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Unanimity, Virtue and the Body Politic: Melodrama and the Representation of the People in the French Revolution

David ANDRESS

The relationship between sovereignty and the people was one of the key political issues of the French Revolution. Although the Declaration of Rights had vested sovereignty in the Nation, this term was ill-defined, and problematic in relation to the actual parameters of popular activity, and to educated commentary on such activity. Over the course of the 1790s, a variety of strategies and rhetorics would be adopted by observers, commentators and politicians to attempt to control, manage, define or condemn popular political activity.[1]

A variety of vocabularies were available to such observers. Many leant on attitudes to the crowd learnt and repeated from C18 experience, which categorised crowds as fickle, bestial, and essentially unable to respond rationally to political circumstances. Resort to this language could be used to foreclose debate on the admission of the common people to the full exercise of sovereignty. However, those who wished to see a clearer association between just this urban population and the supposedly sovereign nation also found themselves forced to adopt similar vocabularies when contemplating the violence which continued to distinguish popular activity from the realm of organised political expression.

Marat was one of the few politicians and observers to wholeheartedly approve of popular violence, and frequently even to demand that it went beyond the isolated incidents which so alarmed others. However, even he was not always able to reconcile his view of the actions of the sovereign with the behaviour of crowds and individuals of the Parisian streets. Indeed, by the last weeks of his life, he was engaged in bitter polemics against the enragés, radical activists whose intemperate pursuit of a subsistence agenda appeared to threaten the future of the 1793 Constitution. The example of Marat's conflict with the enragés reflects the complexity of revolutionary attempts to come to terms with popular activity and demands.[2]

This aspect of revolutionary political culture is seldom remarked upon by historians. Political culture, as a mode of explanation, has been popularised in the last two decades by the work of François Furet and Keith Michael Baker.[3] Both of these schools of thought have emphasised the degree of unanimity demanded from political life by prevailing political tenets in the 1780s and 1790s. What is seldom addressed is the question of means. The French Revolution was incessantly defined in terms of ends – regeneration being one of the common themes – but the means of everyday politics that would achieve such ends, while highly-problematic, were not well-theorised by the revolutionaries.

It is possible to portray the revolutionary political culture as pinioned between several incompatible visions of a political process. One is the model which shades from the pre-revolutionary ‘tribunal of public opinion’ to the Rousseauist/Terrorist General Will, but remains essentially unanimist.[4] A second is the image of politics as corporeal, based in and around the body, in both ‘real’ and variously metaphorical ways.[5] A third is the more underlying interpretation of social action as plot, that deliberate organised human activity was the root of all disharmony in an ‘enlightened’ body politic. The irony of the revolutionary political culture lies in its attempt to hold all these views simultaneously, and still to pursue its regenerative goals. This produced a discourse, and a set of practices, where the resources of the melodramatic – titanic struggle between good and evil, radical polarisations of character, virtue and innocence threatened and suffering, physical mutilation and punishment – were mobilised in an effort to ‘emplot’ the Revolution’s course and vicissitudes coherently.

The connection of the period of the French Revolution with the birth of melodrama as an artistic form is well-established. The term *melodrame* itself appears likely to have been first coined by JJ Rousseau himself, who saw a particular conjunction of plot and musical accompaniment, the original import of the term, as especially suited to French sensibilities. The melodrama in its developed form emerged in the 1790s, amongst the events of the Revolution, and by 1800 had become an established genre of popular theatre in the hands of writers such as Pixierécourt. One of the first recognised proto-melodramas is indeed a play of 1791: ‘The Cloistered Victims’, in which villainous priests acting on aristocratic orders confine a hero and heroine in the cells of a monastery, from which they will be freed by the local mayor in full tricolore regalia. Revolutionary political characters are thus present in the melodrama at its origin.[6]

The nature of melodrama is clearly-defined. It is in Peter Brooks' words, a 'mode of excess'. The melodramatic theatrical presentation involves plots which confront not merely good, but virtue and innocence, with malevolent evil machinations of a most exaggerated kind. Moral and physical peril litter the plots, and identity and virtue are often physically inscribed on bodies in birthmarks and other devices. Fantastical gothic settings and landscapes, hyperbolic rhetoric, and the triumph of virtue out of peril characterise what are to us frequently-absurd denouements. There is no denying that this is on one level merely dramatic entertainment, what we might today call a cartoon view of reality, simplistically structured, where audience catharsis is achieved by the most direct possible appeal to basic emotions.

However, as Brooks points out, it is also rather more than this. The 'melodramatic imagination' as he terms it, was a wider set of sentiments and artistic conceptions that he particularly highlights in the far-from-trivial works of Balzac and Henry James. We may add, moreover, that in the early nineteenth century, and most especially in the revolutionary decade that preceded it, the kind of emotional resonances provoked by melodramatic modes were taken very seriously indeed. Brooks suggests that 'melodrama may be born of the very anxiety created by the guilt experienced when the allegiance and ordering that pertained to a sacred system of things no longer pertains'.[7] This is, without doubt, a description applicable to the period after 1789, and especially after 1792. It is, perhaps, another view to put alongside those, for example, of Lynn Hunt, who paints revolutionary concerns in Freudian colours, recalling the primal parricide of *Totem and Taboo*. Melodrama as a literary and theatrical form attempts to compensate for this by filling, and over-filling, its plots and situations with moral and ethical meanings - 'a search for a new plenitude, an ethical recentring'.[8]

Brooks has also drawn attention more recently to the place of melodramatic conceptions in the more politicised language of the Revolution itself. This is most obvious in the rhetoric of Jacobinism, which quite clearly at a superficial level reproduces the characteristic binary oppositions of the melodramatic form. There is no middle ground in Jacobin rhetoric, and the virtue which Saint-Just, Robespierre and other spokesmen located in the people was threatened by an absolute enemy that could only be deflected by Terror.[9]

It is clear that melodrama, as a fictional form, was emergent in the 1790s, and also that certain political and rhetorical forms provide a parallel language of excess. What must be explored further is the possibility that both these languages reflect a wider cultural and political environment that had evolved from the late *ancien régime* into the revolutionary era. Brooks' consideration of both melodramatic and, elsewhere, 'embodying' languages confines itself, though without specifying this, to the Jacobin rhetoric of Terror, which was of course only a small fraction of the political language of the Revolution, however large it looms in later imagination.

Other historiography broadens our perspective on these concepts. Sarah Maza, in her work on the emergent overlap between legal and literary cultures in the late eighteenth century, has labelled one of the modes of this writing as 'domestic melodrama'.^[10] In the production of legal memoirs, which were freely printed and distributed in large numbers to sway the 'court of public opinion', a style of writing had developed by the 1780s which relied strongly on 'melodramatic' features. Cases often involved convoluted family disputes, the sequestration of inheritances, physical and emotional abuse, and the wider abuse of power in all its forms. Lawyers frequently framed their documents as narratives, in both the third and pseudo-first person, explicitly setting out to stimulate an emotional response in the reader. This goal was in fact enjoined by several manuals of legal practice produced at the time. Through the legal memoir, the politics of the law were opened up to sentimental and melodramatic interpretations by the public.

At the same time, the 1770s and 1780s, learned discourse on the nature of the theatre was also turning to elements of what we might term melodrama. This was the period of the birth of the *drame*, or 'drame bourgeois', as espoused most famously by Diderot. This new kind of theatre was to take its dramatic inspiration from the affairs of ordinary people, and to present serious moral issues in terms of the dilemmas of family life. Family life, of course, envisaged on the dramatic scale - desertions, prodigals, elopements, disinheritances, mistaken identity, noble-born foundlings, and so on. At the same time, the advocates of such a theatrical revolution pressed for a new kind of representation in acting practice. They urged that the actors should involve the audience in a more active mediation of their role. Rather than seeking to concretely and completely embody the nature of their character, leaving the audience merely to absorb the impact of the plot, the new style was for the actor to sketch out, by means of

dialogue and gesture, the emotional content of the part, and to expect the audience to do the work of imparting what they saw with resonance for them. In other words, acting was to become more gestural, and spectating was to become a more active meditation on the relation of the audience-member to the unfolding moral of the tale.[11] It will be apparent that there are 'political' implications in the 'drame bourgeois' project, and in the modification of the actor/audience relationship. In the post-Habermasian world, we must be alert to every sign of modification in conceptions of the public, their representations and self-representations in the eighteenth century.[12] The political import of these issues is reinforced when we turn to the other theme which ties melodrama to the revolutionary climate - the vicissitudes of the body.

The body in recent years has become the focus of considerable historical research, as it has been realised firstly how rich is the somatic history of humanity, and secondly, how far historical societies, and our own, have invested meaning in the physical body. The French Revolution has proved a fertile site for these researches, most recently in the excellent and wide-ranging work of Antoine de Baecque. This has documented the myriad uses of the body, as metaphor, image and object, deployed by the French in 1789 and after. One of the central themes is the body as the bearer of signs. The pamphlet and newspaper literature of the early Revolution is strewn with instructions for physically recognising the moral character of the foes of Revolution, locating the monster below the surface. Aristocrats are frequently turned into monsters, the physical again standing in for the moral in fantastical descriptions and lampoons. On the other side of this, however, is a persistent attribution of physical signs to virtue. Certain characteristics demonstrate the virtues of the true revolutionary, what by 1791 has come to be called the 'man of the people'. Sometimes these are as simple as the hardened hands of the working man, but at others a whole repertoire of gestures, actions and attitudes is invoked to contrast good with insincere revolutionaries.

Retaining these notions of the signification of the body, we can turn to the import of melodrama for the politics of the Revolution. The events and situations of the Revolution from its beginnings were invested with a profoundly 'melodramatic' significance by their actors and commentators. I would argue that the discursive environment of revolutionary actors was saturated with the search for ethical plenitude, and symbolic meaning, that is seen as underpinning melodrama, and that the discourses of the

Revolution took centrally three key elements of what has come to be seen as the 'melodramatic': the virtue of the central actor, its imperiling by radically evil machination, and the 'embodiment' of signification.

By the time that the Estates-General met in May 1789, the language of pamphlets and commentaries had already raised the political stakes to astronomical heights.[13] The battle was for the total regeneration of the French nation, the effective creation of a new kind of Man, in the language commonly used at the time. And it was indeed a battle. The enemies of regeneration were the aristocrats, who rapidly emerged as an all-purpose foe, able to be accused of any crime, suspected of any plot, which the revolutionaries' imagination could support.[14]

This was a conflict which was dramatic, often in a highly self-conscious way. The ceremonials of Court and Parlement were nothing if not political theatre, and the 'pre-Revolution' had already witnessed some dramatic scenes – Orléans' mumbled but shocking challenge to the king in the Parlement in November 1787, the defiance of the Parlement in May 1788 towards troops sent to detain two of its members. Once the Third Estate had entered into the long deadlock that marked May and June 1789, they too would take up the challenge of presenting political theatre – on the occasions of their ostentatious defiance of royal commands to quit their chambers, and on the fateful day of 20 June when they swore their oath to give France a Constitution. One doubts if this event looked at the time as dramatic as David's great unfinished composition would have made it, but it very probably felt that way.[15]

The events of July threw this particular political theatre into turmoil. The advent of the common people onto the political stage in such numbers, and with such force, not only in Paris, but across the country, was initially baffling to the Revolution's leaders. Their response was, ultimately, another great piece of political theatre – the Night of 4 August. From this point onwards, however, political events and situations increasingly reduce the scope for such self-contained theatricalisations of political action, while at the same time the melodramatic resonances of the wider political environment become ever-stronger. Even in July 1789, the elements of melodramatic plot had been present, as aristocrats machinated and the innocent deputies at Versailles, and the people of Paris, feared for their lives. A recent piece of work has shown how the dramatic elements of the confrontation were heightened in narratives from the very beginning. What

was a relatively minor incident in the series of confrontations on 12 July, the action of the Prince de Lambesc's cavalry in the Tuileries gardens, was elevated to emblematic status because it offered the spectacle of dramatic confrontation between an overt 'aristocrat' and a peaceable crowd of the respectable classes – a model of revolutionary confrontation not available from the larger and more bloody skirmishes in several lower-class areas that occurred that day. Lambesc himself is alleged in the accounts to have struck down an innocent old man in a typically melodramatic physical confrontation.[16]

Of course, the educated observers of the Revolution had been presented on 13 and 14 July with another kind of dramatic spectacle altogether — the 'theatre of blood' that Parisian and other crowds would continue to make of the deaths of those deemed their enemies. The deaths of Foulon and Berthier some days later would horrify many even further, as they seemed even more ritualistic and premeditated than de Flesselles and de Launay's ends. Colin Lucas has documented the flurry of revolutionary and patriot writings that sought to explain in some way such deaths, while insisting that, beneath their surface appearance, there was a 'real' people that thought and felt more as the educated revolutionaries thought and felt.[17]

This is one of the key themes of the entire development of the French Revolution. One might say that educated observers saw the political drama as unfolding on the kind of stage that the 'drame bourgeois' had offered, where sentiment and emotion were at play, and dramatic tensions were generally resolved in what were, in a classical sense, comic, uniting denouements. It is arguable that the common people of the cities were more familiar with the performances that the organs of state power staged for their benefit. Here the tone was tragic, and the central performance a piece of suffering, from the pillory and the whipping-post to the spectacle of a branding, the weekly theatre of the gallows, and the occasional performance of orchestrated brutality that was a breaking on the wheel.

Popular activity throughout the Revolution appears to be familiar with a notion of sovereignty in which the gallows is the key feature, and in which bodily mutilation is the sign of the exercise of sovereignty against its challengers.[18] Insofar as there is a 'plot' to such popular actions, it is far more akin to melodrama than to the drame. Indeed, in the willingness of crowds, and later of popular spokesmen, to invoke a bloody solution to the

perils of the Revolution, this surpassed even the limits of melodrama. It is brought back within them by the nature of commentary on such events, and by the persistent efforts of educated observers and commentators to control, channel and suppress what they felt to be unacceptable levels of spontaneous popular activity.

The people, as represented in revolutionary discourse, shares many of the features of the melodramatic hero/heroine. The people are essentially innocent and virtuous, they are or have been unjustly confined and oppressed, and are currently threatened with an even worse fate by malevolent forces. Newspaper and pamphlet comments continually reinforce this sense of imperilled virtue. Several periodic pamphlet-series habitually begin with the resonant phrase 'Tremble Citizens!', before going on to reveal the latest episode of perfidious aristocratic plotting — plotting which is vigorous enough to demand a new pamphlet every few weeks at least. By the spring of 1791, if not before, journalists were seeing plot everywhere from the garrisons of the frontiers to the lodging-houses of Paris, and their exhortations to vigilance rest on the fear that they might all wake up one day and find Paris given over to the same mysterious ravaging horde which provoked the Great Fear of 1789. It is not necessary to pursue this line of examples through beyond the collapse of the monarchy and into the Jacobin era - there the melodramatic nature of political confrontation is visible to even the most casual observer.[19]

We may go on here to make a further point about the development of this revolutionary melodramatic mentality. It is born, I believe, of a political culture with much wider resonances than the term has commonly been given in revisionist analyses. What theorists at the time and since, from Sieyès to de Tocqueville, onwards to Baker and Furet, have not properly considered is the emotional content of relations between the individual and the body politic in eighteenth-century France. Without wishing to lay out a whole political theory here, it can be said that the relation of individual to society and to state, conceived of as separable entities, is a product of the post-revolutionary environment.

The revolutionary environment owed its conception of relations amongst the body politic to two sources, neither of which offered this separation. The first was the monarchy itself, which required at the same time an indivisibility of sovereignty in the monarch, and an indivisible loyalty to that sovereign, which was held to be a form of love. This was mediated, and indeed substantially diluted, in monarchist practice by other

doctrines and practices, such as the notion of intermediary bodies, beliefs about the place and role of the nobility, and the general organisation of the corporate, privileged society. However, the counter-culture that grew up before the Revolution, and carried its ideas forward into it, drew heavily on a second main source for notions of indivisibility: the model of the ancient republic, as taken up on the one hand through a classical education, and as received on the other in the reformulations of Rousseau. In both of these, of course, it is the inner quality of virtue which is held to bind the individual indissolubly to the body politic.

These notions, blended with the beliefs about indivisible sovereignty, did not require conscious formulation in order to profoundly influence the conduct of politics. They would receive such formulation, of course, in the projects of the Jacobin Republic, but what we see there is only a condensation of the whole revolutionary experience. Saint-Just's famous sketch in his 'republican institutions' for the compulsory public declaration of friendships brings out the notion of the body politic not as a separable state mechanism, but as the whole of life, embracing the 'private' with the 'public', rendering the distinction between the two terms meaningless.[20] Yet is there not a taste of this in the electoral provisions laid down in 1789, tested out in 1790, and enshrined in the Constitution of 1791? No man was permitted to say that he wished to be a candidate, caucusing and canvassing were officially banned. The elector was not merely to state in the ballot which few individuals he would prefer in office, but was to nominate a list twice as long as the number of places vacant. Private reflection should produce from the body of the electors a condensation of the right men for the job.[21] In this minor and pedantic form, the revolutionaries captured an essential transformation from the Old Regime. They moved away from particularism, they attempted to annul even the possibility of faction, and to make of the mundane election of the most local officials the kind of communing with the General Will that Rousseau had written of.

It is not in the calm reflection of the ballot that the emotional content of the body politic is most visible, but in the many fields in which the Revolution announced itself, from its origins, as a struggle. It was, of course, a life and death struggle in many simple ways, but it was also from its origins a struggle of signification. The monarchy had signified: it had its every deed and gesture impregnated with meaning, religious, social and political imports woven together inextricably, moving in complex patterns through society to climax in the body of the king itself, that was the public

body, the body politic. From the first titanic events of 1789, the French appeared to need to saturate the new order with representations of meaning, to overwhelm the meanings that had bound up the old order. The representations of revolutionary events themselves, and the allegorical forms that offered to display their meaning, smothered every conceivable medium, from cheap prints to china plates, to the stones of the Bastille themselves, which the 'patriot Palloy' marketed intensively across the nation, carved into models of the building they had composed. The Bastille has always been acknowledged as a symbolic victory, but in its marketing it became a producer of meanings, and a device to tie the new nation together through sharing those meanings. In the Republican era this process becomes obsessive, and the renewing of meaning, from the Republican Calendar to the Festival of the Supreme Being, began to descend towards the replication of empty ritual. Post-Thermidorian efforts, especially in the later Directory, to install a meaningful set of national festivals floundered on this problem, because the material struggles of the Revolution, and the resort to Terrorism which came out of the desire for unanimity, had ruptured beyond hope of recovery the projected national community.[22]

The struggle for unanimity, it may be argued, is less about a primarily 'terroristic' urge to 'force men to be free', than about the desire to have a 'body politic' that operates as a binding-agent between individuals. The aspiration to renew the sense of community that monarchy no longer appeared to offer created for the revolutionaries the image of what that community should be, and this imagined community was from its first inception profoundly threatened. The virtuous body of the people was exposed to the machinations of the aristocrats, and it was their quest to divide and subjugate, to wound this body politic, that was the central force behind the story of the French Revolution.

The appearance in this context of the melodrama as a developing theatrical form may thus be seen as much as a condensed expression of wider political dramas, as a self-contained evolution of artistic forms. Indeed, it would be fair to say that the period of the Revolution can only be constructed as the birthplace of an artistic form called melodrama through the condensations of hindsight. At the time, those features that were to be 'tamed' and confined to the stage were at the heart of a political culture striving agonisedly for the regeneration of a people.

Notes

1. See C. Lucas, 'The Crowd and Politics', in C. Lucas (ed.) The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture, vol. 2, The Political Culture of the French Revolution, Oxford, 1988, pp. 259-85; 'Revolutionary Violence, the People, and the Terror', in K.M. Baker (ed.), The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture, vol. 4, The Terror, Oxford, 1994, pp. 57-79, esp. pp. 60-5; and 'Talking about Urban Popular Violence in 1789', in A. Forrest and P. Jones (eds.), Reshaping France: Town, Country and Region in the French Revolution, Manchester, 1991, pp. 122-36.
2. On Marat in general, see the biography by O. Coquard, Jean-Paul Marat, Paris, 1993. On disputes in the summer of 1793, see R.B. Rose, The Enragés; Socialists of the French Revolution?, Sydney, 1968, and A. Mathiez, La Vie Chère et le Mouvement Social sous la Terreur, Paris, 1927 (reprinted 1973).
3. See F. Furet, Interpreting the French Revolution, Oxford, 1981; K.M. Baker, Inventing the French Revolution; Essays on French political culture in the eighteenth century, Cambridge, 1990.
4. On 'public opinion', see the discussion in French Historical Studies between Sarah Maza, David Bell and Daniel Gordon, vol. 17, no. 4, 1993.
5. See D. Outram, The Body and the French Revolution; Sex, class and political culture, London, 1989. For a wider perspective, see A. de Baecque, The Body Politic; Corporeal metaphor in revolutionary France, 1770-1800, Stanford, 1997.
6. For all of this, and much of what follows, see P. Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination; Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess, London, 1976.
7. Brooks, *op. cit.*, p. 200.
8. *Ibid.*, and see L. Hunt, The Family Romance of the French Revolution, London, 1992.
9. P. Brooks, 'The Embodiment of the Revolution', in B. Fort (ed.) Fictions of the French Revolution, Evanston, 1991.
10. S. Maza, Private Lives and Public Affairs; The causes célèbres of prerevolutionary France, London, 1993.
11. See S. Maza, 'Luxury, Morality and Social Change: Why there was no middle-class consciousness in prerevolutionary France', Journal of Modern History, 69, 1997, pp. 199-229, esp. pp. 223-8.
12. I refer of course to J. Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere; An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society, Cambridge, MA, 1989. This is glossed in the specifically French eighteenth-century context by B. Nathans, 'Habermas's "Public Sphere" in the Era of the French Revolution', French Historical Studies, 16, 1990, pp. 620-44.
13. See for example, D. van Kley, 'New Wine in Old Wineskins; Continuity and rupture in the pamphlet debate of the French pre-revolution, 1787-9', French Historical Studies, 17, 1991, pp. 447-65.
14. See P. Higonnet, "'Aristocrate", "Aristocratie": Language and Politics in the French Revolution', in S. Petrey (ed.), The French Revolution, 1789-1989: 200 Years of Rethinking, Lubbock, 1989, pp. 47-66.
15. S. Schama, Citizens, A Chronicle of the French Revolution, New York, 1989, is very good at presenting such dramatic moments.
16. P. Spagnoli, 'The Revolution Begins; Lambesc's charge, 12 July 1789', French Historical Studies, 17, 1991, pp. 466-97.
17. See the works cited above, n. 1.
18. See P. Viola, 'Violence révolutionnaire ou Violence du Peuple en Révolution?', in M. Vovelle and A. de Baecque (eds.), Recherches sur la Révolution, Paris, 1991, pp. 95-107, and

in general, A. Farge, Fragile Lives; Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-century Paris, Cambridge, 1993, pp. 177-93.

19. On the press in general, see J.D. Popkin, Revolutionary News; the press in France, 1789-1799, Durham, NC, 1990; R. Darnton and D. Roche (eds.), Revolution in Print; The press in France, 1775-1800, Berkeley, 1989; and H. Gough, The newspaper press in the French Revolution, London, 1988.

20. See N. Hampson, Saint-Just, Oxford, 1991.

21. See M. Crook, Elections in the French Revolution; An apprenticeship in democracy, 1789-1799, Cambridge, 1996.

22. On festivals in general, see M. Ozouf, Festivals and the French Revolution, London, 1988.