

Daily Life in the French Revolution*

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The St Jean de Bouisse family was seigneur of the tiny communities of Fraïsse and Montjoi, southwest of Narbonne. In April 1790, Montjoi complained to the revolutionary National Assembly that it had been “enslaved by the tyranny of self-styled seigneurs without titles”; indeed, Bouisse had just made a visit to houses in the village to take the best portions of a recently butchered pig. The mayor of Fraïsse in turn described the Bouisse men: “Four big bodies, uncles and nephews, possessors of imposing physique walking around with four-pound batons, that was the sight which pursued us into our houses ... M de Bouisse, following his old habits, has sworn to plague us to our deaths.” In his defense, the baron could only despair:

I have cherished and I still cherish the people of Fraïsse as I have cherished my own children; they were so sweet and so honest in their way, but what a sudden change has taken place among them. All I hear now is *corvée*, *lanternes*, *démocrates*, *aristocrates*, words which for me are barbaric and which I can't use... the former vassals believe themselves to be more powerful than Kings.¹

There are several layers of meanings that may be teased out of this story. On the most immediate level it is, of course, an example of an outraged noble fulminating against the revolutionary madness that had engulfed his “vassals,” who in turn

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¹ Peter McPhee, *Revolution and Environment in Southern France: Peasants, Lords, and Murder in the Corbières, 1780-1830* (Oxford, 1999), 60.

presented themselves as victims of longstanding oppression. The Revolution of 1789 had given them unprecedented opportunity to confront the man who had dominated their lives, even to harass him. But was their use of the language of the revolution—“lanternes, démocrates, aristocrates”—only a weapon of their own with which to beat the baron in turn? Or did it have a greater resonance? In which ways might a radically altered language of power have spoken of a changed actuality? What was it to “live” the French Revolution?

These are questions for which we will never have simple, confident answers. Like the less powerful in all societies, the peasants of Montjoi and Fraïsse had little occasion to make unsolicited statements about their world in a form that has survived for us. Their voices have mostly been preserved for us when they came into contact with institutions that controlled their lives, such as courts of law or, as in this case, when they wished to defend themselves to authorities.² Because of the nature of the materials with which historians work, whether printed or manuscript, they have inevitably examined the impact of the Revolution on “the people” through the words of others.³ The French Revolution was, however, one of those rare periods in history when “ordinary” people—peasants, laborers, tradespeople, the indigent—felt sufficiently confident to express themselves directly to the authorities. At times this was through the medium of the records of local government—village councils or neighborhood meetings—and at others through legal actions they initiated, or through the language of protest.

The views of social elites are, of course, far more accessible. Towards the end of the revolutionary decade the nonagenarian marquise de Créquy made a trip into the countryside. She was contemptuous:

The châteaux have been demolished, the large farms devastated and the upkeep of the main roads left to the communes, which are crushed by taxes. In the towns you see only insolent or evil people. You are spoken to only in a tone that is brusque, demanding or defiant. Every face has a sinister look; even children have a hostile, depraved demeanor. One would say that there is hatred in every heart. Envy has not been satisfied, and misery is everywhere. That is the punishment for making a revolution.⁴

There was indeed the reality of massive numbers of premature deaths and wrecked lives: it has been estimated, for example, that half of the 30,000 volunteers and conscripts from the department of the Aisne were dead by 1799.⁵ Across the

² Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest 1789-1820* (Oxford, 1970), Part I: a brilliant discussion of the nature and limitations of these archival sources.

³ See for example, Georges Bordenove, *La vie quotidienne en Vendée pendant la Révolution* (Paris, 1974), which, despite its title, is essentially a history of the insurrection in the Vendée through the words of its élite supporters.

⁴ Comte de Courchamps, *Souvenirs de la marquise de Créquy de 1710 à 1803*, vol. 9 (Paris, 1865), 144-5.

⁵ Michel Péronnet, Robert Attal and Jean Bobin, *La Révolution dans l'Aisne, 1789-1799* (Le Coteau, 1988), 138; and Jacques Houdaille, “Le Problème des pertes de guerre,” *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* xvii (1970), 418. In general, see Alan Forrest, *Soldiers of the French Revolution* (Durham, NC, 1990); Jean-Paul

revolutionary decade some two million men were to serve in the army: some 7 per cent of the population. About one-third of families were directly affected by the departure of a son or husband for the army, and their common experiences of hunger, fear and pain were in stark contrast with the idealized imagery of patriotic propagandists.

Perhaps 120,000 young men responded to the Assembly's call in June 1791. Xavier Vernière was just sixteen when he enrolled in October 1791 as a volunteer in the Anjou regiment: "I cannot describe the elation with which this filled me, comparable to that felt by a passionate lover, consumed by long and burning desire, when he finally comes to receive in his mistress' arms the prize for his perseverance."⁶ Jean-Claude Vaxelaire, born in 1770 and raised on a farm in the parish of Vagney (Vosges), volunteered in August 1791. His own department would provide 14,500 volunteers from a population of 227,000. In later life Vaxelaire recalled his sense of adventure: "as I had never seen a town and had seen nothing but our parish church steeple, I was as delighted to leave as if I was going to my marriage."⁷ The honeymoon for both Vernière and Vaxelaire was brief. Like them, another volunteer, Gabriel Noël, was quickly appalled by the conditions: Noël wrote home from the border near Givet (Ardennes):

I won't invite you, dear family, to come and eat the soldier's food ... the raw meat is divided, cut up and sliced on the ground that is used as a cutting board. This meat is sometimes so covered with filth and soil that I don't think that dogs would eat it; but hunger makes you close your eyes and open your mouth.

The grim experiences of soldiers might suggest that the major changes wrought by the French Revolution in the lives of the rural and urban masses were premature death for many and sullen disappointment for the rest. A Revolution that had begun in 1789 with boundless hopes for a golden era of political liberty and social change ended in 1799 with a military seizure of power. In the process, French people had had to endure a decade of political instability, civil war, and armed conflict with the rest of Europe, at the cost of many hundreds of thousands of lives. For the people who inhabited France's country towns and villages, was life in 1799 essentially the same as in 1789, except for the "punishment" that the marquis felt was so well merited? This paper argues that some of the conditions of life had changed irreversibly.

This was, in the first place, a revolution in perceptions of identity. By the end of the decade, French people made sense of the world around them in radically different ways. The most revolutionary transformation of the French Revolution—indeed, of any revolution—was that from subject to citizen. The assumption that the

Bertaud, *The Army of the French Revolution: From Citizen-Soldiers to Instrument of Power*, trans. R. R. Palmer (Princeton, 1988); and Isser Woloch, *The New Regime: Transformations of the French Civic Order, 1789-1820s* (New York, 1994), ch. 13.

⁶ Nicole Pellegrin, *Les Vêtements de la Liberté: Abécédaire des pratiques vestimentaires en France de 1780 à 1800* (Aix-en-Provence, 1989), 181.

⁷ Jean-Claude Vaxelaire, *Mémoires d'un vétéran de l'ancienne armée (1791-1800)*, ed. H. Gauthier-Villars (Paris, 1892), 16; Ferdinand Brunot, *Histoire de la langue française des origines à 1900*, t. IX, 1ère partie (Paris, 1927), 20; and Forrest, *Soldiers of the French Revolution*, 61-5.

sovereign will lay in a body politic of citizens rather than in a hierarchy of appointment speaks of an irreversible transformation of political culture. The evaporation by 1792 of the mystique of divine-right monarchy was the most fundamental shift in popular understandings of power. Even the seizure of power by Napoleon in 1799 and the restoration of monarchy in 1814 could not reverse assumptions of citizenship, even if democratic republicanism could be outlawed.⁸ Henceforth the place of monarchy within a political structure was to be a matter for political debate and division, not—as before 1789—an element of *mentalité*.

Collective practices in thousands of clubs, section meetings and 41,000 local councils introduced millions of people to the language and forms of popular sovereignty. Of course, it may be countered that this was mere verbiage, that people had picked up the new vocabulary as verbal fashion, that the words were devoid of substance. This assumes that language is no more than the words in which thoughts are made verbal, rather than defining how people think. If the latter is the case, then the language of rights, freedom, sovereignty and equality expressed a change in consciousness.

For the festival of the Federation in July 1790, the village schoolteacher of Silly-en-Multien recorded with evident pleasure that 54 people (presumably the “active” citizens) had:

54 bottles of wine, 54 1½ pound loaves of bread, 80 pounds of meat, half as roast veal and half in nine pâtés, one for each six people, 13 bottles of Burgundy wine, one for every four people, for dessert 9 salads, 13 or 14 tarts and as many cakes, 2 bottles of liqueur “parfait amour” and eau-de-vie from Andaye ... half of the dinner was given to the poor there. Afterwards, most of us went for a cup of coffee at Félix Beuve’s, after which we danced under a tent and others played cards.⁹

Voting by men was one way of implanting a new geographical map in people’s consciousness, as cantons, districts and departments were not only new in name but commonly did not respond closely to Ancien Régime boundaries. Significantly, electoral participation was consistently highest in small rural communities. Not only had the democratization of politics introduced unprecedented numbers of people to the practice of popular sovereignty, but this practice underpinned a shift in identity to self-definition through “horizontal” links with people whom one would never meet. The *société populaire* of Chauny, a town of about 3,000 people in the Aisne, met three or four times weekly between July 1791 and November 1794. In that time it had written contact with 31 other societies, seven in its own department, but including others as far away as Niort, Bayonne, Perpignan and Toulon.¹⁰ Whether they were “patriotic,” anti-revolutionary or counter-

⁸ See Sheryl Kroen, *Politics and Theater: the Crisis of Legitimacy in Restoration France, 1815-1830* (Berkeley, 2000).

⁹ Jacques Bernet (ed.), *Le journal d’un maître d’école d’Île-de-France (1771-1792): Silly-en-Multien de l’Ancien Régime à la Révolution* (Villeneuve-d’Asq, 2000), 222.

¹⁰ Bernard Degonville, “De la société populaire de Chauny pendant la Révolution,” *Fédération des sociétés d’histoire et d’archéologie de l’Aisne. Mémoires*, 34 (1989), 61. More generally on the place of the Revolution in creating the bases for new types and arenas for voluntary associations, see William H. Sewell, “Collective Violence and Collective Loyalties in France: Why the French Revolution Made a Difference,”

revolutionary, all French people now lived within radically changed structures and understandings of political power and its administration.

Central to the revolutionary project as conceived by successive regimes was the civic education of the new citizenry through edifying commemorations which would celebrate the new virtues and, from 1792, seek to replace the rituals which had underpinned monarchy and Catholicism. The commissioners sent out from Paris under the Directory to report on public spirit were horrified by the tenacity of traditional festivals and minority languages. "How weak the links must have been between the Revolutionary festival and popular life," concludes Mona Ozouf; the Revolutionary festival was "an impossible, absurd grafting."¹¹ Michel Vovelle, in his study of festivals in Provence, was forced to conclude similarly that the Revolution's impact had been ephemeral by the time the Restoration reintroduced traditional festivals.¹² Both Ozouf and Vovelle insist, however, that the spontaneous celebrations which surged from below were a different matter, for they were a syncretic, resonant bonding of seasonal rituals with revolutionary values, most obviously in the planting of the revolutionary maypoles (*mais sauvages*) and the liberty trees. For Ozouf, the revolutionary decade saw the transfer of sacrality from a Catholic Church in crisis on to the social and political virtues of rights, liberty and the homeland. "How can it be said that the Revolutionary festival failed in that? It was exactly what it wanted to be: the beginning of a new era."¹³

The meanings of this new political culture varied by class, gender and region; they also left a legacy of contrasting ideologies, none of which could claim to represent the aspirations of a majority of French people. Political upheaval and division left a legacy of memories, both bitter and sweet, and of conflicting ideologies which has lasted until our own times: from communism to authoritarian royalism via liberal constitutionalism and social democracy. Memories of the Terror and of mass conscription and war were etched deeply into the memories of every individual and community.¹⁴ French people were to remain divided about the political system best able to reconcile authority, liberty and equality. News from Paris, such as of the execution of Louis XVI, created deep divisions across the country, even among Frenchmen far away. Bruny d'Entrecasteaux's expedition had been sent to Australia in 1791 in search of the missing explorer La Pérouse. Its leader dead, the malnourished and homesick expedition straggled into Java in October 1793 to learn of events earlier in the year. A violent division emerged between the expedition's new

Politics & Society 18 (1990), 527-52; Renée Waldinger, Philip Dawson and Isser Woloch (eds), *The French Revolution and the Meaning of Citizenship* (Westport, CT, 1993).

¹¹ Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 217 and ch. IX.

¹² Michel Vovelle, *Les métamorphoses de la fête en Provence, de 1750 à 1820* (Paris, 1976).

¹³ Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, 282 and ch. X.

¹⁴ Outside the Vendée, there has been surprisingly little analysis of the importance of collective memories of the Revolution. The outstanding study is Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Cambridge, 1981); see also Raymond Huard, "La Révolution française, événement fondateur: le travail de l'histoire sur l'héritage et la tradition," *Cahiers d'histoire de l'Institut de recherches marxistes* 32 (1988), 54-71.

leader, the royalist d'Auribeau, and the naturalist Labillardière, in the 1760s a classmate in Alençon of Jacques Hébert, now a prominent Enragé.¹⁵

The next time that all French men would have the right to elect their representatives would be a half-century later in the elections of May 1849, seen by historians as the first democratic elections offering a genuine choice between “right” and “left.” These were to reveal regional loyalties that would underpin voting patterns until the 1980s. Historians have often analyzed the reasons for the outcomes in 1848-49 and have agreed on one thing: the importance of memory. For the privileged orders of the Ancien Régime the decade after 1789 had been politically and personally traumatic: long after the Revolution, the Catalan noble Jaubert de Passa was haunted by “memories which swirl round in my head like a leaden nightmare.” In contrast, a local state attorney claimed that for left-wing Catalans, “the Republic of ‘93 has left memories which are handed down from father to son, which will never disappear from the spirit of the people and against which it is useless to struggle.”¹⁶ As an Occitan, a Protestant, and a rural laborer, it is not surprising that the young Jean Fontane from the village of Anduze (Gard) should have been a *démoc-soc* in 1849, though, significantly, he himself imputed it to history: “If a majority of us were republicans, it was in memory of our beautiful Revolution of 1793, of which our fathers had inculcated the principles which still survive in our hearts. Above all, we were children of the Revolution.”¹⁷

In sharp contrast, negative memories of 1793 and the heroism of the Vendéan insurrection remain the central element in the collective identity of the region. For example, the discovery of masses of bones in Les Lucs by the parish priest in 1860 was to result in a myth, still potent today, of the “Bethlehem of the Vendée,” according to which 564 women, 107 children and many men were massacred on a single day, on 28 February 1794.¹⁸ Both at the time, and especially in nineteenth-century memoirs, abundant testimony was recorded of atrocities real or imagined. In Clisson (Loire-Inférieure), it was claimed that people who were still alive were thrown into the well of a castle; 150 women were allegedly burned to make fat.¹⁹

¹⁵ Edward Duyker, *Citizen Labillardière: A Naturalist's Life in Revolution and Exploration (1755-1834)* (Melbourne, 2003).

¹⁶ Peter McPhee, *Les Semailles de la République dans les Pyrénées-Orientales, 1846-1852: classes sociales, culture et politique* (Perpignan, 1995), 187-8. See also Edward Berenson, “Politics and the French Peasantry: the debate continues,” *Social History* 12 (1987), 219-229; Peter McPhee, *The Politics of Rural Life: Political Mobilization in the French Countryside 1846-1852* (Oxford, 1992), ch. 5; Jill Maciak, “Of News and Networks: The Communication of Political Information in the Rural South-West during the French Revolution,” *French History* 15 (2001), 273-306; and Peter Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1988), 207-17.

¹⁷ Raymond Huard, “Souvenir et tradition révolutionnaires: le Gard (1848-1851),” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 258 (1984), 565-87.

¹⁸ Steven Laurence Kaplan, *Farewell Revolution: Disputed Legacies, France 1789/1989* (Ithaca, NY, 1995), 84-111. A more recent estimate is that between 300 and 500 of Les Lucs' 2,320 people were killed in all the fighting during the Vendéan insurrection: Jean-Clément Martin and Xavier Lardière, *Le Massacre des Lucs-Vendée 1794* (Vouillé, 1992); and Paul Tallonneau, *Les Lucs et le génocide vendéen. Comment on a manipulé les textes* (Luçon, 1993).

¹⁹ Reynald Secher, *A French Genocide: The Vendée*, trans. George Holloch (Notre Dame, Ind., 2003), 134.

The French Revolution was a critical period in the forging and contesting of collective identities among the linguistic and ethnic minorities who together made up a majority of French people.²⁰ National unity was not only at the expense of the exemptions and prerogatives possessed by privileged social orders, occupations and localities, but also superimposed an assumption of centralized uniformity on the complex ethnic reality of France. Ever since 1330 French rulers had sought to make their language that of public administration; now, however, the French language was assumed to be intrinsic to citizenship, even to be at the core of the Revolution itself. From early in the Revolution political elites expressed the view that French was the language of liberty and equality. The national language bore the name of its nation. When the majority of the king's subjects who spoke other languages became citizens of the new nation, this was to be an imagined community defined in a language in which they were incompetent but which was the sole source of linguistic unity. This is why, on 10 September 1791, Talleyrand expressed his surprise to the National Assembly that:

the national language ... remains inaccessible to such a large number of inhabitants ... Elementary education will put an end to this strange inequality. In school all will be taught in the language of the Constitution and the Law and this mass of corrupt dialects, these last vestiges of feudalism, will be forced to disappear.²¹

Indeed, from 1792 there were repeated calls in Paris for other languages to be banned.²²

The ethnic minorities of Alsace, the Basque country, Flanders and the Roussillon bore the full brunt of the international wars for the survival or destruction of the Revolution. It had been a horrific experience. This was true of all departments that were invaded in 1792-94 and those contiguous with them which bore the heaviest demands of requisitioning.

Among the émigrés was the Marquise de la Tour du Pin, the descendent of English and Irish Jacobites who had been exiled to France after the defeat of James II in 1691. Her husband was an army officer from an ancient and wealthy family. Her liberal father-in-law was Minister for War in 1789-90, but his support for Louis XVI during his trial led to his execution. Lucy and her husband immigrated to Boston in 1793, returning to France in 1796. Reflecting in later life on the impact of the Revolution, she focussed primarily on the decrees of 4-11 August, which:

²⁰ See Alan Forrest, *Paris, the Provinces and the French Revolution* (London, 2004), and the essays in Pierre Nora (ed.) *Rethinking France: Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1, *The State*, trans. Mary Trouille (Chicago, 2001). The brilliant study by David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), emphasizes the pre-revolutionary roots of nationalism, but sees nation-building to have been an élite project alone.

²¹ Brunot, *Histoire de la langue française*, 13-14. Brunot's classic text also epitomizes this view of the place of the French language as "the language of liberty."

²² *Ibid.*, 159; J.-Y. Lartichaux, "Linguistic Politics during the French Revolution," *Diogenes* 97 (1977), 65-84; Martyn Lyons, "Politics and Patois: The Linguistic Policy of the French Revolution," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 18 (1981), 264-81; Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia, and Jacques Revel, *Une politique de la langue: la Révolution française et les patois. L'enquête de Grégoire* (Paris, 1975).

ruined my father-in-law and our family fortunes never recovered from the effect of that night's session. It was a veritable orgy of iniquities. The value of the property at La Roche-Chalais [Dordogne] lay entirely in feudal dues, income from invested money and leases or from the mills. There was also a toll river-crossing. The total income from all these sources was 30,000 francs per year ... We also lost the toll crossing at Cubzac on the Dordogne, which was worth 12,000 francs, and the income from Le Bouilh, Ambleville, Tesson and Cénévrières, a fine property in the Quercy which my father-in-law was forced to sell the following year. And that was how we were ruined by the stroke of a pen ... When I married, my father-in-law was understood to have an income of eighty thousand francs. Since the Revolution, our losses have amounted to at least fifty-eight thousand francs a year.²³

About 40 per cent of the land of France belonged to peasants who worked it directly: that land was now free of seigneurial charges and tithes. As Arthur Young commented at the start of 1792, "small proprietors, who farm their own lands, are in a very improved and easy situation."²⁴ With the sales of *biens nationaux*, the total of peasant holdings increased from perhaps one-third to two-fifths of the total.²⁵ Those peasants who owned their own land were direct and substantial beneficiaries of such losses. This is the single most important "social fact" of the French Revolution.

The weight of the tithe and seigneurial exactions had varied enormously, but a total weight of 20-25 per cent of the produce of peasant proprietors (not to mention the *corvée*, seigneurial monopolies and irregular payments) was common outside the west of France. Producers retained an extra portion of their output which was often directly consumed by a better-fed population: in 1792, only one in seven of the army recruits from the impoverished mountain village of Pont-de-Montvert (Lozère) had been 1.63 meters (5'4") or taller; by 1830, that was the average height of conscripts.

Apart from those able to take advantage of the rampant inflation of 1795-97 to buy their way out of leases or to purchase land, tenants and sharecroppers experienced limited material improvements from the Revolution. In regions like the Vannetais in Lower Brittany, the failure to reform the *domaine congéable* in favor of tenants soured the countryside against the Revolution very early.²⁶ Like every other group in the rural community, however, tenants and sharecroppers had been affected by seigneurial *banalités* (monopolies of mills, ovens, wine and oil presses) and, with rural laborers, had been those most vulnerable to the often arbitrary justice of the seigneur's court. The introduction of the system of elected justices of the peace was one of most valued innovations of the revolutionary period, providing villagers and townspeople with a way of resolving minor grievances that was prompt, cheap, less

²³ Felice Harcourt (ed. and trans.), *Escape from the Terror: The Journal of Madame de la Tour du Pin* (London, 1979), 93-4, 243-4.

²⁴ Arthur Young, *Travels in France during the Years 1787, 1788 and 1789* (Cambridge, 1929), 351.

²⁵ Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 7-9; and *Liberty and Locality in Revolutionary France: Six Villages Compared, 1760-1820* (Cambridge, 2003), 245-50.

²⁶ T. J. A. Le Goff, *Vannes and its Region: a Study of Town and Country in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1981), 343-6, 352-3, 366.

partial, and accessible.²⁷ One important implication is that the success of the justices of the peace may be one of the reasons for the decline in spectacular, collective violence in rural France in the nineteenth-century.

Donald Sutherland has argued that the changes wrought by the Revolution were attenuated and then smothered by “the vast weight of ancient peasant France,” which was beyond fundamental, rapid change. I would argue instead that the Revolution affected even the intimate dimensions of daily life. It is, however, difficult to disagree with Sutherland’s judgment that support for the Revolution in the countryside was strongest in areas of substantial small property, where the Revolution brought tangible benefits; elsewhere, the refusal of successive governments to address the complaints of renters of land provoked resentment and even rebellion.²⁸ Historians’ estimates of the increase in the purchasing power of wages between 1790 and 1810 have ranged from 10 to 20 per cent, but, as Sutherland has concluded, “there was very little in the revolutionary settlement for people with little or no property.”²⁹

While it is impossible to generalize about the impact of the Revolution on standards of living, it seems clear that one class of people who were significantly better off were the élite of farmers—*laboureurs*, *fermiers* and large *métayers*—who, under the Directory, were able to pay off their rents or loans in *assignats* and sell their produce for hard currency. English visitors to France were struck by the change. Helen-Maria Williams, for example, noted in 1798:

this class of wealthy peasants, hitherto unknown in France, and their wives and daughters, who formerly used to go bare-footed, who now are proud of their good shoes, their lace, their earrings and, above all, their gold crosses, witness to their vanity more than to their faith.³⁰

Her comments were applied more broadly across rural society by Charles-Joseph Trouvé, a highly intelligent and politically adaptable man from an artisan family to whom the Revolution offered opportunities which would have been unthinkable under the Ancien Régime. In 1794, when just 26 years old, Trouvé had become editor of the *Moniteur*. As Baron Trouvé, he was prefect of the department of the Aude from 1803 to 1816, and recognized the improvement in the peasants’ standard of living:

The suppression of feudal dues and the tithe, the high price of foodstuffs, the division of the large estates, the sale in small lots of nationalized lands, the ending of indebtedness by [the inflation in the value of] paper currency, gave a great impulse to the industry of the peasantry. ... Although the Revolution had an impact on the diet of the people of the

²⁷ *Ibid.*, ch.8; John McManners, *French Ecclesiastical Society under the Ancien Régime* (Manchester, 1960), 251-52; and Anthony Crubaugh, *Balancing the Scales of Justice. Local Courts and Rural Society in Southwest France, 1750-1800* (University Park, PA, 2001).

²⁸ D.M.G. Sutherland, *France, 1789-1815: Revolution and Counterrevolution* (New York, 1986), 440-2.

²⁹ D.M.G. Sutherland, *The French Revolution and Empire: the Quest for a Civic Order* (Oxford, 2003), 46, 64, 385.

³⁰ H.-M. Williams, *Nouveau voyage en Suisse*, trans.. J.-B. Say (1798), 72, cited in Pellegrin, *Les Vêtements de la Liberté*, 100.

countryside, this impact was even more marked on clothing. ... In the old days, rough woolen cloth, or homespun linen, was their finest apparel; they disdain that today, cotton and velveteen cloth are the fabrics they desire, and the large landholder is often confused with his sharecroppers because of the simplicity of his clothing.³¹

Whatever the grand schemes and principles of the Jacobins, the destitute continued to constitute a large urban and rural underclass swollen in times of crisis by poorer laborers and workers. The realization by the National Assembly that poverty was not simply the result of the church's charity, and that local government could simply not cope with poor relief, had generated a series of work schemes and temporary relief measures that were always piecemeal and never adequately financed by governments preoccupied with war. The revolutionary ideals of providing welfare to all French citizens who were unable to sustain themselves and their families were ended under the Directory. Only in the care of abandoned children was there an ongoing assumption of responsibility by the state. The archives of provincial France are studded with stories such as that recounted by Alan Forrest of Guillaume Laurent of the village of Bully in the department of the Rhône who in January 1793 despaired to the administration of his nine starving children after the death of his two cows.³²

One way in which the rural poor—particularly in the south, parts of the Massif Central and the mountains of the east—sought to take advantage of the Revolution was by seizing and clearing uncultivated land belonging to the commune as commons or to former seigneurs. Previously used for grazing livestock, these “wastelands” or *vacants* were placed under extreme pressure as the rural poor cleared them for cultivation. This was a continuing and major concern to successive assemblies, and one of the most significant elements of the revolutionary experience for the rural poor was a struggle—often violent and certainly not resolved by 1799—over the ownership and use of this marginal land.

Not until Napoleon's restructuring of the forest administration was there an effective reassertion of state control over forest resources. Such was the extent of post-1789 land-clearances and tree-felling that a durable view quickly took hold that the Revolution had unleashed the essentially rapacious attitudes of peasants towards their environment and that the Revolution was an ecological disaster.³³

From the Loire-Inférieure Jean-Baptiste Huet de Coetlizan claimed that tree-felling had reduced rainfall and increased silt in rivers, both of which were ruinous for the Loire. The only animals that had increased in numbers were wolves; there were fewer deer. The Prefect of the Bas-Rhin noted that, along the river, the killing of birds (especially magpies and pigeons) had had the effect of allowing the increase of weeds, caterpillars, bugs and bats, as had the population of rats multiplied with the killing of foxes, wild-cats and other hunting animals. Here as elsewhere, there had been a proliferation of goats, “the resource of the poor.”³⁴ Amans-Alexis Monteil, in his

³¹ Charles-Joseph Trouvé, *Etats de Languedoc et département de l'Aude*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1818), vol. 1, 452-3, 563.

³² Alan Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor* (Oxford, 1983), 84.

³³ Jean-Robert Pitte, *Histoire du paysage français*, vol. ii, *Le Profane: du XVIIe siècle à nos jours*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1983), 86. See also John F. Freeman, “Forest Conservancy in the Alps of Dauphiné,” *Forest & Conservation History*, 38 (1994), 171-80.

³⁴ Jean-Baptiste Huet de Coetlizan, *Recherches économiques...sur le Département de la Loire-Inférieure* (Nantes, 1804), 22, 89; Jean Charles Joseph Laumond, *Statistique*

brilliant report on the Aveyron, noted that people were in general better off than before the Revolution, but bemoaned the environmental impact:

People were already complaining about the degradation of forests before the Revolution: since that time, most of them have been razed. What little is left will soon accede to the pillagers' axes, the murderous teeth of animals, and the greed of the new owners.³⁵

A less powerful counter-narrative has sought to nuance this bleak picture of unchecked pillage. More recently, some historians have instead placed stress on the Ancien Régime's encouragement of land clearing and have highlighted an environmental consciousness among sections of rural society.³⁶ In particular, Louis XV's decrees encouraging clearances had exposed hundreds of thousands of hectares of hillsides to the effects of erosion. Some of the Prefects had this longer-term perspective. From the Creuse, the baron Jean-Joseph de Verneilh-Puyraseau noted that the Revolution had only struck the final blows to a long process of deforestation. More specific was the report from Aix: "the decree of 12 April 1767 devastated our forests, ruined the soil, blocked springs, at the same time as it led to the most destructive floods."³⁷

One *légende noire* of the popular revolution has therefore been that the revolutionary period was a disaster for the environment, that the collapse of authority in 1789 removed constraints on peasants' atavistic impulses, ushering in a decade of unchecked destruction. As we have seen, the reality was more complex. A second *légende noire* is that the French Revolution was similarly destructive of the family.³⁸ By instituting liberal divorce provisions, undermining the testamentary power of parents, and making marriage a purely civil act, it was soon argued that the Revolution had undermined parental authority and debased the institution of marriage.

Again, the reality is far more complex. Revolutionaries themselves argued that the intent of the reforms was in fact to "regenerate" the family, seen to have been corrupted by the inequality of the Ancien Régime. Certainly, this was the explicit rationale of the 1792 divorce law. Between 70,000 and 100,000 people were divorced

du Département du Bas-Rhin (Paris, An X), 29; and Jacques Peuchet and Pierre Grégoire Chanlaire, *Description topographique de la France* (1810), 23-4.

³⁵ Amans-Alexis Monteil, *Description du Département de l'Aveyron* (Rodez, An X), 32. Note the comments on Monteil by Peter Jones in *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 248-51.

³⁶ Andrée Corvol (ed.), *La Nature en Révolution, 1750-1800* (Paris, 1993); Denis Woronoff, "La 'dévastation révolutionnaire' des forêts," in Denis Woronoff (ed.), *Revolution et espaces forestiers. Colloque des 3 & 4 juin 1987* (Paris, 1988); McPhee, *Revolution and Environment in Southern France*, 47-48, 141-47; and "The misguided greed of peasants'? Popular attitudes to the environment in the Revolution of 1789," *French Historical Studies* 24 (2001), 247-269.

³⁷ Jean-Joseph de Verneilh-Puyraseau, *Mémoire sur le département de la Corrèze* (Tulle, An IX), 9; Comité des Travaux historiques et scientifiques, Section d'histoire moderne (depuis 1715) et d'histoire contemporaine. *Statistique agricole de 1814* (Paris, 1914), 536; and Deverneilh, *Observations des Commissions consultatives sur le Projet de Code Rural* (Paris, 1810-14).

³⁸ Irène Thery and Christian Biet (eds), *La Famille, la loi, l'État. De la Révolution au Code Civil* (Paris, 1989).

in 1792-1803, mainly in cities such as Paris and Rouen and in country towns like Vire, Bayeux and Honfleur. It was overwhelmingly women who initiated the divorce to escape marriages that had ended in desertion, violence or misery. The incidence of divorce varied by social class and locale: in general, the smaller the community, the lower the divorce rate. In the department of Meuse, the 413 of 586 communes, which had no divorce, were mostly small. But there were specific factors, too: Orbec, a town of about 3,000 people in the Pays d'Auge, had 24 divorces and a remarkably high divorce/marriage ratio of about one to ten. The comparably sized town of Vassy in the Bocage Virois, in contrast, did not have a single divorce during the revolutionary period.³⁹ Many devout rural women found divorce a profoundly disturbing prospect. They had, after all, sworn before God and their parish that this was a union for life. Everywhere, however, the divorce law represented an opportunity and a challenge.

The divorce law was restricted in 1804, then abolished in 1816. Nor could the exhortation of revolutionaries to a harmonious and peaceful family life erode a tradition of domestic violence (*correction modérée*) to which men resorted.⁴⁰ However, the nature of demographic practices in the early nineteenth century suggests that the Revolution did in fact accelerate significant change in family relationships, even though there is no evidence that the value placed on the family or the institution of marriage had been eroded. Added to the losses of life during the revolutionary decade—for which there are no reliable figures, but which were in the order of one million—the birth-rate plummeted towards the end of the decade and in the early years of the new century: the total number of births in 1804 (933,700) was the lowest since 1748.⁴¹ Nevertheless, it is estimated that the population increased by about 1.3 million, and by 2.5 million by 1814, the result of an increase in the marriage rate and a decline in the mortality rate. Paul Spagnoli has demonstrated that there was a decisive decline in mortality and an increase in life expectancy from the 1780s to the 1820s: for women from 28.1 to 39.3 years and for men from 27.5 to 38.3 years. In searching for an explanation of a phenomenon unique in Europe, he concludes that it was directly linked to the consequences of the Revolution in the countryside: land sales, fiscal equity, the removal of seigneurial dues and the tithe, higher wages for agricultural laborers, and greater incentives to increase production.⁴²

The legal status of women changed significantly in specific areas. In 1791 the law on inheritance guaranteed daughters equal inheritance rights to their brothers; only the addition in 1801 of a share of property set aside for parental discretion altered a law essentially in force to this day.⁴³ The Constitution of September 1791

³⁹ Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, 2004), 124, 377.

⁴⁰ Elisabeth G. Sledziewski, "The French Revolution as the Turning Point," in Geneviève Fraisse and Michelle Perrot (eds), *A History of Women in the West: Emerging Feminism from Revolution to World War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (London, 1993), 37. On the continuity of family relations and violence in a region of the Massif Central, see Elisabeth Claverie and Pierre Lamaison, *L'impossible mariage: violence et parenté en Gévaudan, XVIIe, XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Paris, 1982), esp. chs 4, 11.

⁴¹ See the comments by Peter Jones in *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 5-6.

⁴² Paul Spagnoli, "The Unique Decline of Mortality in Revolutionary France," *Journal of Family History* 22 (1997), 425-61.

⁴³ Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux, "Transmission des biens, pouvoirs familiaux et rôle des femmes en France, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles," in Gérard Béaur *et al* (eds), *Les*

defined civil majority in identical terms for men and women. In 1792 women were also acknowledged to possess sufficient reason and independence to serve as witnesses to public documents and to enter into contracts. They were also allowed to share in the division of communal property in 1793. The laws of September 1792, concerning civil status and divorce, treated husband and wife in symmetrical terms.⁴⁴

Few generalizations about the French Revolution have been echoed with such certainty than that it was a thoroughly negative experience for women, a turning point in the rhetoric and practice of domesticity and the private sphere. Lynn Hunt, Joan Landes and others have argued that, despite the political claims made by radical women in 1789-93, the transition from absolutism, under which all were subjects of the king, to a republican fraternity of male citizens ultimately served to reinforce the subordinate political position of women.⁴⁵ In contrast, a recent analysis by Suzanne Desan of family law and its consequences has argued that a “revolutionary challenge to domestic practices took place not just in the cultural and political imagination, but also in the texture of interpersonal relations and in the very partition of family goods.”⁴⁶ Men who made laws about the family, and peasant women who used or sidestepped them, were part of a central debate of the Revolution, how the new state would interact with its citizenry about suffrage, property and the embodiment of a new order: “the family became a practical terrain for wrestling with the most fundamental questions of the French Revolution.”⁴⁷

In Normandy, the area of Desan’s case study, parents had complete testamentary freedom before the Revolution but could not endow daughters with more than one-third of their property. “A father can dower his daughter with a bouquet of roses,” went one adage; “he owes his daughter a husband and nothing more.”⁴⁸ Rural women as well as their urban sisters welcomed revolutionary legislation on inheritance in Normandy. Of 83 court-cases in Caen over wills contested between siblings between 1790 and 1796, 45 were won by sisters. The citizeness Montfreulle

Sociétés rurales en Allemagne et en France (XVIIIe et XIXe siècles). Actes de colloque international de Göttingen (23-25 novembre 2000), (Rennes, 2004), 141-56.

⁴⁴ Sledziewski, “The French Revolution as the Turning Point,” 37-39. See also Martine Lapiéd, “La place des femmes dans la sociabilité et la vie politique locale en Provence et dans le Comtat Venaissin pendant la Révolution,” *Provence historique* 46 (1996), 457-69. Sledziewski’s argument may be compared with, for example, James F. McMillan, *France and Women, 1789-1914: Gender, Society and Politics* (London, 2000), 31.

⁴⁵ Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1992); Joan Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1988); Christine Fauré, *Democracy without Women: Feminism and the Rise of Liberal Individualism in France*, trans. by Claudia Gorbman and John Berks (Bloomington, Ind., 1991); Madelyn Gutwirth, *The Twilight of the Goddesses: Women and Representation in the French Revolutionary Era* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1992); and Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven, Conn., 1989). A contrary argument is put by Carla Hesse, “The Cultural Contradictions of Feminism in the French Revolution,” in Colin Jones and Dror Wahrman (eds), *The Age of Cultural Revolutions: Britain and France, 1750-1820* (Berkeley, 2002).

⁴⁶ Desan, *The Family on Trial*, 174.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

stated to the court in 1795: "I was married in 1773 'for a bouquet of roses,' to use the Norman expression. That was how girls were married then. Greed was in the air and one often sacrificed the daughters for the happiness of one son." Forty women from Falaise claimed in 1795 that "from birth nature gave us equal rights to the succession of our fathers."⁴⁹

The collapse or absence of clerical authority over birth control facilitated the response of the peasantry to the Revolution's inheritance laws of 1790 and 1793 requiring children to inherit equally. Given the desire and need to keep small family holdings intact, rural people responded by deliberately limiting family size, usually by *coïtus interruptus* but also by using knowledge of the fertility cycle, abortion, douching, abstinence, and occasionally infanticide.⁵⁰ The people of Lourmarin (Vaucluse) had long practiced sexual relations before marriage, but the number of first-born children conceived before marriage escalated from 19.1 per cent in 1781-90 to no fewer than 34.4 per cent in 1791-1800; but they also practiced birth control, and fewer children overall were born in the 1790s. For Basque and Catalan peasants in the Pyrenees, in contrast, the principle of equal inheritance undermined the central element of the continuity of the extended family and its house.

Lourmarin was by no means typical of rural communities: in the devout Norman parish of Crulai (Orne), only 3 per cent of children were born before their parents had been married for eight months. Even there, however, a startling demographic change points to one of the clearest indications of the impact of the Revolution on daily life: an unprecedented—and permanent—decline in the birth rate, from 42.5 per thousand in the 1780s to 36.6 in the following decade. Nationally the decline was from 38.8 per thousand in 1789 to 32.9 in 1804; the average interval between births increased from 19-30 months to 31-48 months, a further indication of deliberate limitation of family size. In 1789-1824 there was a 22.6 per cent fall in female fecundity.

The effects of the new inheritance law and the abolition of seigneurialism may well have meant that women were both better nourished and in a stronger position within the family. In countless households after 1790, the rights of daughters became a family issue, just as the divorce law empowered wives—this was the most significant shift in the status of women in these years. Even though in the Basque country, for example, parents sought ways to sidestep revolutionary legislation, "the

⁴⁹ Suzanne Desan, "'War between Brothers and Sisters': Inheritance Law and Gender Politics in Revolutionary France," *French Historical Studies* 20 (1997), 624, 628.

⁵⁰ Etienne Gautier and Louis Henry, *La population de Crulai, paroisse normande: étude historique* (Paris, 1958), 119; Jacques Dupâquier, *Histoire de la population française*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1988), ch. 7; Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*, 252-3; and Alain Bideau, "A Demographic and Social Analysis of Widowhood and Remarriage: The Example of the Castellany of Thoisse-en-Dombes, 1670-1840," *Journal of Family History*, 5 (1980), 28-43. Reasons for the change in fertility patterns are discussed by Marcel Reinhard, "Demography, the Economy, and the French Revolution," in Evelyn M. Acomb and Marvin L. Brown (eds.), *French Society and Culture since the Old Régime* (New York, 1966), 20-42; Angus McLaren, *Sexuality and Social Order: The Debate over the Fertility of Women and Workers in France, 1770-1820* (New York, 1983), ch. 1; and Etienne van de Walle, "Motivations and Technology in the Decline of French Fertility," in Robert Wheaton and Tamara K. Hareven (eds.), *Family and Sexuality in French History* (Philadelphia, 1980), 135-78.

wind of equality got up,” in the words of Jacques Poumarède, “and would never die down.”⁵¹

In many areas, such as the southern Massif Central and the Pyrenees, inheritance patterns continued, whereby sons ultimately received the family holding, so that daughters must either have been cajoled into renouncing their share or were compensated in other ways.⁵² In Marllhes (Haute-Loire), for example, parents adopted a strategy to ensure that every child was provided for while preserving the household’s wealth intact. This was done most commonly by agreement between the children after their parents’ death on whether to divide the farm or whether some siblings should leave and be materially compensated. The historian of Marllhes, James Lehning, has concluded that the revolutionary and Napoleonic legislation marked “an important shift of control towards heirs,” including daughters. On the other hand, because parents were able to transfer their property at any time, they retained an important measure of control over their offspring, even if they could no longer threaten to disinherit them, for example, over the choice of a marriage partner. Whatever the case, the social consequence of this legislation was to focus attention on children’s rights as well as on the family estate.⁵³ In and around Montauban, the inheritance law did not abruptly change patterns of passing on the family holding to the eldest son, but there was a perceptible—and requisite—concern to meet the rights of his siblings and a shift in values which saw the material needs of widows being expressly met in wills.⁵⁴

David Andress concluded his recent overview of popular participation in the French Revolution by entitling his final chapter “Revolution against the People?” His answer is that this was never the people’s revolution. “The common people of France had made the Revolution, even if its meaning and course had been taken from them”: what the people won they had had to fight for by violent insurrection. In the end, he argues, the only significant gain for the common people was the abolition of feudalism.⁵⁵

In contrast, I argue that while the weight of seigneurialism varied widely, the abolition of seigneurial dues and other rights, and of the tithe, then the introduction of justices of the peace and widespread land sales had a direct, material impact on every village. The abolition of privilege and the call to participation in national elections underpinned the central cultural and political change: the assumption by villagers that they were equal in the eyes of the law and ultimately the sovereign people.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Jacques Poumarède, “La législation successorale de la Révolution entre l’idéologie et la pratique,” in Thery and Biet (eds), *La Famille, la loi, l’État. De la Révolution au Code Civil*, 177.

⁵² Claverie and Lamaison, *L’impossible mariage*, ch. 4.

⁵³ James R. Lehning, *The Peasants of Marllhes. Economic Development and Family Organization in Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Macmillan, 1980), ch. 8.

⁵⁴ Desan, “War between Brothers and Sisters,” 633; and Margaret Darrow, *Revolution in the House: Family, Class and Inheritance in Southern France, 1775–1825* (Princeton, 1989). See also Louis Assier-Andrieu, “Custom and Law in the Social Order: Some Reflections upon French Catalan Peasant Communities,” *Law and History Review* 1 (1984), 86-94.

⁵⁵ David Andress, *The French Revolution and the People* (London, 2004), 257.

⁵⁶ Jones, *Liberty and Locality in Revolutionary France*.

It is true that, except in places where the rural economy had changed abruptly, for example, to more market-oriented winegrowing, or where a branch of urban work had collapsed, most people worked in 1799 as they had in 1789. The nature of their work—manual, skilled, repetitive—remained the same. The production of wine, wheat and cloth involved the same techniques: only the scale of production had changed in particular areas. As in 1700, the countryside in 1800 was a busy, crowded landscape of manual labor. Even in areas where land use remained unchanged, however, the Revolution went to the heart of community and family life: this was a revolutionary experience. Certainly, some of the changes may have been ephemeral: under the Directory, the practice of giving revolutionary names to one's children or to one's community largely disappeared; "regenerated" towns and villages reverted to their Ancien Régime nomenclature; and children with revolutionary names were rebaptized or simply took on another name. The Napoleonic Code sharply restricted grounds for divorce. A resurgent church was soon as present in the countryside as before 1789. In other ways, however, the practices of daily life were changed forever, as were the markers in the mental universe that gave meanings to people about who they were and how the world might be.

I conclude by reminding us, finally, of the fundamental—if necessarily illusory—goal of the historian: to understand the past as the present to those who lived through it. All people live with insecurities and fears as well as dreams, but the revolutionary decade after 1789 was for most French people a time of unprecedented hopes and anxieties, a time when the most fundamental elements of daily life were improved, threatened, and laid bare. The single most important characteristic of daily life after 1789 was uncertainty about when the most profound aspirations of 1789 and the basic needs of survival might be enjoyed in peace. The legislative impulses of revolution originated in national assemblies in Paris, but it was in small towns and villages that the Revolution was lived.