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Lutte des classes, lutte des moeurs:
CLASS STRUGGLE AND CULTURE WARS
IN THE SPRINGTIME OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION, YEAR II (1794)

SOPHIE WAHNICH

(translation by Alexander Dunlop and Sylvia Schafer)

Shades of autumn color suffuse the palette of spring 1794: flaming hues, yellow leaves still engorged with sap and with sun, a luxuriance of desires and declarations written across the seasons and the skies. For Saint-Just, Billaud-Varenne, and Robespierre “everything begins under the sky.”¹ Hope remains immense even though fatigue has set in. In March of 1794 each still believes that it will be possible “to embed the revolution in values, customs, and practices of everyday life [*les moeurs*].” Then, yes, it can be over. Thoughts about public life and on the civil bond are taking shape and people are taking sides in this special moment in the aftermath of the storm. For each one of them says it, in one way or another: it is time to end the revolution.

The “governing machine” must be dismantled; it is now necessary to “form a political community,” says Saint-Just². “Ignorance of the most basic notions of public morality” must end, for “the sole foundation of civil society is

¹ Saint-Just, *Rapport au nom du comité de salut public et du comité de sûreté générale sur la police générale, sur la justice, le commerce, la législation et les crimes des factions*, 26 Germinal, an II, 15 avril 1794 *Œuvres complètes*, présentées par Miguel Abensour et Anne Kupiec, Paris, Gallimard, 2004, p. 753.

² Saint-Just, *Œuvres complètes*, op.cit. *Fragments d'institutions républicaines*, Third fragment, p. 1135.

morality,” says Robespierre³. The “chain of calamities” must be broken if we are to enjoy “the civil harmony that closely binds all citizens through the beautiful delights of human existence,” says Billaud-Varenne⁴.

These three, out of the twelve members of the Committee of Public Safety, aspire to a life of peace restored after the torment, and they say it explicitly: this must end. This idea animates their discourse, their thoughts, their conversations, and their mutual judgments. The idea of the polity as formed by civil bond is consolidated and politicized in this very particular moment after the battering storm. It was as though these members of the republican Convention needed in that moment to think in other than legal terms, as though they themselves could no longer believe in law’s unique power, because the law had become synonymous with constraint. Laws of constraint, laws of terror.

“You wanted a republic; if you did not also want that which constitutes it, it would bury the people under its debris, (. . .) a republic can only be based on nature and customs.”⁵ Reflecting on how to produce the desired customs and harmony, Saint-Just, in his discourse of 8 Ventose, year II, raises the

³ Robespierre, May 7, 1794 (18 Floréal, Year II): *Report on Religious and Moral Ideas and Republican Principles*.

⁴ Billaud-Varenne, *Rapport fait à la Convention nationale, au nom du Comité de salut public, le premier floréal ; sur la théorie du gouvernement démocratique, et sa vigueur utile pour contenir l’ambition, et pour tempérer l’essor de l’esprit militaire ; sur le but politique de la guerre actuelle, et sur la nécessité d’inspirer l’amour des vertus civiles, par des fêtes civiques et des institutions morales*.

⁵ Report of the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security regarding incarcerated persons, presented to the National Convention, 8 Ventôse, an II (26 February 1794). Saint-Just, *Oeuvres Complètes*. Gallimard, 2004, p. 659.

question of institutions. “Is an empire sustained by its own weight or does it require a deeply integrated system of institutions to achieve harmony?”⁶

The central question is perhaps not just to know how to get out of the cycle of terror, but how to succeed at last in creating an antidote to divisiveness, and to open the way to the advent of the harmony so greatly desired. For the Committee of Public Safety federalism is just another word for divisiveness. “Federalism has in no way been destroyed, and it is more deplorable even than civil war, if that is possible. Social relations no longer existed between city and city, even between village and village.”⁷ A divisiveness “more deplorable than civil war,” Saint-Just says, may be simply another kind of civil war, like “the struggle between two classes” which prevented the revolutionary community from being fully revolutionized.

The lack of civil trust is thus a symptom of fatal division. Life no longer flows through this society burned by violence. What further saddens Saint-Just, something he observes daily, is a lack of greatness of soul, a certain pettiness, meanness. The tenuous social connection between people shudders and breaks apart. People even dread connectedness. This is not the dawning of the conditions of familiarity in which each person acts freely in concert with

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Saint-Just, 26 Germinal, year II, *Ceuvres complètes*, ed. Miguel Abensour and Anne Kupiec. Paris Gallimard, 2004, p. 749.

others without having to think about it, without having to fear danger or traps. Caution reigns. This is not the advent of a social order that radically breaks from that of the court and the *ancien régime* more broadly. To survive back then one had to be cunning rather than frank and sincere for no pact of reciprocity secured relations among courtiers. This curial war of all against all is the opposite of the hoped-for revolutionary community in which a strong, trust-based social bond would rest on a foundation of mutually-assured liberty.

When, on 23 Ventose, Saint-Just issues a call to “incorporate the Revolution at last into the civic order,”⁸ it is above all a question of rediscovering this social trust a life force that circulates through the polity and by its very breath infuses passion into revolutionized everyday life. To place the Revolution into the civic order, or to embed the Revolution in everyday customs and habits, would mean at last being able to create a society that would fall back neither into civil war nor into voluntary servitude. It would be a revolution worthy of the name “revolution,” a term that thenceforth could not be applied to mere civil war.

⁸ Saint-Just, 23 Ventose, year II, *Ceuvres complètes*, p.677.

It seems to me impossible to understand this emphasis on civil institutions and civic order, *-les mœurs*, the values, customs, and habits of daily life - in the spring of year II, without returning to their understanding of the necessary distinction between revolution and civil war. The civic order presupposes *mœurs* that are civil not curial. This is why the social transformation must be profound. Civil institutions will be the means of modifying deeply engrained values, customs, and habits where the laws have produced only conformist, mandated, superficial, that is, fraudulent gestures toward change. To allow a latent civil war to flourish below this surface would be to make the Revolution unending.⁹

To the Reader

Reader, you may ask why I take up such a dubious question since both revolution and civil war divide societies and kill women and men on both sides of the divides they create. Isn't the distinction between revolution and civil war that I propose purely ideological and ultimately specious? I would say in response that you are not entirely wrong; the dead don't know whether civil war or revolution ended their existence as living beings. Nevertheless, I find that some of the ghosts of those dead pose important questions on the subject, questions I believe are historiographical as well. Because you see,

⁹ On this interminable revolution, see the work of Jean Claude Milner in *Relire la Révolution*, Verdier, 2017.

these ghosts have been paying attention to what has been going on since the bicentennial that honored them with some unfounded criticism, and indeed some criticism that would have caused them to blush in shame if they were still covered in living skin rather than in white shrouds. For their part, they have found it quite objectionable that some historians mistake civil war and revolution and, I must tell you, that the ghosts of Robespierre, Saint-Just and Billaud-Varenne are among those who not only object, but are moved to anger. They asked me to account for my participation in 1994 at a conference called “civil war between history and memory.” At that conference many different histories were considered on the same plane: France during the years 1789-99, 1848, 1871, 1940-44; the ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990’s; the Spanish Civil War (1936-39); and conflict in Italy (1942-44)¹⁰. When I take a closer look at this now, I am the one who blushes in shame. How can we possibly consider 1940-44 as civil war when those years of conflict in France entailed occupation, collaboration, and resistance? And to put that on the same plane as a revolution that overthrew the old regime? How can we distinguish between despotism and emancipation, founding and subversion, when it is all labeled “civil war” whenever political violence leads to death? There is something to question in all of this despite the obfuscations of some

¹⁰ Jean Clément Martin, *La guerre civile entre histoire et mémoire*, Ouest éditions, 1995.

historians of the French Revolution. What is the difference between civil war and revolution?

I thought at the time that these historians did not want to ask that question because if it were asked they would have to take it seriously. As a result, it has become quite common to think in terms of their equivalence¹¹. To challenge this, I want not only to insist that there is no equivalence between civil war and revolution, but that they represent a historical and even a logical contradiction. I want to reopen the conversation because I think we need to pay attention to the uneasiness and anxiety of our three ghosts. They are not happy because they always dreaded civil war and it is important for us to understand why they did, even if in the Vendée, as in the Contât, it was difficult not to use the term. Some will say to me that refusing to name a fact doesn't deny its existence and I agree. But still I want to say that denying that there is a civil war and failing, as our ghosts did, does not have the same historic sense as wanting civil war and succeeding. We have to take seriously the imaginaries accessible in their writings, as well as the effects of these imaginaries on conscience and action. We have to take seriously what the

¹¹ Pour les lieux les plus récents Annie Jourdan dans sa *Nouvelle histoire de la Révolution française* parue en 2018 chez Flammarion, Thimotty Tackett dans son *Anatomie de la Terreur*, Paris Seuil, 2018, des commentaires critiqued film un peuple et son roi qui mettent en equivalence donc guerre civile et Révoluion. la liste pourrait être bien sur allongée.

actors say they want to do and, only after that, see if we need to use other terms to describe what they in fact did.

You will have now understood that I want to analyze the discourse of these actors, what they said to the assembly as members of the Committee on Public Safety and how it determined their political actions and the meaning they gave to those actions. It is in those speeches that they deploy their arguments, their justifications, there that they show their strengths and weaknesses, their passion and their despair, their need to be heard and the manner in which they try to overcome adversity. It is in the text of political discourse that I find the speech acts that constituted events. There are also more theoretical texts, written late at night or whenever there was a bit of time, texts in which they establish and elaborate their conception of the desired future. The two veins of writing nourish each other. Billaud wrote *L'acéphocratie ou le gouvernement fédératif, démontré le meilleur de tous pour un grand empire, par les principes de la politique et les faits de l'histoire* in 1790¹². But this text remained within him afterwards, and that in part explains his impatience in the spring of the year II (1793), a moment of

¹² Billaud-Varenne, *L'Acéphocratie ou le gouvernement fédératif, démontré le meilleur de tous, pour un grand empire, par les principes de la politique et les faits de l'histoire*, Paris 1791, reprint edhis, éditions d'histoire sociale, 1977.

verticality of power, when Billaud wished it to be more horizontal. For Saint-Just it was the same; his two theoretical texts, *De la nature* and *Fragments d'institutions républicaines*, written between 1792 and 1794, permitted him to reflect on the meaning of his actions and his words¹³. He wanted a clear vision of the desired world to come, he wanted to shape that world, to give it form, so he wrote. But his writings were fragmented, the sentences unfinished—capturing both the man and the very process of his thought. Robespierre never dissociated his theoretical reflections from his actions¹⁴. Maybe this is the place to note something important: we must read and reread these texts because no one of them represents the whole, although some of them are thought to belong to a corpus that we think we already know, so we skim them rather than engage their content. Miguel Abensour, Ernst Cassirer, Régine Robin and Jacques Guilhaumou all hold that a return to texts allows us to think about ideas independently of their infrastructures¹⁵. Close reading of texts produces not only a history of ideas, nor only of social and political

¹³ Saint-Just *Œuvres complètes*, présentées par Miguel Abensour et Anne Kupiec, Paris, Gallimard, 2004.

¹⁴ Robespierre *Œuvres complètes*, éditées par la société des études robespierristes.

¹⁵ Miguel abensour voir *preface aux oeuvres completes de Saint-Just Op.cit.*, Ernst Cassirer, *la philosophie des Lumières*, Fayard, 1966, Régine Robin, *Histoire et linguistique*, Paris, Armand Collin, 1973, Jacques Guilhaumou, *Discours et événement. L'histoire langagière des concepts*, Besançon, Presses universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2006, *Discours et archive. Expérimentations en analyse du discours*, Jacques Guilhaumou Denise Maldidier et Régine Robin, Liège, Mardaga, 1998 *L'avènement des porte-parole de la République*). *Essai de synthèse sur les langages de la Révolution française*, Lille, Presses Universitaires du Septentrion.

histories, but a history of how the former bring the latter to life. That is my purpose here. I want to articulate the relation between discursive and social formations, that is, to explore a state of affairs both social and political. With respect to the question of civil war or revolution, then, I want to use this body of material and this method to dispute the banal representation of revolutionaries as “blood thirsty,” deadly, and show instead their intense investment not in bringing death, but in preserving life.

This was a foundational moment for replacing the sense of sovereign power as the power to cause death with a sense of that power as sustaining life, as Michel Foucault and then Giorgio Agamben have argued¹⁶. The revolutionaries didn’t want simply to provide happiness, but to offer society the conditions of possibility for happiness based on the experimental art of living free. It is from this perspective that I want to propose a new conception of the function of civil institutions in democratic societies, or in societies hoping to become democratic.

Civil institutions have long been considered either as the underpinning of political institutions (e.g., the family) or as superstructures dependent on economic conditions (e.g., patriotism). I want to shift our attention elsewhere.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *Il faut défendre la société, cours au collège de France 1976*, édition Seuil, Gallimard, *ahutes études*, 1992, Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer, Le pouvoir souverain et la vie nue*, traduction par Marilène Raiola, *L’ordre philosophique, Seuil*, 1997, initialement édité en Italie en 1995.

Other sorts of civil institutions flourish (civil religion, village festivals, popular education societies) when democratic political conflict is at its height; they disappear when despotism renders them impotent. As I see it, these institutions calm the violence of democratic conflict and prevent revolution from tipping over into civil war. They civilize, if by civilization we mean the art of living in peace and without domination. They are means of healing a social body burned by violence. They serve as the sources of resilience in the aftermath of violence.

Furthermore, the aim of this inquiry is to show that confusing revolution and civil war is to ignore the uneasy thought of the revolutionary actors who aimed to avert civil war and tried to provide the means of doing so. This thought may belong to the 18th century, but we historians are obliged to understand it, to try to listen carefully to the worries of these revolutionaries with an almost psychoanalytic attention for, yes, they are melancholic. Confronted with the violence engendered by the revolution when the line was drawn between revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries, they claimed they never gave up working to prevent civil war. That is why it is interesting and important to think about the politics of civil institutions in the spring of the year II as a politics aimed toward erecting a firewall, a struggle that sought to give life a chance against the deathly effects

of the laws of the Terror. It was thus, already, a politics that sought to exit the Terror, during the Terror, perhaps even to exorcise the despotism of this Terror.

We have to ask, alongside these authors who are not our contemporaries, whether categories other than those of “civil war” --close to it, perhaps, but different nevertheless--would permit us to understand the melancholy feeling that arose at a time when civil war was in fact limited to isolated pockets of territory and to particular painful moments of confrontation but, also at a time, in this spring of the year II, when the revolution nevertheless seemed interminable.

Civil War is not revolution: Despotism, revolution, and misfortune

Since the Glorious Revolution, *revolution* not only could not be confused with civil war, it was directly opposed to it. The European religious wars of the sixteenth century established the state as a guarantee against civil war. But since then the state reduced people to living in a condition of “slavery.” It is this very strong term that men of the eighteenth century use, in the wake of La Boétie’s *Discours de la servitude volontaire* (1574) and Jurieu’s *Soupirs de la France esclave, qui aspire après la liberté* (1689), texts that reflect on the human condition under the despotism of kings. Loss of liberty means servitude and slavery.

The state and his righteous government may end civil wars, but the Revolution must destroy the morally culpable despotic state. Freedom of thought and speech, as well as freedom to participate in the making of laws is expected of a truly “beautiful revolution,” the kind the French *philosophes* Voltaire and Diderot had dreamed of since the 1760s. For these eighteenth century thinkers, revolution not only cannot be confused with civil war, it must be its direct opposite. If revolution was merely civil war, there would be a vicious circle, for that would give birth to the desire for strong state to suppress it and despotism would be reestablished. The Enlightenment made revolution a necessary response to despotism, but without wishing to fall back into civil war. We can thus say that the idea of *revolution* is the antonym of *civil war*, because where civil war requires the establishment of a strong state – a state that becomes despotic -- revolution arises to strip that state of its legitimacy. While civil war is marked by savage conflict and carnage, the Enlightenment notion of revolution insists on ethical principles and laws. Revolution is the opposite of civil war because it has an emancipatory power that must constrain violence.¹⁷ It is precisely this emancipatory power that puts an end to despotic civil war and the slavery it necessarily engenders.

¹⁷ This is the main subject of the book by Sophie Wahnich, *La longue patience du peuple, 1792, naissance de la république*. Paris: Payot, 2008.

In the eighteenth century, the state having become “the principle incarnate of civil war, if the state is overthrown it is not civil war but a revolution.”¹⁸ Reinhart Koselleck maintains that in this way “the concept of revolution, with its dual implications of morality and politics, rejects civil war ethically even while concealing it politically.”¹⁹ To conceal civil war politically in the context of the Enlightenment would be to cover up the despotism of revolutionary action, and it is exactly this concealed civil war that caused the struggle among factions – including, ultimately, that which swept the Robespierrists away – and exactly why it inspires dread.

If realizing the revolution requires civil war, which is inextricable from governmental despotism, then the revolution cannot be completely revolutionary, that is, it cannot achieve its emancipatory promise. Miguel Abensour reflects on this point when he speaks of a revolution that counters despotism with terror, bringing *misfortune*, and turning liberty into its opposite, properly named a great misfortune by La Boétie in *De la servitude volontaire*, an idea to which Abensour returns. Despotism, he asserts, ultimately makes [revolutionary] passion and energy run dry: “Discouragement, demoralization . . . do not come from counterrevolutionary actions of the revolution’s enemies, but . . . flow forth from the very breast of

¹⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, *La règne de la critique*, p.175.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

the Revolution, due to government acts presented as despotism in the name of liberty.”²⁰ But if demoralization follows, as Saint-Just says, from these circumstances of terror, and if it is undeniable that factional strife demoralized the Parisian sectional workers, as the work of Albert Soboul has shown, where does the responsibility lie?²¹ Terror, Claude Lefort has clearly explained, requires effort²². Like liberty, it takes will. It is realized at the risk of the exhaustion and emotional burnout²³ of those who carry it out. Yet Saint-Just and his friends think they have been driven to this manner of political activism, to terror, by the counter-revolutionaries. Is this sophism? Are the counter-revolutionaries, during the reign of terror, the equivalent of the despotic state of the *ancien régime*?

On the evidence, no, for they no longer have the same resources. But it is they who work, even without being themselves nobles, for the return of the *ancien régime*, which is to say to a condition of enslavement, or, more modestly, of domination, which is to say, without liberty once again. How? By undermining people’s perception of the situation through corruption of the

²⁰ Miguel Abensour, Introduction à *Saint-Just OC, op.cit.* pp. 82-83.

²¹ Albert Soboul, *Les Sans-Culottes parisiens en l’An II. Mouvement populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire : 2 juin 1793 - 9 thermidor an II*, Paris, Éditions Librairie Clavreuil, 1958 (réimpr. 1962), 1168 p.

²² Claude Lefort, « La Terreur révolutionnaire », *Passé/Présent*, 2, 1983, p. 25.

²³ On that question of emotions we can read, Patrice Loraux, « Les disparus », in J.-L. Nancy (dir.), « L’Art et la Mémoire des camps. Représenter, exterminer. Rencontre à la maison d’Izieu », *Le Genre humain*, n° 36, 2001, p. 41-59.

very meaning of revolutionary concepts. “To imagine oneself free is to declare oneself independent to do evil,”²⁴ in other words to implement terror for one’s particular benefit, rather than for the general good. Is this a great misfortune? Perhaps, though it is not that of revolutionary governmental despotism, but rather that of its failure, a second-degree misfortune. Thus, this is not the reversal of liberty swinging, like a pendulum, back to its opposite pole, but the impossibility of mastering true liberty, which links individual to collective liberty by the reciprocity of social bonds. This is what concerns Saint-Just when he seeks to diagnose the situation. It is not the revolutionaries who produce discouragement, nor is it the avowed counter-revolutionaries but rather those who, in revolutionary guise, bring about a counter-revolution.

In the trajectory of Enlightenment thought, Saint-Just identifies civil war with counter-revolution.²⁵ Civil war maintains the condition of enslavement; revolutionary government fights against it. Saint-Just deplores not so much the fear that would paralyse each and every individual, but the lack of fear felt by the “evildoers.” Immediately after the death of Marat, those who had demanded the terror replied that fear would discourage only virtuous

²⁴ Saint-Just, 26 germinal, doc cit, pp. 764.

²⁵ Against Annie Jourdan, *Nouvelle histoire de la Révolution française*, op.cit.

revolutionaries.²⁶ Finally, if the members of the Committee of Public Safety suffer, it is due less to acts of terror than to its own ineffectiveness in dealing with the strength of the many varied counter-revolutionary actions that destroyed the “public trust.” Thus the heart of society is afflicted by the kind of civil war of position – a kind of cultural trench warfare -- theorized in the twentieth century by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*.²⁷ Civil war: is it a misfortune? It is a trap, for sure.

Civil war as a trap

It was, in fact, as a trap that a royalist like Montlosier understood and hoped for civil war in 1791: “I think . . . that we must not expect to attain a goal as difficult as counter-revolution by mere public opinion. I think, however that public opinion can be very useful if one knows how to coordinate it with people’s commitment to act; but for that it is necessary . . . to . . . intimidate those committed to act in opposition; and how can we intimidate the opposing commitments but by force? I have just mentioned force. In doing so I have pronounced a terrible word, for force, intended to oppose force, immediately creates a state of war. And it is a war, a civil war, that I call for to save my

²⁶ Jacques Guilhaumou, *1793, la mort de Marat*, editions complexes, 1989.

²⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Guerre de mouvement et guerre de position . Textes des Cahiers de prison d’Antonio Gramsci*, selected and edited by Razmig Keucheyan. Paris: La Fabrique, 2012.

country! Here I do not want to conceal that the Republicans are making every effort to avoid it.”²⁸

Monsieur de Grave an officer in the king’s constitutional guard, had questioned Montlosier in these terms: “I would like . . . to know how . . . you will safeguard your country from the horrors of civil war, this scourge in comparison with which all the miseries we have experienced are nothing, this scourge that only monsters can desire and contemplate with composure.”²⁹

Civil war is thus a specter summoned by royalists that haunts the French republican revolutionaries, not only as an antonym of Revolution, but also because they remember the civil wars of religion of sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This is true for the Montagnards like Saint-Just as we have just shown, and also for Robespierre addressing the Jacobins as early as 20 April 1792: “We must focus all our attention on the means of preventing civil war. It is firmness and rigor that characterize true patriots. We must dismiss LaFayette from his position as General [in the national guard] or the operations that I have often denounced will take place, in a word we must

²⁸ *Mémoires de M. le comte de Montlosier, sur la Révolution française, le Consulat, l'Empire, la Restauration et les principaux événemens qui l'ont suivie (1755-1830)*, 2 volumes. Paris: Dufey, 1830. These memoirs remain incomplete and the second volume ends with Montlosier’s departure from Paris at the end of the National Constituent Assembly in September, 1791. See also Montlosier, *Des moyens d’opérer la contre-révolution, pour servir de suite à son ouvrage intitulé : De la nécessité d’une contre-révolution*, s. l. n. d. [1791], p. 10, cited by Marie-France Piguet, “‘Contre-révolution’, ‘guerre civile’, ‘lutte entre deux classes’: Montlosier (1755-1838) penseur du conflit politique moderne,” *Astériorion* 6 (2009), online, accessed 3 April 2009. URL : <http://asterion.revues.org/1485>

²⁹ *Lettre de M. de Montlosié à M. de Grave et réponse de M. de Grave à M. de Montlosié*, Lille: C.-L. de Boubers, [1791], p. 8. Cited by Marie-France Piguet, op. cit.

suppress civil war.”³⁰ The day before, on June 19, Jean Bon Saint André had contrasted “the insurrection of an enslaved people which is accompanied by every horror and that of a free people which is merely the spontaneous expression of the public will to exchange or modify several articles of the constitution.”³¹ Insurrection was supposed to avoid civil war at all costs and therefore to avoid attaching to the idea of insurrection to “that of revolt and carnage.” The Girondin Isnard dreads civil war equally in the context of the king and his aristocracy, who in fact become traitors to their country in the spring of 1792 . Isnard can thus proclaim that “if the enemies of the Constitution persist in their antisocial behavior, in their hatred of the patriots, if they attempt to obstruct the operations of government, to secretly promote the restoration of aristocracy, to make even the slightest change in the Constitution, I fear that civil war may be ignited.”³² Finally even Marat, not known for abhorring violence, fears civil war. He counsels the people: “They hope to turn you towards new movements, to make you demand straight away the support of the constituted authorities, to drive you to force the magistrates to display the red flag, to bring us to cut each other’s throats in the name of the law. They hope you will abduct Louis XVI . . . and lead him

³⁰ ³⁰ Robespierre, *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, Publication de la société des études robespierristes, Phénix éditions, 2000, volume VIII. 20 April, To the Jacobins, pp. 292-293.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Isnard, 5 January 1792. *Le Moniteur universel*, vol. 11, pp. 46-47.

away with an army swollen by a mob of vile slaves and misfits, while telling them again and again that the liberty, safety, and inviolable constitutional rights of the King of the French have been violated. Having thus initiated civil war in the heart of the capital, they would extend their rage over all the empire.”³³

Montlosier is right, the revolutionaries do not want civil war. Now, the same Montlosier substitutes the word *struggle* for the word *war* and introduces the word *classe* to speak of a “social component.”³⁴ “It is true, as I have said, that there was in France a struggle between two classes, or, as some may prefer, between two peoples. But far from being something related to our origins, this struggle belongs to the middle ages, in which the cities, having been set up as kinds of republics under the name communes, and the residents of the communes defined as kinds of aristocrats under the name Franks, gradually acquired great civil importance; and then, under the name of Third Estate, great political importance. In this situation, which I have had to describe because it is not unconnected with the events of the Revolution, I have been able, in speaking of these two classes . . . to use sometimes the word war and to consider the two opponents as two peoples. . . .”³⁵ The position of

³³ Wednesday, 27 June. *Le Moniteur universel*, n°179, p. 757.

³⁴ Marie-France Piguet, *op.cit.*, p. 35.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Montlosier is in opposition to the liberties won by the Third Estate, and in opposition to the liberty won by the republics, in contrast to that of the “first free estate,” for him, inherently and essentially free, the nobility.

Civil war or class-struggle?

If civil war comes suddenly, like lightning, to pit one unified party against another, the struggle of social classes is of long duration. It leads people to promote new forces and values and to destroy old ones. But there must be a point of intersection and it is at this meeting point that civil war, for the French Revolution, makes sense.

The report on foreign factions of 23 Ventôse, year II, has often been read as an example of the rhetoric of dirty work, the search for arguments to justify eliminating enemies. But if we take seriously the distinctions between foreign war, domestic counter-revolution, and civil war, the language of the report appears not at all rhetorical, but rather manifests a strategic clarity aimed at understanding the interests of the enemy. The nobles are allied with foreign powers and want the restoration of the monarchy, so it is necessary to understand their plans and methods. Saint-Just uses the voice of the British parliament to explain the nobles’ objectives: “If we make peace, France will

have *civil war*, and we can spoil this republic.”³⁶ Civil war for Saint-Just therefore belongs to a counter-revolutionary strategy, the mechanisms of which must be dismantled. Whence the polymorphic foreigner as political otherness.³⁷ “It is the foreigner who stirs up the factions, who makes them tear each other apart by playing his political game. . . . As a result he sets up a kind of trial in the court of public opinion; the opinion soon divides, and the republic is overthrown. . . . So the foreigner will create as many factions as possible; it matters little to them which ones they are, *so long as we have civil war*.”³⁸ In every case it is a matter of weakening the revolution in order bring back tyranny: “amid civil discord, to restore the throne and to serve the foreigner”; “by means of corruption to prevent the establishment of liberty”; “to make conspirators of the discontented.”³⁹ The foreigner’s aim, in other words, is to create “a populace motivated by unbridled greed, numbed by vices, fatigued by scandals [affaires] and drawn to frivolous pleasures, that will feel the need for a strong leader amid the universal lassitude and, everything having been thus prepared, the leader will be borne aloft in

³⁶ Saint-Just, Rapport sur les factions de l’étranger et sur la conjuration ourdie par elles dans la République française pour détruire le gouvernement républicain par la corruption et affamer Paris, in Saint-Just *OC op.cit.*, p.679. IS THE QUOTE FROM SAINT-JUST OR IS HE QUOTING A BRITISH SOURCE? Emphasis in the original.

³⁷ On that question one can read Sophie Wahnich, *L’impossible citoyen, l’étranger dans le discours de la Révolution française*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1997, reed 2010.

³⁸ Saint Just 23 ventôse, doc cit, p. 694.

³⁹ Saint Just 23 ventôse, doc cit, p.676.

triumph.”⁴⁰ The return of a leader would be the return of royal despotism in the guise of resolving civil war. The revolution would be part of this dreaded vicious cycle.

Saint-Just concludes: “if liberty were destroyed here, the very people who had aided in the plot would be the first to have their throats cut for being the most suspect, the most dangerous, by the power of the perversity that they had engendered.”⁴¹

To characterize these “most suspect” people, Saint-Just speaks again in terms of “class”—not just the classes of Montlosier, but also those of “*malencontre*” (misfortune), classes produced by the Revolution itself.

The classes of Montlosier’s struggle between two groups are also those of Machiavelli in *The Prince* or *The Discourses*. We find them again in Saint-Just under the headings “the idle” and “people who work.” “Do you know what the last support of the monarchy is? It is the class of people who do nothing, who cannot do without luxuries and frivolities, who, thinking of nothing, think evil; they model boredom, lust for frivolous pleasures and revulsion for community life. They wonder what others say about them. They make assumptions and pretend that they can fathom [deviner or see into?] the government, always ready to change party on a whim. It is this class that must be suppressed.

⁴⁰ Saint Just 23 ventôse, doc cit, p.679.

⁴¹ Saint Just 23 ventôse, doc cit, p.694.

None of these idle people have children, they have valets who do not marry, who always agree with them, and who prostitute themselves to foreign influences.”⁴² Surely, this class is not the nobility, or the former nobility. It is the new aristocracy of the rentier. Saint-Just mentions the bank as the best place to encounter expatriates. So it is the haves versus the workers. A classic, transhistorical opposition.

On the other hand, nothing in the classical literature speaks of a class of functionaries: “There is another corrupting class, the institution clan [ménage] of functionaries.”⁴³ It is even more dangerous than the first class because functionaries can claim to represent the people, but also can control and subordinate the people. Functionaries logically should respond only to orders from the legislative authority and should humble themselves before the sovereign people. In the report of 23 Ventôse there is a kind of hatred of those with executive power, seen by Saint-Just as newly corrupted leaders who usurp the popular sovereignty by assuming too much power in the body politic. From this position they merge effortlessly into the class of the rentiers in their comportment and style. Here lie the “*malencontre*”.

⁴² Saint Just 23 ventôse, doc cit, p.690.

⁴³ Saint Just 23 ventôse, doc cit, p.689.

“Yesterday they were scorned and dishonored. Compassion has loaded them with goods, yet they are entirely unsatisfied.”⁴⁴ “The day after a man gains a lucrative position, he orders a palace, he has valets at his service; his wife complains about the times, she can’t get her ermine and jewelry at a good price, she complains about how hard it is to find delicacies. Her husband has moved up from the orchestra to the brilliant boxes at performances”; Saint-Just concludes by calling them “insensitive cowards.” In fact he describes a class of men who move from the position of active revolutionaries to that of functionaries who abuse their power, seeking only to enrich themselves, and who abandon their duty, leaving to the people the work and the real struggle of the Revolution.

Over against the class of rentiers and profiteers, then, we have “the people”: “and while these scoundrels enjoy themselves, the people work the land, they make the boots for the soldiers and the weapons that defend these unfeeling cowards.” In contrast to those who complain of the times, that is, of the difficult époque, Saint-Just cites the middling sort, who do not complain. “Consider those who complain about the times: they are not the most unfortunate: the middling sort complain much less. In the departments of the Haute Vienne and the Corrèze, people have always subsisted on chestnuts. In

⁴⁴ Saint Just 23 ventôse, doc cit, p.690.

Puy de Dôme people live on bread and on vegetables cooked in oil. This custom is ancient in these lands, happy in their ways; all the country folk live only on fruit, and the cattle that they raise like serfs do not either feed or clothe them. Commerce returns the fleece that they have tended in measures of gold.”⁴⁵

The classes of the idle and the functionaries, “those who have the most,” “insult the people the most, even as they live at their expense.”⁴⁶ Class conflict is not only a struggle of the rich against the poor, to the detriment of the poor, it is the conflict of two systems with opposing principles. In the history of this revolution it is a conflict between two concepts of liberty, but also between two concepts of happiness. For no one doubts that the revolution was made “for happiness and for liberty.”⁴⁷ The struggle between two classes is a struggle between two ways of conceiving the emotions of life, especially the question of pleasure. According to Machiavelli⁴⁸ in chapter IX of *The Prince*, the question of the enjoyment of life divides the city into two conflicting “humors’ or “desires,” that of the ordinary people and that of the important people: “the people desire to be neither commanded nor oppressed by the ruling class, while the important people wish to rule and oppress the ordinary

⁴⁵ Saint Just 23 ventôse, doc cit, p.691.

⁴⁶ Saint Just 23 ventôse, doc cit, p.690-91.

⁴⁷ These are the words of Robespierre.

⁴⁸ Machiavelli in chapter IX of *The Prince*.

people.” This asymmetry of desires is not an everyday one, not a simple conflict of interests. It is a ranking of and by moral principles. Certainly in Machiavelli both ordinary and influential people can be evil, but nobles are much more so, as their desire centers on their own particular advantage while the desire of the people is of necessity a universal “good” affecting all citizens. The people desire only the liberty of all, which brings security and the possibility of living well, of living in dignity in the community⁴⁹. Saint-Just, 23 Ventôse, reformulates this conflict as a matter of happiness:

“We spoke of happiness: selfish people exploited this idea in order to exacerbate the cries and fury of the aristocracy. They suddenly revived desires for that happiness that consists of forgetting others and taking pleasure in excess. Happiness! Happiness, they cried! But it was decidedly not the happiness of Persepolis that we offered you. This happiness is that of the corrupters of humanity. We offered you the happiness of Sparta and that of Athens in their times of greatness; we offered you the happiness of virtue, that of the comfortable and ordinary life, we offered you

⁴⁹ It's very nearby the “buen vivir” as a contemporary demand.

the happiness born of the enjoyment of the basic necessities without luxury, we offered you as happiness, alongside the hatred of tyranny, the delight of a simple hut and a fertile field cultivated by your own hands.

We offered the people the happiness of living freely and in tranquility, of peacefully enjoying the fruits and the customs of the revolution, the joys of returning to nature and to morality and hence of fondering the Republic. It is the people who make the Republic by the simplicity of their ways, not the charlatans who must be excluded from our society from the start if you wish for the people to be happy within it. The happiness we offered you is not that of the corrupt, those who were mistaken in expecting from the revolution the privilege of enjoying in their turn being as cruel as the aristocracy and possessing the riches the monarchy. A plow, a field, a cottage protected

from taxation, a family protected from a brigand's
lechery, that is happiness."⁵⁰

There, in this question of happiness in the simple, tranquil life while the important people desire an ever greater accumulation of power and wealth we find the meeting point between civil war and the struggle between two classes. The challenges of this form of civil war affect social imaginaries, social and civic practices—the very sense of what everyday life should be, and the sense of the political of everyday life.

Limiting the horizon of confidence and joy, dividing and sectioning off society, leads gradually to a level of fragility that can only bring about collapse. Such a society would be like that of the *ancien régime*, in which the motivating bonds, whether of interest or of coercion, are fragile. To restore tyranny in opposition to liberty is, in short, to restore the psychological and affective economy of this tyranny. Therein lies the effectiveness of counter-revolutionary civil war.⁵¹

To speak of “civil war” is not an oxymoron, but indeed the manifestation of this odd couple of asymmetrical antonyms separated by despotism and that

⁵⁰ Saint Just 23 ventôse, doc cit, p.687.

⁵¹ On court society, one must turn again to Norbert Elias, *La société de cour*. Flammarion, 1985, and Calmann-Lévy, 1994 (preface by Roger Chartier, translation by Pierre Kamnitzer and Jeanne Etoré).

which ensues from it. *Civil war (despotism) Revolution*. The dreaded temporality is that of a vicious cycle.

If one forgets that terror came after despotism, one forgets the difference between civil war and terror that is a part of the French Revolution but not yet the classical civil war sought by Montlosier. One can understand that terror is a tool to avoid classical civil war, to avoid massacres such as those of September 1792. He forgets that the goal of the terror is to enact justice against those who want to maintain domination. That's why Robespierre names the terror "a war of freedom against tyranny".

Indeed, latent civil war is always ready to surge up again when sensible reason is abandoned in favor of force, force related to domination. This kind of civil war has effects every bit as profound as the other kind: the devious civil war carried out in public space which affects the deepest part of everyone, the capacity of being with others, of evaluating a situation, of thinking together, of producing a collective revolutionary understanding. It affects the very deepest part of the psyche, the affections, the human emotions, and the bonds it produces. It undermines mutual respect and civil benevolence that must serve as the foundation for good laws.

So it is a question, strictly speaking, of a war over the very definition of human relations, a war in which to desire the Revolution is to want human

tenderness when others, like the supporters of the colonial lobby, argue for an ontology of anesthetized human feeling. This civil war at the deepest level of life aims at dehumanizing social relations. And in this dehumanization emerge two social segments that take a stand against each other, a stand related to class, to class struggle. Not because the revolutionaries love to fight every day, but because where they had hoped to find adversaries with whom to deliberate and work things out, they encountered enemies. Class enemies.

Thus the revolutionary moment lays bare an intersection between the hideous classical civil war and the “even more hideous” civil war of positions. The first makes the classes, having become enemies, kill each other off; the second undermines the belief that some day people might be able to live in a society founded on equality and the mutual respect of human beings.

How to end the Revolution and make it harmonious and stable?

“Survivors of great crimes are condemned to make reparations for them”⁵²

In response to the evanescence of their society, the most radical of the revolutionaries, Billaud-Varenne, Saint-Just, and Robespierre, reflect on the way to make reparations for the crimes of the factions. They reflect on what

⁵² Saint-Just, « Rapport sur la police générale », in *Œuvres complètes*, présentées par Miguel Abensour et Anne Kupiec, Paris, Gallimard, 2004, p. 763.

would enable France to no longer be in a state of latent civil war. And they reflect on a good way to end the reign of terror, for this terror has indeed been too despotic and perhaps produced misfortune. They are exhausted by it. It must end. . . . To counter the latent civil war they imagine that civic institutions might be the last hope after the struggle of the factions. On this point, they all seem to agree. They must produce what Gramsci called a counter-hegemonic cultural force: to oppose despotism on the terrain of ways of being in the world, of social imaginaries, of social practices. It is a matter of conceiving them and making innovations which must make a break no longer at the level of laws, but at the level of the values, customs, and practices of everyday life [*moeurs*]. There is a need therefore to invent a politics of institutional rupture to work at the same place that we today call *habitus*, with Bourdieu, or *mentalitiés*, with Vovelle. There must be a rupture with the behaviors of the *ancien régime*, certainly, but how to achieve it?

Factional struggle was a real crisis in the revolutionary movement, and if these three members of the Committee of Public Safety concur on the civic institutions to be valorized, they certainly do not have in mind exactly the same narrative of what took place and what it is appropriate to do going forward. They do not exactly share the same objectives, even if they all sincerely want a true republic, which is to say the public experience of the

exercise of liberty. The three revolutionaries wrote a lot, and this is their point in common. They wrote to reflect on their actions, and from their reflections they drew conclusions on the reasons and ways to act. Because of this back and forth of thought and action they have come to be considered “legislator-philosophers,”⁵³ but no doubt all the work undertaken to understand the origins of the moral and political sciences and especially of sociology could equally lead us to see them as legislator-social scientists.⁵⁴ They influence each other, moreover, for they do not cease to deliberate in the midst of the activities of the Committee of Public Safety. Also something unifies their public language as reporters of this or other committees. They diverge, however, in their more personal language. It is there that their important differences emerge, each according to his “genius,” that is to say according to his particular intuition.

Billaud-Varenne wants to make a *tabula rasa* of the past. He affirms that “Every legislator fully committed to his duties will begin (therefore) by isolating himself from the times, from persons, from customs and old

⁵³ C’est là l’expression mise en valeur par Jacques Guilhaumou et Françoise Brunel qui ont ouvert la voie pour une telle enquête.

⁵⁴ On this point about revolutionaries as social scientist one can read : Keith Michael Baker, *Condorcet. Raison et politique*. Paris, Hermann, 1988 , *What’s left of enlightenment ? A postmodern question*. Stanford University Press, 2001 ; Jacques Guilhaumou, Sieyès et le non-dit de la sociologie : du mot à la chose. *Revue d’Histoire des Sciences Humaines*. Naissances de la science sociale 1750 -1850. N° 15. Novembre 2006 ; Chappéy, Jean-Luc, *La Société des observateurs de l’homme (1799-1804). Des anthropologues au temps de Bonaparte*, préface de Claude Blanckaert, Paris, Société des études robespierristes, 2002

precepts. He will begin by distancing himself from what was and what is, in order to see only what should be. Institutions should be only of our creation.”⁵⁵ He adds that this engagement with first principles must immediately meet the test of reality. “The greatest mistake the reformer of a state can commit is to establish political principles before bringing about a general change, without proceeding to put them into action.”⁵⁶ For Billaud-Varenne, history, the slow pace of temporal change, and the drag of context, are obstacles to a commitment to radical transformation.

Saint-Just ascribes to institutions a double power, that of establishing and of correcting, and if it is necessary to reinvent them and protect their development it is because “the survivors of great crimes are condemned to correct them.”⁵⁷ There can be no separation, no *tabula rasa*. Ruptures cannot be repaired with other ruptures. It is necessary then to understand the execution of duty in regard to what exists, and to give thought to the rhythm of this political work. People cannot pretend that the reign of terror did not create new kinds of obstacles. It will not suffice to return to the constitutional government conceived in the spring of 1793. To extricate France from the terror it will not suffice to suppress the political and administrative

⁵⁵ Billaud-Varenne, 1er floreal year II, doc cit.

⁵⁶ Idem.

⁵⁷ Saint-Just, 26 Germinal, year II, doc cit.

institutions the terror created, for people's everyday ways of being in the world are not yet those of a republic. "If [these] *moeurs* existed all would be well; we need institutions to refine [épurer] them. We must aim for that. This is what must be done; all the rest will follow."⁵⁸ What does this mean? To let the people become their own sovereign and hence "diminish the number of established authorities."⁵⁹ Diminish, not suppress. Saint-Just does not seem to believe in the possibility of a headless political regime. Here he clearly doesn't think it's possible not to have a head. with Billaud-Varenne the author of the *Acéphocratie*. Condemn to repair. Condemnation—the word is heavy. Duty--the necessity of not giving up in midstream, with French society caught in the midst of the torments of the Revolution--has taken the place of desire. One must stay at it, without any break. To be a good magistrate in the ancient Greek sense is to accept the responsibility of the office.

After the struggle among the factions, anxiety is still intense, the three revolutionaries are exhausted. In the third of his *Fragments sur les institutions républicaines* Saint-Just explains how he could fall apart: "The day I was convinced that it is impossible to give the French people habits and customs that are gentle, sensible, and relentless in their opposition to tyranny, I would

⁵⁸ Saint-Just, *Fragments* in *OC*, *op.cit.*p.1135.

⁵⁹ *Idem.*

stab myself to death.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless this is not a despair that leads to impotence, but rather to incessant effort: the management of pessimism. Henceforth, Saint-Just is pessimistic and struggles against whatever might undermine him, a repetition of what had undermined the Revolution: “the reign of terror numbed us to crime,” he says, as “strong liquors numb the palate.”⁶¹ In his sensualist thought, only feeling [*sensibilité*] empowers people to judge situations and resist oppression. To no longer notice crime is to lose natural feeling, to lose the immediate connection between conscience and morality; it is to encounter a situation of anomie. For Saint-Just “The citizen initially consults only his conscience and morality; if he forgets these, his relationship is to the law; if he scorns the law he is no longer a citizen: his affinity for power begins there.”⁶² To corrupt, in the sense of perverting the natural sensibility that gives access to conscience and to morality, is to drive the republic mad and to bring back relations of force.

Indeed, the great crimes Saint-Just denounced on 26 Germinal, an II, are those which destroyed the relations between human beings, destroyed civility, destroyed what Saint-Just calls a “community of affect,” based on the penchant of men to seek each other out according to their affinities, and to

⁶⁰ Saint-Just, *Fragments* in *OC*, *op.cit.* p.1138.

⁶¹ Saint-Just *Fragments* in *OC*, *op.cit.*, p.1141.

⁶² Saint-Just, *Fragments* in *OC*, *op.cit.*p.1138.

forge bonds of friendship,⁶³ love, fraternity, and hospitality. He declares in the same report: “You must make a community,” “you must restore civic trust.”⁶⁴

Robespierre also thinks that the French have been ruined, in the long term by the history of despotism, in the short term by the violence that had to be endured during the time of the terror that everyone now hopes to see brought to a close.⁶⁵ But what disturbs Robespierre in the end is to have observed the ways it was possible to manipulate the people, including by exploiting their best sentiments. If the people are good, they can nevertheless be misled by their own passions or by the impassioned discourses of others, by “scoundrels.” On 18 Floréal he characterizes the corrupters as “those who sought in people’s minds and hearts everything that upholds morality in order to extract it and stifle in it the invisible accusing conscience that nature hid there.”⁶⁶ If the corrupters cannot be destroyed entirely, their influence must be arrested, and the way to accomplish that must be found. For Robespierre, civic institutions have to play this role of protection against corruption. In this he concurs with Saint-Just.

What genius will make the end of the revolution possible?

⁶³ Friendship is for Saint Just, as we shall see, the foundation of civil relations.

⁶⁴ Saint-Just, « Rapport sur la police générale », in *Œuvres complètes, op.cit.* p.747.

⁶⁵ This is the claim of René Levasseur (de la Sarthe), *Mémoires*, Paris, 4 vol., 1829-1831, réédition Christine Peyrard, Paris, Messidor-Éditions sociales, 1989, p. 570 : “However the crisis of anarchy, born of this very energy, had ended by saddening every soul and troubling every conscience. All citizens hoped for the closing of the abyss of the reign of terror.”

⁶⁶ Robespierre, 18 Floréal Year II.

Merely wanting to end the Revolution is not enough to justify the claim that the Revolution was a positive achievement. Billaud-Varenne, who on 1st Floréal presents a report on the war in the name of the Committee of Public Safety, seems to me to be the one who poses most explicitly the strategic question, not about the deployment of the armies but on the political struggle for a positive outcome. “If only courage and a surplus of hopelessness are needed to begin a revolution, it takes as much perseverance as wisdom to manage it well; beyond that, greatness of soul and genius are needed to end it.”⁶⁷ This idea of genius is certainly appropriate for extraordinary individuals— revolutionary heroes—but not only for them. There is also genius, in our sense today of social talent, ingenuity in knowing how to go about doing things. Condorcet in the *Esquisse*, unpublished at the time, speaks of “social art,” but the expression comes from Sieyès.⁶⁸ Billaud-Varenne writes of a thoughtful political art: “For too long we have wandered aimlessly. He who has neither a settled system nor an established plan renders himself the plaything of events, . . . [he] lets himself be led far from the goal he holds dear. Do you want to be assured of success? Begin by knowing your real position. By determining what is most important and cutting out what is

⁶⁷ Billaud Varenne, 1er Floreal p.2.

⁶⁸ To go deeper in the genealogy of the notion, one can read the synthesis of Jean-Louis Morgenthaler afs <https://journals.openedition.org/socio-logos/373>

misleading, you arrive at your goal by the force alone of the direction you have given yourself.”⁶⁹ Billaud-Varenne here seems extremely voluntarist. He wants to believe that strong will can suffice to carry the day, as if one final effort alone would reestablish peacetime political life after the war. Was this not the claim of the revolutionary government until the peace? Victory for Billaud-Varenne is bringing back peace. He does not seem to conceive of the break that could develop between the destruction of the enemies and the possibility of bringing about revolutionary society. He thinks in terms of lost time and of speed, another way of making sense of the leitmotif “it is time.” “It would not be enough to have made justice and virtue the order of the day if one did not hasten to accelerate the realization of these ends by means of public education.”⁷⁰ The need to control the speed of the process is perceived as a strategic issue, because the revolutionaries were caught up in the speed of events without having been able to reflect on their strategy. If, like Saint-Just, Billaud-Varenne knows that the achievement of civility is still to come, unlike Saint-Just, he does not seem, on the 1st Floréal, to take the measure of the gap between the two historic moments of revolutionary government and expected peace, a peace that will at last one day be realized. Transition from the

⁶⁹ Idem.

⁷⁰ Billaud Varenne *Principes régénérateurs du système social*, texte présenté et annoté par Françoise Brunel, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1992, p. 12.

revolutionary government to the constitutional regime could be a matter of a simple decision and quick action. Which is to say that the temporality is that of terror, the speed of light.

What is more, in his report on this examination of what constitutes a real obstruction to revolution, not from enemies but from the body politic itself, he focuses on a specific kind of political obstruction, that of a voluntary servitude with respect to a leader. Billaud-Varenne fears that a grand plan might get in the way of the very possibility of democracy, that people might come to rely on some military figure and willingly abandon their prerogatives and their sovereignty. In this he remains absolutely aligned with his theory of *Acéphocratie*. No head, no captain, no boss. In 1791, after the flight of the king, he was already asking: “will you remain free for long with a leader eager to enchain you, who will again bring together as means of governing the establishment of sovereign authority, all the old methods of intrigue and seduction, and the effects of the weakness of the people?” “Everyone knows that as soon as a man rises to a certain level in society, the rest of the people fall at his feet.”⁷¹ Billaud-Varenne believed then that “there is no truly free nation but that which knows no master but the law.”⁷² He adds further that

⁷¹ Billaud “*L’acéphocratie ou Le gouvernement fédératif démontré le meilleur de tous, pour un grand empire, par les principes de la politique et les faits de l’histoire* [Edition de 1791]” p.2-3

⁷² Idem.

this freedom is recognized as such only if no one can break the law with impunity. When war is at the center of people's concerns and the leader might perhaps be a warrior covered with glory, the danger increases. And, there too, there is a need to act quickly, for how else is it possible to assure a democratic future for the Republic?

For Saint-Just it is not enough to know what direction to give the movement, but to understand what hinders it socially in spite of everything. That is to say, the obstacles in the dense texture of people's actions, in their ways of being in the world, in what could be called their "revolutionary style" or on the contrary in its absence, not to the extent that everyone might be thinking of this, but because people would resume the habitus of the *ancien régime* and become less aware of the effort needed for a coherent republicanism. And if Saint-Just fears that consent to a new voluntary servitude could take the form of support for a great man, he also thinks that the question of this possible return of political servitude is attached to an ensemble of social relations and not to this form of subordination alone. Education, undeniably important, does not suffice to prevent the symptoms of an absence of civic trust.

If Billaud no longer wants vertical or pyramidal organization, if Saint-Just is concerned about the reappearance of old court behaviors and a

consequent harmful fragmentation of the social, Robespierre worries about the competence of people to judge clearly the situations they must navigate. His idea of being politically alert, that is able to resist oppression, rests on the hypothesis of a faculty of common sense judgment, as the Sensualists explained it.⁷³ Far from wishing to count only on the use of reason stripped of feeling, he seeks to give to sensibility a power of judgment that is “infallible.” “Nature placed in man the sentiments of pleasure and sadness, which lead him to flee physical objects harmful to him and to seek those that suit him. The masterpiece of society would be to create in him, in response to ethical questions, a quick instinct which, without the delayed aid of reasoning, might lead him to do good and avoid evil; for the individual reason of each man, misled by his passions, is often merely a sophist pleading their cause, and man’s command of himself can always be damaged by man’s self-love.”⁷⁴

Now, this power of infallible sensualist judgment can only be individual, and the individual must be able to become the spokesperson, the echo of the collectively interiorized rules. The whole question is to know which rules and how they can henceforth be interiorized in order to fight the temptation to let oneself be guided by a great military or political figure, against the temptation

⁷³ On sensualism as issue of popular thought in the XVIII century, one can read , Deborah Cohen, *La nature du peuple*, Paris, Champ Vallon, 2010.

⁷⁴ Bibliothèque nationale, 8°, Le38 787.

to renounce participating in the exercise of power. It would be necessary to invent a form of individual judgment that could respond to collective issues: most of all the defense of principles and thus of natural right as it has been enunciated, but also the defense and protection of the ways of being in the world that form the basis of humanization—the sentiments that lead humans to behave humanely. It is therefore necessary to educate sensibility as a faculty of judgment, and to give it a double mission, ethical and political, to educate the “*thymos*.” This *thymos* for the ancient Greeks referred to internal processes of emotion, to the passions. These could be excited in the theater where, vicariously experiencing the sensations felt and emotions expressed in the represented situations, spectators were inspired to shape and refine themselves.⁷⁵ In fact the emotions are considered by Plato as reactions to the values of the good, the just, and the beautiful, which are translated into action.⁷⁶ That the affections and emotions do not hamper the morality of the individual is a first stage in education; but that they support it is a second, and this is the responsibility of the philosopher, the legislator, and the teacher. If individuals are well-educated, they will be capable of protecting their senses of dignity and liberty when danger is present, and they will be able to sound the alarm.

⁷⁵ On feeling courage, one can read Françoise Proust, *De la résistance*, Éditions du Cerf, 1997.

⁷⁶ Olivier Renault, *Platon, la médiation des émotions*, Paris Vrin, 2014.

It is thus, at the end of the war of factions, that Robespierre seeks to recreate moral and political intuition. He is aware that the violent crisis that the French have just undergone puts them at the mercy of manipulated enthusiasms, and he wants to find the tools that might help them stay the course. He proposes, in fact, a government of the passions and emotions by means of moral and political education. In order to inaugurate a politics in accord with morality, political sensibility must become instinctive. Sharing some kind of common sensibility might also provide salutary limits on the role of criticism, for people would no longer seek to criticize the foundation of society, its republican morality.

The understanding of social organism

Each of the three revolutionaries gives more or less place to the understanding of the social organism as such, which Sieyès had earlier already distinguished from social organization. The social organism is the social thing as a given, outside of laws—the habitual ways of being, thinking and doing, in short the customs, mores (*moeurs*) or “ways of life.” The legislator should observe them, understand how they constitute social life as such, which is not reducible to the aggregate of separate individuals. Under no circumstance is society reducible, as form, to a particular way of organizing individuals. Societies have forms that transcend the individuals who compose them.

For this reason, customs, habits, and ways of life cannot be changed by bringing law to bear on individuals. To change them, it is necessary to think both in terms of social organism and social organization. The latter pertains to voluntary human juridical, civil, and civic works. Social organization is a human invention that depends on voluntary, deliberate thought and action. But for the social organization to affect the social organism, ways must be found to connect them. The process, which should be considered a “social art,” is not a matter of will, but of facts that exceed both the individuals and the clear reasoning of social organization. Social art must, by bringing together different kinds of knowledge, enable us not only to describe what is, that is to produce immediate history from the facts at hand, but, more importantly, to understand how to suggest what should be, and to conceive of rupture with present attitudes and behaviors, while building upon them.

If that rupture is the concept of the good, that is of liberty and equality where there had been despotism and domination, revolutionaries must nonetheless invent a way to make the connection between social organism and social organization. Now, this connection is mysterious; success involves alchemy, and for it to happen and for the endeavor to be realized tangibly, we must accept uncertainty and discouragement, but at the same time consider

that when the path to utopia is lost, we must understand how it was lost in order to recover the path.

To identify the institutions necessary for this recovery of energy in the face of adversity Miguel Abensour coined the term “insurgent institutions”: institutions that do not deny the utopian dimension of a revolution, but also do not pretend that its success may be beyond imagining, and which consequently can offer reserves of energy as a basis for action.⁷⁷ For revolution is a regime of action. Laws must be made, things must be organized, civil institutions--not to be confused with the state-- must be founded, conditions of a future justice must be thought out again. In short, continually begin again, because the social art is always open-ended. For this reason, Condorcet, mathematician of probability, considered this relationship to uncertainty a fundamental vector of rigorous mathematical thought applied to the social art.⁷⁸ The social art is a conception not about truth, but a technique for correcting errors. It is a matter of correcting action or of finding the appropriate action. It is an analysis entailing foresight and hindsight at the same time. *Foresight* to envisage what should be. This is a simple matter in a

⁷⁷ Miguel Abensour, Democràcia insurgent i Institució, *Enrahonar: an international journal of theoretical and practical reason*, 2012: Núm.: 48 *La democràcia invisible*.

⁷⁸ Keith Baker, *Condorcet, from natural philosophy to Social Mathematics*, the university of Chicago press, Chicago and London, 1975.

democratic republic, for what should be is the understanding of virtue as the love of everything that consolidates liberty and equality. In the *Principes de morale politique* on 5 February 1794, Robespierre formulated it with precision: the determination of what should be is “a compass.”⁷⁹

Hindsight because of the need to understand why “what should be” does not more easily become the very essence of the republic. Hence the need to constantly revisit the narrative of the revolutionary event, for the narrative is a way of interpreting the obstacles that the Revolution encountered. This narrative is, in turn, the tool to explain revolutionary action, to explain what broke revolutionary momentum in order to recover the path toward the desired end. This is why action comes first, because it can test reality. Then comes critique of the relation of action to reality. Then comes the corrected action. Action must be shaped in response to criticism. And this is why the politician is also an engineer, or a physician, when he needs to care for the weakened social body.⁸⁰

As I see it, Billaud-Varenne, Robespierre, and Saint-Just part ways on this question. Even as they share the same overall project, they do not arrive

⁷⁹ Robespierre, *Sur les principes de morale politique qui doivent guider la convention nationale dans l'administration intérieure de la république*. » Convention. – Session of 5 February 1794. (17 Pluviôse, an II of the French republic).

⁸⁰ The philosophy of Canguilhem is enlightening on this point. One can read on him, Emiliano Sfara, *Georges Canguilhem inédit, Essai sur une philosophie de l'action*, Paris, L'Harmattan 2018 and Xavier Roth, *Georges canguilhem et l'unité de l'expérience, juger et agir, 1926-1939*, Paris Vrin, 2013.

at the same critical analysis of the situation. Consequently, they do not prioritize the actions to be taken to bring the republican project finally within reach in the same way. The discord within the Committee of Public Safety could be ideological, as it was between those who, like Carnot, did not fear a war of conquest, and those who, like Billaud-Varenne, Saint-Just, and Robespierre, drew upon a more defensive logic and fought “not to conquer but to prevail.” The discord among these last three, however, arose from their critical dispute, from the strategy that would follow from it, and the resulting plan of action, even as they belong to the same ideological group.

Conclusion

The violence of the laws, the “force of law,” constricts life, encouraging withdrawal, and this is why we must find a way to protect the revolution by profoundly changing the habits, customs and values of everyday life [*mœurs*], and to be able once again to bypass the laws of constraint that turn citizens into the living dead.

Those who reflect on the social art have long known that, contrary to Montesquieu, changing habits and attitudes does not depend on laws alone. Laws may influence those habits, customs, and values but it takes more than laws to transform them. A capillary connection between the social organism and social organization must be created. This involves attending to attitudes

and customs when inventing new social practices. This is why “making a community” presupposes “suffusing social customs with the revolution,” bringing about the rediscovery of a vital surge of revolutionary desire after the experience of exhaustion brought on by latent civil war.

The call for “civil institutions” that are not always easily distinguished from civic institutions is a call to realize this deep capillary flow among participants in social, civil, civic, and political life. “To make a community” is to concern oneself with this quasi-alchemical capillarity and to rely on civil institutions as sites of the social art.

This social art cannot be confused with the notion of a social organization that, having emerged fully armed from the brains of philosophers, sociologists, engineers, and physicians, would target the social organism directly. This social art can be clarified by understanding, but it is first and foremost an experiment, a construct, a *techne*, or craft. Hence the time needed for this radical transformation is not predictable because the gesture that creates the link between understanding and action must be repeated a hundred times, just as the engineer or the craftsman returns repeatedly to his model or his work to make it more effective or function more smoothly. This is why the revolution can seem interminable, for, unlike inert matter, social matter is always changeable. This social project of connection

through capillary flow, this attempt at cultural hegemony transmitted by the cultural revolution of year II, can never really come to an end.

I will allow myself here to turn for a moment to our present conditions. The recent conflict between the movements in France in favor of and against marriage for all and those who oppose it, exemplifies the struggle of at the level of the habits, customs, and values of everyday life and attitudes (*mœurs*). This confrontation coincides less with classic forms of class struggle than with that which, since the French Revolution, has solidified and stratified different types of social groups within the social organism itself. How, in the final analysis, are the “classes” of Saint-Just to be characterized? No doubt they were both classes in the Machiavellian sense: -- *popolo grosso* and *popolo minuto* --, and, sometimes, classes in the Marxist sense: those who control the means of production and those whom they employ. But these are also the classes of habit and custom, for happiness depends on how one imagines it. These are classes in which issues of social conflict in a context of scarce resources overlap with issues of class conflict in the sense of class consciousness dependent on values shared within the groups. Without this overlapping of common interests, entailing the collective daily confrontation of forbidden values and the *mœurs* that arise from those values, it remains difficult to make solid revolutionary alliances. Perhaps the fragility of the

strategy of the *gilets jaunes* is related to the fact that initially it consisted of disguising the struggle of everyday habits, customs, and practices as a struggle of social classes. But, undeniably to be a Yellow Vest is not to belong to a homogenous social class, but to a quite homogeneous cultural class, one solidified by *moeurs* as a way of thinking about what happiness must be now, in manners, customs, principles. In the long run, the improbable fractures that this movement has exposed is indeed something that can properly be called revolutionary. The Yellow Vests seek to end or avoid latent civil war and to realize the ideals of revolution in the lives of all citizens.

As for latent civil war, governmental power has shown that it has never ceased; at times it surfaces and roars viciously onto the scene, taking here an eye, there a hand, from the demonstrators who are more often “without arms and without clubs.”