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Sade in Paris: The Banality of Survival

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Of all people, the Marquis de Sade should not have survived the French Revolution. He was an aristocrat from an ancient noble family; a family that could trace its roots to the knights of the Middle Ages. He was a convicted sex offender, to use present-day terminology.[1] When the Revolution broke out, he had been in prison for thirteen years, five of them in the Bastille. He was a notorious author of libertine novels, although he had not yet achieved the notoriety he has today. Sade was, in other words, an ideal candidate for the guillotine, but he died in his bed in 1814, in the lunatic asylum of Charenton. He was 74 years old.

Sade's case is interesting for a discussion of "revolutionary survivors." In the original proposal for this H-France Salon, the editors foregrounded the role of networks and strategies in the survival of historical actors. These terms imply a good deal of agency over one's fate. They imply a string of social ties – be they weak or strong – and the ability to draw on them in moments of need.[2] They imply that survivors often possessed the skills required to evaluate the context correctly, calculate various courses of action and their respective consequences, and act in accordance with individual judgment.[3] These skills and judgments are needed to navigate social life, and most of the time, we take them for granted. But in times of revolution, when the unwritten norms and rules that make up the everyday get rewritten again and again, these social navigational skills are stretched to the limit.[4] This breakdown of quotidian normalcy raises the question of how much influence individuals have over their fate in volatile situations like a revolution. This was doubly so in the case of Sade. On the one hand, here was a member of the nobility whose family had certain resources at its disposal and who knew, to some extent, how to operate in the corridors of power. On the other hand, Sade was a non-conformist who refused, or was unable, to adhere to the rules of the game, and was ostracized for this by his peers. Referring to Sade's incarceration in 1777 and probably also to the fact that he spent a third of his life in prison or in insane asylums, the literary critic Francine du Plessix Gray wrote that, "his eventual demise would be in great part caused by the fact that he refused to network with his fellow nobles."[5] Sade's case intrigues because it is unclear how much he owed his survival to his agency over his fate, and how much to dumb luck.

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[1] In 1772, a prostitute accused Sade and his valet of trying to poison her in Marseille. They were tried in absentia, convicted of sodomy and attempted murder, sentenced to death, and burned in effigy. Sade was arrested five years later, in 1777, not because of the affair in Marseille, but rather because of a *lettre de cachet* issued by the king and requested by Sade's mother-in-law. For details on some of the affairs that gained Sade notoriety as a sex offender, see Maurice Lever, *Sade: A Biography*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), chapters 8 and 10.

[2] I am referring here to Mark Granovetter's oft-cited article, "The Strength of Weak Ties," *The American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 6 (1973): 1360-1380. See also Peter Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (New York: J. Wiley, 1964).

[3] See Irving Goffman, *Strategic Interaction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970).

[4] I am relying here on Victor Turner's analysis of revolutions as liminal moments, when the rules that made up the old order have been jettisoned, and the rules that make up the new one are not yet stable. See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974).

Sade's case is also interesting because it raises the question of whether surviving the Revolution was the same as coming out of it alive. The 1798 edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* defines survival as "the state of one who has survived another." This definition associates the term survival with marriage, as in "he is survived by…."[6] A quick search in the digitized *Archives parlementaires* shows that most mentions of terms like "survivance" and "survivant/ante" were in relation to marriage, inheritance, and property.[7] The noun "survivant/ante" and the verb "survivre" are mentioned often in the registers of the Committee of Legislation after 9 Thermidor. They designate, most often, the widows, widowers, parents, or children of men and women who had been condemned to death and executed in 1793-94 and who then demanded restitution.[8] If we refer to Sade as a "survivor", what was he a survivor of? Ostracism by his peers? The Old Regime? The French Revolution? His own predilection for violent sex (real or fictional)?[9]

Sade lived but is this the same as surviving? The Revolution cost him his fortune, his social ties – I would say, his entire social ecology – and his marriage. More important, as far as he was concerned, was the loss of his manuscripts. Sade was in his fifth year of imprisonment in the Bastille when the Revolution broke out. He was moved to the institution at Charenton on July 3, 1789. He was not allowed to take any of his belongings when he was relocated. His manuscripts were left behind in his cell in the Bastille. When the crowd broke in on 14 July, his cell was ransacked, and his manuscripts were gone. It is this loss which seems to have hurt him the most. He wrote to his lawyer, Gaspard François Xavier Gaufridy, a year later that "All my possessions, that is, more than a hundred louis of furniture, of clothes, of linen, six hundred volumes, several quite expensive, and, what is irreplaceable, *fifteen volumes of my works in manuscript*, ready for the press, all these things, I say, were put under the seal of the Commissaire of the Bastille." He was especially upset over the loss of his manuscripts. "I shed tears of blood every day" over their plunder, he wrote to Gaufridy.[10] Was not the loss of the manuscripts a death of some kind for a man who saw himself, above all else, as a writer, a man of letters?

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[5] Francine du Plessix Gray, "Introduction," in Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Boudoir* (New York: Penguin, 2006), xi. Sade's foremost biographer, Maurice Lever, also notes his hostility to court life and the ethos of his class. See Lever, *Sade*, 402

[6] "Survivance," in *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, 5th ed. (1798), *ARTFL*, https://artflsrv04.uchicago.edu/philologic4.7/publicdicos/navigate/11/13965 (accessed February 4, 2024).

[7] "Survivance," in *Archives parlementaires*, *French Revolution Digital Archive*, https://sul-philologic.stanford.edu/philologic/archparl/query?report=concordance&method=proxy&q=survivance&start=0&end=0 (accessed February 4, 2024).

[8] *Registres du comité de legislation de la Convention nationale, Nivôse-Prairial, an III* (December 1794 – June 1795), Archives nationales, D III 15* - D III 27 *.

[9] I almost did not survive reading his *120 Days of Sodom*… To quote a recent biographer, "There is no novel more scarifying than *Les cent vingt journées de Sodome.* It is certainly a test of the reader's humanity, his stomach, and the absolute limits of his curiosity." See Neil Schaeffer, *The Marquis de Sade: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 365.

[10] Paul Bourdin, ed., *Correspondance inédite du Marquis de Sade* (Paris: Librairie de France, 1929), 269-70. Sade could not know, at that time, that the manuscript of *120 Days of Sodom* did survive. Sade had hidden the scroll in the walls of his cell. It was discovered by one of the men who had broken into the fortress on 14 July. He seems to have

Let us turn to what happened to Sade during the Revolution. I will follow the story from his initial release from prison in 1790 to his renewed arrest in December 1793 and onto his second release in October 1794, several months after the fall of Robespierre. The beginning of the Revolution was propitious for Sade. He was freed from prison after thirteen years.[11] The National Assembly abolished the *lettres de cachet* in March 1790, and consequently, Sade walked out of the gates of the lunatic asylum in Charenton on April Fool's Day, 1790. He was a free man, but he was also penniless, and after the National Assembly adopted a decree abolishing the nobility and all hereditary titles in June, a former nobleman in an environment that grew increasingly inhospitable to such a status.

His immediate concerns were material. He needed money, and a place to live. It is here that we see his network in action. His mother-in-law loaned him some money so that he could rent a room at the *hôtel de Bouloir* in Paris, where his neighbor was, incidentally, the revolutionary firebrand Théroigne de Méricourt.[12] A few months later, Sade made the acquaintance of a noble lady, Margueritte Camille Marthe Fayard des Avenières, known as La Présidente Fayard de Fleurieu, who rented him a small apartment in the Saint-Sulpice parish.[13] He began to make and receive visits. He also started to make contacts in the theater world, with the hope of getting his plays performed, although he was not very successful in this regard.

Money was a constant problem. Sade relied on his family's estate in Provence. He continuously badgered Gaufridy, the lawyer who managed the family's estates. Money was the main subject of their lengthy correspondence.[14] Here is a typical example, from June 1790. Sade had received a letter from an agent (M. Lions) who was overseeing one of his estates. The letter explained that there was no income from this particular property because the wool from the sheep had not been sold yet. Sade wrote to Gaufridy to complain:

> I get, along with yours, a letter from M. Lions, who tells me that the sheep have not been sheared… Fuck the sheep, my dear lawyer! Do you think my butcher and my baker will

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sold it to a French nobleman and it was kept in the latter's family for several generations. It was sold, at some point, to a German collector. The German psychiatrist Iwan Bloch published a first, truncated, edition of the work in 1904. The full manuscript only saw the light of day in 1929. The fate of this manuscript is a gripping story, but as far as Sade knew it was gone forever. In general, only a small number of his writings survived the storming of the Bastille. See John Philips, *The Marquis de Sade: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13. Translations from the French are mine, unless noted otherwise.

[11] The contentious relationship between Sade and his mother-in-law has been the subject of extensive commentary. See Laurence L. Bongie, *Sade: A Biographical Essay* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), as well as Lever, *Sade*, chapters 15-16. The Japanese nationalist author and poet, Yukio Mishima, dramatized the antagonism between Sade and his mother-in-law in a play that he wrote in 1965, *Madame de Sade* (New York: Grove Press, 1967). On the *lettres de cachet* in the Old Regime, see Arlette Farge and Michel Foucault, *Le désordre des familles. Lettres de cachet des archives de la Bastille au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

[12] Sade seems to have admired her greatly. See Lever, *Sade*, 358. On Théroigne de Méricourt's exploits during the Revolution, see Suzanne Desan, "Théroigne de Méricourt, Gender, and International Politics in Revolutionary Europe," *The Journal of Modern History* 92, No. 2 (2020): 274-310.

[13] Her title of "présidente" came from her husband, who was the president of the regional financial administration in Lyon during the Old Regime. See *Mémoire pour Madame de Fleurieu, appellante, contre M. Camille-Jacques-Annibal-Gaspard-Claret de Fleurieu, premier président du Bureau des Finances, Intimé* (Lyon: Imprimerie d'Aimé de la Roche, 1774).

[14] The correspondence with Gaufridy is the most important source we have for Sade's life, except his writings, of course.

> settle for being told, "Monsieurs, the sheep have not been sheared? […] send some money, or you are going to put me in the most troublesome situation…[15]

Sade's money problems became worse after his family's main property, the Chateaux at La Coste (Provence) was ransacked in September 1792, and after Gaufridy, an active royalist and counter-revolutionary, went into hiding. At a certain point Sade was reduced to working as a prompt in the theater for 40 sous a day.

In July 1790, Sade obtained his citizenship card. Like many former nobles, he dropped the *particule* from his name, and registered himself simply as "Louis Sade, *citoyen*". This would later be changed to "Aldonze Sade" – probably a clerical error for "Alphonse" – since "Louis" was not a great choice in this context.[16] He became involved in revolutionary politics, first as the secretary of his Paris section, the *Section des piques*, and then, in the summer of 1793, as its president. He authored two texts that were printed and circulated among all members of the revolutionary sections in Paris. The first text, "On the Method for Approving Laws" (1792) espoused radical democracy. The second text was a eulogy for the revolutionary leaders Louis Michel Le Peletier and Jean-Paul Marat, both of whom had been assassinated.[17] In cultivating his persona as a former-noble-turned-revolutionary, Sade drew on his status as a past prisoner in the Bastille. As a former soldier – Sade served with distinction in the Seven Years War – he was also drafted to serve in his neighborhood's National Guard. "I am," he wrote to Gaufridy, "mind, heart, and neck, in the Revolution."[18]

Despite Sade's revolutionary record and his own words, scholars have interpreted his politics in contradictory ways. Jules Michelet saw him as embodying the corruption and debauchery of the Old Regime.[19] The British anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer argued that Sade was an early socialist.[20] Biographers of Sade often describe his conduct during the Revolution as opportunistic.[21] If we turn from scholarly works to Sade's own writings in search of his politics, we find equally contradictory statements. Sade published three major works during the revolutionary decade: *Justine* (1791), *Philosophy in the Bedroom* (1795), and *Juliette* (1797). The political ideas expressed in them are inconsistent. To take one example, Sade inserted a fictional political pamphlet into his novel, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, with the provocative title, "Frenchmen, One More Effort if you Wish to Become Republicans." The first part of the pamphlet advocated ideas that accorded well with revolutionary political culture, such as the rule of law and a civic spirit. In the second part, Sade argued that vice and murder are good for the Republic, but that the state had no right to sentence people to death. He also advocated the establishment of brothels on every street corner. Which of these positions represents Sade's "real" politics? It is difficult to tell, and the text is best read as a pastiche that parodies revolutionary rhetoric. Early in the Revolution, Sade offered what is perhaps the most honest assessment of his own politics. He wrote to Gaufridy in December 1791,

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[15] Bourdin, ed., *Correspondance inédite*, 272.

[16] Frequent name changes, of people, places, and things, were a feature of the revolutionary decade, and reflected the need to adapt one's identity to a rapidly evolving, and ever-changing, political situation. I do not know how common it was for ex-nobles to drop the *particule* from their surname in order not to be identified with their previous estate, but Sade was certainly not the only case. See Pierre-Henri Billy, "Des prénoms révolutionnaires en France," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 322 (Octobre-Decembre 2000): 2-16; Pierre-Marie Dioudonnat, ed., *Encyclopédie de la fausse noblesse et de noblesse d'apparence* (Paris: Sédopols, 1994); Ronen Steinberg, *The Afterlives of the Terror: Facing the Legacies of Mass Violence in Postrevolutionary France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019), 39-41 and 79-82.

[17] *Idée sur le mode de la sanction des lois, par un citoyen de cette section* (Paris: Imprimerie de la rue S. Fiacre, s.d.); Le Peletier was assassinated on 20 January 1793. Marat was assassinated on 13 July 1793. For Sade's printed speeches on these occasions, see Donatien Alphonse François de Sade, *Discours prononcé à la fête décernée par la section… aux manes de Marat et de Le Pelletier, 29 Septembre 1793* (Paris: Imprimerie de la section des Piques, s.d.); and *Section des Piques*.

[18] Bourdin, ed., *Correspondance inédite*, 334.

[19] Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Revolution française*, 2 vols. (Paris: Laffont, 1990), 2: 784-5.

[20] Geoffrey Gorer, *The Life and Ideas of the Marquis de Sade* (London: Peter Owen, 1962).

[21] In his biography of Sade, Maurice Lever titled the chapters that deal with Sade's revolutionary record "The Great Illusion" and "the Patriotic Farce," respectively. See Lever, *Sade*, chapters 20, 22. Bongie titled the chapter on Sade's revolutionary politics "His Finest Lie," itself a quote from Paul Bourdin, who edited a selection of Sade's letters. See Bongie, *Sade: A Biographical Essay*, chapter 19.

> I am an anti-Jacobin, I hate them to the death; I love the King, but I detest the former abuses. I love most of the articles of the Constitution; others of them revolt me… I do not at all want the National Assembly, but two houses, as in England… the clergy is unnecessary. I want nothing of them…. What am I now? Aristocrat or democrat? Please tell me, lawyer, because, as for me, I do not have the faintest idea.[22]

Sade's politics were elusive and ambivalent. As the literary critic John Phillips put it, he was sometimes a feudal aristocrat and sometimes a true revolutionary, and "no single reading of Sade's politics is wholly satisfactory."[23] It is perhaps this ambivalent political conviction that explains his survival. It was useful, and maybe even wise, to be a chameleon in the volatile, fluid dynamic of the Revolution.

Sade's role in the Revolution did not save him, however, from persecution. Members of his section denounced him as a former noble and accused him of "moderatism," and he was arrested in December 1793 under the provisions of the Law of Suspects. He was imprisoned in Saint-Lazare, and his way to the revolutionary tribunal, and from there to the guillotine, seemed certain. But then, by a stroke of luck in March 1794 – or was it luck? – Sade was transferred from Saint-Lazare to a convalescent home, the Maison Coignard, located in the former convent of Picpus on the outskirts of the capital. The Maison Coignard was one of several *maisons de santé*, or convalescent homes, that functioned as prison hospitals of sorts during the period known as the terror. Wealthy suspects could arrange to be transferred to one of these places from Paris's makeshift prisons, and, once there, in return for exorbitant sums of money, they would enjoy some fresh air, better food, and maybe also evade the scaffold.[24] Sade later described

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[22] Bourdin, ed., *Correspondance inédite*, 301-2

[23] Phillips, *The Marquis de Sade*, 59. For other texts that discuss Sade's ambivalent politics, see Philippe Roger, "A Political Minimalist," in *Sade and the Narrative of Transgression*, ed. David B. Allison et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 76-98; Michel Delon, "Sade Thermidorien," in *Sade. Ecrire la crise*, ed. Michel Camus and Philippe Roger (Paris: Belfond, 1983), 99-116; Carolyn J. Dean, *The Self and its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), esp. Part II.

[24] The history of these prison hospitals or convalescent homes is full of gaps because the negotiations that led to the transfer of certain "suspects" from the makeshift prisons in the Capital to these establishments were conducted orally and secretly. Nevertheless, there is some scholarship on these places. See Erwin H. Ackernecht, "Political Prisoners in French Mental Institutions before 1789, during the Revolution, and under Napoleon I," *Medical History* 19, no. 3 (1975): 250-55; Frédéric Lenormand, *La pension Belhomme. Une prison de luxe sous la Terreur* (Paris: Fayard, 2002). See also a list of these establishments in Olivier Blanc, *Last Letters: Prisons & Prisoners of the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1987), 218. Other famous suspects who whiled away the

Picpus as "a terrestrial paradise: beautiful house, superb garden, choice society, pleasant women."[25] Yet the reminders of revolutionary violence were not far from view. By order of the revolutionary government, two mass graves for the victims of the guillotine, which was situated at this point in the nearby *Place du trône renversé* – today's *Place de la Nation* – were dug in the garden of Picpus. Sade would later comment that the daily sight of the cadavers being brought to the mass graves in Picpus, "did me a hundred times more harm than all the Bastilles imaginable had ever done."[26] The contradiction between describing Picpus as a paradise on earth and describing it as the most harmful prison he had ever been in reflects, in part, the vicissitudes of daily life during the Revolution and, in part, Sade's penchant for describing everything in extremes.

Sade's transfer to the Maison Coignard probably saved his life. It seems he owed his good fortune to the intervention of the woman he had been living with since his release from the Bastille, Marie Quesnet. She was a former actress, whom Sade nicknamed "la sensible" and who would remain devoted to him, and he to her, till the end of his life. When Sade drew up his will in 1806, he left much of whatever fortune he still had to her, writing that "under the Terror… she plucked me from the revolutionary scythe most certainly suspended over my head."[27] If Sade owed his transfer to Picpus to the woman in his life – and Sade was often saved by the women in his life – he might have also owed his deliverance from the guillotine to a clerical error. On July 24, 1794, charges were drawn against "Aldonze Sade, ex noble and Comte… accused of conspiracy against the Republic."[28] Two days later, 28 people were supposed to appear before the revolutionary tribunal in Paris. Sade's name was eleventh on the list, but he was not in the courthouse. It seems the turnkey at Picpus made a mistake. One of Sade's biographers, Gilbert Lely, believes that the bailiff charged with collecting prisoners to appear before the tribunal may have become confused by Sade's frequent transfers from one prison to another. Maurice Lever believes he was spared because Marie Quesnet paid bribes.[29] What we know for certain is that a few days later, Robespierre fell from power, and in October 1794, Sade was a free man, again. Whether it was due to bribery, the influence of friends, a clerical error, or the Providence that Sade, a staunch atheist, did not believe in, he was spared in the last minute.

What can we learn from his case about surviving the French Revolution? Let me make two points. First, agency and access to effective networks played a part, but a smaller part, I think, than we imagine. Survival depends on reading the situation correctly, and having the means to respond, but in the volatile, fluid context of the Revolution, this was almost impossible. Luck, and structural factors that had little to do with one's intentions or actions, played just as large, if not a larger, part in this case. Second, Sade's contradictory persona helped. In *The Pleasure of the Text* – an essay that has much to do with Sade – the literary theorist Roland Barthes wrote:

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terror in the Maison Coignard at the same time as Sade included the philosopher the Comte de Volney and the novelist Choderlos de Laclos. The British novelist A. C. H. Smith wrote a fictional account of conversations between Sade and Laclos while they were both in Picpus. See *The Dangerous Memoir of Citizen Sade: A Novel* (Bristol: Loxwood-Stoneleigh, 2000).

[25] Bourdin, ed., *Correspondance inédite*, 360.

[26] *Ibid*, 365.

[27] Alice Laborde, ed., *Correspondance du Marquis de Sade et de ses proches*, 25 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1991-), 25: 256-57.

[28] *Ibid*, 23: 203.

[29] Lever, *Sade*, 466-67.

> imagine someone who mixes every language, even those said to be incompatible; who silently accepts every charge of illogicality, of incongruity; who remains passive in the face of Socratic irony… and legal terrorism…. Such a man would be the mockery of our society: court, school, asylum, polite conversation would cast him out.[30]

Barthes was writing about the figure of the reader here, but his description could be equally applied to Sade, who was indeed cast out by society and from polite conversation.[31] Sade's life and writings were marked by contradiction. A nobleman who rejected the codes of his caste; a notorious libertine who had achieved a measure of anonymity by the time the Revolution broke out, because of his long imprisonment; an author who put to paper some of the most violent scenes ever recorded in western literature, but was, at the same time and in the same pages, vehemently opposed to the death penalty and to the revolutionary recourse to terror.[32] No one knew what to do with him. Sade's unclassifiable persona contributed to his survival in the context of the revolutionary decade, when the way one was labeled – as, for example, an aristocrat, a Jacobin, sans-culotte, or belonging to this or that faction – often meant the difference between life and death. Perhaps one lesson to draw from Sade's case is that it is good to be an outcast in certain situations.

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[30] Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975), 3.

[31] Barthes refers explicitly to Sade a few pages later, likening the pleasure of the text to autoerotic asphyxiation. "The pleasure of the text is like that untenable, impossible, purely novelistic instant so relished by Sade's libertine when he manages to be hanged and then to cut the rope at the very moment of his orgasm, his bliss [*jouissance*]" Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 6-7. Barthes also pointed out the contradictory nature of the Sadean text, where "pornographic messages are embodied in sentences so pure they might be used as grammatical models," (p. 6).

[32] In an analysis of the growing interest in Sade in the interwar era, Carolyn Dean points out that writers were fascinated by his condemnation of political violence. See Dean, *The Self and its Pleasures*, 148-9.