THE KING AND THE CROWD: DIVINE RIGHT AND POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY IN THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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> We French cannot really think about politics or philosophy or literature without remembering that all this— politics, philosophy, literature—began, in the modern world, under the sign of a crime. A crime was committed in France in 1793. They killed a good and entirely likable king who was the incarnation of legitimacy. We cannot not remember that this crime was horrible... When we speak about writing, the accent is on what is necessarily criminal in writing.
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> (Jean-François Lyotard, "Discussion Lyotard-Rorty" 583; quoted in Dunn 165)

> The condemnation of the king is at the crux of our contemporary history. It symbolizes the secularization of our history and the disincarnation of the Christian God.
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> (Albert Camus, *The Rebel* 120; quoted in Dunn 140)

Susan Dunn makes a well-documented case that the death of Louis XVI was unconsciously understood, especially by the Jacobins, as a human sacrifice that was necessary for the founding of the republic. "Louis must die because the *patrie* must live," said Robespierre at the king's trial, and the representative Carra considered Louis "the source of corruption and servitude . . . the fatal talisman of all our ills" whose death would cause the people to be "regenerated in morality and virtue" (Dunn 15-37). The king was a monster and the source of all the ills, and his death

had the power to alleviate those ills and regenerate the nation. This image of the king as sacrificial victim persisted throughout the first half of the nineteenth century in French literature and politics, sometimes assimilating itself to the image of Jesus Christ who died for the sins of the world. Legitimist writers like Joseph de Maistre saw his death precisely in this light as a great Christian sacrifice that would do France and the world good (Dunn 28-37). The king as a sacred monster whose life causes all ill and whose death brings healing is the classic figure of the scapegoat or sacrificial victim identified by René Girard. Susan Dunn recognizes this but because she does not know Girard's mimetic theory she is not able to explain the significance of the scapegoat king. Her work is, indeed, as Conor Cruise O'Brien says in the foreword, a work of demonstration rather than argument, of evidence rather than interpretation. I offer a mimetic interpretation of the Jacobin claim that the death of the king was the human sacrifice that founded the republic, and an argument that a universally operative generative mechanism forged the historical events of the revolution.[1]

There is no essential difference between the sovereignty of the king and the sovereignty of the people. In both cases sovereignty arises from a metaphorical contract that threatens death to anyone who violates it. The royal metaphors are organic while the revolutionary metaphors are legal and rational, but they all express the sacrificial structure of political power. Revolutionary democracy imports the fiction of rationality to obscure its sacrificial structure. The desire of the general will for contractual equality is a transformation of mimetic desire in search of a victim around which the bad violence of mimetic rivalry can coalesce into the good violence of sacred order. *Sovereignty, therefore, is structurally single and simple; it is violence transformed through the sacred into the powers of order.* Max Weber understood this in general if not in its particulars when he defined sovereignty as the monopoly of the means of violence within a single territory.[2]

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[1] Mimetic theory was discovered by René Girard. I have given an account of my understanding of it in *The Gospel and the Sacred* 129-52. The idea of a mechanism universally operative in human history is justified in the emerging discipline of evolutionary psychology. Such mechanisms are the result of the interaction of genetic and environmental factors in the process of evolution (see Robert Wright).

[2] The precise quotation from Weber is as follows: "The state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a

The transition from royal to popular sovereignty is a transformation of the basic pattern of victim and group. The two poles of king and crowd become the single pole of the crowd governing itself. The line between victim and group is erased, and the victim's function as the conductor of violence out of the group is suspended. The group takes the violence that was focused on the victim back into itself. This violence has, however, been shaped by its long attachment to the king and so its return does not cause the group to revert to a total sacrificial crisis. There is increased disorder and victimage during the transition from monarchy to democracy, and the king has to act out the role of victim, but the sacral control that kingship exercised over violence still holds more or less and royal violence becomes *mutatis mutandis* the democratic violence of the general will. Royal power becomes popular sovereignty and divine right becomes civil religion.

From this point of view democracy is a myth of the murder of kings, and a ritual of self-scapegoating. The victim, with all the power of the sacred adhering to him, is now inside rather than outside the group. He is, in fact, the soul of the group, the general will itself. The revolutionary nation takes the royal scapegoat into itself, identifies with it by identifying itself as sovereign, and thus turns itself into a scapegoat. The nation makes itself the scapegoat by claiming sovereignty for its general will, that is, by putting itself in the place of the king. If the sacral unity of the nation is strong enough to hold it together after this change it will scapegoat itself as a whole and become the victim nation. In that case the whole nation together would be animated by self-rejection; it would turn its energy of mimetic rivalry, formerly directed onto the victim/king, against itself. Since this cannot be borne, it will deflect this energy onto another nation and so pose as the victim of a rival nation, attributing to the other the rejection it feels for itself. Thus the group becomes its own savior by self-rejection, and that rejection is projected outwards onto rival nations in the proximity. One would expect revolutionary France to declare war on its neighbors, and this it does without exception! The common self of the general will is the Rousseauvian romantic, self-scapegoating and solitary subject, projected onto the group, to which the group appears unjustly afflicted, driven out and scorned. Nietzsche understood this perfectly when

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given territory ... a relation of men dominating men . . . supported by means of legitimate (i.e. considered to be legitimate) violence" (78).

he identified resentful morality as constituted by negative comparison with outsiders.[3]

If, however, the sacral unity is not strong enough, the nation will fall apart into warring groups that scapegoat each other. In this case the rivalry will be about ownership of the central symbols of the nation, about which group is true to the general will and so entitled to the prestige of the national symbols. In a stable democracy this internal rivalry is ritualized in periodic elections which are contests for the right to interpret the meaning of the general will and use the symbols to govern. In a new or unstable democracy the ritual might break down and the ritual conflict of democratic process become civil war. The Jacobin state, in fact, plunged into civil war.

According to mimetic theory, therefore, the deep structure of the transition from royal to popular sovereignty is the reversal of the direction of the surrogate victim mechanism. Originally the mechanism worked from the inside out, now it works from the outside in, originally by exclusion, now by inclusion. The victim was originally expelled and killed, and from a place outside the group exercised the ordering power of the sacred. It threatened and it promised, and from it emanated the powers of prohibition, ritual, and myth. This power is now taken back into the group. In a vivid metaphor that occurs often in the royalist propaganda of the revolution, the mob ingests the victim and thus dismantles the bipolar structure of victim and group, ruler and ruled, king and crowd. Popular sovereignty replaces the bipolar structure of monarchy with the unipolar structure of self-government.

If this account of the deep structure of the revolutionary situation is correct, we might expect to find in the narrative of the revolution disorder and violence, scapegoating and resentment (self-scapegoating) expressed as the awareness of a cloud of internal and external enemies, and above all, a king treated as a sacred victim and a crowd that orders itself by means of its unanimous hostility to the king. We find all these features in the history

[3] Nietzsche: "The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values. . . . While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is 'outside', what is 'different', what is 'not itself ; and *this* No is its creative deed. The inversion of the value-positing eye—this *need* to direct one's view outward instead of back to oneself—is of the essence of *ressentiment:* in order to exist, slave morality always first needs a hostile external world; it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally reaction" (36-7; emphases original).

of the revolution, especially the Jacobin period from 1792-1794. They are the windows onto the mechanism that generates the events of the transition from royal to popular sovereignty.

The king and the crowd are, therefore, counterparts on the thematic level of the victim and the group on the generative level of the narrative of the revolution. For this reason we expect to find marks of the victim on the king, marks of the lynch mob in the crowd, and traces of scapegoating and sacrifice in the relations between the two. These marks are there, sometimes clear, sometimes faint, always more or less transformed, and always requiring the heuristic lens of the theory to spot them and bring them to light and coherence. The idea of the divine right of the king is well documented, and the theory of the crowd well-developed, so I do not need to expound them here. Rather let me try to show how the dynamics of the mechanism can be discerned in the history of the revolution itself.

The Jacobin Republic

Walzer shows us that he intuits the role of the victim when he writes of the need to dispel the mystery of kingship if democracy is to be securely founded, and refers to the Machiavellian insight that political origins are ineluctably bloody, because there are always rivals, and only the winner founds the state. Quoting Machiavelli (*The Discourses* I, 9), Walzer says, "to found a republic, one must be alone" (5).[4] This solitary founder is however, paradoxically, not the winner but the loser, the scapegoat who provides the opportunity for the structure of all against one to come into being. The king founded the republic by providing this opportunity, by being the goat. Because they wished to refound the state on a new, egalitarian basis, the radical revolutionaries believed they had to destroy the monarchy itself and not just an individual monarch. For them the king was the foundation of inequality, a sign of the false claim that God intended humans to be unequal and to live in a hierarchy based on privilege. There could be no justice as long as there was a king of any kind. Thus the content of their mythology.

"Louis started to die on 21 June 1791," writes François Furet, when he was caught at Varennes trying to flee the country (96). Thus he displayed

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[4] Walzer further acknowledges that "sacred kingship was pervasive in human history—a fact that suggests a certain independence from sociological determination," and reflects on ". . . the central importance of this strange and yet commonplace creed which taught one man to rule and everyone else to obey" (11).

his insincerity and distaste for the measures leading in the direction of constitutional monarchy that he had been forced to accept. On September 14 he signed the constitution that officially made him a constitutional monarch. On October 1 the first sitting of the Legislative Assembly replaced the Constituent Assembly, and France was a constitutional monarchy. In April of 1792 France declared war on Austria, and soon found herself facing formidable imperial armies. After several discouraging defeats that caused great consternation in Paris, France won the legendary battle of Valmy on the 20th of September, 1792. This day of victory and relief was also the last day of the Legislative Assembly before it gave way to the Convention that was to draft a new constitution. The Convention met the next day and abolished royalty, effectively declaring the first republic, and by November 7 Mailhe was presenting the report of the committee appointed to decide on the fate of the king. It recommended that he be tried by the Convention. The radicals, represented by the Jacobins, opposed a trial. They wished rather to execute the king forthwith as an enemy of the people. On November 20 there was discovered the secret "iron cupboard" in the Tuileries in which clandestine and incriminating correspondence of the king with parties abroad had been concealed. The king's case took a dramatic turn for the worse.

So the events leading up to the execution of Louis XVI were driven firstly by the stress of a foreign war, which for much of the time in question went badly for France, causing general anxiety and a feeling of threat especially on the part of the radical revolutionaries and their supporters in the sections and Commune of Paris. Secondly they were influenced by the well-grounded suspicion that Louis favored the foreign enemies of France, and that in this he was not alone. Therefore, the situation in 1792 was on the way to becoming a crisis of order that, in mimetic terms, demanded a scapegoat to rectify. Louis died on January 21, 1793 as that goat.

His death, however, did not quell the violence but rather seemed, as Edmund Burke prophesied, to exacerbate it.[5] The next month France declared war on Britain and Holland and the first conscription in modern history was declared. In March the counter-revolutionary insurrection in the Vendée broke out, plunging the country into civil war, and the Convention declared war on Spain. Dumouriez was defeated at Neerwinden

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[5] This need not mean that the theory is false, because it acknowledges that the mechanism works imperfectly in nontraditional societies. The killing of the king as a response to social chaos shows the persistence of the scapegoating impulse.

on March 18 and on March 19 the Vendéens crushed a republican army at Pont-Charrault. In April Dumouriez went over to the Austrians.

Things were bad on the battle front at home and abroad, and in the Convention the war between the moderate Girondins and the radical Jacobins reached a climax. In May the Convention appointed a commission of twelve Girondins to investigate the Commune of Paris. It arrested two prominent leaders of the urban mobs, Hébert, deputy prosecutor of the Commune, and Varlet, a leader of the *enragés.* This caused the mob to invade the Convention, now meeting in the Tuileries, and haul off the prominent Girondins. The Jacobins thus gained political control of the Convention through mob violence and a precedent was set for the popular justice of the Committee of Public Safety. The Committee, formed in April, gained dictatorial power after the fall of the Girond and the accession of Robespierre to membership on July 27. It ruled France for a year, from July 27, 1793 through the fall of Robespierre and Saint-Just on July 27, 1794. This was "the year of the terror" (see Palmer).

The period from April 5 to July 27, 1794—from the fall of Danton to the fall of Robespierre—is the climax of the democratic Revolution, and therefore we should examine it for signs of the deeper nature of popular sovereignty. It was a period of vengeance and bloodshed, which, Palmer says, were the result of panic. "The Grand Terror was a psychological fever, like the Great Fear that had gripped the peasants five years earlier" (305). It was also the time of the Festival of the Supreme Being. In the two months before July 27, 1794 two thousand five hundred people were executed, most by the Revolutionary Tribunal of Paris following "revolutionary justice," whose prerogatives had been voted them by the Convention. At the same time the Convention officially recognized the existence of a Supreme Being (May 7) and celebrated with great pomp its Festival (June 8).

This combination of official severity and public piety is a reaction driven by the anxieties of external and internal threats to the revolution. It owes much to the personal convictions of Maximilien Robespierre who was austere and moralistic, opposed both to excess and atheism, which he probably thought were symbiotically related. He wished to control the excesses of the mobs and believed that an orderly public festival in honor of the source of high ideals and moral restraint would contribute to the maintenance of order. There is, however, more than a trace of mimetic effect in the zeal with which enemies were tracked down or simply identified as such, and the draconian sanctions they suffered. Paranoia is

the common word for this phenomenon, but it is not accurate because the reaction of panic was not simply psychological but the result of a run-away of mimetic power and the attempt to stop it by the sacrifice of victims.

There is a stunning indication of Robespierre's deep complicity with this cult of human sacrifice in his dress on the day of the Festival of the Supreme Being. He happened to be president of the Convention at that time and so walked at the head of the phalanx of *Conventionnels.* They were all dressed in dark blue, while Robespierre was dressed in a sky blue jacket with a yellow waistcoat and yellow trousers. As he walked, the rest of the assembly, with what Michelet called "perfidious respect," lagged farther and farther behind, making him appear more and more alone. Some conjecture that the assembly did this deliberately to indicate their belief that he was behaving like a king, and to dissociate themselves from him. He might indeed have been in the symbolic role of king, king as grand victim, for he was dressed as a sacrifice. It was surely complicity with the mimetic mechanism that persuaded Robespierre to dress in blue and yellow and to walk alone, because the clothes he wore were easily recognizable as the suicide outfit of the young Werther, whose sorrows Goethe had exposed to the world in his novel of 1774, a novel that owed much to Rousseau's *Nouvelle Héloïse.* The cult of the young Werther was responsible for several well-publicized suicides of young men "too good for this world." It was a cult of mimetic enthrallment, reminiscent of the later case (1887) of Henri Chambige who, on trial for a half-successful *Liebestod* with a married woman, pled in his defense that he had been "hypnotized by novels" (Barrows 123). He got nine years; Robespierre had only six weeks.

Carol Blum, to whom belongs the credit for pointing out the significance of Robespierre's outfit at the festival, writes, " Thus the combination carried the connotations of the 'suicide costume', and Robespierre's presentation of his public person attired in this widely understood sign of impending sacrifice carried the message that the Terrorist was to be known as his own victim" (253). The ruler as terrorist and victim is psychologically an attempt to pre-empt the vengeance that he is incurring by the Terror. He knows that the violence is bound to rebound at him and so he pre-empts it with his talk of suicide. Sociologically, however, such a dual identity is characteristic of the sacred king who both threatens and suffers. In order to be the source of good violence that brings order he must also be the victim of the bad violence of disorder. Robespierre and Saint-Just were playing out the two-sided role of the sacrificial ruler to the end, killing others and preparing to die themselves. When the end came for them on

July 26 and 27 they displayed a curious lack of zeal in their own defense. Some say it was because they were unwilling to set the Commune against the Convention and thus damage the Republic, others that they no longer had the political power to do so even had they wished; but the deep psychosocial structure of the victim-king was also operative. In the headquarters of the Commune, on the evening of the 26th, Robespierre attempted suicide; the executioner tried to execute himself. He wanted to die because death was the culmination of the role of the founder of a new republic. Only the rejected stone can become the head of the corner.

For some time before the festival Robespierre and Saint-Just had given hints that they understood themselves to be imminent victims of the enemies of virtue. They inhabited a Manichean world of insiders and outsiders, the virtuous and the wicked. In a discourse from this period, Robespierre says that there are two peoples in France, a mass of truly virtuous and naturally honest citizens, and a mob of "scoundrels and foreigners" working to alienate the people from their leaders. "As long as this impure race exists, the Republic will be in pain and danger. In saying these things, I sharpen the daggers against me, and that's the reason I say to them ... I have lived too long" (quoted in Blum 249). The victim-king had to die for the people. At a meeting of the Jacobins on May 25 Robespierre cried, "I, who do not in the least believe in the necessity for living, but only in virtue and Providence, I find myself placed in the state where the assassins wished to put me; I feel myself more detached than ever from human wickedness. Cowardly agents of tyranny, contemptible tools of the oppressors of the human race . . . See us exposed before your homicidal daggers, chests bared , not wishing to be surrounded by guards. Strike, we await your blows" (quoted in Blum 248). They struck on the 27th of July, and they were not foreigners but the members of the Convention by whose erratic, violent power Robespierre lived and died.

Robespierre was an especially vivid representative of the mimetic scapegoating mechanism. He operated with a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders, and had a lively sense of his own victimization. The basic distinction between the victim and the mob structured his awareness, and in this respect he was a conscious and unconscious heir of Rousseau, especially the Rousseau of the *Confessions.* The *Confessions* present a man acutely aware of his own virtue and also of the persecution that he suffers because of it, a man in the mold of the suffering servant of Isaiah. Robespierre resonated with this image. He said that Rousseau had taught him to know himself and to reflect on the principles of social order.

"Divine man, you taught me to know myself: while I was still young you made me appreciate the dignity of my nature and reflect upon the great principles of the social order" (quoted in Blum 156). Knowledge of the self was the knowledge of one's essential goodness, and the extension to social principles was the attribution of this goodness to the people. One loves the virtue of the people because it is a part of one's own goodness. The Rousseauvian keynotes of "Virtue," "Sovereignty," and "the People" sound again and again in Robespierre's rhetoric. Virtue is the goodness of the self in solidarity with the goodness of others, making the virtuous nation to which the individual owes a duty of allegiance and service; sovereignty is the general will of the people, indefeasible, indivisible, and just; and the people is the group that claims and maintains the full dignity of virtue in equality and solidarity. So the three watchwords define and blend into each other. Virtue is the sovereignty of the general will of the people, or as Saint-Just put it, "the sovereign consists of all the hearts yearning for virtue" (quoted in Blum 166).

The people

This virtuous sovereign is an imaginary quasi-person, "a collective sentimental mystery" (Blum 166) whose unity is best conveyed by the French collective noun *"le peuple."* It is a central category in the political thought of the Jacobins. Since Annie Geffroy has given us a fine philological study of Saint-Just's usage, he might serve as an example. Saint-Just uses *le peuple* more often than any other single word, on average three times per page in the standard edition of his principal discourses. It is the principal thematic word in his oeuvre, and is best defined by contrast (Geffroy 231-7). Firstly, *le peuple* is the nation over against the state. This usage is to the fore in the speeches at the trial of the king. The state in this context is the king, the aristocracy, and anyone who might be classified with them. Even after the king's demise Saint-Just continues the distinction between the people and any institution that wields political power. This is the political definition of *le peuple.* The social definition contrasts it with the rich. *Le peuple* is the nation over against the rich and powerful, the governed rather than the governors, and the specific experience in mind is the power of the rich over the poor.

Le peuple is frequently linked with the terms "friend" and "enemy." *Ami du peuple* is the preferred phrase at this time, rather than, for instance, "partisan," a sign that the relationship of the one to the many is to be like the relationship of friends, cast in personal rather than socio-economic

terms. Thus the opposite phrase *ennemi du peuple* has the connotation of personal betrayal. For Saint-Just it covers the king and his supporters, countries at war with France, monopolists and exploiters, and any other group that he considers a danger to the purity of the revolution. He is eager to purify *le peuple* of those who do not share devotion to the general will, those whose reticence is a personal betrayal of all good people, and who must be expelled if the group is to survive and thrive. He uses the term *les ennemis* more and more in the critical months before Thermidor (July 1794), when the guillotine worked overtime and his end was drawing near, a lexical fact that corresponds to the historical extension of the stain of impurity (*l'extension progressive de la sphère de l'impureté"*[6]*). Le peuple* is, therefore, a characteristic "in-group" that constitutes itself by expelling the scapegoat, and maintains its unity by constant "cleansing."[7] Indeed, the characteristics of those to be expelled changes so markedly with circumstances that the only constant factor is the fact of exclusion, the drawing of boundaries and the identification of those inside and outside the lines. The substance of difference is variable, the fact of differentiation is constant.[8]

The personal nature of betrayal by an enemy of the people is of Rousseauvian inspiration. It bridges the chasm between the individual and the group by imagining that there can be a social relationship of the same *sensibilité* as a personal one. The Jacobin version of Rousseau follows that strand of his thought, represented in the *Social Contract,* which takes a benign view of the transition from the individual to the group, rather than the view of the *Discourses* which sees it as a tragic fall from self-sufficiency into dependence. This contradiction is resolved in the person of Rousseau rather than in logic or theory. The solitary, suffering sage presents himself as the true individual who incarnates the virtue of humanity and from whose example the people can learn how to live virtuously. He is at the same time the solitary, persecuted individual, and the incarnation of humanity in general, of the "peopleness" of the people.

Robespierre's sense of identification with the people is like Rousseau's, and both are like the traditional king's. "You dare to accuse me of wishing to mislead and flatter the people," cries Robespierre. "How could I? I am neither the courtier, nor the moderator, nor the defender of the

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[6] Geffroy (236) quoting L. Sebag, *Marxisme et Structuralisme* (1964, 160).

[7] See Carol Blum's excellent chapter, "Purging the Body Politic" (216-37).

[8] This is consonant with the well-known theory of Frederik Barth that ethnicity is defined by boundaries as such and not by any substantial identity.

people; I am (the) people myself! (*Je suis peuple moi-meme!)"* (quoted in Blum 160). *"Peuple"* is like a quality that constitutes Robespierre's identity and substance. As *"peuple "* he is both ruler and victim, and uncannily like the royal person of tradition. The claim *"Je suis peuple moi-meme "* recalls the famous remark of Louis XIV, *"L'état c 'est moi, "* and the picture of Leviathan on the title page of Hobbes's first edition, a monster made up of tiny human bodies topped by a crowned head. Robespierre, of course, denies that he is such a head, yet he sets himself apart, makes himself an example of human virtue, and identifies himself as the victim of the enemies of the people. In terms of royal tradition the applicable image for this Jacobin conception comes from the apostle Paul's account of the church as the body of Christ in 1 Cor. 12, where Christ is not the head but the spirit that imbues and suffuses the whole, ensuring that every member, like the members of Plato's just republic, plays his own part and does not meddle in the work of others. Robespierre, in his austere loneliness, is the most communal of men, a veritable Son of Man like Jesus Christ and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

The trial

The victim/crowd structure of the events and ideology of the revolution is, I hope, clear. The crowd is pure and must deal with any pollution or infection by expulsion and sacrifice. The leaders of the crowd oscillate from hero to goat, and in both roles they are saviors, because their lives cathect the powers of unanimous violence and their deaths ritually re-enact the founding murder and thus renew the powers of group solidarity. The founding victim of the new order, however, remains the king, and the story of his trial and execution provides the clearest example of mimetic structure. So powerful is the operation of that structural mechanism that it makes Robespierre and Saint-Just doubles of the suffering monarch.

According to the theory, the mythology of the mimetic mechanism always presents the victim as guilty and thus exonerates the group. The king was the guilty perpetrator and the crowd was the innocent victim. Camille Desmoulins wrote: "You know very well that to the Republican all men are equal. I am mistaken, you know very well that there is only one man whom the true Republican cannot regard as a man (but) a two-legged cannibal, and that enemy beast is a king" (quoted in Blum 175). The king is a cannibal and a beast. Saint-Just said, "He forced his way into the bowels of the Fatherland with blows of his sword in order to hide himself inside" (quoted in Blum 180). The king is a violator of the body politic, a

rapist and a parasite. "And I say that the king should be judged as an enemy; that we must not so much judge him as combat him; that he had no part in the contract which united the French people, the forms of judicial procedure here are not to be sought in positive law, but in the law of nations" (Saint-Just's speech of 13 November 1792; in Walzer 121). The king is a foreign enemy, and always has been. "For myself, I can see no mean: this man must reign or die" (123). The king cannot be accommodated in the new polity. "A king should be accused, not for the crimes of his administration, but for the crime of having been king . . . an eternal crime against which every man has the right to rise and arm himself. . . . No man can reign innocently" (124). Kingship is not like other crimes, it is an eternal crime. Normal crimes expel one from the polity, an eternal crime means that the criminal has never been a member of the polity. The paradox of a trial would be that one who had never been a member of the polity would gain entry by his crime. Finally, the king is a monster. The word "monster" occurs again and again on the lips of his persecutors. Susan Dunn gives a rich selection from this rhetoric. He is a "flesh-devouring monster . . . a carnivorous monster . . . a monster made out of blood and mud. . . a monster soiled by crime . . . a monster dripping with the blood of the French" (17-18).

The king violated all the taboos, and in this he was not alone, his queen did the same. Fouquier-Tinville smeared Marie-Antoinette as "immoral and perverse in every way; this new Agrippa, intimately acquainted with every species of crime, denying her motherhood as well as the taboos forbidden by the laws of nature, this widow Capet was not afraid to lure her own son, Louis Capet, into the kind of obscene behavior the very idea of which makes us shudder in horror" (quoted in Dunn 23, n.34). Incest was the apex of a pyramid of transgression piled on her person, which included larceny, treachery, and "foreignness."

Thus the polluting burdens of the community, all the evils of the ancien régime summarized in Jacobin rhetoric as the effects of inequality, were off-loaded onto the royal victim/scapegoat, and the violence of the people was certified as the good violence of justice, nature, and eternal goodness. Saint-Just said, "I combat this pretext used by tyrants, of the natural violence of man, in order to dominate him" (quoted in Blum 164). The violence of the Terror was not natural in this sense of "original sin" but in the good sense of a proper expression of the natural desire for equality. Humanity is naturally good, equal and non-violent, only the depredations of hierarchy cause violence, and for every bad instance of the violence of

hierarchy there is a good instance of the violence of justice. This position could be construed as a version of the "just war" justification of the use of force, or it could be a myth to conceal the ambition and ruthlessness of revolutionary violence.

I have argued that it is a myth that hides the operation of a generative mechanism at the structural level. The basic energy of the mechanism is mimetic desire and the competition, convergence, and violence that it causes, and the answer to this threat of disruptive violence is the scapegoat that structures society in terms of the two poles of victim and group. The French revolution tried to change that polarity decisively by having the mob swallow the victim and thus reduce the two poles to one, and for that reason alone it warrants the honor of being the authentically revolutionary revolution in modern history. It is the paradigm of the Utopian, messianic ambition to change the deep structure of human existence. Equality was to be an order in which the distinction between the governors and the governed was to be removed. That distinction, between the victim and the mob, is the line across which the bad violence of mimetic rivalry passes to be processed into the good violence of ritual order and to return cloaked in the benign guise of mythology.

The revolution wished to be the abolition of the scapegoat mechanism, but it turned out to be just another of its transformations. The violence of the Committee was as draconian as any violence of monarchy, and the leaders of the revolution were as powerful and pathetic as any king. To recognize that violence is the driving force of popular sovereignty is not to counsel despair, but only to challenge the Jacobin faith in the innocence of natural man. The question of an original human goodness or badness is, in any case, otiose because the results of assuming either are not significantly different. Whether humans are good and society makes them bad, or bad and society makes them good, the empirical outcome is the same mixture of violence and peace and the same inability to "cure" fundamental social ills, especially to curb the resort to violence. Revolutionary ambition is dangerous because it holds out the hope of a final solution to problems that are at best manageable and at worst tolerable. The French revolution claimed to be the regenerating moment in human history, the time when the human spirit is being reborn by the entrance into equality.

The festivals

This apocalyptic nature of the French Revolution is particularly discernible in the theory behind the many civil festivals staged by the

revolutionaries. More important than Rousseau's doctrine of the essentially religious origins of the polity and the need for a civil religion is the apocalyptic sense of a radical end to the old order and the beginning of a new. A new order, like the old, needs a sacred foundation, which it was the aim of the festivals to lay in the course of their "obstinate search for an elementary anthropology" (Ozouf 278). The revolutionaries went back to classical antiquity for models, because antiquity seemed closer to the absolute, sacral origins they craved psychologically and needed politically (273-6).

The festivals were also a way of experiencing the power of the general will and thus identifying it with the sacred.[9] In his Report of 18 Floréal, Robespierre said, "I want to speak of national festivals. Bring men together, you will make them better. Man is the greatest object existing in nature and the most magnificent spectacle is that of a great people assembled" (quoted in Blum 245). He clearly appreciated the essentially Rousseauvian truth that Durkheim later gave formal expression to, that religion is the fundamental organizing power of community and that it originates as a feeling or "effervescence," experienced chiefly in a crowd of similar people. The experience of the sacred is the experience of the common life of the group on which the individual depends for existence. The revolutionaries sought to renew this founding feeling as the point of sacred origin for the new order, to make the experience *of patrie* the cornerstone of a new polity.[10]

Durkheim does not take the role of violence into account, and for that reason cannot explain the elementary forms of the sacred, its double valence of threat and succor, and he cannot explain the belief of the revolutionaries that the festivals would curb violence and help bring the revolution to an end, stop the destruction of the old so that they could get on with construction of the new. Therefore, Mona Ozouf s appeal to Durkheim provides only a partial explanation of the phenomenon of the festivals, and leaves a central concern of the festival givers out of account. It explains the intuition that large crowds in ritual order would experience the quasi-religious awe of the sacred, but it does not explain how this experience could be a strategy in the war against violence. The revolution-

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[9] Durkheim compared the *fait social* to the "general will" of Rousseau.

[10] ". . . the fatherland. This was the long-lost sacral reality" (Ozouf 280).

aries intuited more accurately than Durkheim or Mona Ozouf that there is an essential link between the mob, violence, victims, and social order.

The festivals were to control violence by imposing a ritual order on large groups and by providing a mythology. They were essentially rituals that transformed actual into enacted violence. The annual festival of the king's death illustrates this well. It always featured a tree, by explicit instruction, and there was an ambiguity to the symbol of the tree. In the custom of the maypole or *mai sauvage,* which was linked in the popular mind with the Liberty tree, the pole symbolizes both life and death, the tree of liberty or the gibbet (Ozouf 237-8). These two connotations coincide in the festival of the king's death because there the tree represents the victim whose death unites the group and the new liberty in which the group is united against all present and future tyrants. This particular festival is clearly a ritual of violence deliberately instituted to control actual violence by enacting the death of the founding victim under the traditional symbol of the tree of execution.

Symbols were, however, to be tamed by means of allegory and commentary. The subject matter of the festivals was presented in elaborate allegories accompanied by mind-numbing commentary (Ozouf 211-5). Allegory was a way of blunting the point of the symbol, of cultivating allusion rather than illusion, and making sure that while the heroic violence of the past was remembered it was not presented as something to be imitated. In the same way, commentary labored to divert the attention from the deed to the idea, to cultivate states of mind and soul rather than to galvanize into action. The revolutionaries were aware of the contagious force of mimesis. When the deputy Isnard waved a sword in the Convention to emphasize a point, Robespierre warned the assembly of the "emotive contagion" of such acts and asked that they be prohibited (Ozouf 215). The festivals were to be anodyne for a new order of docility, pulling the teeth of mimesis by means of pedantic ritual and artificial myth.

Michael Walzer said that the execution of Louis XVI was the killing of a sacred king, and that attention paid to the circumstances of this act would be repaid with insight into the nature of popular sovereignty. He is, of course, absolutely right. I hope I have been able to show how right in fact he is, by opening up the depths of the historical process and disclosing the role of the sacred through its victims and executioners. Popular sovereignty is simply a transformation of royal sovereignty, another form of the sacred. Sovereignty is always essentially the same, the threat of violence against deviants. In the terms of mimetic theory, the fundamental

structure of sovereignty is the bipolarity of the victim and the mob, and in the historical period we have considered, popular sovereignty is the myth of the murder of kings.

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