Rousseau, Ritual, and Revolution
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This summer I set out to explore the particular culture of insurrection that characterizes both the contemporary and the historical French political ethos. To do so, I followed two basic approaches, broadly understood as theoretical and historical. The latter led me to the political writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau, particularly to Rousseau's "The Social Contract," a work which proposes a theory of social change that necessitates the design of a system of ritual practice. Rousseau describes an idealized system of state and sovereign, in which the "popular will" and the "political will" are one. To transform an extant society into the utopic one "Social Contract" describes, Rousseau prescribes a radical redefinition of 'the people.' The question of how this change is to be accomplished presents a more complicated problem. The use of explicit and coercive force violates the very definition of this consolidated and singular state by creating and subsequently weaponizing a division between people and power.

To cross this theoretical bridge between utopian and existing forms of governance, Rousseau describes a kind of soft political coercion: a means of changing the norms, customs, and eventually the identity of a population in order to form a truly new people, one capable of constituting and upholding a new political order. Rousseau finds this alternative authority in the religious apparatus of the state. In Book IV, Chapter 8 of "The Social Contract," Rousseau delineates a theory of civil religion formulated based upon twin tenants of citizenship and duty. This secular cult functions as a sort of keystone in Rousseau's carefully constructed theory of society. The civil religion binds citizen to citizen, establishing a collective will and unitary people.

My second approach views the 1789 revolution 'from below;' I looked to historical accounts and critical analysis of events to understand the role Rousseau's theory played in shaping the course and outcome of the revolution. In 1789, the revolutionaries found themselves faced with the very problem Rousseau had theorized: how to construct a new people suited for a new government? Their programmatic solution was both philosophical and sociological in nature, combining the theory articulated in Rousseau's chapter "Of Civil Religion" with traditional forms of ceremonial insurrection. I looked to French political historian Mona Ozouf to understand the solution designed by the men of the revolution: the political festival, pacific in form but symbolically and rhetorically violent. In *Festivals and the French Revolution,* Ozouf writes that "the festival was an indispensable complement to the legislative system, for although the legislator makes the laws for the people, festivals make the people for the law.... Through the festival, the new social bond was to be made manifest, eternal, and untouchable" (Ozouf 9).

The national rituals of the revolution were typified by a horizontality that emphasized the equality of participants, and a thinly veiled symbolism of violence. Ozouf writes that the violent language of the revolutionary festival functioned as "affirmation that the revolution had still not completed its work," and that "mock violence was accompanied by an invitation to go further" (11). These gatherings provided the newly minted citizens of France an opportunity for escape from the chaotic and difficult drudgery of daily life in the nascent state, for the exercise of passion and personal action in the name of sovereignty.

These festivals, constructed and proscribed, were parallel or perhaps corollary to the explicit violence of the revolutionary years, which itself manifested in ritual form. Moments of bloodshed and death were coded with ceremonial and purgatory symbolism: the guillotine, for example, adopted a nearly relic status. Executions were thoroughly public and broadly celebratory event; Parisians flocked to the site of execution in celebration of justice accomplished and popular will realized. The spurt of political persecution and revolutionary violence during the period of the Terror (1793-4), like the festivals Ozouf describes, figured as a substitution of popular and anarchic violence for systematized, politicized violence. In pursuit of political stability and the realization of a utopian dream, the agents of the Revolution used violent festival and ritual violence as tools of political consolidation, a strategy located at the potent intersection of Rousseauian theory and popular practice.

As the summer has drawn to a close, I have begun to explore the contemporary implications of these questions of ritual and revolution. Today's strike culture and the frequency of mass protests can be interpreted as part of a continuum of political expression: the modern French protest (or *grêve*) adopts the joyful language and celebratory form of the Revolutionary festival. Though they are political and serious in ambition, they are often accompanied by marching bands and followed by social gatherings in cafés and bars. Like the revolutionary festival and the peasant insurrection, they are coated with a patina of violence: tanks roll through the streets of Paris with regularity shocking to the American observer, heavily armored soldiers line the streets, semi-automatic firearms in hand. Grêves, nevertheless, abound—clogging roadways and closing subways; as scholar Frank Wilson writes: "protest and demonstrations in France are perhaps less acts of political participation than political rites, with much the same meaning as Americans pledging allegiance to the flag" (Wilson 36).

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