

COUNTING AND TREMBLING DURING THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: ELEMENTS OF A HISTORICAL MULTIPLICITY

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Introduction: Adunation

Let us begin with a somewhat unfamiliar word used by the greatly influential logician and pamphleteer of the French Revolution, Emmanuel Joseph Sieyes, Abbe Sieyes: In 1789, Abbe Sieyes proposed the term “adunation” to the Constituent Assembly to convey a kind of statistical project of nation-building. This was a project meant to construct a system of common references for revolutionary France in objective and quantitative terms, a system not dissimilar to the ‘political arithmetic of someone like William Petty who urged the uniformity of “measure, weights and numbers” for the whole of England.¹ Yet there was something peculiar about Sieyes’ ‘adunative’ proposal. While data with respect to the population, the incidence and distribution of births, marriages, death etc. therein, were being collected in the age of Louis XIV – and one could say there were specific statistical ‘styles’ prevalent in Germany and England too in the 17th century – Sieyes seemed to be speaking from *another* place and level of pre-supposition. So, what is this peculiar locus of enunciation?

To Sieyes, “adunation” did not mean the collection or aggregation of data originally dispersed all over the existent provinces of the Old Regime. Such provinces were too haphazard in their distribution, unequal in size, population, abundance of natural resources; even their formal unity secured by the feudal thread running through them, in actuality, betrayed striking disparities of seignuerial practices and relations. Of course the king was meant to unify the regime but this symbolic function was increasingly being weakened by fiscal and administrative crises in the time Sieyes was campaigning. But *even if* these disparities and heterogeneities could be statistically regulated and reduced by a process of arithmetical standardization, or the imposition of standard ‘measures, weights, numbers’ on the French provinces, the demand of Sieyes’ adunative project would still not be sufficiently met.

“Adunation”, then, did not mean the arithmetical homogenization of qualitative and contingent differences of political, economic, geographical phenomena that encompassed the monarchical realm; rather, it meant the index and blueprint of a kind of statistical, mathematical and existential *sharing* of the nation, nay, Nation which was *already* pre-supposed, understood and declared to be One and Indivisible. But at this point, consider the following paradox: How can one think in any meaningful way the existential sharing of a reality which *does not yet exist*? Because in the year 1789, that is precisely the revolutionary commitment – the commitment to something that does not quite exist yet. One could also say, this is the paradox of the ‘municipal’ existentialism of this period. And it is at the municipal level that the Constituent Assembly attempts to mitigate the statistical and organizational paradox, or knot, that France’s historical existence, at this point, is tied up in.

To this end, the municipal unit sought to be operationalized was the “department” as different from the provinces of the Old Regime. The departments would be of equal size unlike the provinces and would consist of prefectures and sub-prefectures. The operational principle was that a person could travel to the prefecture within a day and from a sub-prefecture she could even come back the same day. One extreme municipal and revolutionary ‘vision’ at this time was the ideal physical partition of France into equal squares mapped by latitude and longitude. This idealization, however fantastic (and fanatic), did reveal the *axiomatic* pre-supposition of Sieyes’ idea of the nation: The nation, which was One and Indivisible, was also strangely a composition of ideal and equal ‘ones’. Now compare this situation of discourse with another of Sieyes’ acute formulations in 1789: “The nation is the people assembled”.² Which means, the people in this formulation, are not to be considered either as a congregation (of which religious liturgical assembly was a standing model) or as a multitude (of which the ideas associated, from at least Machiavelli to D’Alembert, were those of dispersion and danger). Rather, the people, in the above axiomatic, were distinguished by the supreme – and sovereign – attribute of being ‘counted-as-one’ without being any sort of corporation or body or ‘entity’. Sieyes’ adunative project, which sought to operationalise new statistical and administrative units, which is to say new forms of corporations, new ‘ones’ called “departments” etc., pre-supposed that a non-corporate reality called “people” already existed and counted for one. However, *this* was precisely the knot or paradox mentioned above. And the difficulty presented itself in a historical and structural dimension.

First the historical dimension: In George Lefevbre’s great study and unfolding of the French Revolution, he relates the event of a particularly *municipal* revolution starting from 1789. According to Lefevbre, the event

was a municipal articulation towards *direct democracy*. So, people in the provinces and districts (units chosen for election of deputies to the Estate General) wanted to *be present to the new nation* so as to disarticulate the older forms of centralization of which the king was the most visible talisman.³ But this subjective demand for absolute, direct and localized presence to the axiomatic of national sovereignty was *also* a demand not to be counted as a local corporate entity in the earlier fashion of the estates. And therein enters the structural dimension of the paradox, or knot, being discussed: How to count a non-corporate reality – and by what measure? What form of being to assign to an absolutely localized existence which refuses to present itself as a ‘local’ body an ‘entity’?

And yet...When Sieyes proposes the principle of adunation and in another place, announces that the nation is the people assembled, it is exactly that – an announcement, a historico-axiomatic declaration of modern political ontology with, if I may call it that, a ‘mathematical unconscious’. And if the unconscious, to follow Freud’s teaching, surfaces in its displacements and disavowals, then the mathematical unconscious of the political discourse of the revolution was encountered at the flickering conjuncture when the enunciative apparatus of *bringing into existence* a new political reality (Nation as “people assembled”) was simultaneously disavowed into the pre-supposition that such a reality (the new nation) was *already* existent. Consequently, the fundamental task of an investigation such as this is to invent and forge tools of a kind of archaeology of these disavowals. Of course the possibility of such a structure and history of disavowal is predicated on the mathematical property of an axiom that it is *declared* in the mode of a decision and not proven in the form of a deduction, inference or theorem. So the historically specified question is, does Sieyes’ adunative, statistical and ‘counting’ project for the Constituent Assembly acknowledge the precarious nature of its axiomatic decision(s) or does it attempt to bury the courage and risk of the declaration in the mute depths of pre-supposed existence?.

Counting

However, to the specific question of history there is no exhaustive and proper historical answer. Any such answer would itself presuppose a saturated reflection of the ontological movement of “coming into existence” by a kind of transparency of historical consciousness and intentionality embodied in the leader and protagonists of the Revolution, whether Sieyes or the several others. But what the structural aporia of the logic of adunation indicates is the exigent insertion of that labour and passion we call the “new” in the *gap* between the intentionality of the historical actors and

the blurred forms of actual historical existence. Lets take two situations of the “new” from the first half of 1789 and both connected with the person of Abbe Sieyes. First, his text from January 1789, *What is the third estate?* Then the issue of re-naming the Constituent Assembly as *National Assembly* with Sieyes’ proposal at the centre of the debate.....

If Sieyes can ask the fundamental question he did in January 1789 – “What is the third estate?” – and he can hypothesise the existence of the third estate *itself*, it is in the wake of a series of moves made in 1788 from different quarters to historically and numerically rectify the relation of the third estate with the two others. This rectification is attempted on the question of *voting* in the Estates General. Hitherto the estates voted as single units or corporations and each – the clergy, nobility and the third estate – had one vote. Thus on issues of both feudal and clerical privileges, whether they related to tax – exemptions or such impositions as the *tithe* (among other things) it was a foregone conclusion that the clergy and the nobility would vote on one side and against the third estate which had to bear the enormity of the fiscal burden at hand.⁴

Now, in 1788, when the king called a meeting of the Estates General to be held the following year, the first one after 1614, it was not for reasons of correctional or egalitarian justice. The finances of Louis XVI were in doldrums and his minister of the exchequer Jacques Necker knew that it was impossible to fiscally sustain the nobiliary privileges any further. And thus he responded with tactical and vigilant approval to the third estate’s demand for a doubling of its vote and additionally, counting by heads on crucial matters in the Estates General. Because that was the only way to defeat the motions for continuing exemptions and privileges. The demand of the third estate was of course articulated along the self-evident justification of its large numbers (over 98% of the total population) *and* the material deprivation of its condition. On this point, lets open a short parenthesis with regard to some protocols and stakes of the historiography of the French Revolution.

It was in the 1970s that Francois Furet, in several studies including his most influential work *Interpreting the French Revolution*, diagnosed a kind of Jacobin ‘fallacy’ in the dominant history-writing around the Revolution which was history – writing on the Left.⁵ The singular source of this fallacy, according to Furet, was the mid – 19th century writer Jules Michelet and its approximate shape was the following: Led by Michelet’s magnificent and ambiguous ‘Jacobin’ passion, historians of the Left had mistakenly identified the material *state* of a part of the population – that is the deprivations of the *sans-coulotte* – with the rational *cause* of the revolutionary ‘act’ of 1789. And in this fallacious schema of reasoning, the leaders of the revolution provided the ideal mirror of reflection whereupon

the lucidity of the cause yielded its corresponding passion, imperative and organization that made revolutionary action possible. Clearly Furet's criticism was the diagnosis of a proto-Leninism in the discourse of this type of history – writing. Without involving oneself too much in the densities of this contestation – and there are several chapters to it – let us take a brief look of the modalities of the source mentioned above, that is, of Michelet's narrative singularity and the 'bent' arrow it becomes when aimed at the heart of the revolutionary *present*.

No doubt Michelet's account lends a double imagery to the fluid presences of 1789 – a 'passive' imagery of popular destitution, hunger and expropriation on a massive scale and a strangely active one which presents these very conditions of existence and their 'mass' as *gesture*.⁶ One could hazard naming this gesture: "the revolt of Number". What are the phenomena dramatized by Michelet that this name seeks to capture? Well, this seems the place to make a preliminary numerical observation: In the passive type of imagery, the statistical support comes, from a citation of *numbers* – numbers relating to poverty, famine, people imprisoned in the Bastille before July 1789 in a certain form and order that could be called "sequential". Unlike "numbers" which are *counted* in sequence, that is, one after another, Number, to roughly paraphrase Alain Badiou's superb thesis, presents itself as a *gesture of Being*.⁷ This can be illustrated from Michelet's narrative, though the example is only a random citation from the historical multiplicity we are studying.

Michelet recounts the date 5th October 1789 when eight to ten thousand women led a large crowd to Versailles to fetch the king to Paris. Why? Because the king must live with his people who haven't enough bread to feed their children. The king must live among those who *love* him, the people, that is. And so Michelet writes, it is this love and *hunger* that galvanise the people towards Versailles where the king is secured. Further, it is the women who *materialize* this combination of forces more than the men whose subjectivities are still oriented to the militant event of the storming of the Bastille. At this point, Michelet writes these most vivid, most enigmatic lines, "...What is most *people* in the people, I mean most instinctive and inspired, is assuredly the women. Their idea was this: 'Bread is wanting, let us go and fetch the king; they will take care, if he be with us, that bread be wanting no longer. Let us go and fetch the *baker*'".⁸ No doubt it takes the historian to add the acid of *enunciation* to the other ferocious but mute forces of history. And it is with the event of this enunciation, that an 'infant – people' who were merely the idolatrous lovers of the king hitherto, produced this same love as a torn gesture from their own fabric of being, their immanence. The ontological name I hazarded earlier for this gesture is Number. Thus women who led the

crowd to Versailles, and who bring the king to Paris are indeed counted as persons and bodies, peoples and sexes, individuals and genera but they also are “most *people* in the people”, meaning, they are the *event* of a people in the set called “people” who can be counted in several ways or as several sub-sets. The ontological as well as operational enigma that Michelet’s singular narration presents us with is indeed, how to count an event?

Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, in their doctrine of the multitude, have powerfully recognized the above problem but preferred a kind of ‘chaosmic’ solution attuned to contemporary spinozisms, or should one say, Deleuzisms.⁹ To them, the event of a people is a chaosmic singularity, i.e., a chaosmos of ontological possibilities such as love, poverty, revolution, subjectivised by the praiseworthy name “multitude”. What the name expresses is a splendid if miraculous transmutation and metamorphosis of number (in their sequential, counted unity) into subject of possibility, into enactment. Its leap of faith, hope and love, why not, takes it to a ontological and political region where the field of possibilities is ‘tendentially’ maximized and saturated. The contemporary region is global capitalism but in its own time, the French Revolution in the discourse of history and political philosophy did claim a similar maximization beyond its local ‘gestures’. However, it seems to me, the local premise of the global multitudinarian thesis is unable to cross the threshold from numbers to Number. It would subjectivise Michelet’s women too quickly in the direction of a chaosmic ‘force’ or potentiality – hence the common identification of Michelet’s Jacobinism- and its enthusiasm would spring from the hopes of a maximal *actualization* of this potential which is *already* inscribed in the ontological field of politics. Strangely, this enthusiasm which, in the revolutionary conjuncture, must be nothing if not enthusiasm for “the new”, itself prevents anything unforeseeably new from taking place. And thus in this hypothetical argument over how to interpret a certain historical text and its situation the very fecundity of Jules Michelet’s source of historiographical passion might be at stake. To retain the passion of the situation, if not to save its ‘truth’, let us take another path, the path of Number as gesture.

The proposition for this other movement is the following: Unlike the counting (and counted) sequential numbers which present themselves in specific cardinalities at specific crossroads – so the cardinal figure of eight to ten thousand for women going to Versailles – Number, as a gesture torn from the fabric of Being, is a *swarm*.¹⁰ What does this mean? In a simple way, it means that unlike the single chain or order of numbers, which can be an ascension, descent, accumulation, subtraction etc, taken as a “swarm”, numbers display a simultaneity of orders and by that property,

can be capitalized into the gesture of Number. Applied to Michelet's imagery and formulation, the "most *people*" in "people", that is, women marching to fetch the king, does not merely convey a point of extraordinary psychological intensification or of ontological potentiality; it transmits the *actuality* of women condensing in their being the simultaneous ordering of *several* demands of existence. Each supposed generative potential, "love" "hunger" "revolution", constitutes, in this thesis, an actual and non-localizable element of an emergent historical multiplicity. The women of France on 5th October 1789 tear these elements from their domestic habitats, their expected localities and re-deploy them in the tremulous hollow or void which the multiplicity *that they are* is perpetually sutured to. The economy of the above proposition on numbers and Number, the passage between them, deserves some elaboration.

In this effort, lets recapitulate Francois Furet's effective allegations of a kind of Jacobin Micheletism or Micheletesque Jacobinism colouring historiography on the Left to the detriment of the analysis of the 'other' French Revolution, the long and elusive one. Furet intervenes in and revises decisively what he considers to be the presumptive 'innocence' of those who incarnate the Revolution as the Antigone of the new era, absolutely transparent, absolutely trustworthy.¹¹ Indeed, what is at stake in this discussion is a certain reading of the *interruptive* innocence in Michelet and a certain search for the 'matheme' of this interruption rather than the repetition of its consecrated image(s). It is not unknown that guided by Tocqueville, Furet de-stresses the very point of concentration and intensity that enacts the caesura between the Old and New Regimes in the year 1789. He mobilizes all the revolutionary parameters extending from economic data, political acts to religious and cultural indices against themselves to produce a *generic indiscernment* of criteria by which the Revolution can be reliably identified and evaluated. This, in essence, provides the effective force of Furet's 'revisionism'. And I will suggest that it is precisely the *generic* resources of this revisionism that must be re-inserted in the constitutive 'void' of Michelet's discourse. Of course it is the void which demands the most urgent, most persuasive demonstration. And the poetic horizon within which this demonstration might unfold is that of a Micheletesque 'innocence' whose ontological name is the "void". Which is to say, Furet's figuration of the Revolution in Michelet as the trustworthy Antigone must be displaced from its substantive pathos to a kind of logical and indiscernible space of possibility which must be *taken up, re-commenced*. And only upon such a re-commencement will the space be filled up with a supposed subject, intentionality, project and language.

In the above sense, the innocence or transparency Furet alleges attaches to the "void" of Michelet's theatre not its busy mise-en-scene of signifiers.

And that historians on the Left, with varying degrees of accuracy and vehemence, have *repeated* the 'filled' signifiers, not re-commenced the void strangely unites the so-called revisionist Furet with them, not set him apart. Now to demonstrate the void in Michelet, with admittedly a great deal of ellipsis, let us shift back to June 1789 when in the Constituent Assembly, two proposals were made – by Sieyes and Mounier – regarding the composition, status and name of the Assembly. In short, the demonstration takes as its object the very "coming-into-existence" of the Assembly, its *constitution*. It is difficult not to be transported from crest to crest in Michelet's rhythmic narration of the *names* of this constitution: from Sieyes' rousing declaration of "the third estate" to "commune" to Mirabeau's 'flexible' "people" to the final movement from Constituent to National Assembly.... Yet it is required to modulate this undulating reception to a more interruptive tone and pitch, a response which every time *breaks* the rhythm of history and every time re-commences it. In concrete terms, it means taking up the problem of June 1789 when Sieyes emphasized that the deputies of the third estate must be known as "acknowledged representatives of the French Nation", as different from the deputies of the other orders (clergy and nobility) who could only be presumed to be so. Sieyes was further advanced by other proponents who desired the eventual and urgent constitution of the Assembly as "General" and "Indivisible". But how was that possible with the formal composition of the Assembly still consisting of three separate orders or corporations? There was only one logical and political way out – to produce a *non-corporate* form which was constitutively indivisible: To this end, Sieyes proposed the non-corporate and interruptive name – Nation or National Assembly.

Let us pay close attention to Michelet's terms of narration: Michelet says that the proponents who were precursors to Sieyes's proposal on change of name wanted that *nothing* should separate the *declaration* of the new name ("General", then "National") from the ontological truth of the nation's indivisibility. This was a desire *against* the void and yet this desire brings up the void in history and discourse in a razor-edged way. Now note the tremendous paradox that Mirabeau, who, according to Michelet, feared Sieyes' radicality, desired precisely another sort of repetitive adherence in history notwithstanding the Revolution, a desire against the void and for adherence the cipher and glue of which was the king. In particular, Mirabeau campaigned for the retention of the king's veto on the Estates General, the Assembly now, thus, in effect, retaining the corporate and idolatrous mark of the king's haloed body on another, drastically altered non-corporate, revolutionary 'body'.

Yet Mirabeau preferred, in the penultimate rounds of discussion before

voting, the "formula" for the Assembly as a forum for the Representatives of the French *People*. "People" was a flexible word whose meaning was manipulable. But the two proper motions, Mounier's and Sieyes' that were to be voted raised the formal even mathematical stakes of the political discourse of this period. Mounier's motion said that the Assembly consisted of the Representatives of the *major* part of the Nation, in the absence of the minor part. Obviously the major part of the nation could be construed as the "people", the word Mirabeau preferred. Sieyes' motion clearly asked for the enunciation of *National* Assembly. Mounier's arithmetical basis was that the "people" constituted the simple majority of the total members of France - an overwhelming 98% or so - and so *simply* understood, their deputies were representatives of the 'simple major' part of the Assembly. So arithmetically argued, the nation was a sum of its simple parts, a class of its constituent classes, an abstract body of empirical bodies. *That* was its justice. Michelet calls this Mounier's "unjust justness" and I will suggest that Michelet draws out here the unjust justness of a kind of arithmetical masking of the problem of political and ontological constitution. To perform this task, Michelet's historiographic arrow bends with devious, almost "unjust" innocence.

Michelet draws the reader's attention to the ironic fact that the arithmetically simple and negligible part of the national sum, the privileged classes, owned two-thirds of land in France and thus most of its source of wealth (in physiocratic terms, at least). This unsurprising knowledge possesses a political and mathematical surprise: Mounier's *simple* scale according to which the parts, corporations, classes are counted next to each other has already been interrupted and indeed voided by the surreptitious smuggling in of a *inconsistency*, which means, the presumed simple and countable parts of the welcoming 'national' totality are inconsistently, thus complexly, *weighted*. This further implies that between the parts apparently passively subject to this 'just' count (of major and minor partitions), an inconsistent, 'unjust' *void* must exist. Now, the void which is the ontological and mathematical name for inconsistency *in the scale of count* must not be confused with the physical image of a passive, neutral 'empty space' that must lie between discrete, indifferent, countable parts. In other words, while the empty space is a structural condition of *repetition*, the void is the inconsistent, interruptive and in the context we are studying, definitely violent *event* of 'decision'. Sieyes' motion in the Assembly was the enunciation of such a decision.

It was a decision, neither an arithmetical nor a political demonstration, that the "people" were not a simple if major part nor the "nation" a sum of parts; rather the latter was a complex and *re-composed* articulation of a decision in response to the structural complexity indicated above and

disavowed in Mounier's proposal. The nation was a re-composed articulation beyond the schema of aggregation or collection – an 'adunative' decision enunciated by Sieyes. When the deputies voted in Sieyes' proposal (with four hundred and ninety one in favour and ninety against) and the Assembly was proclaimed *National Assembly*, the decision that won against Mounier's arithmetical and "unjust" *exactness* was, in set-theoretic language, a "generic" decision. Meaning, the decision wagered the imminent existence of some element, some reality, some combination of elements – that is, some sub-set – that was *indiscernible* within the contemporary order of countable, identifiable entities.¹² Thus, the decision to name this 'indiscernible' set "nation" was a new and perilous *axiomatic* declaration with the only generic attribute of being 'new'. And it is not a matter of negligible irony that the only way to *force* the new into the existent *dispositifs*, apparatuses, of the present was to *demonstrate* the new as an exercise of sovereignty. In the case of the Revolution and its perilous dialectic of interruption, forcing and re-composition, the demonstration was by asserting the right of taxation once the Assembly had been founded, "it existed". According to Michelet, the assertion of exercise was the infusion of "life" to an axiomatic constitution, its founding decision – which, according to our thesis, was a decision to suture a name, a gesture, a subject to the void.

Let us open a cinematic parenthesis on the question of the void in relation to the subject's suture and its degree of ontological and topological freedom – an example from contemporary Iranian Cinema to be resonated with Sieyes' great wager on the people's will, their sovereignty in the January 1789 pamphlet *What is the third estate?* In Majid Majidi's film *Children of Heaven* (made in the last decade of the 20th century) the young boy is relentlessly led by a single prescription issued by the terrible contingency of the situation – he must acquire a pair of shoes for his sister such that they don't have to share the same pair for school. A contingency which is the cause of their running late to school, their consequent anxiety and unhappiness. Then the boy discovers there is a long-distance race at school and the person *coming third* will win a pair of new shoes. This, then, is the boy's greatest will – to be *third* in the race, win the shoes and restore their lives to equanimity. And he will try as hard as he can to translate his will to the desired result. What does 'trying' mean here? It means that the boy must run hard enough to be within the first three but slow down or should one say, *turn down* enough at the critical moment when the group of first three has crystallized in the race such that he *retracts* from the fundamental numerical logic of the game – which is to be counted in the proper 'place' and according to the proper 'scale' of the set of competitors. Thus he wills a *void* at the point of crystallization so as to suture himself to that

void with an explicitly, sovereignly, unjustly, innocently chosen thread of Being. This is the thread of the 'third', the existential thread of the boy's and his sister's salvation in desperate immanent retreat from the universal fabric of arithmetical, unjust justice whose other war-like synonym in the game is 'victory'. Can the boy win this retreating victory, this existential victory over the universal rule of the game but also this numerical victory of being the exact third over the *force* of existence that running or the running body is? The film simply, wisely, tenderly demonstrates he can't – his body runs ahead of his will and he comes first in the race. The film demonstrates that the subject, at the very point of his disorientation, retraction and renewed declaration of the will, can't will the void. And because the void can't be willed, the event (of standing third in a pure filling of the void with the desired existential cardinality beyond the ordinal environment of the race) can't be willed *as one's will*.

What is the mathematical meaning of the above example? It is that while the void is constitutive of the number series or an ordinal (that is, ordered) multiplicity (whether sequential or swarming), it can't be actively – which is always immixed with passion, the *passio* or pathos – *localized*. The void structurally pre-exists the will and at the point of the emergence of the subject, in all its epic disorientation and delicate, courageous creation, this perpetual and non-localizable pre-existence must be the subtle material, the ontological fabric of its *decision*. In Majid Majidi's film, this decision is pointed at in the last scene when the boy dips his tender, wounded 'unbound' feet in water – indeed the decision has crossed the threshold of anxious and finite will, anxious because finite, and become 'unbound' from all relational capture. The *infinite* feet of a very small, very 'finite' boy.... Both in Michelet's early 19th century account and Abbe Sieyès' January 1789 pamphlet *What is the third estate?* the "people" are understood as very callow, an infant people enjoying a 'least' existence. In his pamphlet, when Sieyès starts with the famous text – what is the third estate? Nothing. What must it become? Everything – nothing announces the decision to suture the subject to the void more decisively.¹³ Yet the void is *not* the name of the event, it is the friable 'infantile' material of Being. In other words, the "event" of the people is not decided in the revolutionary pamphlet; but its *imminence* is prepared for with a tensile, "coming" energy.

Negri and Hardt have praised Sieyès' central tenet of "constituent power" as a multitudinarian intuition that resists the rigid constitution of "people" and "nation" as fixed names of sovereignty. Indeed Sieyès calls the history of the idea of "people" the 'history of constituent power'. All I am arguing for here is that instead of adding a third name, "multitude", let us not shirk from muddying our boots on the rough trail to the structural

support of the void to the process of constitution and the indiscernible component of the event that befalls this process. So with some mud soiling it, let us still risk the rough proposition that Sieyes' doctrine of people as constituent power is a revolutionary subjectification of what could be called a "constituent void". And insofar as the void makes possible an order of the count and prescribes the re-commencement of the count at every critical step but is itself *not counted* and doesn't have an algebraic or a political location, the "people" as a constituent void are not counted and must never be. They are not sovereign *and* must never be! To any objection that the "people" in this thesis oscillates between the constituent power of the void and the indiscernible localization of the event, one can reply with the caveat that the suturing *decision* unto the void decides the event without personifying it in the alternative forms of theological or secular sovereignty. In this sense, the "people" do not come to occupy the same space of sovereignty as the king of the Old Regime and if they do, it is already an attenuation and retractive personification of its drastic evental and indiscernible precision. The revolutionary and the later so-called Jacobin wills to incarnate the new in the *personae* and figures of the new – whether the new calendar and the commemorative figures of the festival between 1790 and 1794 – were examples of resolving the historical oscillation of the new political being in favor of certain resplendent and 'full' signifiers. These wills willed the pacification of the *trembling* induced by the constitutive void and the domestication of the *enthusiasm* (Kant's epochal word for the French Revolution as an intensity of pure thought)¹⁴ generated by the event. And exactly to the measure that this project of the will was an executive, governmental failure, the government imposed on the "people" a state of emergency and its decision took the figural and intensive form of the Terror.

Trembling

Before God's inscrutable decision and command that Abraham must sacrifice his young and innocent son Issac, the father felt *trembling*. Or at least he must have – this is what Kierkegaard hypothesized about Abraham's state on Mount Moriah and in this unrelieved, 'trembling' state, Abraham must decide his faith in the face of the "void" of God's command. Modern philosophy, of which Kierkegaard was indeed, a 'trembling' source, gives a simple and shattering name to the void – "absurd".¹⁵ In his play *Danton's Death*, Georg Buchner wrote an 'absurd' scene: In the flurry of deaths by guillotine during the Terror, well after the king had been executed in January 1793, a woman in the public witnessing another such beheading shouts out, "long live the king!" What explains the absurdity of this

declaration? Its errancy? Its innocence? Its terrible injustice in a time inundated by the blood demanded by an endless revolution? Paul Celan, in a lecture cited this "absurd" declaration from Buchner's 19th century play – and Jacques Derrida has written about it in more than one place – as the *poetic* condition for revolutionary sovereignty which is not a simple structural and temporal transfer from an earlier sovereignty.¹⁶ The poetic revolution of the French Revolution...

Of course it is possible to object that the woman in Buchner's play was only a crypto-royalist unable to control herself in the heat of the moment. Even if that be the case, the *singularity*, the non-localized errancy of the utterance in a revolutionary situation must be given its poetic instance of enunciation, or rather, such an enunciation demands its errant, 'weak' place-holder in a *truly* revolutionary place of speech. In other words, true revolutionary sovereignty must include inconsistent, 'absurd', *other* instantiations. The revolutionary intensity must calm the trembling in the air not by sedating (or terrorizing) it but by affirming its *uneconomical* – thus in the sense George Bataille gave to the word – sovereign core. Let us draw a provisional conclusion at this point: Buchner's absurd, definitely comic, example counterposed to our earlier structural proposition on the "void" indicates, a counter-attribute of the situation we are trying to formalize. The situation secretes an "excess", an uneconomical and transverse movement of bodies, affects and utterances, which, nevertheless, must not be left to the expressive resources of a chaosmos. Insofar as "trembling" is an intensity of errant, inconsistent forms, it passes between the form of the void and the form of excess.

On the fundamental and inconsistent immanence of the revolutionary situation and its bloody yet strangely burlesque consequences, Francois Furet quotes from a letter from Friedrich Engels to Marx in which the former says the Terror was a reign of the terrorized.¹⁷ For historical logic and its 'Jacobin' historiographer i.e., Michelet as seen by Furet the crucial question was, how to formalize the division between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces *without* dividing the 'true' subject of this history, the "people"? For Furet, the problem is more ironic in the sense that the divisions of the Terror "put the unity of "people" into question and further, these divisions had a denser history than the one inaugurated by Robespierre's 'normal' declaration of Terror in 1794.

This is not the place to treat these issues in detail but some summary remarks are in order: First, if Furet contrasts the opacity of circumstances leading to the Terror to the transcendental transparency of Michelet's interpretation, it is eventually to convert the sharp figure of the people-subject into something vaguer, fuzzier. Furet calls this converted milieu "democratic sociability" formed during the Revolution with its constituent

societies, clubs, media, groups, groupuscules – an array of socio-historical variables (of which the Jacobin tendency was one) that “implodes” into the decision of the Terror. So on the one hand, the Terror ‘decides’ the undecidable and precarious event in the direction of revolutionary virtue (subjective condition of the militant of the event) and terror (the objective name of the event declared in 1794); on the other, this mode of decision returns the variability of the temporal sequences, their enigmatic ‘swarmings’ without cardinal discernment into the number and figure of the subject of history, to the binary and obsessive distribution of *personae* – revolutionary and counter – revolutionary, people and enemy of the people, humanity and the criminal against humanity.

Second remark: in Furet’s analyses and schematizations, the Terror was also an *abstraction* from the actual history of ‘mixtures’ between 1789 and 1794. What was the composition of these mixtures? Well, two leading ingredients seemed to be the older corporate exercise of power and privilege *and* the new, vaguer form of a kind of ‘mass-politics’ wherein the idea of “mass” couldn’t be equated with the corporate form (whether that be the clergy, nobility, even the corporate presence of the king etc.) Yet out of the theological core of the older corporations – a core in which the theology of divine grace and the terror of sovereign *exercise* of power were indistinguishable – and the political constitution of the new “mass” – which was a locus, or *topos*, of strategy and passion – the horizon of a ‘modern’ style of trembling was composed. We could say this was the horizon of the “state” whose Hobbesian *theory* intended it to be a space of eternal and economical trembling but whose historical experience between 1789 and 1794 revealed it to be a staccato and unstable rhyme of various emergencies. And so it is not surprising that at least in theory, Joseph de Maistre, avid polemicist against the Revolution, admired the Jacobin readiness to shed uneconomical amounts of blood for the sake of a mysterious economy – the economy of theological authority whose permanent mystery was further demonstrated by the ‘abstract’ blood of the Terror, according to Maistre.¹⁸ However, according to Michelet, the *alleged* Jacobin, the trembling of the Revolution was born of its concrete enthusiasm, its feverish *eros*, not its abstract Terror. But how does this testimony relate to our argument about the functioning of the constitutive void in Michelet’s discourse and that joins him with Sieyès?

I think Michelet conveys an essential materialist truth in his historical narration: In the situation of trembling, the void functions as a non-localizable and tremulous ontological condition but the trembling itself accrues to *bodies*. And so in January 1789, when Sieyès put out his influential pamphlet, the infant body of the people was both trying to get itself

counted according to some *representative* scale and (in the pamphlet) staking a super-numerary 'national' (adunative?) claim. Between July 1789, when Bastille was stormed and October 1789, when the king was forced back to Paris, the people were an *improvisation*, a gestural actuality whose numerical name we have given "swarm" and whose *complex* order had already breached the historical condition of infancy. This movement Michelet narrates with a kind of partisan accuracy. In the episode of October he presents to the reader two trembling bodies, but this time removed from the popular stage – the king and the queen. Strangely, this pathetic drama of corporate destitution is transmuted by Michelet into an account of popular and ambiguous *eros*.

On the one hand it is true that in Michelet's scenario, the royal couple are trembling before the hungry and volatile crowd. *On the other*, when the same crowd sees and hears the queen's young son, the dauphin, cry out "Mamma, I am hungry" they gasp for tenderness at the sight of royal, innocent, *infantile* hunger – Michelet writes of this instantaneous communication of incorporeal intensities, this shared affect of hunger between classes otherwise separated by the abysses of history, "Hunger passes from people to the king!"¹⁹ This, Michelet writes at this point and into the next chapter, is the ideal conjuncture of pardon, of popular clemency. It is the subjective emergence of an unbound and generous horizon which, indeed includes both the people and king on the same plane. Here the king is as if 'liberated' from his own court, its artifice, its false images, automata and lifeless statues, to be restored to his 'natural' body. Thus from trembling, the king is delivered to the *eros* of the people – such is the subjective horizon painted with a exuberant brush by Michelet. When the people, in this period, want to free themselves from the church's imposition of the traditional *tithes*, they seek to unbind themselves from the infinite debt of religious inheritance. Through a similar act of forcing a *defaulting* on inherited debt, only in the reverse direction of the king, the people would force the king to default on his own "artificial" sovereignty to restore him to natural, forgiving, loving life.²⁰ In other words, the people, in Michelet's impassioned plea, in the first year of the Revolution were "full of magnanimity, clemency and forgiveness". Their *will* is a will to unconditional forgetting, a lifting of what the ancient Greeks called "stasis" (civil strife)²¹ once and for all ...will to revolutionary *void* to which a new, emancipated society could be sutured. Of course everything Michelet, and the historians after him will write of the developments following this idealized conjuncture confronts us again with our earlier ontological thesis: The will can't will the *place* of the void, it can't will the event in its own image as will, the will can only *decide*, the

event as an indiscernible effectivity... In this confrontation, the “people” fantasized as a great count of the One – and in that exact sense of fantasy, Sovereign – are ‘forced’ to turn towards and face the trembling reality of what I will call “historical multiplicities”.

What is a “historical multiplicity”? A concluding note on torsion

A historical multiplicity, being a multiplicity, is not One. What is the ‘historical’ dimension of this general definition? It is, negatively put, not a historical *period*. What is a “period” in history? It is a bloc of repetition within an empty temporal schema. The content and intensity of reflection gives the schema a certain density but the very structure of repetition gives this density a homogenous presumption despite enormous differences of coloration and texture between historical periods. The generalized form and name of this presumption is “subject”. So, for example, in the first half of 4th century AD, we see the insertion of Christianity in the Roman Empire as a ‘countable’ element in the open totality that the Empire was. Once countable and historically designated, Christianity also became the specific *subject* of history, whose amplitude increased from the scale of the West to world-history. Thus Paul Veyne could write a book recently with as simple and provocative a title as *When Our World Became Christian: 312-394*.²² Here the “becoming-Christian” of the “world” is not an isolated question of either religious conversion or political change but the befalling of a ‘new’ and ‘true’ subject of history. The *befalling* and the *constituting* divide the terrain of history into the *torsion* between *that* which periodises and the repetitive closure of the period. Pending the meaning we give to the mathematical idea of “torsion”, let’s call “historical multiplicity” as that which periodises as different from the unity (one-count) of the period.

In the appendix of his book, Paul Veyne uses an interesting term that would describe the nature of a historical multiplicity very well – it is a “generic plural”.²³ A generic plural indicates a non-localizable set of forces that effect an interruption of repetitive, even rhythmic sequences – the case of Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in all its non-localizable pragmatics, its multiple durations of actualization in history for which the date 312 AD marks a *subtle* index – and must be distinguished from the predicative unity of a historical period with its sovereign subject – the case of a *Christian Roman Empire* as a period of ancient history and after. The mathematical concept of “torsion” corresponds to this process and distinction and helps formalize it to an extent but before I explicate that notion, let’s outline the stakes of such “generic” philosophies of history in relation to those who oppose them.

Joseph de Maistre poured counter-revolutionary vitriol on the 'generic' philosophy of the Revolution.²⁴ He carried out at least three polemical operations against this philosophy: First, Maistre refused any credence to generic humanity; hence according to him, the Declaration of the Rights of Man was a document based on a false premise of generic Man. Second, he shot down the claims to a French republic on the grounds that no cohesive republican *body* (*res publica*) could correspond to the largeness of the 'number' of France (whether expressed as population, number of provinces, the number of representatives of the people etc.); in this he mocked the use of the (adunative) word "nation" as a mystification of the real impasse of representation. Third, and crucially, Maistre *insisted* on an alternative philosophy of history as *war* enacted in the numbers killing and the numbers killed, encoded in a kind of economy of blood; thus his main concern was not the impossible emancipation from bloodshed but the constant quantity of blood shed which must not flow too much more, shouldn't exceed the economy. Consonant with these unsparring operations, Joseph de Maistre laid down the prescription of the counter-revolutionary and sovereigntist Right in the discourse of revolutionary historiography. It was that the axiomatic declaration of sovereignty, a declaration intrinsic to the nature of an axiom, must never pretend it can issue from a void in history. History is only the repetitive series of pre-existences (thus the Rights of Man was only a specific *polemic* against already existing rights with no real change of substance) and no real interruption, no *event* occurs in this schema (neither the Revolution nor the Thermidor were real events for Maistre). Indeed there is a generic depth (or height) to the world and to life – but that *originary* place of mystery – in that sense, a void – was beyond any intra-historical declaration, however inventive and courageous. In this way, Joseph de Maistre opposed the glacial transcendence of sovereignty (of which the most lucid embodiment was always the one king, not the multitudinous and "childish" people) to the immanence of historical multiplicity. This was also the paradigmatic prescription against *torsion* in history.

The mathematical notion of torsion involves a series where an element, let's call it x , is repeated a certain number of times, let's say n times, upon which the value of $x+x+x+\dots+x$ (n^{th} place) is equal to 0, or $nx=0$.²⁵ A group, series or multiplicity with such a place of interruption, disappearance or voiding may be called a "torsion group". Now it must be remembered that there is no code or algorithm or programme by which this void-point (the n^{th} place) can be anticipated or calculated. Its befalling is its 'event-quality' and as a formal place or location, it is strictly indiscernible. In other words, a torsion group (call it T) is similar to any repetitive or rhythmic sequence (call it S) with the 'indiscernible' difference that there

comes an interruptive, 'non-relating' whole number (n) when the repetition disappears into an abyss, the accumulating value meets with the caesura of null-quantity, or in set-theoretic terms, the empty set. So in this abyssal but determined sense, between S and T, there is *nothing*.

What consequences does this simplified meaning of torsion have for historical multiplicities? Well, the first consequence is paradoxical in that the event of disappearance is also the event of *excess* over the designated place of repetition, which upon torsion, has been voided. Only from the perspective of such an excess can the punctual failure of value at the torsion-place be thought of as *lack*. And from the anxiety of lack, the excess is viewed as a wandering, nomadic, almost anarchic search for a *singular* place. Why singular? Because the place in question doesn't *follow* from the last place of the economy of repetition or it is not the *next* place. And precisely for the reason of this non-localizability, the interrogation of this singular place becomes all the more historically razor-edged: which would be the next step from the interruptive, periodising and dividing (non) place of torsion, the step to the next, new period of history? And *who* takes that purely prescriptive, purely unprogrammable decision of the "next step?" Thus we are confronted with the second historical-ontological consequence of the mathematical concept – it pertains to the status of the *subject* of history. If the form of the subject doesn't pre-exist the periodising torsion and is the locus of stabilisation and crystallation that renders a historical period accessible to *nomination* ("Christian", "French", "Popular", "Elite", "Sub-altern".... Revolutionary" etc.), then the periodising and abyssal 'step' is not the subject's. Lets formulate the anonymity of the step with two ciphers: The step is any-one's. And any-one is the one first to pass by the (non) place of torsion. One among the countless winds to pass through the void and yet the 'first' wind to *commit* to the void. In that sense, not the one which insists in and repeats the place of identity but the singular one, the *one* one. A brief illustration from Michelet: In July 1789 on the brink of insurrection in Paris, there was formed a kind of "citizen-police" which was meant to be a permanent committee to watch over public order. The general consensus was that this committee would comprise the electors – which of course implied that the deputies on the Constituent Assembly would mainly perform this task. A man, during these discussions, steps forward, "why electors alone?" He is asked, "Why, whom would you have named? "Myself". The man is appointed to the committee by acclamation.²⁶ According to the ontological schema I have drawn out, with its tremulous boundaries and abyssal neighbourhood and the perturbation of that schema by what I have called "historical multiplicity" or *event* of torsion, the declaration of "myself" is made by any – one. Thus *any-one-whomsoever*, exactly equal to the *one* one who says "myself", is acclaimed, appointed.

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NOTES

1. For "adunation" and the context of statistical history in this period, see Alain Desrosieres, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning* trans. Camille Naish (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp. 16-66.
2. For Bailly's statement, "The assembled nationa cannot receive order" in relation to the king's power to command the estate in June 1789 along with Sieye's declaration to the third estate, "You are today what you were yesterday," See Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution: From its origins to 1793* trans. Elizabeth Moss Evanson. (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) p. 110.
3. *ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

4. *ibid.*, p. 98-111. On the question of *tithes* and their eventual abolition, see, Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution* trans. Charles Cocks, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1967) pp.249-50.
5. See Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
6. We can summarize our impressions of Michelet's mobilization of numbers in the paradoxical formulation that they are historically generated but they have a 'natural' appearance. This formulation will be substantiated as we proceed but this much must be said here that the 'natural' being of numbers is their *ordinal* character. That is, they present themselves as relations, networked and ontologically *woven* rather than simply as cardinal quantities or units.
7. For this thesis and the entire range of philosophical and mathematical inspiration, see Alain Badiou, *Number and Numbers* trans. Robin Mackay (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).
8. See Michelet, *op.cit.*, p. 282.
9. Among their trilogy on the *potentia* of the multitude – *Empire, Multitude, Commonwealth* – let us refer to the first for its inauguration of the debate, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Harvard University Press, 2001).
10. In Alain Badiou's view, as swarm, Number displays its *infinite* extension albeit that extension is also orderly. While as sequential progression, each number comes "step-by-step" Such that *we* recognize them in their assigned place. But that counting also involves the structural and ontological complication of the "void". See Alain Badiou, *op.cit.*, p. 30, p.141.
11. In his 'revisionist' evaluation, Furet counter poses the early 20th century sociologist Augustin Cochin to the Historian from the early 19th Michelet and analyses the paradoxical similarities between the two. See Furet, *op.cit.*, pp. 164-203.
12. For the narrative material of the above analysis see Michelet, *op.cit.*, pp.108-121; for the idea of indiscernible and generic sets, See Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* trans. Bruno Bosteels, (London: Continuum, 2009) pp. 271-274.
13. See E.J Sieyes (1899), *What is the Third Estate?* In *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*. Vol.6, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA (first published 1789).
14. The word "enthusiasm" that Kant uses in *The Conflict of Faculties* (1798) for what the thought of the Revolution evokes occurs in Michelet frequently. For the latter, enthusiasm is not just a subjective experience, it is equally the objective 'milieu' of the Revolution.
15. Apart from in the Old Testament contexts, "fear and trembling" also accompanies St. Paul's message. But these are not accidental affects in Paul; rather they are the *generic* Pauline intensities that announce the event of Christ. Kierkegaard is not away from this generic logic when he joins the pure decision of faith to the sense-less, 'absurd' command of God. See Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling and The Sickness un to Death* trans. Alastair Hannay, contribution by Johhanes De Silentio, (Penguin Books 1985).
16. Among other sources, See Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of*

Paul Celan, ed. Thomas Dutirot and Outi Pasanen (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

17. See Furet, *op.cit.*, pp. 128-129.
18. Joseph de Maistre's several responses and polemics against the French Revolution are contained in Joseph de Maistre *Considerations on France* trans. and ed. Richard A. Lebrun (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
19. See Michelet, *op.cit.*, p. 313.
20. On the *tithes* and defaulting on the heirs of the old regime, see *ibid.*, pp. 249-50.
21. For a brilliant historical and theoretical account of the role of *stasis* in ancient Greek Society, see Nicole Loraux, *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens*, trans. Corinne Pache and Jeff Fort, (New York: Zone Books, 2006).
22. See Paul Veyne *When Our World Became Christian: 312-394* trans. Janet Lloyd, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).
23. *ibid.*, p. 158-159.
24. For the following arguments and polemics, see, among others, the essays "On the Violent Destruction of the Human Species" and "Can the French Republic Last?" by de Maistre. See de Maistre, *op.cit.*, pp. 23-40.
25. Several questions of method and ontology are involved in this exploration: There is the initial question of the productivity as well as hazard of the encounter between mathematics as knowledge and the serial descriptions of history. Also, the ontological question of mathematics as a possible science of the Real, or as the reprise of the event. This much can be proffered here that the algebraic idea of "torsion", which presents the aleatory, non-programmed interruption of the series, apart from holding metaphoric attractions, also realizes the gesture of language or discourse in its improvisational capacity to precipitate a limit-signifier: Torsion is such a signifier whether extracted from mathematics or historical analysis – and in its adherence to these fields, it divides them, hollows them. Strangely then, the limit-signifier is also always a signifier 'in the middle', a partitive gesture of discourse. So torsion doesn't only convey a marginal or great crack, cut in the fabric and field of being we are concerned with but it also raises anew the epochal questions of new coherences or restored totalities. The locus of the French Revolution that we are following and which goes by the 'canonical' distribution between "revolution", "counter-revolution" is nothing but the topology of these epochal questions. In its algebraic opening, torsion helps formalize a certain tendential movement towards topology from algebra. Which replicates, in our terms, the movement from historical 'period' to the 'periodising' event. See Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, pp. 148-153.
26. See Michelet, *op.cit.*, p. 156. 27 For "adunation" and the context of statistical history in this period, see Alain Desrosieres, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning* trans. Camille Naish (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp. 16-66

