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Places of history: Politics and Time

Sophie Wahnich, senior fellow in CNRS.

In the fourteenth thesis *On the Concept of History*, Walter Benjamin affirms that ‘history is the object of a construction whose place is not homogeneous and empty time’.¹ He points out that the configuration of the place where the thinking of history can be interrupted depends on the way of considering time. According to Benjamin, the homogeneous and empty time of capitalism does not allow to make history, because nothing can become clear in its unfolding which leaves no room for chance or events. The time of capitalism is an ineluctable and flat time. In order to truly make history, one would have to assume the construction of a time that is more dialectical and complex, and even mixed with the messianic.

Such a complex time was experienced by the French revolutionaries, who knew from experience that time counts, and that time takes various forms: hope, suspense, presence, action, and commemoration can all form places of history at the intersection of time and politics.

Thinking of places of politics requires that one brings together concrete political spaces: rooms, squares, cafés, political battlefields – ‘multiple arenas’ as the political scientists say. But it also requires time itself as matter that is processed in the same way as these places are matter processed by history. This is why, in these places of politics, the spatial and the temporal are inseparable. There must be places for assembly and deliberation, places for secrecy, places for organization and places for making laws. No Roman political life without a forum, no Athenian political life without a theatre, without an ecclesia or without a sacred enclosure for the *hecatombaion*. The French revolutionaries, schooled in classical humanities, knew this. They made history into a place of civic and political education for which antiquity served as the point of reference. In so doing, they saw the present in the light of the democratic culture of Athens or the republican culture of Rome.² Nevertheless, the place of history of the ‘free peoples’ did not prevent them from being creative and claiming the need for creativeness: ‘heroism does not have a model’; ‘nothing should be neglected but nothing should be imitated’ affirmed Saint-Just.

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*, in *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965), 78–94, at 90.

² Sophie Wahnich, “L’héroïsme n’a pas de modèle: une morale de la liberté au printemps de l’an II”, in Nathalie Richard (ed.), *Ecrire l’histoire, la morale de l’histoire* (Marseille: Gaussen, 2011), 10–23.

To make history into a place of politics does not amount to repeating it but to making it a space of learning so as to not repeat our ancestors' mistakes.

On this basis, I will try to understand history as a temporal place, a place of reflection and of political reflexivity. What can the period of the French Revolution offer us today as a subversive social imaginary, and in particular as a place of reflexion for an experience not to be repeated but emulated? In discussing this question, I will provide empirical examples for the reflection that we carry out on the places of history in their relation to time.

1 The place of politics

Drawing on Marc Augé's distinction between places and non-places, Marc Abélès has put forward the notion 'place of politics'.

The anthropologists' notion of place brings together space and time to the extent that this place is first and foremost a historical space. This is why it is opposed to the non-place, which is devoid of the relation to time and of its specific consistency. Augé reserves the anthropological notion of place for 'this concrete and symbolic construction of space, ... which serves as a reference for all those it assigns to a position, however humble and modest'.³ Such places share at least three characteristics: they are 'places of identity, of relations and of history. The layout of the house, the rules of residence, the zoning of the village, placement of altars, configuration of public open spaces, land distribution, correspond for every individual to a system of possibilities, prescriptions and interdicts whose content is both spatial and social.'⁴

Abélès associates this anthropological notion of place with politics. His concept of 'place of politics' testifies to a desire to reinvent, to institute, and to ritualize the political gesture of human life as social life. This presupposes shared places, even if each person has their own household and way of life. Marc Abélès developed this concept while studying the Ochollo in Ethiopia in the 1970s.⁵

1.1 Ochollo

³ Marc Augé, *Non-Places. An Introduction to Supermodernity*, trans. John How (London and New York: Verso, 1995), 51–52.

⁴ Augé, *Non-Places*, 52–53.

⁵ Marc Abélès, 'Ochollo et pratiques d'assemblée', in Marcel Détienne (ed.), *Qui veut prendre la parole, le genre humain*, no. 40–41, 2003/1–2, XX–XX.

Ochollo is a society where assembly practices play a determining role.⁶ However, far from having institutions that immediately embody the whole of the community, the Ochollo hold small assemblies that make decisions by deliberating in the proximity of a given neighbourhood. The construction of the village itself enables this, for in each neighbourhood of this mountainous area of the Ethiopian highlands there is a rocky area devoted to the assemblies. Everything that can be settled through these restricted political processes makes it possible to avoid larger assemblies of this remarkably cohesive society. More complex assembly processes are invoked only when local assemblies fail.

The political processes can be highly elaborate and ritualized. The time of politics is a process of becoming more encompassing – which does not necessarily amount to generalization – according to each encountered difficulty. Time proceeds according to the degree of encompassment, each of which has its specific place. At the very top of the village, there is a platform for the largest assembly. Different sections of the society attend different assemblies, and the largest assembly includes the whole of Ochollo society.

In fact, the members of Ochollo spend a great amount of their time settling disputes, and in doing so they deliberate to reach a decision without having to vote. Voting is often considered a risk.

In the absence of voting, it is necessary to get along and to agree, and this quest for agreement is a way of doing politics that takes time, sometimes several days. It presupposes these places, these rituals of politics, and therefore a time that is tamed and worked, that is to say, shaped by the rituals.

1.2 The Hall of Menus-Plaisirs, May–June 1789

This anthropological concept of the place of politics is reminiscent of the one that Jean-Paul Sartre develops when he discusses the sequence May–June 1789. This historical moment provides him with a point of reflexion with which to understand the Revolution as a political place for a democratic initium.

⁶ Ibid.

Indeed, for Sartre 'a society is first of all the place which contains it'.⁷ How did he arrive at such a statement?

As of the opening of the Estates General, the hall of the menus-plaisirs, formerly a theatre hall, was used to gather the deputies of the three orders of the kingdom. However, there was no specific hall for the Third Estate which decided to call itself Les Communes. When each order was asked to meet without the other two in order to confirm the powers of each deputy, Les Communes occupied the hall reserved for all the Estates. Les Communes thus occupied the common and demanded that the powers of the deputies be communally confirmed.

Necker deplored this situation as he considered it dangerous. The event, which Sartre qualifies as 'material', had immediate political consequences: it accelerated the course of history. From 6 May, as the privileged orders were no longer present in the common hall, they were 'absent' and their absence could be experienced as a 'deficiency'. Here again it is the lived materiality which gives meaning to the situation, according to Sartre: 'This absence, materialized by the emptiness of certain rows, could not but be experienced as a lack. And first and foremost by the people and the members of the public who visited the hall: they saw the Hall of the Estates with one part of the Estates inside, and so this part of the Estates became symbolically the Totality of the Estates pierced by absences'.⁸ 'If the Third Estate had had a room, the reunion of the three orders would have required an act': it would have required asking for the use of either the common hall or some other room. The material situation of not having a specific room made the decision much easier. Now it was enough to wait for the two other orders of the kingdom to join the Third Estate to make an act of demanding the common. According to Sartre, 'the inertia of the deputies was dictated to them by things: they waited for the two other orders as the benches and the rows awaited them'.⁹

The place thus produced a politics of rapid but hidden decision, suspense, and apparent inertia. The capacity to wait itself became a political act of insubordination. The Hall of Menus-Plaisirs was the place of politics for the Third Estate, acting by waiting and nominating itself as commons.

⁷ *Études sartriennes*, n° 12, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁹ *Ibid.*

This relation between the materiality of the space and the situation, or ‘the vagueness and emptiness of an expectation’,¹⁰ leads the Third Estate to be more than the Third Estate.

For Sartre, ‘the hall is the body of the assembly’.¹¹ As he explains, for the public the place is sacred, and the Third Estate is the National Assembly; ‘as an object for the Other, the Third Estate already considers itself the National Assembly’.¹² In this context, inertia takes the form of the act that consists in internalizing this objectivity: ‘the Third Estate’ becomes ‘the Hall’ and ‘the National Assembly’. The public thus constitutes the hall and the deputies of the Third Estate as ‘sacred expectation by all through the place’.¹³ From this Sartre concludes that there is a homothety between the Hall and the expected Society, and he considers this homothety as sacred because it produces the demanding nature of the situation. ‘The Hall is the Society as reality at the centre of the world and as a demand. It is sacred’. Sartre speaks of the ‘spiritualization of the concrete container’ and of a hall which gives ‘being to meanings’. Thus, the sacred amounts to a double movement where ‘the idea materializes itself through matter insofar as matter idealizes itself. A society is first of all the place which contains it’.¹⁴

This materiality of the container helps to highlight what Sartre calls a ‘synthetic totality which exceeds the actors and waits for them’ – an exceeding that leads to the famous spiritualization of politics.

Thus, for Sartre, the Assembly ‘is transformed from the Third Estate into a Totality with a lack’.¹⁵ As we know, Sieyès had already affirmed this strange relation of positive subtraction in *What is the Third Estate?*: ‘Who is bold enough to maintain that the Third Estate does not contain within itself everything needful to constitute a complete nation? It is like a strong and robust man with one arm still in chains. If the privileged order were removed, the nation would not be something less but something more.’¹⁶ The Third Estate, in the same way as the Hall, is the incarnation of the totality of the anticipated society of individuals which is to replace the ordered society of the Ancien

10 *Ibid*, 82.

11 *Ibid*.

12 *Ibid*, 84.

13 *Ibid*, 84; emphasis removed.

14 *Ibid*.

15 *Ibid*, 81

16 Abbé de Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?* (1789).

Regime. Even as individuals, the deputies of the Third Estate embody this unity, and it is in this capacity that they become sacred.

1.3 The roundabout of the Gilets Jaunes

Closer to us in space and time, the roundabouts of the Gilets Jaunes still offer the possibility of thinking the place of politics as a place that is created first of all to enable living together, having meals and coffee together, discussing, and, little by little, getting organized on the strength of a newly discovered solidarity. This place of politics plays the role of home for people, a place of hospitality where decisions are made and where mutual aid is created. It is thus the creation of a new common. Each roundabout occupied during this movement had its specificity but at all of them the movement made itself visible to express clearly what according to those present was dysfunctional in French society and to feel, thanks to these places, new cohesions. This undeniably enabled a better analysis of the inanity of neoliberalism which fragments society. The destruction of the gatherings and the makeshift huts by the state shows how important this 'container' was for the Gilets Jaunes to exist. Hence, it showed that the mere ritual of street demonstrations was not enough to pursue the political invention manifest in this place of politics. Architectural inventiveness, be it a Gallic counter, a triumphal arch, a galley – all of it in an oftentimes humorous way.

The time of the roundabout was that of conviviality and, in Karine Clément's words, of a 'rehabitation of the world'.¹⁷ By leaving their homes and by occupying the crossroads and the toll stations, the protesters inaugurated novel encounters. These encounters allowed for sharing experiences that had developed in solitude and to experience a commonality unveiled by the place of politics. Here again it is as a process that place enables this living world to re-emerge. Strata of a past lived in isolation are being shared in the present through the pleasure of a rediscovered sociality. In the roundabout, matter is transformed. Useless things are made useful and trivial things are turned beautiful. The space of life is rearranged. The Gilets Jaunes valued their collective work. It is through that work that imagination is set in motion and that it redefines the future. One of the explicit claims of the Gilets Jaunes was, in fact, 'I want a future'. In an

¹⁷ Karine Clément, *XXX Condition humaine, conditions politiques*, n°1, 2021.

apparent paradox, this future took the form of a past, that of the French Revolution:¹⁸ the Gilets Jaunes wanted a real revolution. In this sense the roundabouts of the Gilets Jaunes became places of history – places which, to be sure, were often difficult to completely decipher due to the ambivalence of the ‘neither right nor left’ which characterizes the movement.

2. The taking of ritual time in the places of politics

2.1 Rituals: role or effects?

In the chapter entitled ‘Time Regained’ in *The Wild Thought*, while categorizing rituals as rites of control, rites of mourning, or historical rites, Claude Lévi-Strauss introduces the notion of ‘cold history’.¹⁹ According to Lévi-Strauss, rites enable societies to remain immutable, in a homogeneous and more or less empty time. This time is not that of capitalism, however, but rather the time of a society that refuses to change. Rites can serve to manufacture this ‘cold history’, one that allows a society to invent itself as permanent or even immobile in spite of the unceasing passage of time. ‘Hot history’ would in contrast allow societies to think their contradictions and to transform themselves, to invent themselves in a movement that they may or may not call progress. This ‘hot history’ is the one that Sartre highlights in *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* with reference to Jean Jaurès, who first spoke about ‘a historical fever’ in relation to the French Revolution.²⁰ Now, all the described places of politics are ritualized places, places of either a well-oiled rituality or a rituality that invents itself and allows to give form to that which has emerged in an untimely way. The rite of the Ethiopian assemblies helps to keep the division among the Ochollo under control. The rite likewise cools down, so to speak, the history of the revolutionaries and of the Gilets Jaunes. No event that is concerned with the future is alien to the question of ritual, which organizes, stabilizes and codifies gestures and gives rise to a symbolic system. This is why rituality is one of the forms of revolutionary action within the places of politics. One could even say that the French Revolution gave rise to a new rituality of the untimely, and that for this reason there is no opposition between untimeliness and rituality; on the contrary, there

18 Sophie Wahnich, ‘La Révolution française un temps inactuel pour les gilets jaunes’, *Condition humaine, conditions politiques*, no 1, 2021, .

19 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and John Leavitt (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2021), 245–277.

20 Quoted in Jean Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume One*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London and New York: Verso, 2004), 362.

is a complementary relation between them. The more untimely an event is, the more it requires rituality. One could say that rituals control the temperature of politics, either warming it up or cooling it down, always preventing politics as such from disappearing. It is no surprise, then, that the French revolutionaries resorted to rituals intuitively through their sensibility without having to think about it. This happened out of the need to soothe their daily experience, to reassure themselves or to restore their courage. This is why rituals have a unique reflexivity. They reflect this lived need but are also objects of reflection in the usual sense of the term. Some of the most important figures of the Year II of the French Revolution theorize their function and their necessity. They try to create syncretic practices out of what had been invented by the people, before reflecting on it further.

Analysing revolutionary rites and rituals from a historical point of view allows one to reject the direct opposition between 'hot history' and 'cold history', already largely undermined by anthropologists. For, the related process of intensification of conflicts and emotions, which characterizes the sequences of 'hot history', at the same time invites a process of appeasement, that is, 'cold history'. And conversely, when a revolutionary process is frozen, it is necessary to find ritualistic means to warm it up.

In light of an actual revolutionary sequence, then, the opposition between these two regimes of historicity tends to appear as a mere theoretical artifact whose validity is challenged by practical experience. Rituality itself becomes untimely. It is invented to respond to the violence of the event, it comes to symbolize this event, to stabilize it and to reflect on it, in order to make it bearable. In so doing, it allows the actors involved to soothe the anguish that arises from the event. I would like to suggest the following hypothesis: ritual is part of a civil institutionalization of politics, that is to say, of a lived necessity to create civil institutions where a political event could tear society to pieces due to a conflictuality that verges on civil war. Indeed, the intense political conflictuality of a revolutionary moment puts its actors in danger, threatening sociality with disintegration. The rituality invented with the creation of new civil institutions comes to prevent and limit this danger. It is a question of both calming time and metabolizing that which is new. This applies to the period between May and June 1789 when the power struggle between the Third Estate and the two other Estates caused the deputies of the Third Estate to fall from the strongest excitement to the most profound

discouragement.²¹ The Tennis Court Oath can thus be interpreted as a gesture that expresses at the same time the radical dimension of the political event as well as its ritual dimension.

Indeed, this oath is not only an insult directed at the orders of the king, but also an affirmation of a political sacredness which replaces that of the divine right of the king who has the force of arms at his disposal. But it is also a gesture that belongs to an already existing register of rituality, one that had just been re-symbolized by Jacques-Louis David's famous painting, the Oath of the Horatii, and that, one might say, was recycled in the event itself. It can be stated that the ritual is in itself a reflection of the political before becoming an object of reflection.

This is particularly true for the event of the Tennis Court Oath, immediately associated with David's famous unfinished painting.²² The represented Oath was to become a symbol of national unity by the unanimous gesture of those who had taken it. The painting, which was to be placed in the Assembly Hall, was supposed to be a constant reminder of this union.

It is well known that political divisions made the project represented by the painting null and void. The ritual of the oath was nevertheless repeated whenever unity needed to be strengthened. The federations were the high places for taking oaths, be it in villages, towns, or during the *Fête de la fédération* on 14 July 1790.

But the Tennis Court Oath itself became the object of an institution in need of rituals. A society of the Tennis Court Oath organized pilgrimages to the indoor Tennis Court at Versailles and came to ritualize the honouring of the deputies who took this oath, because the foundation of the promise then made had to be renewed constantly. No picture was possible, for it was too early to fix national unity. What was possible was a ritual to express the value of the initial commitment of the deputies which was recalled whenever they were reprimanded or threatened for having abandoned their duty towards the people. In all the phenomena of revolutionary politico-civil ritualization, a dialectic of invention and permanence, of loss and transmission, finally of hot history and cold history, is played out. And such a dialectic needs places of politics.

21 This is shown by Timothy Tackett in *Par la volonté du peuple, comment les députés sont devenus révolutionnaires* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997).

22 On this, see Philippe Bordes, *Le Serment du Jeu de paume de Jacques-Louis David. Le peintre, son milieu et son temps de 1789 à 1792* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1983).

We can see a similar popular inventiveness in the case of the *Gilets Jaunes* and the roundabout: the protestors come to heal themselves on the roundabouts after trying demonstrations.

Revolutionary rituals offer the possibility of thinking about a specific revolutionary temporality, which is played out in three moments. The first is that of the political event, and the second, of its appeasement through ritual emergence. But what is equally important is a third time, in which a new sequence of conflictuality leads to the use of created rituals or symbols, to generate appeasement or renewed ardour, an appeasement or ardour that, one might say, are now being established to the second degree, that is to say, in reference to a beginning that the ritual recalls or reinvents.

After the Champ de Mars Massacre on 17 July 1791, it was necessary both to regain courage and to reclaim the places of politics, without ceasing to maintain and enhance the permanence of the revolution and the life of revolutionaries. This place of politics, which refers to a layering of events, will allow me to show how rites of control, rites of mourning, and commemorative rites are intertwined and reflected upon.

2.2. The Champ de Mars from 1789 to 1792

The Champ de Mars was carved into the revolutionary mythology by all Parisians. The first emotions that arise in relation to this place are characterized by the imaginary of working together and by a fusion of wills. They are followed by the federative emotions of the 14 July 1790 celebration, where the disappointing celebration of the Ancien Régime's collapse rubs shoulders with the satisfaction of having succeeded with this national federation, in affirming the will of the Frenchmen to give each other mutual help and committing the king to an oath of loyalty to the law and the Nation. When the king fled and betrayed his oaths, it was this very spot where the Parisians gathered, picnicked, sang and danced, and where they signed a petition calling for the king to be put on trial. However, on 17 July, the petitioning crowd was suppressed in a bloodbath. The dead gave this place a new sacred and taboo dimension. When, in the spring of 1792, patriotic ministers came into government, the Champ de Mars had to be re-conquered by the side of life. A series of celebrations produced an opportunity to lift the taboo. The re-conquest of this place of politics was at the same time a way to re-conquer the Republic and the imagination of a united people capable of harmony.

The victory of the patriotic ministers in place of the monarchist *feuillants* was celebrated on 25 March 1792.

This was an event with three facets: a stroll around the city of Paris; a banquet that served as the foundation of the meeting; and, after the banquet, the baptism of a child, with all the good fairies of the Revolution gathered around a cradle and another banquet for the baptism. Thus, the celebration was a mixture of commemorative rites, rites of mourning and rites of control.

The stroll crossed the places of politics still saturated with events which manifest the conflictuality between the people and the king. Thus, '[t]he appointment was at the new Hall. From there, to the sound of drums and music and preceded by a cap of freedom carried on a pike with the national colours, people went to the site at the Champs-Élysées where the banquet was to take place. A candid and lively joyfulness, a fraternal abandon presided over this celebration that no disorder disturbed'.²³ By resuming the route that leads to the Champs-Élysées, the stroll served to commemorate two founding moments where the link between the people and their king had been tied and untied. During the October Days, the women of the Hall, led by Théroigne de Méricourt and Reine Audu, had passed by the Champs-Élysées before arriving in Versailles. When the king was brought back to Paris after the flight, he, too, arrived through the Champs-Élysées, escorted in the greatest silence by two rows of national guards with their rifle butts in the air. The choice of the location thus amounts to recalling a specific conflictuality and several important events of the Revolution, but it equally amounts to breaking the silence. The drums, the music, the joy, all were ways of saying that the place had now been reinvested with a different meaning, far from the fear that had occupied it before. It was now a question of celebrating life. But to choose the Champs-Élysées was also to *not* choose the mourning place of the Champ de Mars.

As a place of commensality, the banquet recodes the ritual forms of weddings and funerals where the ritual passages of life are celebrated and where one reconnects with life once the dead are no longer among the living.

The rite thus controls the circulation of emotions, evokes and revokes a certain amount of negativity and welcomes life in general as well as a new political life. It is a question of

²³ As reported in *Le patriote français*, a Brissotin newspaper and at the time part of the Jacobin's Club, and recorded by *Le Moniteur universel*, volume 12.

restarting the movement stopped by fear which is why the banquet is also a commemorative rite of the Revolution's founding moments.

The notion of civic banquet readily expresses an entanglement where having a meal together in the name of a new form of political civility unites the guests in friendship and fraternity. The civic banquet brings the countryside into the social pact and moves the banquet to the urban sphere.²⁴ The displacement is not without consequence, because it moves those present into a highly politicized space, as we have analysed it above, making them the representatives of political life.

In order to recover ardour it is thus necessary to evoke these famous and important events, and to do so one must gather their actors in the very places where their actions were carried out.

A successful political celebration in this moment of the Revolution must be first and foremost a celebration of life for, as everyone knows, the Revolution is an event that includes greatest dangers. One cannot be a revolutionary and be spared from the risk of death, and as the experience of death was still very close, it was necessary to ward it off. The political celebration is staged, the living and dead heroes are all at the banquet table. The victors of the Bastille thus represent a part of the whole. They are the ones who stayed alive while embodying both the dead and the living. The art of the revolutionary ritual lies in knowing how to associate several functions of rite (rites of control, rites of history, rites of mourning) by preparing a setting which is at the same time meticulous and flexible. The event that comes to close the banquet testifies to this consummate art:

'The wife of a drummer from this suburb had given birth the day before. The man was at the party, and we thought we could not end it better than by attending the baptism of the child. It was a girl. She was baptized by Mr Fauchet, the bishop of Calvados and a victor of the Bastille. She was held on the baptismal font by Mr Thuriot, a deputy, and also a victor of the Bastille, and by Mlle Calon, the daughter of Mr Calon, a deputy. The little girl was named Pétion-Nationale-Pique, and her father took the civic oath on her behalf. A flag of the Bastille and the cap of liberty were on the bottoms, and patriotic tunes were played throughout the ceremony,

²⁴ On the background of this correspondence, see Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau, la partie de campagne et le pacte social* (Paris: Société des amis de François Furet, 2002).

which ended with a fraternal meal, provided by Mr Santerre, the president of the party, to the father, godfather, godmother, and several other patriots.’²⁵

The infant represented the renewal brought by people from the suburbs and symbolized ardent commitment. The drum manifests the sense of sacrifice and the ability to maintain ardour, affecting the body through its rhythm.

The baptism that is performed by a prominent figure of the *Cercle social*, Claude Fauchet, combines elements from traditional Catholic religion and the Revolution. Not only is Fauchet a victor of the Bastille, but the Champ de Mars petition is reputed to have been written at the *Cercle social* and its newspapers had been censored in the summer of 1791.

The godfather and godmother, as deputies, represent the Nation. The child is not called Marianne. But if the name Pétion honours the man who embodies republican fidelity (he was at the Champs-de-Mars on 17 July); if the Republic must merge with the sovereign nation; and if to protect itself it must arm itself with pikes [*piques*], then one understands that this strange first name, Pétion-Nationale-Pique, is a metaphor of the anticipated republican future that the celebration evokes. The infant is a bridge between the glorious past and a future capable of fulfilling the revolutionary promise. The day ends with another fraternal meal where the spokesman of the faubourg Saint-Antoine, the brewer Santerre, appears as a new fatherly and philanthropic figure.

Thus, under the figure of the woman in childbirth and the birth of a daughter, the mourning of the republican social pact is completed, and it is only then, on 15 April 1792, that the Champ-de-Mars can be reconquered, as the end point of another parade.

The spirit of the festival is nourished by the image of those who had died for the cause of the Republic on 17 July 1791.

One of the stakes of this festival lies in denouncing the cruelty of despotism and affirming the humanity of a sovereign people in action.

The festival was nourished by a strong conviction: even though the event was one of mourning, the gathered men, women, and children celebrated and danced. We must not give up this way of doing politics. The *Moniteur* evokes ‘a ravishing music sometimes listened to in a religious silence sometimes interrupted by varied dances, irregular but whose very disorder was made more piquant by the fraternal agreement of all’.²⁶

25 *Le patriote français*, no 960, 349.

26 *Le Moniteur universel*, volume 12, 138.

'We left the faubourg Saint-Antoine at eleven o'clock in the morning and arrived at the Champ-de-Mars only at seven in the evening.' The public demonstration was then transformed into a ceremony: 'However, the field of the federation and the altar of the fatherland were covered with citizens who impatiently awaited the arrival of the procession. Soon, loud applause and numerous cheers announced it, and it advanced majestically towards the August altar where the fraternal pact uniting all Frenchmen was sworn'. The celebration of 15 April 1792 invents the ritual gestures of a civic cult rendered to a pagan divinity: Liberty overarching a sacred text of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*. 'The table of the *Declaration of the Rights* was placed there; one gathered around all the signs, all the emblems, all the flags which decorated the march.' These emblems represented those who were absent. Tutelary figures of great ancestors and glorious friends: 'the busts of Voltaire, J.-J. Rousseau, Sydney and Franklin'; the friendly peoples: 'the English, American and French flags'; the provincial revolution: 'banners and inscriptions preceding each group, 83 banners on which one read the names of the 83 departments'; the symbols of the founding event: 'the keys and the flag of the Bastille, stones of this den of despotism'. The ceremony thus acquires not only a national but also a universal value. It finds gestures that belong as much to the ancient Roman religion as to Catholicism: 'Perfumes were burned for expiation... but let us save ourselves from heart-rending memories and allow only tears of joy to flow on this day.'²⁷

In the narrative of the festive event, the end of a taboo is thus marked paralitically. It is indeed a question of recalling the heart-rending memories of the Champ-de-Mars in order to better affirm that the ceremony removes their presence, that it inscribes them in the past, which is commemorated at the very moment when the present freedom is celebrated. 'The chariot of liberty circled the altar, and the air rang with the praises of this unique divinity of the French.' Finally, the third phase of the festival began: 'The night put an end to the ceremony, and dances and farandoles began, again brightened up by civic songs.' This third phase consecrates the Champs-de-Mars as an anthropological place of politics where being a full citizen includes in celebration. The festival is a place where each one plays a role, which is essential to the articulation of the political life and life in general. We rediscover here the sequencing, the altar, the public square with its possibilities, its prohibitions and its prescriptions to social and spatial contents, in this

²⁷ *Ibid.*

specific historical configuration, a hoped for future, an invested present, and a commemorated past. The same gestures accomplish or evoke these three temporalities of history, a history that has become fullness. Hope is again present.

The civic commemorative festival, the political act, and the control rite are thus inseparable. The revolutionary political rituals carry out the work on a temporality where a glorious and courageous past supports a future in the making.

While 'celebrating' always means 'doing', which is a 'knowing-how-to-do' inscribed in previous forms, the arrangement of forms, sounds, and gestures is never pre-established but always re-invented. The writing of the festival is indeed a revolutionary writing in the sense that Roland Barthes understood it in *Writing Degree Zero*: 'there is the impetus of a break and the impetus of a coming to power, there is the very shape of every revolutionary situation, the fundamental ambiguity of which is that Revolution must of necessity borrow, from what it wants to destroy, the very image of what it wants to possess'.²⁸

3. The time of untimely events calls for new places of politics

This could be a conclusion, but it is more than that. As we have seen, time is multi-layered. In every present, there is a bit of indissoluble past in the sense of Sartre's 'practico-inert'.²⁹ It is the time of that which structures us subjectively, a time that no collective or individual subject can escape. However, there is also a memory in which the past is not indissoluble but rather constantly reinvented. There is a time of the places of memory where we tell ourselves stories that suit what we want to bring back from the past, comforting us in the present. Art and history museums are archetypes of such places. They remake their exhibitions to suit the public of each generation.

But to live in a time that is described by its protagonists as 'revolutionary' is to live a new opening of time in a 'precipitate'³⁰ marked by the courage of an improbable decision. The perception of the spectators of these 'initia' is that of a 'sudden

28 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 87.

29 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, t. I et II, Paris, Gallimard, 1960/1985. « Questions de méthode ».

30 On the notion of 'precipitate', see Jacques Derrida, 'Penser ce qui vient', in René Major (ed.), *Derrida pour les temps à venir* (Paris:, Editions Stock), 2007, 17-44.

revolution'.³¹ As a demonstrator in Tahrir Square on 29 January 2011 testified: 'I did not think it could happen, I did not think I would see this. I went to the demonstration out of duty, and I am more and more surprised'; 'I went down and the Revolution was there'.³²

This 'suddenness' does not refer to an improbable desire for emancipation that would not have had time to develop, but rather to the impossibility of foreseeing under which conditions the constraints of subjection and fear of dying could give way to a subjective and new necessity of living free. 'We didn't know that this is what we were dreaming about because it's so big, when it happens we know that it has touched our minds and hearts'.³³

To speak of the heart in this way means to recognize in this movement a catalyst for emotions. It could be characterized as a coalescence of subjectivities in a seesawing movement that founds the revolutionary event. The 1789 constituent process that transformed the Estates General into the National Constituent Assembly in France and the 2010–2011 demonstrations that started with the death of Mohamed Bouazizi and led to the departure of Ben Ali in Tunisia and of Mubarak in Egypt, seem to be far removed from one another. And yet they both serve as historical laboratories that can be linked in order to understand this subjective seesaw, which presupposes places that are both concrete and imaginary.

The Storming of the Bastille aimed above all at protecting the revolutionary practice of assembly by seizing the means for an active armed defence in the face of the threat of monarchic repression. What is at stake in both the French Revolution and the Arab Spring are forms of risking death in the name of freedom. No subjective shift without such a risk and without new places of politics: the street, Tahrir Square, the Hall of Menus-Plaisirs – in all those places, the container is no longer differentiated from the content. But it was necessary first to de-ritualize the Estates General and to accept the uncertainty of the suspense. Some people are overwhelmed by anxiety as soon as they leave the place of politics and find themselves alone.

This is why telling stories or giving an account of history becomes a fundamental resource. It allows one to face the risk of death, or the risk of marginalization or incrimination. The French revolutionaries discussed the Greeks and the Romans; the

31 Fethi Benslama, *Soudain la Révolution* (Paris: Denoël, 2011).

32 Interviews broadcast in the show *Les Pieds sur terre* by Joseph Confavreux on France Culture, 14 February 2011. <https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/les-pieds-sur-terre/revolutions-au-bord-du-nil-jour-1-la-difference-entre-revolution-et-manifestation-2650628>, accessed 01 February 2023.

33 Ibid.

Arab Spring speaks of the French Revolution, and its actors talked about *their* 14 July and Storming of the Bastille, and they also spoke about their earlier revolutions too. As for the Gilets Jaunes, they tell each other about the French Revolution, construct a narrative that becomes a script where the Elysée is the Bastille to be stormed. But it also includes a 'Women's March' on this 'Bastille', a 'Tennis Court Oath', flags, caps, hymns, fake guillotines, show trials. For the lack of invention, however, reality carries the day. The repression is stronger than anyone had foreseen. The bodies are bruised, crippled, intimidated. The huts are destroyed.

One can say that Sartre's group-in-fusion did not have time to consolidate itself by an oath.

What does this mean?

In *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*,³⁴ Sartre distinguishes three forms of what we often call a 'collective'. The first is constituted by a series of individuals who act according to unquestioned habits. They live with a heritage that they do not recognize. Sartre qualifies this as practico-inert. The individuals are 'inert' in the sense of not free, since they do not determine their own actions. As such they constitute a 'discontinuous series'. This series, capable of reacting to stimulation, can be a pawn in the propagandistic aestheticizations which activate the norms incorporated in the practico-inert.

The passage from the serialized collective to the group-in-fusion is produced by the necessity to act together for a goal which is felt as necessary. It is the alert, the alarm that produces a change of state like the passage from a solid matter to a liquid or gaseous matter. To shed light on this kind of transmutation and to stage the question of ubiquity, Sartre chooses to widen the focus and to analyse the Storming of the Bastille.³⁵ According to him, necessity becomes active and common everywhere at the same time and without any necessary point of contact. Paris has become the place of politics as a city in fusion, and at this precise moment the armed Parisians are the subjects of history.

For Sartre, as long as each Parisian acts on his own behalf to defend himself from the royal threat, the city is only a 'collective'. The series dissolves only with the free decision to produce a militia of forty-eight thousand citizens.

34 Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.

35 Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*,XXX.

When against all odds the saving action gains the upper hand in the situation (in view of the 'public safety', as the revolutionaries would say) without the action being concerted or controlled by a leader, the group-in-fusion occurs and testifies to a free praxis. The ubiquity of decisions makes the merging group realize itself in a myriad of singular and analogous merging groups. In each singularity resides the common. 'The city was a fused group.'³⁶

The transmutation of the collective into a group in fusion is never complete. However, the gap between individuals, the maintenance of individual responsibility is not, for Sartre, an obstacle but rather a condition for the group in fusion. These gaps produce 'innumerable refractions of *the same* operation'. Without them there would be no more regulating action, 'the action would be blind, or would become inertia'.³⁷ One can say that it is these gaps that enable decisions to be free.

In order for the group in fusion to not collapse, it is nevertheless necessary to consolidate it, and it is this consolidating function that Sartre calls an 'oath'. The oath is then 'an inert determination of the future'³⁸ that 'protect[s]' the group 'against the threats of the practico-inert'. The 'pledge-conjuration' of the 'Tennis Court' is again evoked but as one of the possible forms of this 'stabilized freedom'.³⁹ The oath is a stake that is always 'a practical contrivance of a free, inert permanence of common unity in everyone' which amounts to saying that the goal of the group is its own maintenance.⁴⁰ Everyone is thus responsible for the whole, as in the articles 34 and 35 of the Declaration of 1793. Sartre speaks of a movement which consists in swearing to make others swear, a movement where, in a common gesture, each one becomes the demand of the freedom of the other. 'Let us swear' is thus a watchword decided together. '[I]n *this dangerous mission* which may save *us*, or save *me* in the totality, I exist in everyone as his trust and courage.'⁴¹

Having turned the tables on the Estates General and reconquered legitimate violence on 14 July 1789, the French revolutionaries equipped themselves with the landmark text of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, or an oath which allowed them to

36 Ibid., 358.

37 Ibid., 409.

38 Ibid., 420

39 Ibid., 419

40 Ibid., 419.

41 Ibid., 426.

verify whether the goals of the revolution are actually being achieved in the course of the conflictual revolutionary movement. Whatever the flaws of this text, it allows us to constantly argue in favour of the world that is to come and must be made to come, and to remain in adversity. Even in the popular defeat of 1790–1791 when martial law authorized the national guard to shoot at any public gathering of more than 20 people; when census suffrage excluded the poor, women, and foreigners from the right to vote, bear arms, and petition; when the victory of economic liberalism seemed limitless; and when a latent religious civil war soon became open, the *Declaration of Rights* remained a crucial landmark and resource. From 1789 to 1795, the most radical revolutionaries were fighting on all these fronts with explicit reference to it, and they, too, were enthused as well as discouraged.

The place of politics became this oath-declaration which is activated in different concrete material places of politics: a party, the assembly, an altar, a house where children learn to read, and so on.

Oath and the history of oath then become places of history. They are anachronistic because the present is exhausted or cheats on its true content. One then seeks to return to the root of one's place of politics through objects, texts, and practices against the homogeneous and empty time of capitalism. It is a question of finding lost treasures, which for some is the French Revolution, for others the Paris Commune or May 1968. For the French revolutionaries it was the moments of freedom in history, such as antiquity and Republicanism. It is in this very quest that the new places of politics are reinvented. 'Nothing should be neglected but nothing should be imitated.' History is no longer the place for a homogeneous and empty time but a place for a time filled with phantoms, a time creating spirals, layers of fog, and ruptures. There are various forms of time for a contemporary history, which is a history of rifts, re-enactments, and revivals.