

# FAMILY NARRATIVE AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE AND AMERICA

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Let me begin with the most obvious of comparative questions: how is it that two countries so relatively similar today in politics and so relatively similar in the eighteenth century in terms of their participation in an Atlantic tradition of republicanism and Enlightenment could have fostered traditions as different as liberal republicanism on the American side and the ideologies of revolution, socialism, and authoritarianism on the French side? There are several corollary questions implied by this larger one about the differences between liberal and revolutionary politics: why did the American constitution « succeed » whereas the French ones « failed »; why did party politics get a foothold in America long before they did in France; why was the political language of economic and social interests so much more acceptable in America than in France? I do not mean to imply by this set of questions that the American model was in some way better than the French one, for the French establishment of a revolutionary tradition – translated as it was by the early socialists and Marx – has had a much greater ideological impact on the world since the eighteenth century than the American constitution. The French and American models are, in my mind, simply different, and I want to explore some of the ways in which they are different.

Beginning from such a conventional comparative politics perspective, it will no doubt seem jarring that I am going to end with Freud, ritual sacrifice, and the phantasm of the band of brothers. In thinking about the differences between American and French political culture. I found that I had to consider the most basic elements in the political imagination: not just titles and articles of constitutional documents, for example, but notions of political kinship and family, fathers and sons, brothers and sisters. You will see that I do not mean kinship in the strict anthropological sense, that is, the actual structure of family relationships. I mean instead « the family romance », to borrow and partially deform Freud's terms, that is, myths and images of the family and its internal dynamics that serve as a set of building blocks for the conception and operation of power<sup>1</sup>. Although I plan to end

<sup>1</sup> When Freud used the term, he meant the neurotic's fantasy of « getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others, who, as a rule,

with the family romance, I will ask you for your patience in getting there because I think that my argument will be most convincing if it is developed in a step-by-step fashion so as to demonstrate the ways in which psycho-symbolic elements are related to the most traditional narratives of political power.

I am going to begin, very schematically, by arguing – or rather by simply asserting – that the major difference between the American and French Revolutions was the fate of their constitutional documents. From this all else, or at least much else, followed. In America, the constitution of 1787 quickly took on a sacred aura, despite the difficulties of ratification and despite the violent opposition of anti-Federalists. In France, the constitution of 1791 failed to become sacred, despite the near unanimity of the National Assembly in proposing it, despite the lack of concerted opposition to it in the country, and despite the conscious efforts of the government to include it in new rituals of power. With sacralization came an enduring, if contested, framework for party politics; without it, party politics proved impossible, indeed literally almost inconceivable; and without party politics, that is, without a means for legitimizing factional differences, factionalism led to political violence, in other words to terror as a system of governing. These are rather large claims, and each one of them could be contested in various ways. Moreover, there are many other ways in which one might approach the differences between the American and the French revolutions ranging from comparisons of the differing weights of the feudal heritage to obviously important geopolitical factors such as distance from continental Europe and the existence of sparsely-inhabited frontier regions. Nevertheless, I hope to demonstrate that the focus on constitutions can be especially fruitful and interesting.

I see three main reasons for the French « failure » to sacralize a constitutional document: 1) a different notion of political time; 2) a different location of political charisma; and 3) a different underlying psycho-familial model for the polity. These three themes are interrelated in an unstated yet nonetheless powerful psycho-political imaginative structure.

are of higher social standing ». « Family Romance », in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, tr. James Strachey, vol. 9 (1906-1908), London, 1959, pp. 238-239. When the child feels slighted by the parents, he (he, in particular, since Freud thought this tendency was much weaker in girls) retaliates by imagining that these are not in fact his real parents; his real parents are important landlords, aristocrats, even kings and queens. This notion of the family romance with its emphasis on revolt against the father was incorporated by Otto Rank into his psychological interpretation of mythology. According to Rank, « myths are, therefore, created by adults, by means of retrograde childhood fantasies, the hero being credited with the myth-maker's personal infantile history ». *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Interpretation of Mythology*, tr. E. Robbins and Smith Ely Jelliffe, New York, 1952, p. 82. Rank incorporated Freud's paper on family romance directly into this book, pp. 63-68. Myths incorporated the same infantile rebellion against the father that was displayed in the family romance of neurotics.

It is not necessary to accept the entire Freudian framework in order to make use of the concept of family romance, by which I mean here more generally the development of unconscious fantasies about the familial order underlying revolutionary politics.

## *Political Time and the Ancien Constitution*

The sacralization of the American constitution was made easier by the fact that the American revolutionaries never rejected the English tradition of constitutionalism. Although, as Bernard Bailyn shows, they eventually came to believe that the source of rights was ultimately to be found in the abstract and universal laws of nature, they never repudiated the heritage of English common law. Americans believed that they shared with the British a unique inheritance of liberty that was centered on the English constitution. In 1763, John Adams captured the prevailing sentiment when he proclaimed the English constitution

the most perfect combination of human powers in society which finite wisdom has yet contrived and reduced to practice for the preservation of liberty and the production of happiness<sup>2</sup>.

American political discourse in the years after 1763 continued to be shaped in the most fundamental and pervasive ways by this conviction<sup>3</sup>. American revolutionaries imagined themselves as defenders of an « ancient constitution » against the insidious, conspiratorial and tyrannical innovations of the English monarchy of the 1760s and 1770s. They compared themselves to the purer and freer Saxons whose government « was founded upon principles of the most perfect liberty »<sup>4</sup>. Given this identification, it is hardly surprising that revolutionary pamphlets contained much discussion of English history and especially of the Saxon origins of the English constitution. Even though the American framers of the constitution eventually came to believe that they had superseded the English constitution with their new principle of representation, they continued to believe that their work rested on that previous example<sup>5</sup>.

In France, controversy about an ancient constitution dominated much 18th century political writing, but in contrast to America, the notion quite quickly disappeared from constitutional debates after the beginning of the Revolution. By 1789, perhaps even by 1788, French writers were more preoccupied with the comparative virtues of the English and American constitutions as models for their own new one than they were with the supposed virtues of any ancient French one. The interest in America, especially, was a kind of escape from the French past; America was imagined as the

<sup>2</sup> *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Cambridge, 1967, quote pp. 66-67, see also p. 188.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon Wood does not differ from Bailyn in this regard, as far as I can see. *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787*, Chapel Hill, 1969.

<sup>4</sup> Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins*, p. 80.

<sup>5</sup> Although Gordon Wood argues in his concluding chapter for the originality of the new American conception of politics, it is an originality that seems to rest on continuity with English practices and principles rather than radical departure from them. Admittedly, however, Wood doesn't really say anything precise on this point. *The Creation*, pp. 593-615 (« The American Science of Politics »).

antithesis to everything degenerate in French aristocratic civilization: It was not so much a model to be followed closely as it was a kind of utopian thought-experiment<sup>6</sup>. Before long, moreover, the French gave up trying to find precedents anywhere else for their creation of a new polity. Even the use of Roman examples had a largely utopian meaning: the Roman Republic, for example, was a model of political purity that could be used to denounce the French feudal past; it was not a recipe for constitution-making<sup>7</sup>.

The rejection of the ancient constitution in France was the most momentous intellectual revolution in French political thought in the eighteenth century. And like many such revolutions, though there were telltale signs along the way, when the rejection actually became conscious, it occurred virtually all at once. In his *Fragments and Unedited Notes on the Revolution*, Tocqueville dated the moment of break quite precisely in the months between the decision to call the Estates General (August 1788) and the actual elections to the Estates (spring 1789):

During this space of time, there was almost no change in the facts, but the movement that drew the ideas and sentiments of the French towards the total subversion of society hastened and became finally furiously rapid... In the beginning, one spoke only of better balancing powers, of better adjusting the relations between classes; soon one advanced, one ran, one rushed towards the idea of pure democracy. In the beginning, it was Montesquieu that one cited and commented upon; at the end, one spoke only of Rousseau<sup>8</sup>.

How was such a break possible in a country with such a long and glorious history? How, especially, was such a break possible even before the fall of the Bastille in July 1789? How was it possible, as Tocqueville observed, to begin by trying to accommodate all ideas of the moment to the Middle Ages and end so quickly by throwing precedent overboard in the search for abstract and general notions of what legislative power ought to be?

The problem – if we can call it that – began with the very defenders of the « ancient constitution ». Although virtually all eighteenth-century commentators took the French past as their standard of measurement in political debate, they had different views of that past, and no one could agree on the fundamental laws that defined the nation<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, the monarchy itself sponsored propaganda designed to attack the historically-based arguments

<sup>6</sup> Durand Echeverria, *Mirage in the West: A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815*, Princeton, 1957. This book is actually quite disappointingly uninformative about the most radical revolutionary views of America.

<sup>7</sup> Mona Ozouf, *Festivals and the French Revolution*, tr. Alan Sheridan, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 275-276.

<sup>8</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Fragments et notes inédits sur la Révolution*, vol. 2 of André Jardin, ed., *L'Ancien régime et la Révolution*, vol. 2 in *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris, 1953, quote pp. 106-107.

<sup>9</sup> See François Furet and Mona Ozouf, « Deux légitimations historiques de la société française au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Mably et Boulainvilliers », reprinted in Furet, *L'Atelier de l'histoire*, Paris, 1982, pp. 165-183.

of the Parliamentary magistrates and so participated in the general undermining of historical appeals<sup>10</sup>. If the « ancient constitution » seemed clouded in controversy for the greatest intellects of the time, and even for the monarchy, it was even less clear to the pamphleteers of 1788-89. When the crown solicited opinions on the form that should be proposed for the forthcoming meetings of the Estates General, hundreds of pamphlets appeared with historical arguments. Some found the ancient constitution in the earliest days of the monarchy; others in the Estates General of the fourteenth century. It was not long before other pamphleteers argued that precedent should be jettisoned altogether. As Rabaut de Saint-Etienne asked:

If the form of our government has been vicious since the beginning of the monarchy; if the composition, the holding and the deliberations of the Estates General have been irregular, does it follow that, in the most enlightened century that ever was, we should go back to the times when France and all Europe were covered in darkness, and adopt usages that are defective and contrary to reason?<sup>11</sup>.

Sieyès's ironic mocking of historical argument in his famous pamphlet, *What is the Third Estate?*, only expressed the going sentiment in the strongest possible terms. As he bitingly queried, « Why doesn't [the Third Estate] send back to the forest of Franconia all those families that maintain the crazy pretention of being born of a conquering race »<sup>12</sup>.

The rejection of any ancient constitution opened the way to a particularly unitary, abstract, and rationalizing conception of the nation. The constitution and all law became the expression of the national will, which no longer had any connection to tradition. If the constitution ceased to conform to the national will, which could only be determined by the deputies meeting in assembly, then it had to be replaced by one more suitable. The rejection of precedent, then, contributed mightily to the difficulties of sacralizing the new French constitution of 1791 as a founding document. This can be seen very clearly, I think, in the opening lines of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen that stands as a preamble to the Constitution of 1791. The « natural, inalienable and sacred rights of man » had to be declared so that they could be « constantly present to all the members of the social body ». They would serve as reminders of the citizens' rights and duties but also, and most significantly, as standards for judging government and law: « so that the acts of legislative power and those of executive power can be at every instant compared with the goal of all political institutions ».

<sup>10</sup> Keith Baker, « Memory and Practice: Politics and the Representation of the Past in Eighteenth-Century France », *Representations*, 11 (1985): 134-159.

<sup>11</sup> As quoted by Mitchell B. Garrett, *The Estates General of 1789: the Problems of Composition and Organization*, New York, 1935, p. 134.

<sup>12</sup> Emmanuel Sieyès, *Ou'est ce que le Tiers état?*, ed. Roberto Zapperi, Genova, 1970, quote p. 128.

Thus, the ratification of the French constitution simply put into operation the principles by which legitimacy had constantly to be judged.

The rhetoric of the American constitution, in contrast, seems to assume that the new social contract is being signed and in some sense fixed with the process of ratification. Thus, the preamble to the American constitution reads,

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, etc. ... do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

It is assumed here that the constitution will thenceforth stand in for the social contract, whereas in France it must apparently continue to be renegotiated through the application of the general principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. It can even be argued that the Declaration of the Rights of Man played the same role in the 1791 French constitution as the Supreme Court (eventually) did in the 1787 American constitution; it became the control of constitutionality, whether intended or not.

As far as I know, few historians on the American side have tried to trace the process of sacralization of the American constitution in its early years. One of those few is Lance Banning, who attributes the amazing success of the American constitution to the heritage of Anglo-American ideas of constitutionalism. By 1791, he argues, the constitution was accepted on all sides as the starting point for debate. Why would the Anti-Federalists give in on this major point so readily? According to Banning, the American Whig tradition predisposed Anti-Federalists, like the Federalists, to a posture defensive of constitutional settlements: « almost by definition a constitution was something to protect, a fragile structure raised from chaos in liberty's defense ». Change could only be for the worse; the friends of liberty had to guard against social and political degeneration, against the corruption inherent in the passage of time. The only guarantee against corruption was a frequent return to the original principles of the constitution. This worry about constitutional decay could only operate effectively if the constitution itself was accepted. Thus, Banning concludes, since the Republican successors to the Anti-Federalists had no ancient constitution to defend, they had to make the constitution of 1787 ancient, or in my terms, sacred<sup>13</sup>.

What I find particularly interesting about Banning's argument is the connection he makes between the American Whig fear of corruption and the development of a party structure. The Republican party took shape in reaction to a feared Federalist conspiracy to undermine the constitution. Without that fear of conspiracy and its expression in terms of constitutional

<sup>13</sup> Lance Banning, « Republican Ideology and the Triumph of the Constitution, 1789-1973 », *William and Mary Quarterly*, 31 (1974): 167-188, quote p. 178. Banning concludes with these words: « [The world of classical constitutionalism] forced the Republican party to defend a sacred constitution against an executive threat. This world of classical politics assured the quick apotheosis of the Constitution of the United States » (p. 188).

corruption, there would have been no Republican party. Opposition to constitutional degeneration was the most acceptable, perhaps the only acceptable, means for converting political faction into a patriotic gesture. In this paradoxical manner, opposition to the policies of the first American administration assured the acceptance of the constitution, and, moreover, assured that this acceptance would be of a very literal kind.

The belief that history meant corruption and degeneration was a commonplace in the eighteenth century. And the French certainly used those terms when referring to history. But when the French rejected their ancient constitution – or rather rejected even the intellectual activity of looking for an ancient constitution – they introduced a new temporal dimension into revolutionary discourse. I have called this the « mythic present », by which I mean the effort to live in a kind of timeless present defined by the moment of new social consensus – or in other words, the constant attempt to re-enact and thus mythologize the social contract<sup>14</sup>. The French never referred much to past models (or did so only in the utopianizing sense that I mentioned earlier); they constantly referred instead to the new moment, to the new national character, to newness in general. And this newness was to be created instantaneously, by a kind of Rousseauian appeal directly to the political heart. As one radical document proclaimed in 1793,

to be truly Republican, each citizen must experience and bring about in himself a revolution equal to the one which has changed France. There is nothing, absolutely nothing in common between the slave of a tyrant and the inhabitant of a free state; the customs of the latter, his principles, his sentiments, his action, all must be new<sup>15</sup>.

The festivals of the revolutionary decade, for instance, were meant to instill this sense of newness, and the mass swearing of oaths was used to internalize the revolutionary present in the hearts of all participants. The festivals with their mass oath-taking ceremonies were a herculean effort to essentially freeze the present, and failing that, which of course they must, to continually recreate, through commemoration, the original sensation of belonging to a radically new community<sup>16</sup>. The French answer to corruption, then, was not vigilance against the degeneration of a textual document; their answer to corruption was an unceasing reproduction of a present sense of revolutionary commitment to renovation of heart, soul, and political process. Nothing better expresses this new sense of time than the literal effort to redo the calendar; the Republic was so new that it required a new system

<sup>14</sup> *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*, Berkeley, 1984, pp. 27-31.

<sup>15</sup> « Instruction adressés aux autorités constituées des départements de Rhône et de Loire, par la Commission temporaire » of Lyon (16 November 1793), reprinted in Walter Markov and Albert Soboul, eds., *Die Sansculotten von Paris: Dokumente zur Geschichte der Volksbewegung, 1793-1794*, Berlin, 1957, p. 224.

<sup>16</sup> On the sense of time created by the revolutionary festivals, see Ozouf, *Festivals*, pp. 158-196 (« The Festival and Time »).

of dating in which the old months gave way to new names based on nature and the old days gave way to new ones based on reason. It was now year II of the Republic rather than 1794.

The revolutionaries could not live without a sense of time; the calendar shows that they wanted to redo the conception of time rather than eliminate it altogether. And the revolutionaries did not ignore history; they immediately began constructing a history of their revolution, but it was always, in a sense, a history of the present. History in the usual sense was « the registers of the unhappiness of humanity », where one encountered « kings, great nobles, and everywhere the oppressed, on each page the people counted like a herd of animals »<sup>17</sup>. The history of the present was supposed to be the story of regeneration, a perpetual romance, but it was also always in flux; commemorative dates had to shift with every political shift in the revolution. This was a strange history indeed, one that was entirely open-ended towards the future, one in which the past was simply something to be gotten past. It was a history that was obviously productive of an enormous sense of anxiety. The past had been presumably abolished, the future was in the process of enactment; there was no closure that seemed possible. And the constitutional document reflected this with its insistence on the continual reappraisal of the fit between laws and the general will. The French constitution itself admitted of no fixity; in those circumstances, it could hardly become ancient. The French constitution writers likewise could not style themselves as « framers » (unlike their American counterparts who used this metaphor frequently) because they were not in a position to embrace the idea of enclosure (especially temporal boundaries) that is imbedded in framing<sup>18</sup>.

### *Political Charisma*

In this will to hold onto the present of revolutionary innovation, political charisma was necessarily very difficult to locate. Until Napoleon, the French Revolution had no charismatic leader like Washington, and it never had a charismatic document like the United States Constitution. Mirabeau, Lafayette, Marat, Danton, and Robespierre all disappeared from the scene without succeeding in creating an enduring cult of personality. Like the people or the nation that was the foundation of legitimacy, charisma could be located nowhere *in particular*. Charisma was free-floating, attached only to abstractions such as the nation, the people, the Revolution, the Republic. The people could learn to love representations of the Revolution such as Marianne, the female figure of Liberty who stood for the Republic, but such representations were successful in the measure that they were removed from

<sup>17</sup> As quoted in Louis Trenard, « Manuel scolaires au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et sous la Révolution », *Revue du Nord* (1973): 107.

<sup>18</sup> On framing, see Robert A. Ferguson, « Ideology and the Framing of the Constitution », *Early American Literature*, 22 (1987): 157-165.



any connection to living political leaders. Napoleon's ability to overturn this state of affairs, to capture charisma for himself, and to represent himself as the savior of the nation showed, in itself, that Napoleon was the end, the closure, of the Revolution and not part of it.

Although François Furet does not use the word charisma in his book *Interpreting the French Revolution*, he does give an explanation for its unlocatability. In his view, the key to the revolutionary process was the fact that

Language was substituted for power, for it was the sole guarantee that power would belong only to the people, that is, to nobody<sup>19</sup>.

In other words, the ideology of democracy demanded that the sacred center of power be de-centered; in the democratic ideology of the Revolution, power could belong to everyone only if it belonged to no one, no group, no faction in particular, so power could only be held, temporarily, by those who could claim to speak for the people. Political parties were, by definition, out of the question because they represented partial interests.

Furet concludes this analysis on a rather ambiguous note about democracy in general:

If the Revolution thus experienced, in its political practices, the theoretical contradictions of democracy, it was because it ushered in a world where mental representations of power governed all actions, and where a network of signs completely dominated political life. Politics was a matter of establishing just *who* represented the people, or equality, or the nation: victory was in the hands of those who were capable of occupying and keeping that symbolic position<sup>20</sup>.

Pure democracy, in Furet's view, leads to a kind of semiotic free-for-all, in which totalitarianism is the logical outcome. Totalitarianism is the total control over symbols by one group that successfully insists it permanently represents the people (the party of the proletariat, for example). This totalizing control is made possible by the very free-for-all that is instituted by democratic principles.

The problem with Furet's analysis, in my view, is that democratic principles did not turn out this way in America. It was the French version of democracy that had these problems; they were not necessarily inherent in democracy itself, or if they were inherent, the American experience shows that democracy could be nonetheless « framed » by a constitution and thus the nation could be given some concretion and particularity – some particular representation. In America, democratic principles did not foster totalitarianism because charisma was located, because there was a sacred center, first in the person of Washington, then in the document of the Constitution.

<sup>19</sup> François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, tr. Elborg Forster, Cambridge, 1981, p. 48.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Charisma could be located in these ways because there had not been such a furious rejection of the past in America; the American revolutionaries were willing to give themselves a lineage and thus in the end to become themselves fathers. The Constitution was the guarantee of their patrimony.

### *Family Romances*

In other words, the question of charisma is intimately tied up with the psycho-familial model of the polity. The American imagined themselves first as Sons of Liberty and later as Founding Fathers. These convenient labels are striking – especially in comparison to the French case – but they should not blind us to the complicated process of development that lay behind them. The notion of Founding Fathers was not invented all at once in the 1790s; it may not have been current until the 20th century. But the rhetoric of the « parent-child analogy » has been shown to be widely diffused in the political literature on both sides of the quarrel over American independence. One does not have to accept the specific psychological hypotheses of Burrows and Wallace or the particular literary reading of Fliegelman to admit to the pervasiveness of the analogy itself<sup>21</sup>. Peter Shaw, for instance, demonstrates the importance of children, both physically and symbolically, in the rituals of the American Revolution. In crowd actions during the 1760s and 1770s, Americans « made themselves into children »<sup>22</sup>. Yet, by the time they came to write the constitution of 1787, they had developed a rather different image of themselves, or at least of their leader, George Washington. In the most comprehensive account to date on this issue, Fliegelman argues that the Americans were revolting for filial autonomy from tyrannical patriarchal authority. They were not revolting against all notions of paternal authority, however, simply against the « bad » despotic father. By mythologizing Washington, Americans glorified the new, more understanding father of eighteenth-century educational tracts and set a moral example for themselves<sup>23</sup>. As John Adams remarked,

I glory in the character of a Washington because I know him to be only an exemplification of the American character<sup>24</sup>.

By the 1790s, then, American revolutionaries had transformed themselves collectively from political children into political fathers; they were in a position, consequently, to imagine passing on their political patrimony

<sup>21</sup> The phrase « parent-child analogy » comes from Edwin G. Burrows and Michael Wallace, « The American Revolution: The Ideology and Psychology of National Liberation », *Perspectives in American History*, 6 (1972): 167-306. Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800*, Cambridge, 1982.

<sup>22</sup> *American Patriots and the Rituals of Revolution*, Cambridge, MA., 1981, p. 195.

<sup>23</sup> By 1778, George Washington was already being referred to as « Father of his country ». Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, p. 200. I haven't been able to find any work that talks about the paternal image (or not) of the constitutional framers.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted by Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*, p. 223.

through a contractual document. It may be that this transformation outweighs in importance the specific details of disagreement between what Isaac Kramnick describes as the four «distinguishable idioms» of 1787-88: republicanism, Lockean liberalism, work-ethic Protestantism, and state-centered theories of power and sovereignty<sup>25</sup>.

No one has undertaken a comparable study of French sources on paternal imagery. But as far as I can determine, the French never called themselves either sons or fathers; they insisted instead on the third segment of their famous triad, liberty, equality, and fraternity. I want to argue that the notion of fraternity was not simply a pleasant icon for universal equality and liberty, a kind of good neighborly feeling about one's fellow «man». It was rather a heavily-freighted psycho-symbolic story or fantasy (i.e., romance) that was critical to the fortunes of the Revolution itself.

I do not have the space here to hammer home a documentary case for the band of brothers as the family romance embedded in the revolutionary experience. Moreover, it would be very difficult to find much explicit evidence to this effect. French revolutionaries did not stand at the tribune and lay out their psycho-sexual fantasies about the political order. But there are all sorts of clues about fraternity in revolutionary symbolics – in, for instance, the ordering of festivals and the choice of icons and emblems – and, on occasion, in revolutionary discourse itself – in, for example, the debates on women's clubs or in the newspaper accounts of the killing of the king. Consequently, the psycho-symbolics of the revolutionary political imagination – what I term the homosocial republican imagination – can be sketched out in a preliminary fashion through a reading of political symbols and a few more conventional political sources.

In order to give a broad outline of the family romance, it is necessary to pass over its historical development rather quickly. There were indications that a crisis of paternal authority was brewing in the decades before the Revolution. In a suggestive article on «Fallen Fathers», the art historian Carol Duncan has argued that Salon paintings in the second half of the eighteenth century «bear witness to a growing ambivalence toward established authority». They were increasingly preoccupied with figure of old men who had trouble holding onto their powers. Rebellious sons were appearing with great frequency along with paintings that were devoted explicitly to Oedipus as an old and blind patriarch. The artist who went furthest toward imagining «a new set of social relations» was Jacques-Louis David. Two of his greatest paintings from the 1780s, *The Oath of the Horatii* and *Brutus*, offer new models of the family and fraternal solidarity<sup>26</sup>. These paintings cannot be read as straightforward translations of a new

<sup>25</sup> «The "Great National Discussion". The Discourse of Politics in 1787», *William and Mary Quarterly*, 45 (1988): 3-32.

<sup>26</sup> Carol Duncan, «Fallen Fathers: Images of Authority in Pre-Revolutionary French Art», *Art History*, 4 (1981): 186-202, quote p. 186.

ideal of fraternity – in the *Oath*, the sons swear allegiance to the father, and in *Brutus*, the father has to sacrifice the sons to the well-being of the republic – but they do demonstrate a deep preoccupation with the relationship between family and state obligations and a striking concern with the links between masculinity and virtue<sup>27</sup>. In these two influential David works, gender differentiation is central (it literally divides the paintings in two) in the very ways that it will be central to homosocial republicanism; the men bond to the state through their affective relations to each other and develop their bonds in distinction to ordinary heterosocial family relationships, which are represented by the groups of women, who shrink and recoil from the scene of action<sup>28</sup>.

We can trace the changes in family romance during the Revolution itself by following the changing narrative structures of revolutionary rhetoric<sup>29</sup>. In the early years of the Revolution, between 1789 and 1791, revolutionary rhetoric was driven by the generic plot of comedy. The revolutionaries thought of themselves as brothers trying to convince a good-hearted but obtuse father to agree to the reforms that they had proposed. The debate about the veto which took place during the fashioning of the 1791 constitution reflects this vision: almost everyone thought that the king had to have some authoritative, paternal role – he had to have a veto. But how absolute should it be? The solution was to make the king share in the national sovereignty, without having an exclusive claim to it; he could suspend legislation for a time, but not veto it absolutely. He was supposed to become an understanding father who would give the sons more independence.

By 1792, the family romance had turned into a family tragedy. The king had tried to run away, thereby refusing his role as conciliatory father. In January 1793, the Convention ordered the killing of the king, and the band of brothers now took complete charge, after what some radical newspapers self-consciously described as a ritual sacrifice. The *Révolutions de Paris* editorialized in this way:

We owe to the earth, since we have in a manner of speaking consecrated slavery by our example, we owe a great lesson in the person of the 66th king,

<sup>27</sup> Thomas E. Crow notes that in the *Oath*, « The body politic appears in the form of the sons, its chosen representatives; they stand on an equal footing with the father as his multiplied mirror image and receive from him, in a charged and ecstatic exchange, the instruments of power. Virtue is no longer in the exclusive keeping of the old, but passed on to the young in a moment of triumphant celebration ». *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, New Haven, 1985, p. 213.

<sup>28</sup> Crow notes the way David relegates traditional composition (the women in the *Oath*) to the « devalued realm of femininity ». *Painters and Public Life*, p. 236. The growing concern with establishing the basis for homosocial virtue may have been reflected as well in the general rise of neoclassicism with its concomitant retreat from depicting French national history. Also relevant in this context is Crow's insistence on the radical (and I might add, masculine) characteristics of David's style: the defiance of convention, the asperities, dissonance, austerity, and awkwardness. *Painters and Public Life*, p. 235.

<sup>29</sup> On the narrative structures of revolutionary rhetoric, see Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class*, pp. 34-38.

more criminal than all his predecessors taken together. The blood of Louis Capet, shed by the blade of the law on 21 January 1793, cleanses us of a stigma of 1300 years... Liberty resembles that divinity of the Ancients which one cannot make auspicious and favorable except by offering to it in sacrifice the life of a great culprit.

The paper then described the scene at the scaffold, in which people ran up to dip their pikes and handkerchiefs in the blood of the king. One zealot sprinkled blood on the crowd and shouted,

Brothers, they tell us that the blood of Louis Capet will fall again on our heads; well, so be it, let it fall... Republicans, the blood of a king brings happiness<sup>30</sup>.

This is one of those rare occasions when revolutionary discourse is most self-revealing about the psycho-sexual foundations of the political order. I think that it is clear even from this brief passage that it is possible to do a reading of this scene as a primal murder of the father – « that first great act of sacrifice » described by Freud in his controversial *Totem and Taboo*<sup>31</sup>. Except that Freud himself wrote in a comic mode, assuming that the sacrifice would eventuate in a reconciliation between the sons and the dead father. The inevitable « longing for the father » would lead to a revival of his ideal in the creation of gods and social organization. In 1793, in France, however, the brothers seemed to be refusing to follow the Freudian script; they insisted on « the original democratic equality of each member of the tribe » and refused to venerate « those individuals who had distinguished themselves above the rest ». In Freud's terms, they were stuck in that phase where « no one could or was allowed to attain the father's perfection of power »<sup>32</sup>.

Freud's own inability to work himself out of a patriarchal model of psycho-political organization was revealed in one of the throw away lines of *Totem and Taboo*: speaking of the move toward deification of the murdered father Freud inserts: « In this evolution I am at a loss to indicate the place of the great maternal deities who perhaps everywhere preceded the paternal deities »<sup>33</sup>. Freud's vision was so patriarchal that he could only

<sup>30</sup> *Révolutions de Paris*, # 185, 19-26 janvier 1793, « Mort de Louis XVI, dernier roi de France ».

<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances between the Psychic Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, tr. A.A. Brill, New York, 1948. I have developed some of my arguments about the killing of the king in « The Sacred and the French Revolution », in Jeffrey Alexander, ed., *Durkheimian Sociology* (forthcoming, Cambridge University Press, 1988). The emphasis on the « primal scene » can also be found, though not in a very elaborated fashion, in Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789-1820)*, New Haven, 1983, see especially p. 26. « It is here that we find the central and most important aspect of the self-representation inside Paris: a tension of the stereotypic and the unique, of the symbolic and the representational, which is to say the regressive, which urges a return to the primal scene which Père Duchesne and others (in England Burke) knew as the real heart of the matter, a scene more primal than republican Rome or Lycurgan Sparta ».

<sup>32</sup> Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, pp. 191-192.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

imagine contests between fathers and sons. As he asserted in a telling passage,

psychoanalytic investigation of the individual teaches with especial emphasis that god is in every case modelled after the father and that our personal relation to god is dependent upon our relation to our physical father, fluctuating and changing with him, and that god at bottom is nothing but an exalted father<sup>34</sup>.

It is hard to envisage, consequently, what Freud would have done with the French band of brothers who were operating in the tragic mode, who refused reconciliation with the dead political father, and who, moreover, appeared to want to worship the female goddess Liberty. It seems that he could only have argued that they were indeed stuck in a cultural developmental phase in which they were repressing their « longing for the father ».

The notion of fraternity, conceived in the sense of the band of brothers, makes it possible for us to integrate the issues of revolutionary time and the location of charisma. Charisma was decentered in the Revolution, diffused and dispersed, available only through language and symbols, because in the band of brothers, no one could be allowed to stand out. No one could be allowed to attain the father's perfection of power. Charisma, then, is the mirror image of the guilt of sacrifice, and like that guilt, it had to be shared in fraternal solidarity. All the brothers had eaten equally of the king's body, in a manner of speaking, and all were equally guilty and equally sanctified. In the French case, the collective sense of guilt was not transformed into the incest taboo and a general desire for obedience to the totem of the dead father (just as charisma was not settled upon a single individual or document). Rather that guilt was displaced onto the French past, while charisma was displaced into language and symbols. The revolutionaries had to cleanse themselves of the stigma of 1300 years of slavery by sacrificing their father, and they had to resanctify themselves by continually recreating the moment of primal solidarity. Only in this way could they cease being political children and achieve their political autonomy. The past was simply an unpleasant reminder of their political and moral dependence, a reminder of their guilt, and as such, had to be rejected.

At the same time, the revolutionaries hoped to remain perpetually youthful themselves; they were to be permanent brothers and not founding fathers. In the iconography of the French Revolution, for example, there were virtually no emblems of fatherhood. Most representations of the Republic were feminine and they almost always showed young women, often virginal, but sometimes with very young children. But there is never a father present. The male representation of the people in the form of Hercules was almost always shown as a virile brother; we know that he is a brother because he is shown with his sisters, liberty and equality, who cannot be

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

imagined as wives, if only because there are always two of them<sup>35</sup>. Indeed, one might argue that the incest taboo is not being very well enforced iconographically. This is a family without parentage, without a lineage. It is a family, consequently, that has trouble passing on its political patrimony (it has trouble constituting itself in a patriarchal sense). Is it too much to suggest that it is far from accidental that the two great radical spokesmen, Robespierre and St. Just, were bachelors? Certainly, the authors of the Constitution of the Year III did not think so since they required all deputies to be either married or widowed.

We have come very far from the parent-child analogy of the American Revolution, and my very brief exposition of the French family romance must necessarily raise many more questions than it can answer. Amongst those questions is the difficult issue of the status of such analogies. Are the band of brothers, the revolution without parentage, and the goddess of liberty simply striking metaphors for something going on more fundamentally within the political process as we usually describe it? Are they merely fancy ways of talking about party or class? I am trying to displace the usual narratives of the Revolution – the narratives of political and class conflict – in order to make a point about how politics works on an unconscious level, without, however, subscribing to a strict Freudian view of the family romance as dominated by the Oedipal conflict. Indeed, the Revolution demonstrates the narrowness of the Freudian version of the family romance. Nevertheless, Freud did have the virtue of showing that political and social conflict was shaped in important ways by the most personal stories people have told, the stories of family relationship and gender differentiation. I have tried to show that much of the difference between the American and French revolutions can be traced back to a difference in unconscious familial analogies; the radical nature of the French Revolution, the inability to sacralize a constitutional document, the permanence and continuing urgency of the revolutionary moment, all were linked to the image of the band of brothers as the makers of the new order. I do not conclude from this that the French were somehow less mature than the Americans, more regressive in their fantasies of political power and social order. They were participating in practice in the great adventure undertaken by political theorists since Machiavelli, i.e., they were trying to enact a social contract based on grounds other than naturalized patriarchal authority<sup>36</sup>.

There can be no political order without an imaginative construction of

<sup>35</sup> See figures 12 and 16 in Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class*.

<sup>36</sup> I hope that it is clear that I am not using gender differentiation in the sense of a self-conscious and explicit ideology of sexual difference but rather in the sense of an unconscious pre- and refiguration of the social order. For a different kind of approach, much better developed on the American side, see Ruth H. Bloch, « The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America », *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13 (1987): 37-58 and Linda K. Kerber, « The Republican Ideology of the Revolutionary Generation », *American Quarterly*, 37 (1985): 474-495.

basic kinship elements or what I have called here the family romance (though the romance must vary enormously across cultures). The French Revolution destabilized the going images of social and political order; unconsciously, the revolutionaries ended up undermining patriarchal images of authority. They also made an effort to reconstruct the basis for authority along masculine but less patriarchal lines, for as Freud says in a different context, there is a problem with the « liberated women » once the father is dead<sup>37</sup>. Of course, Freud meant liberated from control of the father and hence too accessible to the brothers, not liberated from control of men, whereas the French revolutionaries faced the prospect precisely of women liberated from the control of all men<sup>38</sup>. By destabilizing patriarchal images of authority, the French revolutionaries revealed just how much depended upon a stabilizable political imagination. They also revealed that the political imagination, the psycho-familial model of politics, was necessarily gendered, because it was about family and kinship. As the Revolution became more radical after the killing of the king, women's clubs proliferated and women began to appear more prominently in the public sphere. What followed from the subversion of patriarchal authority was divorce, legislation in favor of illegitimate children, and women's demands for rights.

The revolutionaries did not subsequently rush headlong toward women's liberation; far from it. Rather they began to elaborate a vision of republicanism that was profoundly homosocial, that is, based on the bonds between men which specifically excluded women, just as David's pictures of the 1780s had excluded them, by relegating them to the separate sphere of domesticity, which now required its own justification. Yet by rejecting the past, decentering charisma, and overthrowing the patriarchal image of kingly authority, the revolutionaries had opened the Pandora's box of family relationships and of women's relationship to the public sphere. By challenging the naturalized presuppositions of patriarchal rule, they showed that constituting a new nation meant reshaping the political imagination in its most fundamental aspects, aspects that were usually left unspoken and unjustified and hence largely unproblematic. Although the revolutionaries themselves tried to repress the consequences of their actions, the experience of the French Revolution had demonstrated that there could be no constituting without families, without genders, without women and men as well as universal man. Power went far beyond constitutional documents because power could arise only out of the most fundamental relationships and so could only be imagined in terms of them. As a consequence, the fate of constitutional documents was tied up in the end with images of fathers, brothers, and female goddesses.

<sup>37</sup> *Totem and Taboo*, p. 185.

<sup>38</sup> I discuss the reconstruction of masculine authority in « Révolution française et vie privée », in Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, eds., *Histoire de la vie privée*, vol. 4, *De la Révolution à la Grande Guerre*, Paris, 1987, pp. 21-51.