

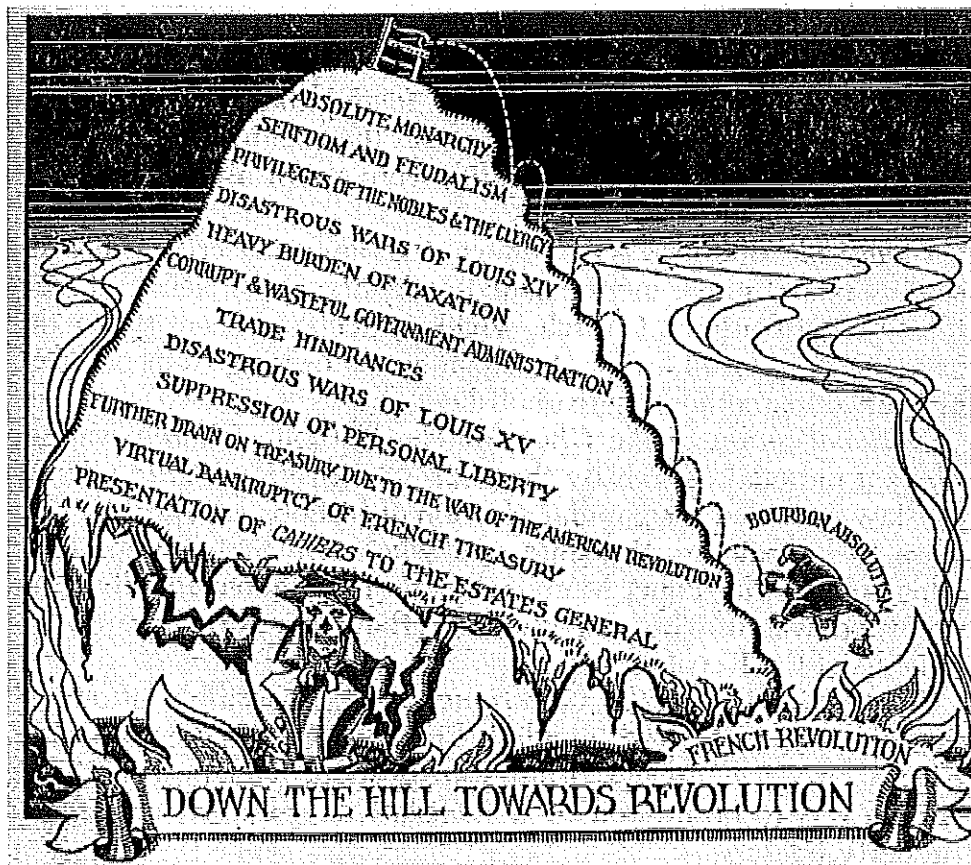
## Sister Revolutions: American versus French Revolutions

"Externally all the despots surround you; internally all the friends of tyranny conspire...It is necessary to annihilate both the internal and external enemies of the republic or perish with its fall. Now, in this situation your first political maxim should be that one guides the people by reason, and the enemies of the people by terror...terror is the only justice that is prompt, severe, and inflexible; it is thus an emanation of virtue"

Maximilien Robespierre's "Republic of Virtue."

**QUESTIONS** [after reading excerpts from *Sister Revolutions* (1999)]:

- 1) What are the main differences between Emmanuel Sieyes and James Madison regarding the importance of individuals in relation to the broader society? Be specific.
- 2) According to the excerpts from *Sister Revolutions* (1999) and your textbook readings, what are the major differences between the American Revolution (1776-1783) & the French Revolution (1789-1799)? Be specific.



On the other hand, in England stagnation seemed to reign. "The dread of innovation there," he observed, "has, I fear, palsied the spirit of improvement."

Twenty years later, Tocqueville also concluded that the spark of new ideas revitalizes and reenergizes a society. Predicting that egalitarian democracies like America, where men are inclined to promote social stability and political moderation in order to protect the enjoyment of their wealth and property, would eventually become prey to intellectual enervation and political and social stagnation, he counseled that only new ideas and theories could rescue and refresh such societies. "I cannot help fearing" he wrote, "that men may reach the point where they look on every new theory as a danger, every innovation as a bothersome problem, all social progress as the first step toward revolution. . . . Personally, I am afraid that the human race will stop and clip its own wings and that . . . humanity will progress no farther."

For Jefferson and Tocqueville, successful revolutions and, even more important, healthy democratic societies call for leaders who possess the crucial combination of political experience and political imagination. People—experienced in representative institutions and, at the same time, courageous, farsighted, idealistic, and hopeful—can assure the perpetual renewal and thus the survival of their societies.

But the remarkable synthesis of ideas, experience, and experiment that took place in America could simply not have been reproduced in eighteenth-century France. French intellectuals would have had to temper their theories with some practical understanding of representative political institutions, but those institutions did not exist.

Ideas gone amok doomed the Revolution in France. As we shall see, one blinding idea in particular—the idea of unity—mesmerized revolutionaries, preventing them from creating a political culture more democratic, inclusive, and open than the lifeless and closed government of the *Ancien Régime*.

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### *Conflict or Consensus?*

**T**he harmony and consensus that reigned at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 delighted James Madison. The delegates, he marveled, managed to deliberate without conflict or faction and "with a unanimity almost as unprecedented as it must have been unexpected." Throughout the stifling summer months of July and August, the windows of the State House closed, the curtains drawn, these leaders toiled six days a week on the new Constitution, hammering out compromise measures, from the problem of representation in Congress for smaller states to the issue of counting slaves in the representation of the South.

Such concord, Madison knew, was a rare achievement, almost a miracle. One could plausibly believe, he remarked, that God himself had intervened. He could discern in the Constitutional Convention no evidence whatsoever of "pestilential" party influence, the disease considered inherent in virtually all deliberative bodies, always threatening to contaminate and undermine them.

How had such amity and unity been possible? Perhaps the members of the Convention approved the Constitution, Madison hypothesized, because they possessed "a deep conviction of the necessity of sacrificing

private opinions and partial interests to the public good." Ironically, such willingness to sacrifice one's own interests for the good of all was not to be expected of citizens of the new federal union. Unless there were some extreme crisis and overwhelming sense of shared purpose, Madison anticipated neither consensus nor unity in the new republic.

The Convention represented a privileged moment in American politics, a moment of harmony that produced a Constitution incorporating and even enshrining the principles of disharmony and conflict. After that founding moment, unity would never again be the goal of government. On the contrary, the new federal government was carefully structured so that people and interest groups would collide rather than concur. Consensus *and* conflict would coexist. The American *constitutional consensus*, in the words of one historian, presents "an invitation to conflict," an agreement to disagree.

Indeed, as soon as the Constitution was agreed to and signed in Philadelphia, conflict over it commenced. Would the state legislatures vote in favor of the new federal government? Antifederalists were galvanizing their followers and drumming up opposition. James Madison was troubled that even in Virginia distinguished men such as Patrick Henry, Arthur Lee, Benjamin Harrison, and others were opposed to the Constitution. On the one hand, he could only regret this dissent, but on the other, he knew well that just such pluralism and conflict were the fundamental underpinnings of his political vision. When Alexander Hamilton proposed that he, Madison, and John Jay help strengthen the Federalist position by publishing a series of essays in New York newspapers, Madison readily agreed. Returning to New York that November, he drew up, in less than a week, one of the masterpieces of modern political thought. Two words describe the import of *The Federalist* No. 10: "diversity" and "conflict."

Madison's plan for American government gave free rein to citizens to act in their self-interest, to form factions, to enter into conflict with one another, and the predictable result would be disorder and tumult. The government would make no attempt to eliminate conflict—that is, non-violent and rational contention—only to moderate it and provide channels for it.

In France, however, the momentum of the Revolution was toward order, not tumult, toward oneness, not multiplicity. Far from accepting diversity and conflict, the French worshipped homogeneity and unanimity. Their leaders believed that the salvation of the Revolution depended above all on the absolute unity and solidarity of the people. According to their revolutionary agenda, three orders—nobility, clergy, and Third Estate—would become one, 25 million citizens would form one unitary people. All would sacrifice their self-interest for the common good of all; diverse opinions would yield to consensus.

#### AMERICAN TUMULT

Madison's brilliant and novel plan for the federal republic stemmed from his fundamental belief that citizens are individuals and that as individuals they are all different. He explicitly rejected the idea of regarding Americans as "one homogeneous mass." He knew well that people would never agree unanimously on anything. A vast variety of "unavoidable" factors—wealth and property, social class, religion, geography, political ideas, etc.—would always divide people into different interest groups and factions. Indeed, the principle of diversity seemed embedded in human nature—that is, in human rationality. Madison argued that rational people view issues in different ways because reason is essentially imperfect. "As long as the reason of man continues fallible," he maintained, "and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed."

Could differences and factions be removed from society? Madison asked. Could conflict be eliminated and unity achieved? Certainly, unity and unanimity could be created by summarily outlawing factions, but such an option was completely unsatisfactory and unacceptable, since its cost would be freedom itself. People would be forced to sacrifice the very liberty that was "essential to political life." Thus the remedy would be worse than the disease. "Liberty is to faction," Madison said in a superb simile, "what air is to fire. . . . But it could not be less folly to abolish liberty, which is essential to political life, because it nourishes faction, than it would be to wish the annihilation of air."

Was there any other way to achieve unity? No. The dream of unity, he noted with disdain, was a fantasy that only "theoretic politicians" could find fruitful. Only cloistered philosophers could imagine imposing the same opinions, passions, and interests on every citizen. In the "civilized communities" of real life, no such "perfect homogeneity of interests, opinions & feelings" would ever be found. Division and conflict were inevitable because "the latent causes of faction are . . . sown in the nature of man." Not "reason" but passion and self-interest would always dominate human affairs. "In all very numerous assemblies," Madison wrote in *The Federalist* No. 55, "passion never fails to wrest the scepter from reason. Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob."

Madison's acceptance of the reality of human nature was itself a crucial feature of the American Revolution. He was never tempted to remold or "regenerate"—as the French would have said—human beings to suit utopian political blueprints. "What is government itself," he wrote, "but the greatest of all reflections on human nature. If men were angels, no government would be necessary."

Madison was influenced by the mentality—if not by the words—of Niccolò Machiavelli, the great Florentine political thinker. Though he was celebrated as the author of *The Prince*, a training manual in realpolitik for power-driven, hard-nosed rulers, the kind of government that Machiavelli himself preferred and wished to see return to his native Florence was a republic, a government by the people. In *The Discourses*, his writings on republican government, Machiavelli offered the gleaming insight that a republic is energized by conflict: without conflict there is no politics and no freedom. Tumult, he wrote in 1513, was "the guardian of Roman liberties" and "deserved the highest praise." When tumult is absent, when everyone in a state is tranquil, he noted, "we can be sure that it is not a republic."

Machiavelli described ancient Rome as a kind of unruly "theater of turbulence"—plebs hurling accusations against the Senate, senators railing against the plebs, angry crowds milling through the streets, people locking up their houses and fleeing the city. While accounts of this tumult and unrest horrified many of his contemporaries, Machiavelli

alone recognized the value of conflict. The people, he explained, demonstrate and clamor for their rights when they experience or fear oppression. Their demands, far from being harmful, eventually produce "all legislation favorable to liberty." Looking for the reasons behind the achievements of ancient Rome, Machiavelli contended that the greatness of the republic depended on and even required internal dissension. If Rome had been "more tranquil," she simply would have lost her energy and her capacity for expansion. "Continued tranquility," he remarked, far from stabilizing or consolidating a republic, would in fact have the contrary effect of enervating and undermining it.

Machiavelli understood that conflict is the foundation of freedom and politics. The very nature of politics is *conflictual*, and only tolerance for political conflict can guarantee the survival of political freedom. Nearly three hundred years later, James Madison not only revived Machiavelli's ideas but acted upon them, making the people's right to form factions and engage in conflict the foundation of his theory of republican government.

Like Machiavelli, Madison embraced disorder. The Virginian's political genius lay not merely in his realization that diversity and division were inevitable but in his further insight that they could be useful in government, that they could be an effective bulwark against tyranny. This was the lesson he had learned when he worked with Jefferson to secure the right of religious freedom in Virginia. He discovered that the ultimate protection of religious freedom lay not in statements of principles or in deeply held convictions or even in laws, but surprisingly in a power situation. Divisions among a variety of religious groups, and even conflict among them, made it unlikely that one "overbearing" religious group would seek to oppress or infringe upon the rights of others. A multiplicity of religions and sects—Protestant, Catholic, Jewish—ensured the freedom of all.

Applying this principle to political power and factions, Madison believed that self-interested and passionate factions, given free rein, would check and balance one another, making it virtually impossible for one faction to dominate the others, thus creating "social and political equilibrium." Although political theorists had for centuries viewed

factions and parties as so many sicknesses eating away at the body politic, for Madison, factions were stabilizing rather than disruptive. He counted on factions to perform a task of paramount importance: resistance to any concentration of power, especially the power of an "over-bearing" majority. He was convinced that the more diverse the society, the more it was broken down into "so many parts, interests and classes," the more likely it would be that any majority would become broad and hence moderate in its goals, and the less likely it would be that the rights and interests of individuals would be threatened by "the combinations of the majority?"

This same notion of division, conflict, and equilibrium also became the foundation for Madison's plan for the structure of American government. The government would be structured around institutions that checked and balanced one another; it would be divided against itself, institutionally split "between different bodies of men, who might watch and check each other." Power would always be fragmented and a certain balance and stability in government could be achieved.

#### THE FRENCH NATION, ONE AND INDIVISIBLE

In January 1789, in the middle of a turbulent winter, pregnant with anticipation, a small political pamphlet began circulating in Paris. People read it aloud in cafés, passed it excitedly around to their friends, discussed it in intellectual salons, and speculated about who the anonymous author could be. Soon people talked of little else. Within weeks thirty thousand copies were sold; three more editions were printed that same year. The fourth edition revealed at last the author's name: Emmanuel Sieyès.

The pamphlet that took Paris by storm, *What Is the Third Estate?*, contained the radical concepts that would mold the Revolution and chart its course. Sieyès was a forty-year-old priest and church administrator, surprisingly indifferent to religion and spirituality but passionate about philosophy and politics. Reserved, perpetually clothed in blacks, his face pale, his health fragile, he seemed to come alive only when he spoke out about freeing France from her history. Then his weak voice

would gain strength as his abstract ideas gained audacity, his eyes ablaze as he attacked with trenchant words the predatory aristocracy that he despised. Sieyès was Madison's French counterpart, the artisan of revolutionary ideology.

That winter, a sudden economic crisis rocked France. Every day people demonstrated in the streets over taxes and food shortages. Everyone awaited the momentous meeting of the Estates General, hoping that this body could restore financial order as well as address burning questions of liberty and equality. Representatives of the three social and legal orders—the nobility, the clergy, and the Third Estate—would meet, each order deliberating separately. Spokesmen for the Third Estate were already objecting to this antiquated structure. Looking for a strategy that would guarantee them a majority, they were demanding that the three estates meet together rather than separately and that the Third Estate be accorded representation equal to the two other orders combined.

But in his pamphlet Sieyès had gone even further, making a far more radical demand. Bitterly denouncing the entire anachronistic institution of the Estates General, he declared that there should be a single National Assembly comprised solely of representatives of the Third Estate. The aristocracy and the clergy together included about 200,000 members; the Third Estate, 25 million. The nation and the Third Estate, he insisted, were one and the same.

"What is the Third Estate?" Sieyès demanded in his lapidary style. "Everything. What has it been in the political order up to now? Nothing. What is it asking for? To become something." Instantaneously Sieyès excluded the two privileged orders from membership in the nation. Their representatives, he claimed, spoke not for different orders but for different nations. Even the clothes they wore, he added, proved that they were foreign. The aristocracy, judged Sieyès, were "enemies" and "traitors." Thomas Jefferson, always buoyed by upheaval and revolution, commented that Sieyès's words "electrified France." Tocqueville later called the pamphlet a "war cry."

"How easy it would be to do without the privileged orders?" Sieyès predicted. "How difficult it will be to turn them into citizens!" The first two orders detracted from the nation. Without them, France would be

more, not less. Without them, the nation would flourish. Though he briefly entertained the possibility of permitting the first two orders to join the National Assembly, since they would constitute only a powerless minority, he determined that it was pointless to incorporate a permanent obstructionist minority party that would constantly vote against the majority. He approved, however, of the idea of the other two estates renouncing their privileges and joining the rest of the nation as equals—as he himself would do, winning election to the National Assembly as a representative of the Third Estate, not the clergy. Separate, privileged orders, he noted, were like malignant fluids attacking a sick body: they had to be “neutralized.”

When the Estates General convened that spring, Sieyès, by then a celebrity in Paris, audaciously proposed that the Third Estate declare itself the National Assembly. Not only did his profoundly revolutionary motion pass by a vote of 491 to 90, but two days later, the clergy agreed with the representatives of the “Third,” and voted to join them. The next morning, Louis XVI locked them all out of their meeting room, insisting that the traditional three separate orders of France be respected. Refusing to disperse, the representatives went en masse to an athletic court, the Jeu de Paume, where they took an oath not to leave until a new constitution for France was written and enacted.

“I order you, Gentlemen, to disband,” commanded the king. But after some nobles defected to the Third Estate, the king, realizing that he had little choice but to accept the legitimacy of the new National Assembly, invited his “faithful clergy and faithful nobility” to join the Third Estate. In August, all privileges and feudal rights were abolished. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, composed that month, decreed that the nation was sovereign. Just eight months after the publication of his ideas, Sieyès’s theoretical blueprint for France had become the new reality. His printed words and radical ideas had metamorphosed into the revolutionary acts of a nation, proving that ideas and theories can shape events and institutions.

The key to Sieyès’s vision of a new France—and the concept that shaped the Revolution’s politics and became its mantra—was *unity*. The refrain—repeated in every possible context over the course of the Revo-

lution—always remained the same: “the nation, one and indivisible.” People swore oaths to it, agreed to die for it, and denounced traitors to it. The salvation of France and the success of the Revolution appeared to hinge on the indivisibility of the nation. “It is through union and concord,” one representative asserted, “that prosperity occurs: . . . if you are united, the nation is invincible. If you are divided, the nation becomes a slave.”

Underlying this doctrine of “oneness” lay Sieyès’s radical new definition of the nation as consisting solely of the Third Estate, the new sovereign. Composed of this one order, the nation would possess one single will and could therefore deliberate and legislate purposefully and effectively. “There cannot be one will as long as we permit three orders,” he patiently explained. “At best, the three orders might agree. But they will never constitute *one* nation, *one* representation, and *one* common will.”

Can 25 million people possess one single will? The answer for Sieyès was “yes.” He conceived the Third Estate *not* as a diverse population of heterogeneous individuals each acting in his own self-interest, but rather as a homogeneous mass devoted to the common good. This philosopher-politician, more comfortable with abstract ideas than with unruly human beings, envisioned all members of the Third Estate not only as equal but also as like-minded, sharing the same opinions, ideals, and revolutionary goals. Indeed, the hallmark of a citizen was the commonality he shared with other citizens. Individuals might differ from one another in their private lives, Sieyès allowed, but those differences occur “beyond the sphere of citizenship.”

Significantly, Madison had already criticized in 1787 the leap that Sieyès made in 1789—that is, the leap from the idea of citizens’ equality before the law to the idea of citizens’ similarity in everything else. “Theoretic politicians,” Madison wrote in *The Federalist* No. 10, “have erroneously supposed that by reducing mankind to a perfect equality in their political rights, they would at the same time be perfectly equalized and assimilated in their possessions, their opinions, and their passions.” For Madison, there was no single common good or “General Will” in society, only the interests and wills of diverse citizens and factions, all competing for influence and power.

But the French were mesmerized by a dream of unanimity and harmony that had come down to them from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Sieyès, Robespierre, Saint-Just, and others proved to be diligent and devoted pupils of Rousseau; they had studied his books, especially *The Social Contract*, absorbing his central notion of the General Will, taking for granted its validity.

Democratic societies, the Genevan philosopher had claimed, possess a General Will, tantamount to the common interest of all. This "will" reflects what enlightened citizens would want if they were able to make decisions solely as social beings and citizens and not as private individuals. *Individuals* may possess private wills that express their particular interests, but *citizens* must recognize and concur with the General Will that mirrors the good of all. The General Will is not tantamount to the will of all citizens. Nor is it the sum of all individual wills or the expression of a compromise or consensus among them. Nor is it the equivalent of the will of the majority, for even the majority can be corrupt or misguided. The General Will is *general*, not because a broad number of people subscribe to it but because its object is always the common good of all.

Thus, hovering strangely yet absolutely and infallibly above and beyond the wills of all, the General Will is "always constant, unalterable, and pure," always mirroring perfectly the common good of all members of the community. The ultimate authority—and ultimate sovereignty—thus reside not really in the people, who may err in their estimation of the General Will, unable to transcend their private wills, but rather in the General Will itself—the power of Reason, the enlightened collective moral conscience.

True freedom, Rousseau maintained, consists in *choosing to obey* the General Will. But how can freedom be equated with obedience?

For Americans like Madison, liberty meant the right of individuals to be autonomous, to act as they wished, in a variety of diverse ways, and pursue their self-interest and happiness as they conceived them. But Rousseau proposed a radically different concept of freedom. It was not a Madisonian kind of "negative freedom," freedom *from* constraint, that inspired him, but rather "positive" freedom, freedom *for* some higher good, for the enjoyment of a moral life as a citizen devoted to the com-

mon good. This kind of freedom paradoxically implied *obedience* to the General Will. People were free to *concur* with the General Will, not to oppose it. For Rousseau, true freedom could belong only to citizens who were able to suppress their private wills, sacrifice their private, selfish interests for the good of all, and consciously choose the common good over their own desires. Freedom was the province of citizens who had mastered themselves, becoming moral and hence free beings.

This was a radically original society, geared not to individuals interested in maximizing their own private interests, but instead to citizens who possessed a strong moral sense of their responsibilities and duties toward one another and toward the community. The blossoming of their humanity is inseparable from their citizenship and their conformity to the state's prescription for the "good life." By identifying fully with the community, by choosing to live as parts of a whole, citizens have a chance at real fulfillment and peace of mind. They are free and equal, not because they own equal property or possess equal talents, but rather because they share an equal measure of civic rights and responsibilities. By renouncing their autonomy and participating in and obeying the General Will, they assure that they will all be treated fairly and with equal consideration and respect.

The General Will has come to dominate all of society and its laws. Every citizen must submit to its infallible, unlimited authority. What king ever ruled so absolutely?

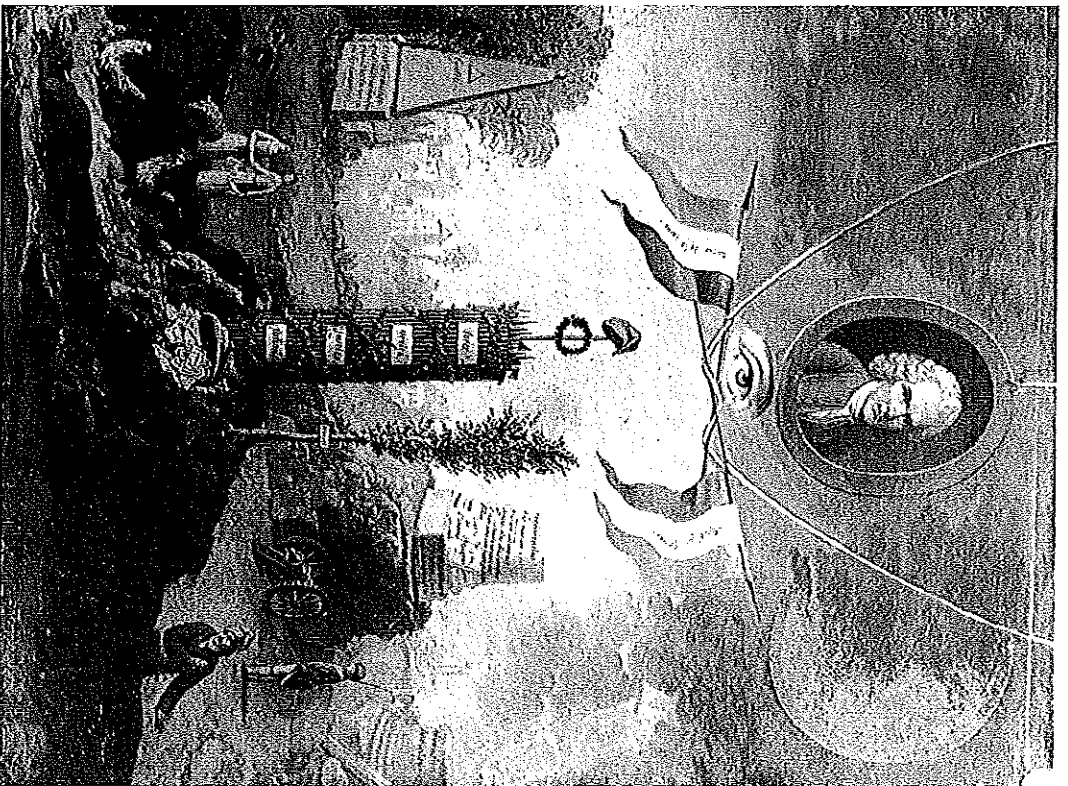
Indeed, Rousseau's utopian, ethical, democratic polity includes no channels for the expression of dissent or opposition. Having defined the General Will as infallible and sovereign, Rousseau could not logically imagine any legitimate opposition to it. Political "freedom" in such a solitary, unified society requires submission and obedience to the General Will. In Rousseau's utopia, those who disagree with the General Will are simply in error, expressing selfish, "particular" interests that perversely thwart the common good of all. There can be no role for minority opinion. Neither dissenting individuals nor groups, political parties, or factions can be tolerated by the cohesive whole. To persist in questioning or opposing the General Will is to abdicate one's membership in the polity and give up one's political rights. Those who have

difficulty recognizing the General Will must be made to see the light. "Whoever refuses to obey the general will," Rousseau decreed, "shall be constrained to do so by the whole body: which means nothing else than that he shall be forced to be free."

*Forced to be free?* These paradoxical words are shocking, for they cast their dark shadow on some of the grimmest periods of history. The concept of the General Will, we have come to realize, is arbitrary, illusory, and coercive. Yet Rousseau's goal was freedom, community, and morality, not mass repression. Rousseau would contend that if society constrains people to be free, socializes them to suppress their animal instincts and selfish desires, and educates them to choose the General Will over their private wills, it is in the name of their own human dignity.

Following Rousseau, Sieyès would similarly claim that French citizens must choose the General Will in the name of their nation and their Revolution. And, not surprisingly, the coercive and repressive policies that he and other French revolutionary leaders would derive from their understanding of Rousseau's political thought would lead them slowly but inexorably to the Terror.

Sieyès, like Rousseau, viewed citizens' rights and freedoms as springing from their status as equal and concurring members of society, from their submission to the General Will. Any individual who "exits from the common quality of citizen" cannot "participate in political rights." For Sieyès, as for Rousseau before him, there could be no legitimate role for dissenting individuals or minority factions to play in self-government. Sieyès contended that all citizens, by virtue of having accepted and entered into their society's social contract, agree to be bound by the will of the majority: "A citizen has the obligation to 'view the common will as his own.' Should he refuse to yield to the majority, his only alternative is to leave the polity. Thus the sole solution envisaged by Sieyès to the problem of possible political conflict between an individual and the group was expatriation. Similarly, a minority faction has no right to oppose the majority, since the majority could be assumed to speak for the General Will. Sieyès impatiently insisted that if someone could not clearly see that the General Will was the will of the majority and not the



*Allegory of the Revolution*, by Jean-Baptiste Leplat.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the symbols of the Revolution. The flags read "French Republic" and "Love of the Fatherland." The obelisk at the left reads "Equality." The pillar at the center reads "strength," "truth," "justice," and "union." The tree is labeled "liberté." The short column at the right reads "Regeneration of Mores."

will of the minority, "there is no point in trying to reason with him." The minority must simply join the majority. So much for opposition!

Patriotic citizens would always place the public interest above their private interest. "Everyone must forget his own interest and pride," instructed Saint-Just, the most radical ideologue among the Jacobins. "Private happiness and interest are a violence against the social order. You must forget yourselves. . . . Your interest demands that you forget your interest; the only salvation is through the public good." Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were thus conceived in collective terms. "The social union has as its object not just the freedom of one or several individuals," Sieyès declared to the National Assembly in July 1789, "but the freedom of all." Similarly, the goal of society was the "common happiness" of all, not individuals' pursuit of their own personal happiness.

Underlying Sieyès's coercive and antippluralist vision of united citizens, all concurring with the General Will, are certain assumptions about human rationality. While Madison's theory of the *fallibility* of human reason had led him to deduce the inevitability of diversity and factions, the French embraced an entirely different theory of human reason that predisposed them to a doctrine of unity.

The seventeenth-century philosopher Descartes's famous treatise on human reason, *Discours de la méthode*, buttressed Sieyès's vision of citizens happily sacrificing their self-interest for the good of all. The opening sentence of Descartes's book had announced simply that "good sense is the best shared thing in the world." All human beings possess "reason." It is what distinguishes us from animals; it is an essential part of our very being, the determining feature of our humanity. And because reason—like an essential chromosome—is what defines human nature, all human beings, Descartes concluded, must therefore possess reason in equal amounts.

When there is diversity of opinion, it occurs not because some individuals are more rational than others, but rather because they take different approaches to reflecting on the same problems. If all people adopted the same method for analyzing a problem, Descartes contended, they would all arrive at the same truths. Certain objective "truths" exist, and human reason, with the help of disciplined, methodical think-

ing, can provide the path to them. Thomas Jefferson commented that Descartes's theoretical "fancies" retarded the progress of science in France for generations.

Ironically, Descartes had specifically tried to dissuade his readers from applying his method to politics. "Reason" might only change things for the worse, he cautioned, recommending instead that imperfections in the political system be tolerated, for they were probably more bearable than would be the consequences of efforts to improve upon them. But so convincing was his demonstration of the universality of reason and its power to discern the "truth" that his own warnings went unheeded.

It was only logical, according to this vision of human reason, that citizens would agree on the same principles and ideals. "One must have a poor idea of the march of reason," Sieyès wrote, "to imagine that an entire people could remain blind to its true interests." With rational people thinking correctly, the Revolution's goals would be easily accomplished: "If everyone thought right," Sieyès hopefully remarked, "the most significant changes . . . would not be difficult to make."

Sieyès was especially confident in his own ability to "think right." Not only were there certain objective political and social truths, but he sensed that he himself had privileged access to them. "My own personal role," he commented without irony, "consists in presenting the truth. . . . That my principles are true, that my deductions are flawless, I have no doubt." Harboring no reservations about his ability to discern truth from error, he conceived his revolutionary role as that of prophet and guide. Rational, grateful citizens would accept his enlightenment and guidance.

Fortunately, the people would not require very much guidance, for they too occupied a privileged position in French revolutionary mythology. Like the nation, "the people" was conceived as one and indivisible, an organic collective being. Over and over, revolutionary orators extolled the new divinity, "the people," in whose name they claimed to speak. The people were taken to be the source of all virtue and goodness. Ultimately Jacobins were willing to sacrifice real people—rowdy, imperfect, Catholic, royalist, apolitical—to their abstract, rational concept of an ideal "people."