes, that it was necessary to unite the “two heads of the Eagle”, so to speak, because only in this way could the “political unity” be restored.<sup>29</sup> But Rousseau’s civil religion differed from that of Hobbes in that he was hostile to Christianity in all its forms. In his opinion, even Hobbes “ought to have seen” that “the dominating spirit of Christianity was incompatible with his system” and that “the interest of the Priest would always be stronger than that of the state”.<sup>30</sup> So, there must be, he says, a “purely civil profession”,<sup>31</sup> and its dogmas “ought to be simple, few in number, stated with precision, without explanations or commentaries”.<sup>32</sup> These articles must be established by the “Sovereign”, “not exactly as Religious dogmas, but as sentiments of sociability without which it is impossible to be a good Citizen or a faithful subject”.<sup>33</sup> While the sovereign cannot oblige anyone to believe in these dogmas, it can “banish from the State anyone who does not believe them”, “not for being impious, but for being unsociable”.<sup>34</sup>

It would be worthwhile, moreover, if they have not already done so, to take an account of all the religiously motivated decrees and resolutions of the French Revolution, and of the sectarian wars and skirmishes, some of national and others of local importance, which have accompanied it throughout its history. Undoubtedly, the Revolution was not originally a civil war or an anti-religious movement (or even an anti-clerical uprising), but it has evolved into one or the other, and the events have been followed by the declarations and decrees of the National Convention. Although the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizens* generously promised religious tolerance and freedom of conscience, stating in its Article 10 that “no one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views,

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<sup>29</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “On the Social Contract”, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 4. Ed. Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly, translated by Judith R. Bush, Roger D. Masters and Christopher Kelly (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1994), 129-225, citation on page 218.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law”, freedom of religion had to be confirmed from time to time by decrees and resolutions – for example on 8 December 1793 or 18 September 1794. Although the revolutionaries recognized freedom of conscience, and Robespierre himself confessed his belief in it in his speech, they did not consider religion a matter of conscience, but of *superstition*, being themselves children of the Enlightenment and the century of the ‘philosophers’.

But if there were disagreements between Rousseau and Robespierre on natural religion, there seemed to be complete agreement on the *liturgy* of civil religion. Rousseau’s preoccupation with the celebration of civil religion, even after the writing of the *Social Contract*, is evidenced by the fact that in his *Considerations on the Government of Poland* he proposes that Poles should embrace “religious ceremonies” typical of ancient republics, which looked “for bonds which attached the Citizens to the fatherland and each to each other”, and “which were always exclusive and national by their nature”.<sup>35</sup> The idea, as it becomes clear on the next page of the book, goes back not only to the last chapter of the *Social Contract*, but also to his letter to D’Alembert four years earlier, in which Rousseau broke up with the Encyclopedists. In this letter, Rousseau was already proposing a ‘liturgy’ for such a religion, or more precisely, he was saying that liturgy was superfluous. “With liberty, wherever abundance reigns, well-being also reigns. Plant a stake crowned with flowers in the middle of the square; gather the people together there, and you will have a festival. Do better yet; let the Spectators become an Entertainment to themselves; make them actors themselves; do it so that each sees and loves himself in the others so that all will be better united.”<sup>36</sup> When, on 7 May 1794, Robespierre made his speech on the national holidays, asking the National Convention to legislate for the mandatory veneration of the Supreme Being, he even took the justification almost verbatim from Rousseau: “gather the people together”, he said, “you will make them better” (*rassemblez les hommes, vous les rendrez meilleurs*); “because men gathered together will seek to please each other”, and “because men do not see each other without pleasure”.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Considerations on the Government of Poland”, 173.

<sup>36</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Letter to D’Alembert”, in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, vol. 10. Edited and translated Allan Bloom, Charles Butterworth, and Christopher Kelly. (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2004), 251-352, citation on page 344.

<sup>37</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes*, tome X, *Discours* (5<sup>e</sup> Partie), 458.

These are, then, the Rousseauian ideas which in some way inspired the celebration of the Supreme Being, but the reason for its inclusion in a decree was undoubtedly Robespierre's intention to do away with the Cult of Reason and its adherents, the 'Exaggerators' (*Exagérés*). Robespierre's (and Danton's) opposition to the Hébertists in November 1793 was not without consequences: the founder of the Cult of Reason, Hébert, and his atheist followers, together with Anacharsis Cloots, were executed on 24 March 1794. A month and a half later, on 7 May, the Convention, at Robespierre's request, recognised the existence of the Supreme Being, and a month later Paris (and other cities or even remote villages, but in a much less spectacular way) organized his festival. According to the decree of the National Convention, "the French people recognises the existence of the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul" and also "recognizes that worthy worship of the Supreme Being is the practice of man's duties".<sup>38</sup> (According to Mercier, these inscriptions proclaiming the existence of the Supreme Being and the immortality of the soul were still hanging in the public squares of Paris long after Robespierre's torture, "and this seems", he says, "just as inconceivable as to having seen it raised by so many docile hands".<sup>39</sup>) Besides this, the Convention also decided that "festivals will be established to remind man of the thought of the Divinity, and to the dignity of his being", and that "the French Republic will celebrate de feasts of 14 July 1789, 10 August 1792, 21 January 1793 and 31 May 1793 every year".<sup>40</sup>

The celebration of the Supreme Being in Paris, on the date fixed in advance by the decree, 8 June 1794, was rather grand and confusing, although it largely followed Rousseau's idea of the tree of liberty and the people gathered around it. In its second location, the *Champ de Mars* (or *Champ de la Réunion*), a 'mountain' awaited the crowd, dotted with 'accidents of nature' (grottoes, boulders, brambles), and crowned with the 'tree of liberty'. "On arrival at the Champ de la Réunion", says Jonathan Smyth, who dedicated an entire chapter to the Parisian feast in his book about the Festival of Supreme Being, "the men proceeded to the rear of the Mountain, on the river side, the young persons encircled the Mountain, while the chosen group of fathers and grandfathers with their sons and grandsons, together with the nursing

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 462.

<sup>39</sup> Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris*, 122.

<sup>40</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Oeuvres complètes*, tome X, *Discours* (5<sup>e</sup> Partie), 463.

mothers with their babies, took up their positions on the Mountain itself, along with members of the Convention and the Opéra orchestra and chorus.”<sup>41</sup> One after the other, the different groups sang a verse of Marie-Joseph Chénier’s hymn in honour of the Supreme Being (*Dieu puissant, d’un peuple intrépide*). The last verse, sung in unison, marked the climax of the event, says Furet, who himself recounts it with visible irony and pleasure: “the adolescents brandished their sabres, the old blessed them and the young girls threw their flowers to the Supreme Being”.<sup>42</sup> (For the occasion, the guillotine was dismantled and covered with flags and banks of flowers.<sup>43</sup> And although it was moved from *Place de la Révolution*, three days later, and the day after the Convention passed the famous law of 22 Prairial (or the law of the Great Terror), it was back at the western end of the *Rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine*, near the ruins of the Bastille.)

Obviously, the celebration may seem quite grotesque in the light of the above, but there is something about it that makes it “enigmatic”, Furet says, something deeply thought-provoking, the result of which is that it is in fact still an unsolved mystery for historians. The surprising thing is that a huge crowd took part, as if the whole of Paris had just swarmed out into the open. The ladies who attended it were dressed in their pre-revolutionary finery, the boats on the Seine were covered in flags, and all this was done not by decree but without any constraint from the authorities, which is difficult to understand because the celebration took place during the worst period of terror and the guillotine was only stopped for a few days. Moreover, as Furet also adds, there was nothing unusual in the festival’s offerings to raise any expectations: those who knew a little about the deism of the century could predict what the scenario would be. Be that as it may, he says, the fact is that a huge crowd attended it, without any compulsion or political imperative, and with apparent joy, because at this point all the “accounts agree”.<sup>44</sup> Furet’s concise observation is fully confirmed by Jonathan Smyth: “even those contemporary commentators”, he writes in his book, “who had no love for Robespierre, and who saw the Festival purely as part of his drive to

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<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Smyth, *Robespierre and the Festival of Supreme Being. The search for a republican morality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 69.

<sup>42</sup> François Furet, *The French Revolution. 1770-1814*, 148.

<sup>43</sup> Charles Nodier, *Souvenirs de la Révolution et de l’Émpire*, tome premier (Paris: Charpentier, 1860), 288.

<sup>44</sup> François Furet, *The French Revolution. 1770-1814*, 148.

become dictator of France”, agree that the joy was “the overriding feeling in the celebrations both in Paris and in the provinces”. And “this seems also to be true”, he adds, “both for those members of the public chosen to take an active part in the celebrations and for the great mass of the population as well”.<sup>45</sup>

Perhaps one of the greatest accounts of the day is that of historian Charles Nodier, who attended the Parisian feast at an age of fourteen and recalled it in 1831. This is why he considers it important to emphasize that he was young enough to enjoy it “without that the terrible impressions of that time being mixed up with his memories”.<sup>46</sup> He describes the Parisians attending the celebrations as a huge, intoxicated, self-indulgent crowd. “We get closer”, he writes, “without knowing each other, we kiss without each other appoint; public banquets served in the streets gathered the rich to the poor, the aristocrat to the Jacobin, and in this enormous crowd [*cohue*] there was no fuss, no argument, and no accident.”<sup>47</sup> While it is still possible that the crowds were attracted just by the lovely June weather, as many historians claim, and it is also possible that many were hoping for a general amnesty, it is much more likely that Furet is right when he says that the best explanation is still the one offered by Nodier: “In order to appreciate it”, he wrote, “one must take the trouble to travel in time. *Nothing was left*. This is therefore the cornerstone of a nascent society.”<sup>48</sup> Or, in other words: this was the day when Paris (and with it all of France) celebrated not just the Supreme Being, but also the new ‘Nation’ that was just being born. The feast found its audience because, as Rousseau suggested, it was the crowd itself that became the spectacle and its own audience.

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<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Smyth, *Robespierre and the Festival of Supreme Being*, 129.

<sup>46</sup> Charles Nodier, *Souvenirs de la Révolution et de l'Émpire*, tome premier, 288.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.