

A Modern Hero. Bonaparte and the Culture of Heroism

**Patrice Gueniffey
EHES**

Texte provisoire: ne pas citer

"The sublime simplicity of a republican hero": the figure of Bonaparte as hero spreads after the battle of Arcola, in November 1796, as painted later by the famous painter Antoine-Jean Gros.

Bonaparte, 27 years old at the time, is represented on the bridge of Arcola, leading his troops during the supposedly victorious assault on Austrian positions. In fact, the assault was not successful; besides, Bonaparte fell down in a small river by the side of the road and was rescued by his brother Louis.

A brief summary: the First Italian Campaign began in the spring of 1796, and was followed by a series of extraordinary victories in North Italy, from Torino to Milan. Piedmont and Lombardy are conquered by the month of May. Then, from July to the end of the year, Austrian armies are trying, four times, to come back, but they fail each and every time. The battle of Arcole occurs during Austria's third attempt to change the military situation. The fourth such attempt, in January 1797, will be the last one. After being defeated at Rivoli (15 January 1797), the Austrians are reduced to capitulation. The war in Italy is over.

Come back now to the representation of Bonaparte after Arcola.

The battle of Arcola did not invent the glory of Bonaparte: this kept growing since the battle of Lodi, in May 1796. Since that victory, Bonaparte was everywhere, in newspapers, in poems, in songs, on stage (actors interrupted their own performance to announce Bonaparte's new victories) and everywhere one could buy paintings, medals, statues: and not only in France, but also in Italy, in Germany and, in fact, everywhere across Europe.

A quote of Germaine de Staël could help us to understand the significance of this phenomenon:

“It was the first time since the beginning of the Revolution that everybody talked about one man, and one alone, this man who was going to put himself in the place of all, grab fame for himself, and make mankind anonymous.”

Scholars are very cautious about this phenomenon, and often they suspect it was only the result of propaganda: the figure of young Bonaparte as Hero? Simply a myth, a lie, a deliberate invention. Napoleon's legend? The work of Napoleon himself: “His legend”, says a famous historian of Napoleon era, Jean Tulard, “he has made it himself. His genius was to understand, one of the first to do so, the importance of propaganda in modern times.”

Even if we agree with this assertion, we must add that Bonaparte was not the only author of his own legend: the French government at that time, the Directory, was certainly responsible for part of it. On the one hand, Bonaparte did nothing to stop the growth of the legend, but, on the other hand, the Directory contributed to it by celebrating all victories and by applauding Bonaparte as a genius and a savior. In fact, the Directory had serious reasons

to celebrate Bonaparte's victories: while they feared a military putsch, military victories were the only good news the Directors could give to the French people. Thus, the government was forced to celebrate the army and its chiefs, especially Bonaparte, just in hopes to be able to continue ruling France for a while, until the army would seize power. But political interest was not the only motivation of the Directors' rather compliant attitude towards Bonaparte. They were really excited, just like the public was, by so many victories in so few months. Carnot, one of the members of the Directory, was not lying when he was referring to Bonaparte, in his Letters, as: "the Hero of all French people", or "the greatest captain in history", or "the benefactor and legislator of a free people"... No other chief of the republican army had won so often and so brilliantly.

This being said, Bonaparte was certainly very adept at producing his own publicity.

One could say he had understood very well Machiavelli's lesson: since the prince is judged on appearance and not on his true nature, he has to be a simulator and dissimulator in order to reign over people; he has to give a positive public image of himself.

Second, one could say that Bonaparte well understood the importance of public opinion in modern societies. He especially grasped the fact that since the Revolution, the superiority of birth, of origins, of blood, had been replaced by the superiority of talent, as recognized by the judgment of the public opinion.

The question was not, for Bonaparte, to gain a legitimacy he could oppose to the government's own legitimacy for having, at least, taken the power (it was not the time was for such a move); the question was to gain, with the support of the public opinion, a legitimacy that would render him free and independent with regard to the orders and instructions of the French government: he just wanted, at this time, to act as he wished in Italy, that is: not only as a military commander, but as a foreign policy chief as well. He wanted to be sovereign in Italy.

For this, he had to dazzle in order to be free, liberated from any submission to the government's instructions.

So, it is true: there is propaganda in the genesis of the figure of Bonaparte as a Hero: proclamations, newspapers, paintings, poems, that all describe him as a "general-citizen", who prefers peace and cultivates the sciences but makes war if necessary, and is as able to make war as he is to govern, or to write constitutions, or to discuss astronomy and physics with scientists. A complete man, the best, the first, in all activities: war, government, the arts and the sciences.

This being established, we need to clarify one more point: we need to be careful not to exaggerate the efficiency of propaganda.

Propaganda is efficient only if its recipients consent to it. Propaganda does not have the power to rule people's minds, even in the most authoritarian regimes. There, if people remain silent and obey, it is less because of the efficiency of the propaganda than because of the actions of the police. Neither

the French government nor its police had, in 1796, the capacity to impose silence to the population, and Bonaparte was not, yet, powerful enough to be able to force the French people to believe he is a Genius and a Hero. We must conclude that if it was propaganda, it was the kind of propaganda that was responding to the expectations of the public opinion.

We can't forget either that the victories of the French army in Italy were really extraordinary. For many people, it was like a sort of miracle, some unnatural thing, at least something unknown since the Ancient times. Everyone compared Bonaparte's victories with the victories of Ancient Roman armies. The enemies of Bonaparte themselves admitted there was something special in his story.

True, his epic exploits were further enhanced by the brilliant style of the reports, bulletins, and proclamations.

These reports, though, were not as deceitful as we imagine.

Nothing more true, indeed, than the report he sends to the government just after the battle of Arcola.

Bonaparte hides nothing, neither the failure of the troops, nor the bravery of his officers.

He does not misrepresent the reality, he magnifies it.

His style is that of a writer, not of a military leader. He conveys a sweeping story of fatigue, courage, cowardice, surprise, sacrifice, suffering and death in the midst of the swamps of Arcola.

As told by Bonaparte, war is no longer a mathematical operation, but a passionate drama, with horror and greatness, inhumanity and virtue. It was another reason why this so-called “propaganda” was so efficient: its style was in accordance with the sensibilities of that time.

Antoine-Jean Gros’ *Bonaparte au pont d’Arcole* is the best pictorial expression of the figure of the Bonaparte-Hero. Gros, on the probable indications of his model, took several liberties with the truth since, while simply episodic, the appearance of Bonaparte on the bridge becomes the *whole* battle in the painting. Moreover, the posture of Bonaparte—sword drawn as if he is charging, hair and flag waving in the wind, glancing in his rear—recalls another image: that of a Bonaparte leading his army victoriously across the bridge, even though, in reality, he did not succeed in victoriously crossing the bridge. But this is hardly the most important fact. Bonaparte fills up the whole frame; neither the field of battle is seen—if it is not in the background, and then the sky is obscured by smoke—nor the Arcole Bridge, nor any soldier of the two armies. The painting does not represent a heroic scene as the Revolution had already inspired; it sets the stage for the hero himself, and only him.

The Enlightenment had revived the basis for the cult of great men. Kings, saints, conquerors; too many false idols, they said, were offered by the powerful for the adulation of the masses. The enlightened century thus

clarified the preference for men made famous by their discoveries or benevolent actions on behalf of the happiness and progress of civilization.

Gros' work, novel in its composition and spirit, registers itself under the extension of a heroic culture developed, somewhat in spite of itself, by the Revolution.

But while redefining titles, forms, and objects of celebration, the Enlightenment philosophes had not contested the principle of the cult of great men. They considered, first of all, that men had need to be able to admire; next, that to celebrate great men as models could help the weak among us to become more courageous and more virtuous; finally, they thought that the celebration of great men would lose all of its danger in modern societies: in effect, the public opinion would exercise over it a sort of sovereign power. The praises addressed to great men would be, from that time on, granted by the free suffrage of the citizens and thus consecrate the ultimate power of the public opinion. An example was often cited: the triumphal return of Voltaire and Rousseau to Paris in 1778, for whom the Parisians organized a royalty-worthy entry, complete with huge procession who accompanied them to their residences.

However, as the century progressed, doubts began to arise: could a society based on equal rights pretend to celebrate great men without creating ominous distinctions between its citizens? Should society not award its tributes to more authentic forms of grandeur? The deeds of the virtuous citizen, those of the good father of the family, are they not worthy of the

greatest epics? The simple performance of duty, is that not as worthy of respect as the most dazzling glory? Hence, one reads in an *Essai sur les éloges* from this time period:

Athens erected an altar to an unknown god; we could erect on the earth a statue with this inscription: to virtuous men that we do not know.

Ignored during life, forgotten after death, the less they seek renown, the greater they become.

In 1784, it is the “just citizen,” the modest hero, anonymous, even obscure, that Bernardin de Saint-Pierre placed at the center of his “Élysée,” a lush pantheon dotted with statues, where he is surrounded by equally anonymous mothers of families and, farther, much farther, by the circle of illustrious defenders of the homeland, of men of letters and inventors. Not only does Bernadin contest the traditional criteria of grandeur: he also rejects the inequality and the separation that grandeur introduces among men. The true grandeur, he would say, does not separate men, it brings them together, it makes them equal, since it finds itself in each of them.

Down, therefore, with the great man of the classical age, of the century of Louis the fourteenth, who uncovered exceptional talents thanks to extraordinary circumstances and whom an infinite distance separated from his contemporaries. To this greatness that set individuals apart, Bernardin de

Saint-Pierre opposed another sort of greatness which brings them together, replacing in this way the heroism rooted in exceptional qualities with a heroism without qualities and perfectly ordinary.

The French Revolution was at first on Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's side: The Revolution dreamed of inaugurating a society of equal citizens who, without being perfectly virtuous, would be so enough to subdue their own private interests. If France, regenerated by the Revolution, was to pay homage to a great man, it would have to be to the very people, since the Revolution was the work of this collective being, supposedly endowed with feelings, reason, and will power. The historian Jules Michelet, who knew the Revolution 'from the inside' so to speak, so profoundly was he imbued with its spirit and ideals, was the most profound of those who, from Joseph de Maistre to Karl Marx, declared that the French Revolution was a great age without great men.

The revolutionaries themselves thought the same way. For a long time, they made every effort to bring into reality the idea of a collective hero, perfectly anonymous. They came as close as possible to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's dream during the Festival of the Supreme Being, celebrated in Paris on 8 June 1794: the organizers took care to avoid any hint to the discords of the Revolution the better to display the spectacle of a liberated and reconciled society, where greatness is everywhere precisely because it is nowhere; they banished from memory the busts of the Philosophes, of the heroes of Antiquity, and those of the martyrs of the Revolution, all of them exhibited until then in

civil ceremonies; instead, they pulled out of anonymity two young soldiers of 13 and 14 years of age, Viala and Bara, fallen in combat, and called on to become the almost ordinary heroes of a Republic without heroes.

However, giving to the regenerated France two heroes to admire and imitate, amounted to admitting that Bernardin's dream would remain a utopia; it amounted to admitting that virtue, far from being an innate quality, requires from each individual efforts that not all are able to fulfill, at least not without help: the Republic, therefore, had to call on great men to serve as examples.

This idea had already inspired, in 1790, the creation of the Panthéon; but, aware that there was but a small step from admiration to idolatry, the revolutionaries only paid homage to the dead. And yet, the imagined society, so perfectly egalitarian, remained in limbo.

The French Revolution – and this is true for any revolution – maintained a conflicting, to be sure, but still very tight relationship with heroism. If the great man is, by definition, the one who defies an ostensible fatality, the one who dares to go where common mortals do not dare to go, if, therefore, heroism is inherently a transgression, then, what is there more heroic than a revolution? For a revolution whose aims are, ultimately, overthrowing the existing order in favor of another.

In the case of the Revolution of 1789, the cult of heroism played the part of a new religion. Alexis de Tocqueville will say that, at that time, heroism had replaced Christianity and had – I quote – torn the French from their “individual

selfishness”; it – heroism – pushed them to “devotion,” pushed them to sacrifice, it made them insensitive to common affections, to family ties, to their day to day interests; and finally, Tocqueville says, this new religion allowed society to survive et to avoid complete destruction.

Finally, heroism cannot be separated from the revolutionary figure. Indeed, the revolutionary is always confident beyond doubt that the revolution is carved onto historical necessity; but the events teach him that in order to succeed, the Revolution must overcome numerous obstacles. Consequently, the revolutionary is persuaded that this revolution written into necessity, this revolution whose final success is absolutely certain, this revolution requires at the same time his intervention and maybe even his sacrifice. Which is why he sees himself not as the passive instrument of necessity but rather as a hero who - because he is ready to sacrifice everything to the cause, including his own life and that of others - rises above most other men, above the desires, sorrows, and rules that governed the existence of the others.

And so, the French Revolution generates heroes constantly, from Marat to Robespierre. They represent two apparently contradictory issues:

1. They are the symbol of an anonymous collectivity which exercises a faceless power over itself and
2. They are at the same time exemplary types who have already walked from start to finish the entire road on which their comrades have barely ventured the first step.

They embody the sovereign people in his anonymity even as they embody a people who does not yet exist.

And so, these great figures –great by their exceptionality – recreate between themselves and the mass of their admirers the kind of relationship, remote and unequal, associated with the hero of the classical age that the Revolution sought to abolish.

Which is why the Revolution first honors its great men and then destroys what it had adored, reproaching itself for indulging in “individual idolatry”: the Revolution sends Mirabeau and Marat to the Pantheon only to drag their corpses through the mud soon afterwards.

.....
Everything changes after the 9th of Thermidor, after the fall of Robespierre, and the end of the Terror. The denunciation of the crimes of that period invalidates in one fell swoop the heroic conception of politics. These ‘blood-suckers’ who deny their crimes to save their heads, these despots, ignorant and inebriated – as shown in “Inside of an revolutionary committee” a very famous print during the Thermidorian period – these is then who they are, stripped of their costumes and of their masks, these fervently celebrated heroes!

It is at this juncture that the heroic values, previously discarded in the political sphere, find a new part to play on a stage always suitable for heroes and heroic gestures: the war; and, in 1796 and 1797, in Italy, Bonaparte restores and rejuvenates a role neglected since Robespierre’s fall: the hero who represented

the avant-garde of the Revolution is followed by the figure of the 'savior' awaited by an entire nation.

Why a general?

1. Not only is France embroiled in a crisis of such complexity and depth that no exit is in sight, but also the idea of monarchy is still so much ingrained in so many minds that - along with the hardships of the times and with the Republic looking more and more like an accident - scores of Frenchmen see no other solution but the return to a form of absolute power: and generals are those who most naturally embody this type of power.
2. Why Bonaparte instead of another general - and there was no shortage of generals in France?

Was he not, a priori, the one least destined to personify the greatest number? He was born in Corsica, the year the island had been attached to the kingdom; he was speaking French badly, mixing French and Italian words, and he himself felt like a stranger in France (he had, in his youth, fought for Corsica's independence).

True, the exploits of the army of Italy had counted for much in this decision. But Bonaparte derived his force not only from his victories, from the ability to dominate all those who approached him, from his undeniable talent to produce his own advertising; his force came also from his capacity to reconcile in his

own person, or rather in the image he was giving of his own person, the contradictory aspirations of the public opinion of the moment:

On the one hand, the French were tired of Revolution; they wanted to see it come to an end. On the other hand, they refused to sacrifice the material and symbolical gains of the Revolution. Equation a priori without solution, but one that Bonaparte alone had the power to solve, thanks to the simultaneously revolutionary and post-revolutionary aspects of his character.

1. Revolutionary figure: he was such especially by his youth, seeing that the Revolution had aged badly, and very fast. The Revolution had loved youth with a passion: was it not supposed to mark a new beginning in History and to personify the youth of an everlasting world? At the time the Revolution reaches its third age, with its worn-out actors and its thwarted ideals, the myth of its eternal youth is reincarnated in the army, first of all in the Army of Italy whose soldiers were so young that – in the words of Stendhal – their 27 years old general (that is, Bonaparte) was rumored to be the oldest man in the entire army. Before being a masterpiece of strategy, the campaign of 1796 was a hymn to youth.
2. Bonaparte symbolizes the Revolution's strength of will: in Italy, he creates States, writes constitutions and laws; but he embodies equally the promise of equality: the spirit of the Revolution, meaning, the feeling of being able to accomplish the impossible. This spirit is revived so much more in the military sphere since these 25 year old generals are for

the most part – it is the case with Bonaparte – risen from the ranks.

Their stunning ascent confirms the ideals of the Revolution – the principle of equality – in ways that were not found in civilian life, where the advantages of fortune have rapidly replaced those of birth.

The rise of these young officers also explains why the army had become the last refuge, the last bastion, of the Revolution. How could that be different, in an institution where personal ambitions have been so long kept in check by aristocratic rules of advancement? Logically, the Army is apprehensive of a monarchical restoration which would take away grades earned on the battlefield and give precedence – again - to aristocratic privileges. Nothing can make the Army backtrack: this will be obvious again, in 1814 and in 1815, when the Bourbons return. The Revolution hates the devotees of the Old Regime who have emigrated, but the Army, on its side, hates them because they are the enemies to be encountered on the battlefield.

Revolutionary out of interests, the Army is also revolutionary out of passion, and all the more whole-heartedly so that, unlike the political personnel, shackled to its past, 1793 does not make soldiers think of the Terror, but of a gigantic effort, strewn with battles and victories against foreign invaders. The Army can in this way profess allegiance to the entire Revolution, its most tragic moments included. Finally, the Army embodies the Revolution delivered from the Terror, the Revolution without the Terror.

It is in this sense that the character Bonaparte, representative of the the Revolution in so many ways, is a post-revolutionary character at the same time: he embodies the Revolution, but not the civil war within.

He had obtained on the battlefield a legitimacy that he will soon brandish against the legitimacy of the government (the Brumaire coup). It is true that at Toulon, maybe – in 1793 royalists from Toulon had surrendered the port-city to the English; Bonaparte had contributed to recapturing the city – and it is true that during the 13 Vendémiaire for sure – when he led the repression against royalists insurgents in Paris - he had taken part in episodes of civil war; but, in the end, the epic Italian campaign erased all that came before.

He, Bonaparte, is the son of a nation at war, not the product of political infighting. He receives the power to stand for values unstained by either partisan interests or the memory of recent fractures. Two more years and he will derive from this the power to transcend French disagreements, to be at once on the left and on the right of any issue, to unite the pre-1789 France with the post 1789 France.

Only a military man could accomplish such a feat.

Indeed, the armies that export the ideas of the French Revolution and threaten the old European monarchies mend at the same time, through their marches across Europe, the continuity of history; they bridge the gap between before and after 1789. In Italy and in Germany, the republican

Armies march on the roads treaded by the soldiers of the Old Regime. The theater of military operations is the same; the fields of battle are the same as during the Old Regime wars. On the battlefield, the republican soldier rediscovers the values that, in all time-periods, make the greatness of the military profession: courage, honor, commitment, loyalty.

In this way, by reconnecting with values specific to the old aristocratic society, the Revolution reconnects with the Old Regime. But at the same time, this does not mean – just the contrary – that the Old Regime has caught up with the Revolution by means of warfare.

Just the contrary, the war deprives the Old Regime of the past and of the tradition which constituted its main claims to legitimacy. The war accomplished the complete demise of the Old Regime society by incorporating its values, especially the military ones, into the heritage of the Revolution. In a certain way, it is the task of warriors to succeed where the men of 1789 have failed: the war allows them to overtake the values of the aristocracy, and through them equality is achieved *from above* while the political order had attempted to achieve equality *from below* by means of destroying all the old values. The army fulfills the dream of an entire generation, a dream which did not necessary aimed at eradicating all aristocratic culture, but at giving a democratic reorientation to aristocratic culture by replacing birth titles with merit.

Bonaparte's politics of 'fusion' between the elites of the Old and the New regimes, a landmark of the Consulate, will only be the political extension of what he had discovered during the Italian campaigns, that is: the marriage between democracy and aristocracy.

This synthesis, this fusion will later on, throughout the imperial saga, completely reshape the nineteenth century European society. It will associate – not without frictions and tensions – the character of the bourgeois to the character of the military; it will join the utilitarian ethics of interest to the ethics of honor, brotherhood in arms, and sacrifice for the fatherland; it will bring together the liberty of the Ancients and the freedom of the Moderns. The Bonaparte persona, rather than representing, as Nietzsche thought, a final, strange and ephemeral resurrection of the old order of things, embodies this association of opposites, characteristic for the first century of the history of the democratic world. Without a doubt, the nineteenth century will interpret Napoleon's fall as proof of the final defeat of the ancient hero clashing with the modern bourgeois, but what else will the colonial epic story be later on if not another display - on the world's stage - of inextricably ancient and modern passions, at once aristocratic and bourgeois, previously expressed in the wars of the Revolution and of the Empire.

This association between the bourgeois and the hero engenders the cult created around Bonaparte, at the same time invincible conqueror and modest reader of great poets. His marriage with Joséphine – itself an act

simultaneously bohemian, aristocratic, and bourgeois – illustrates the melting or rather the intermingling between traditions a priori antagonistic, which will infuse the entire century. Bonaparte is not modern only by his bourgeois features, because he loves his wife, shares her bed, and does not hesitate to make domestic scenes that would have been unthinkable for an Old Regime aristocrat; he is also modern by the heroic side of his persona. What is apparently most ancient, almost antique, is maybe what makes him the most modern. Napoleon is the figure of the modern individual. The side of him that speaks to modern imaginations is his conviction – so much like our conviction – that, as he said once, “his destiny will not resist to his will.”

In the eyes of his contemporaries, Bonaparte is the man who, without ancestors and without a name, builds himself up by the force of his will, of his energy, of his work and of his talent; the man, so to speak, born of himself, who transforms his life into destiny and elevates himself up to new heights by pushing aside all accepted limitations.

There is something existential in the life of this man. As he saw perfect happiness only in the ‘most complete development of his faculties’ he strove to verify this maxim every day by never allowing a single hour to go to waste. He was persuaded that life had meaning only if lived on an ever larger and grander scale. In glory, like in the love inspired by Joséphine, he was seeking this very energy where his life found meaning.

This is the secret for the fascination still wielded by the persona of Napoleon. He is the one who **does** and, to quote Thomas Carlyle's definition of the hero, he is the one 'who can do more and better' an embodiment of values such as exceptional energy and worship of larger than life individuals, values that will be later celebrated by romanticism. Which explains Goethe's exclamation – after having the opportunity of meeting with Napoleon: “This is how Napoleon was a formidable character! Always enlightened, always clear-minded and decisive, and endowed at any time with the energy of carrying out, right away, everything he had identified as advantageous and necessary. His life was the life of a demi-god.”

This does not mean, however, that his contemporaries dreamed of *doing* things like Bonaparte was doing, since he was inimitable, unmatched, out of reach.

“His destiny” Goethe added, “was of a brilliance such as the world has never seen before him, and will maybe never see after him. Yes, yes: he was one fellow with whom we obviously cannot compete in equal terms.”

The hero offers himself to admiration, but not to imitation. This means, on the contrary, that his contemporaries dreamed of *being* like him, animated by the same vital energy which allowed him, since the beginning of his domination, to transform the world around him and turned it into the fabric and the background of his destiny. He was exemplary and inimitable at the same time. But were not the mythological heroes themselves - part-men, part-gods - close and so exceedingly out of reach at the same time?