

Abstract/Résumé analytique

Political Pathologies: Barnave and the Question of National Identity in Revolutionary France

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In the influential revisionist interpretation of the French Revolution initiated by François Furet, the radical conception of the nation as genuinely "one and indivisible" has been condemned as a dangerous pathology that led to the violence of the Terror. In this context, neglected figures such as Joseph Barnave have been rehabilitated as members of an alternative political tradition, a liberal one that would eventually supplant the "totalitarian" tendencies of early revolutionary thought. If Barnave has often been marginalized because of his seemingly inconsistent political positions – his conservative views on political authority and the colonies, for example, were complemented by an almost materialist perspective on the Revolution as an economic event – he is today celebrated for his historical realism, his pragmatism, and his attention to economic interests. In this essay the author shows how Barnave's historical sense must, however, be understood in light of his strong belief in the idea of the "spirit" of the genuine French nation. Using medical parallels, Barnave believed that the Revolution was a "crisis" that had resulted from a pathological turn in French – and European – history. His complex understanding of the tension-filled relation between a metaphysical, organic national identity and its shifting concrete institutional forms invites a reevaluation not only of the liberal tradition, but more importantly, of the supposedly "pathological" character of all revolutionary concepts grounded in the idea of a single and unitary nation.

Dans l'interprétation révisionniste influante de la Révolution française mise en place par François Furet, la conception radicale de la nation comme étant vraiment "une et indivisible" a été condamnée comme étant une pathologie dangereuse qui a mené à la violence de la Terreur. Dans ce contexte, des personnages ignorés, tel que Joseph Barnave, ont été réhabilités comme membres d'une tradition politique alternative, une plus libérale, qui finalement remplaça les tendances "totalitaires" du début de la pensée révolutionnaire. Si Barnave a été souvent mis à l'écart à cause de ses positions politiques qui semblaient inconsistantes – par exemple, son opinion conservatrice sur l'autorité politique et les colonies qui était le complément de son point de vue quasi matériel de la Révolution en tant qu'événement économique – il est glorifié aujourd'hui pour son réalisme historique, son pragmatisme et son attention aux intérêts économiques. Dans cet article, l'auteur démontre comment comprendre le sens historique de Barnave à la lumière de sa foi en "l'esprit" d'une nation française authentique. En se servant de parallèles médicaux, Barnave a cru que la Révolution était une "crise" résultant d'un trouble pathologique dans l'histoire de la France, voire même de l'Europe. Sa compréhension complexe des rapports tendus entre une identité nationale métaphysique et organique et ses formes institutionnelles concrètes et changeantes invite à une réévaluation non seulement de la tradition libérale, mais plus important encore, du caractère soi-disant "pathologique" de toutes les notions révolutionnaires fondées sur la conception d'une nation individuelle et unitaire.

David Bates

POLITICAL PATHOLOGIES: BARNAVE AND THE QUESTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN REVOLUTIONARY FRANCE¹

Although Joseph Barnave (1761-1793) was one of the greatest leaders of the French Revolution in its early period — politically powerful, intelligent, pragmatic, and extremely popular with a cross-section of French society — he has been greatly neglected in both the popular imagination and in the academic study of the Revolution. A native of the Dauphiné region, notable for its progressive political thought in the late eighteenth-century,² Barnave first made his mark as a very young politician, showing himself to be a brilliant speaker during the formation and the negotiations of orders within the newly recalled Estates General. By 1790, he was, along with Adrien Duport and Alexandre Lameth, one of the undisputed leaders of the new revolutionary government that was radically reconstructing France and writing a new constitution. Yet Barnave's dramatic fall from power and subsequent execution during the Terror tarnished his historical legacy, minimizing the importance of his political perspective. His secret dealings with the Court after the king's infamous flight to Varennes (an indiscretion that led to Barnave's imprisonment and death), not to mention his extremely unpopular views on colonial issues, reveal a figure who, it seems, resisted the rapidly progressing movement of the Revolution.³

Yet this is not a sufficient explanation for Barnave's marginality. Extreme failure, execution, even cynical compromise hardly diminished the historical role of well-known figures such as, for example, Robespierre or Sieyès. In fact, Barnave is particularly problematic because unlike many revolutionary actors he cannot easily be fitted into familiar categories. Although he approached the Revolution late in his life from an almost "materialist" perspective, in a famous manuscript

¹ I would like to thank the late François Furet, Jan Goldstein, Steven Wolfe, Michael Geyer, and especially Harvey Mitchell for reading earlier versions of this essay and offering their respective critiques.

² See: Michael Fitzsimmons, *The Remaking of France: The National Assembly and the Constitution of 1791* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 24-26; Jean Egret, *Le Parlement de Dauphiné et les affaires publiques dans la deuxième moitié du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris and Grenoble, 1942), 2 volumes.

³ Details can be found in the rather dated standard political biography, Elizabeth Bradley's *The Life of Barnave*, (Oxford, 1915), 2 volumes. See as well: Jean-Jacques Chevallier, *Barnave: les deux faces de la Révolution, 1761-1793* (Paris, 1936); François Furet, "Barnave," in Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds.), (trans. A. Goldhammer) *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp. 186-96; Mona Ozouf, "Barnave et la Reine," in Furet and Ozouf (eds.), *Terminer la Révolution: Mounier et Barnave dans la Révolution française* (Grenoble, 1990), pp. 115-30.

published only posthumously, his conservative ideas about the role of the colonies and his perceived pragmatism (not to mention his own brand of monarchism) put him at odds with the radical left and the historians who championed them, as well as many liberals. On the other hand, Barnave's measured revolutionary spirit hardly connects him with the critical right or counter-revolutionary figures. Barnave, inevitably, has been interpreted as yet another moderate who was caught in the unfolding dynamic of revolutionary discourse, someone whose views were not rigorous enough to survive the rapidly changing framework of political action. Never adopted by any one modern political tradition, Barnave's complex political stance was never seriously studied, even though he was in the mainstream of revolutionary activity at a most critical point for the foundation of the state in France.

This neglect was only exacerbated when for many years the political history of the French Revolution *itself* was so marginalized, owing to a number of factors — the dominance of Marxist historians in France and elsewhere in this field, the disinterest of the alternative “Annales” historians in any *histoire événementielle*, and of course the overwhelming turn toward social scientific approaches to history, particularly in North America. In this climate, the political theory of the revolutionaries received little attention from historians, while political scientists and theorists generally ignored the unfamiliar actors of the revolution, to focus instead on canonical thinkers such as Rousseau and Montesquieu, and the major revolutionary theorists of democracy, such as Sieyès and Robespierre.

Of course, the resurgence of the political in historiography of the Revolution has dramatically transformed this situation. Beginning with François Furet's revolutionary text, *Penser la Révolution française*, historians and political theorists have radically revised the social interpretation of the revolution.⁴ This revisionist move is not, however, simply a resurrection of an interest in politics; rather, the political culture of the Revolution is understood to be the key for *any* interpretation of this event. The reasons Furet gave for this position were provocative. He argued essentially that there was no “real” French Revolution to be studied, because it was in effect only an *illusory* intellectual construction, a myth of collective agency and popular sovereignty, a product of language, not a fact of history. Understanding the Revolution, Furet suggested, meant understanding first of all the processes by which this rhetorical fiction came into being — and as Keith Baker and others have shown, this “language” of Revolution was forged in the Enlightenment.⁵ Furet, along with those who follow his approach, have always emphasized the inherent dangers of this language of unity and fraternity. Incapable of conceiving difference, conflict, or interests, the revolutionaries, Furet claimed, put France on the path to Terror because they grounded political action on a fantastic notion of a singular national will — one inherited from the absolutist monarchy of the Ancien Regime and merely “inverted” in the name of popular sovereignty. In the spirit of Tocqueville,

⁴ François Furet (trans. Elborg Forster), *Interpreting the French Revolution*, (Cambridge, 1981).

⁵ See Keith M. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990).

whom Furet explicitly invoked, historians, not to mention political theorists such as Marcel Gauchet and Claude Lefort, now argue that the French Revolution was not the origin of a modern liberal democracy but instead the first appearance of a dangerous “totalitarian” logic of national identity in the West, one that inevitably led to the Terror and its catastrophic twentieth-century repetitions in Europe.⁶ Writing the history of revolutionary political culture in the Revolution contributed to the diagnosis of a pathology of the modern authoritarian state.⁷

One significant result of this move to a “pathological” interpretation of revolutionary political thought and discourse has been the increasing attention paid to supposedly “marginal” revolutionaries such as Barnave or figures like the *monarchiens* Mounier and Malouet, those who occupied the right side of the centrist movements.⁸ It is precisely their marginality, according to this new revisionist argument, that *protects* them from the pathological tendency of the mainstream of revolutionary discourse — the tendency toward “absolute” notions of unitary collective identity. Furet, for example, long celebrated Barnave’s political thought because it derived its main concepts from Anglo-Scottish economic and historical doctrines, and not from a tainted French Enlightenment tradition of thinking about democracy, sovereignty, and “rights.” In his preface to a new edition of Barnave’s posthumous history of the French Revolution, Furet explained how Barnave defined himself as anti-aristocratic in the early days of 1789, like any other member of the Third Estate, but eventually veered from the mainstream by identifying the new enemy of the French state as the *democratic* escalation (“*le surenchère démocratique*”) of political life.⁹ While Furet earlier in *Penser la Révolution française* condemned the Revolution for its pathological refusal to recognize the reality of conflicting *interests* within French society — they were, he said, contrary to the revolutionary idea of the nation as “one and indivisible”¹⁰ — he could now point to Barnave as someone who thought that these “new principles” of the Revolution should never completely overthrow the “commercial interests” of France. Hence Barnave’s reluctance to extend the Revolution to the colonies is seen as a gesture to “save” France from the violence of its own idealism. Barnave, according to Furet, recognized the “primordial importance of commerce,” something he opposed to the “democratic abstraction” favoured by the ultra-revolutionaries of his time, like Robespierre. Barnave, for Furet, belonged to a “political family” that was opposed to the “pure rationalism” of the dominant

⁶ See Marcel Gauchet, *La Révolution des pouvoirs: la souveraineté, le peuple et la représentation* (Paris, 1995) and Claude Lefort (trans. David Macey), *Democracy and Political Theory*, (Cambridge, 1988).

⁷ As Reinhart Koselleck noted early in the post-war era, in his *Critique and Crisis: The Pathogenesis of Modern Society* (Oxford, 1988), published in German as *Kritik und Krise* (1959).

⁸ For a revisionist approach to these figures, see Ran Halévi’s article “Monarchiens,” in Furet and Ozouf (eds.), *Critical Dictionary*, and the various articles concerning Mounier and his circle in Furet and Ozouf (eds.), *Terminer la Révolution*. On Malouet in particular, see Robert Griffiths, *Le centre perdu: Malouet et les “monarchiens” dans la Révolution française* (Grenoble, 1988).

⁹ Furet, “Préface,” in Antoine Barnave (ed. Patrice Guennifey), *De la Révolution et de la Constitution*, (Grenoble, 1988), p. 11.

¹⁰ Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, p. 78.

revolutionary camp; he was much closer spiritually to English and Scottish liberals.¹¹ Barnave becomes, in Furet's vision, a kind of paradigmatic victim of the democratic illusion, an illusion that was, incidentally, only destroyed in the waning years of the twentieth century with the final "victory" of capitalism and neo-liberal values.¹² However, it is important in this global era of new political conflicts to contest the rehabilitation of figures such as Barnave; the neo-liberal "end of history," and the pathological history of the French Revolution that it relies on, needs to be put into question.

While there can be no doubt concerning his very real intellectual debt to the historical traditions of eighteenth-century thought,¹³ Barnave's conception of "history" was complex, and his debt to what we might call "historical sociology" should not blind us to his equally important thinking about national identity, his almost metaphysical conceptualization of the "spirit" of the French people. Barnave's focus on the specificity of historical epochs and cultures (an approach that supposedly separates him from philosophical abstraction) must be understood in relation to his interest in locating extremely important — though often hidden — continuities in historical processes. Political action was for him the preparation of concrete (though never permanent) forms that would contain the expression of a potentially errant social force, one constantly pushing against the borders of existing social and legal frameworks as it developed and transformed over time. He did not think that political action was merely an illusion in the face of inevitable historical movement.¹⁴ Politics was a way of mediating invisible realities and concrete forms of order. Barnave's repeated use of medical imagery shows that he understood the health of any political body to be anything but guaranteed. In fact, for Barnave as for so many other political theorists in the West, the role of the politician was, especially in revolutionary times, identified with that of the medical doctor, the one who attends the fragile patient who has just undergone an intense "crisis." The challenge for Barnave was to identify that underlying spirit of France, and to provide it with proper institutional forms of expression in extremely unstable circumstances. Politics was inevitably dangerous because there would always be a gap between this spirit and its concrete appearances in social, economic, and political realities. Barnave's conservative, and sometimes puzzling, political ideas and decisions can be understood only in this context.

¹¹ Furet, "Préface," pp. 12-13, 19, 22-23.

¹² See Furet (trans. Deborah Furet), *The Passing of an Illusion: the Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, (Chicago, 1999).

¹³ Especially important for the development of Barnave's political and historical thinking were figures such as Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and other writers in the Scottish Enlightenment. Barnave was less interested in the triumphal progress of "Reason" traced by philosophes like Condorcet, than the very specific development of civil and economic social relations in the eighteenth century. These sources have been traced in, for example, John Lough, "Barnave and the French Revolution," *Modern Quarterly*, 2 (1939), 68-78; Emmanuel Chill, "Introduction," in Barnave (trans. Chill), *Power, Property and History: Barnave's "Introduction to the French Revolution" and Other Writings*, (New York, 1970); Alison Webster, "J. Barnave: philosopher of a revolution," *Journal of the History of European Ideas* 71 (1993), 53-71; and Furet, "Barnave."

¹⁴ See Furet's position in "Barnave," p. 192.

In order to trace this complex dialectical framework, I will begin with some of Barnave's lesser-known writings, those early works that connect him to the literary and philosophical Enlightenment that was so critical to the formation of the young revolutionaries of France. A general analysis of this often ignored preparatory thinking, with an emphasis on how Barnave dealt with supposedly non-political questions concerning epistemology, truth, and literature, will lead us into a rigorous reading of his most sustained piece of intellectual work, *De la Révolution*, an historical interpretation of the Revolution in its largest European context. Within this framework, Barnave's revolutionary political ideas will be explicated. I will argue that Barnave's supposed historical "relativism," his privileging of social and economic "facts" over unrealistic philosophical abstractions, must be reevaluated. Barnave's recognition of the inevitable imperfection of any specific historical form of being, and his awareness of the constant threat of political and social "illness," both were linked to a very real faith in the genuine spiritual unity of French identity. Here, Barnave's own pathological interpretation of history and revolution will complicate the revisionist attempt to "pathologize" the very concept of unity in France. The Revolution may have been legitimated, as Furet said, by the idea of a single popular will, but the institutions of the new France were being created at a time when the future manifestations of this will were understood to be anything but predictable.

I. Error and the quest for truth: Barnave and late Enlightenment thought

Before the Revolution, Barnave was privately educated and would most likely have entered a career in law. In notebook writings from this period, he explored a wide variety of late Enlightenment philosophical and political difficulties, and although the nineteenth-century printed version of these notebooks is not always reliable, and dating the fragments is next to impossible, the diversity and range of Barnave's youthful thinking can help us establish his deep interest in the tense relation between inner identity and outer appearance, a relation so important to his revolutionary political thought and to his own understanding of the Revolution as historical event.

Reflecting on the nature of science in one pre-revolutionary manuscript fragment, Barnave wrote that one must always strive to be exact. The goal of the scientific enterprise is to distinguish between the "occasional" and the "regular" (*ordinaire*), exposing the laws that govern this relationship, the relationship between identity and difference that structures the concrete world. Exactitude is the language of scientific expression, for the precision of natural law must be mirrored in its explanations. Otherwise, "in being conveyed differently one would occasion error." If one part of the explanation is faulty, "the rest of the system would be a series of errors." There is no room for interpretation, or a multiplicity of forms, in science.¹⁵

¹⁵ Antoine Pierre Joseph Marie Barnave (ed. M. Berenger de la Drôme), *Oeuvres*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1843), IV, 3. Further references (1843, volume, page) to this edition will be in the text. For the most part, this edition is a highly problematic selection from Barnave's notebook writings, arranged under headings chosen by the editor. An analysis is in F. Vermale, "Manuscrits et éditions des oeuvres de

If error, for Barnave, is defined according to the Enlightenment tradition as “the non-conformity of ideas to the entities that they represent” (1843, III, 142) then error is, strictly speaking, inadequacy. But what would define “adequacy” in science? To define error in this structure would be to realize the truth, which would be the only measure of this distance separating the representation from the “entity.” Barnave refuses to lapse into this strict formula. While all sciences are “exact” in their method, he says, not every science is “useless” if it is not completely precise; there are those where “imperfect knowledge, in making us liable to error [*en nous assujettissant à l’erreur*], still gives us great advantages.” Barnave is implying something more complicated than a simple distinction between “useful” and “true.” What is being questioned is the very nature of truth. Truth cannot always separate itself from error and misdirection. “Exactitude is pure truth; everything else is truth mixed with errors, or imperfectly known. Let us purify [*nettoyer*] the compound metal as much as possible, but let us never neglect that which, without being pure, can still enter into our usage” (1843, IV, 3-4).

In other words, it is not the “error” that can operate usefully, but rather the imperfect or deviated truth which, despite its distorted appearance, still offers its powers. It is hardly surprising, then, that “truth without restrictions is obtained rarely and with difficulty; and often, in the course of life, it is advantageous to use some *à peu près* and some probabilities.” So often, those who “love truth” want to “grasp it completely whole in its principle, like a bird in a cage,” as if “truth was a large fortune imprinted on a portable bill” (1843, III, 8-9). Truth cannot be grasped in its entirety, or even glimpsed in its full light, and thus the measure of our progress cannot be merely mechanical (incremental steps), nor the object of exact calculation. But this should not, Barnave stresses, lead to the despair of enduring uncertainty. It does require a certain mode of discipline that can somehow guide us in this unknown territory.

Reason, as he explains in his notebook writings, can only ever navigate according to rules, which themselves can always change depending on the circumstances and aspirations of any individual or society. Reason, writes Barnave, “guides man from principles” (1843, III, 4), and yet it has no way of creating these foundational principles on its own. “There is hardly anything but character which can fix principles and the aims [*vues*] of action.” “The man without character,” on the other hand, “wanders in his course [*divague dans sa marche*]” (1843, III, 48). Reason, then, is only a “supplement,” according to Barnave. Left to itself, it would constantly lead man astray. Reason is productive when it nurtures the seed nature plants within man, completing the task that nature has begun. “Working against nature’s wish, or without her help, it will create, at best, only a play-actor [*comédien*]. Whatever apparent form it gives to this artificial machine, time or the first shock restores to the springs, that would have been constrained, their true direction.” Reason is like the pilot of a “vessel” and the “dispositions of nature” the wind that powers it. Barnave observes that one can move in many directions by

modifying the forces of this wind, yet it is impossible to move without it on a calm sea (1843, III, 6-7).

For Barnave, practice is not merely “practical” or pragmatic. Practice is the disciplined work that is tied to the concrete conditions of life. Theory often gets ahead of itself, creating fictional fantasies that can never be implemented, however attractive they might be. “It is rare that men deceive themselves in notions that are the result of daily practice and observation. But it is rare that they do not deceive themselves in theories which are the work of imagination and reasoning.” Barnave concludes that nothing is more deceptive than the ideas admitted by the experts in the “sublime sciences.” On the other hand, nothing could be more true than the ideas constructed out of the details of life, *la morale*, the practical knowledge of man. The problem, as Barnave sees it, is that modern civilization has lost this knowledge of humanity’s true essence. While peoples “close to their origin” might have absurd theories about nature and the world, their practical notions are very true, and “the multitude has a well-trained instinct.” Modern peoples may have refined metaphysical ideas, yet their instinct, writes Barnave, is “limited and depraved,” and philosophy has “almost nothing in common with the practice of life” (1843, III, 2-3). This is what grounds Barnave’s mistrust of liberated spirit. All activity must be disciplined, working within given conditions. If the path to insight is never rigidly straight, it must remain true to some direction.

Like Condorcet, Barnave believed in the progress of ideas, the gradual revelation of truth as man traversed history. He also realized that this historical evolution was tied to a disruptive and unpredictable course. If the “spirit” of philosophy was always the same, its various forms in particular eras were never exactly alike, and it was this ongoing transformation which structured the creation of new ideas. Human thought, as Condorcet would explain later in his historical sketch of human progress, travelled through error and truth, which were, according to Barnave, integrated in a dialectical relationship. “A mind is all the more philosophical as it unmask more errors and discovers more truths,” he wrote, but the “truths” of one era often become the unfounded opinions of another, so that sometimes an illustrious philosopher from the past, such as Voltaire, “will be today only a man of prejudices” (1843, III, 38). The history of error, for Barnave as it was for Condorcet, is an integral part of the history of progress. The wide variety of forms of knowledge “invites us to investigate the ways in which the human mind goes astray [*s’égarer*].”¹⁶

The discipline of experience and character, then, is not a limitation of man but the foundation of real progress. Barnave rejects rigidity as strongly as he condemns the wild flights of unconstrained imagination. Without the possibility of the new and unexpected, without the power of imagination, man “drags himself along the road of imitation and habit” (1843, III, 76-7). In a way, Barnave is showing how the very linearity of repetition eventually becomes errancy. “The Imitator does not follow the great path of progress, consequently he often deviates [*s’écarter*] from

¹⁶ Cited from an unpublished manuscript, and translated, by Emmanuel Chill, in his “Introduction” to Barnave’s *Power, Property and History*, p. 51.

the direction where nature carries him and would have maintained him." Originality is not "peculiarity" (1843, III, 203-4). It is the courage to travel into the unknown, trusting the call which nature allows us instinctively to perceive. The impurity of human knowledge is only useful if it is actively engaged. Knowledge is not a mode of "application" but rather *participation*. "To imitate and believe passively always leads to the role of a worthless being or a fool" (1843, III, 5).

II. Historical forms of human identity

For Barnave, the study of human nature is always going to be a twofold enterprise: the demonstration of "necessary and common laws," and of the "accessories which vary the phenomena." The first effort is a search for the "base," the "same" which governs identity; the second, a demonstration of "the changing envelope which is its cover." Clearly, differentiation is defined in terms of the foundational unity that governs all "modifications." The problem, of course, is that we are immersed in the world of modification and "changing envelopes." The science of *morale*, Barnave writes, must be able to distinguish what is and is not "analogous" to human nature, what is possible and what is impossible. It must work within certain given truths, yet it cannot predict all the cases which "can be engendered from the heart of this possibility" (1843, IV, 10-11). The difficulty becomes apparent: how to distinguish "human nature" among the wealth and diversity of facts and circumstance? How to distinguish the accidental from the fixed, given that the fixed cannot enter into the world without covering itself in some form, which is itself conditioned by the concrete circumstances? Barnave's answer is not an explicit solution in metaphysical terms.

The study of "man" and the study of mankind cannot be separated; that is, *la morale* and history are not merely complementary, they exist in terms of each other (1843, IV, 10-11). The general laws of human activity, Barnave thought, are to be gradually revealed in the constant changes occurring across human history (and between cultures). Historical work, for Barnave, should not be the mere reconstruction of the past in all its superficial detail, nor should it be the drawing of practical "lessons" from previous eras.

From history and from books you may construct a thousand maxims, a thousand examples to admire; but when compared with [things] in the present, they no longer apply. In the eyes of some people the difference will be small, but this difference is everything.¹⁷

He criticizes contemporary historians for their obsession with detail and their total lack of "bonnes idées." Barnave himself searches for a *structural* history that analyzes and compares the "vicissitudes" of peoples and countries, one that is open to the revelation of an authentic continuity in the heart of difference. History's

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

utility is “to make known men, to describe the characters of peoples, to demonstrate the influence of climates on governments,” and so on, all with the aim of learning how to perfect political action (1843, IV, 248). This is possible only because the careful study of these concrete appearances of human life themselves reveal the inner nature of both man and society that is developing in time and space. The facts of history are not to be categorized and mechanically interpreted as a guide for future action. The “facts” of human development are the envelopes, or rather the *forms* of the general laws of humanity. History, then, “will clarify more and more the secrets of *la morale*” (1843, IV, 249). The proliferation of difference will gradually reveal the inner structure of unity that conditions these differentiations. In other words, *la morale* “teaches, through analysis, the nature of the mass, in presenting the varieties of the individual, their circumstances and their causes” (1843, IV, 8).

This is why *la morale* is “the first study” that must ground political knowledge and action. Politics, the organization of “the mass,” is not, Barnave believes, the management of inevitable difference, but the penetration of identity, that “pure metal” hidden in the sometimes errant course of human social evolution. The concrete operations of political authority become the translations of these basic structures into concrete, articulated expressions, and not the application of idealized patterns of organization. This is one reason why Barnave was so attracted to Montesquieu. “He who would have seized the spirit of the laws will learn the positive laws like the good grammarian learns a language. He would only have to study convention” (1843, IV, 9), that is the specific differences appropriate to the various contexts. And as Barnave says elsewhere, general grammar, though it exists in no concrete form, is the “description of rules common to all languages” (1843, IV, 15). This conception of grammar and language is important for understanding Barnave’s social and political theory. There is a unity to mankind that structures the concrete unities of individual beings and whole peoples, although one cannot say that this unity exists in any visible form, or that it could ever be realized in its static perfection. It was always important, Barnave felt, to realize that the purity of identity, like the purity of truth, would forever be bound up with the accidental forms which conditioned (and frustrated) its appearance and development. Historical transformations were not an affirmation of a radical historical relativism.

III. Pathology and Crisis: Barnave’s history of the French Revolution

Barnave’s meditation on the origins and effects of the French Revolution, contained in a notebook manuscript written during his time of house arrest during the Terror, is an analysis of concrete forms that aims to uncover hidden inner laws.¹⁸ Despite efforts to place Barnave within a tradition of materialist interpretations of history,

¹⁸ Antoine Barnave (ed. Patrice Guennifey), *De la révolution et de la constitution* (Grenoble, 1988). Further references (1988, page) will be in the text.

beginning with Jaurès's rediscovery of Barnave's work,¹⁹ this fundamental text is not really an attempt to uncover economic or social structures that mechanically produce the events of the Revolution, "beneath" the superstructural activities of the revolutionaries. Rather, Barnave, as we have already seen in his pre-revolutionary notebook writings, wanted to understand how the inner nature of man, and the fundamental character of French society, were expressing themselves through externally visible historical forms, forms that could very well resist and pervert these foundational realities. He was especially concerned with the interplay of political practices and identity of a nation. *De la révolution* was not at all an apology; it reveals a complex political and historical model worth investigating before turning to Barnave's revolutionary speeches, which address more immediate forms of political intervention.

"We shall try in vain," wrote Barnave, "to form a correct idea of the great revolution which has just convulsed France if we consider it in isolation, detaching it from the history of the great states that surround us and of the centuries that have preceded our own." An analysis of the Revolution requires a larger view, an understanding of the "larger system." It is not enough to study events in themselves, for they are in fact the manifestations of a larger, more comprehensive structure. Often, writes Barnave, "we pay too much attention to accidental causes." We must, instead, contemplate the "general movement which has determined the successive changes of *form* of European governments," if we want to interpret "the point at which we have arrived and the general causes which have led us to it" (1988, p. 45, note).

Barnave carefully distinguishes this kind of analysis from a strictly scientific one, where "fixed" and "calculable" laws define all the operations of its subject. The historical analysis is one which tries to penetrate the inevitable deviations that mark the concrete forms, in order to reveal basic principles. The "nature of things," as Barnave puts it, is intimately bound up with certain "causes" that lurk among the events of history. "All minor events are *enveloped* in their general results: they *prepare* the great epochs of history," which are brought about by the "secondary causes" which act as their catalyst (1988, p. 46). At a social, historical level, then, individual action is less creative than it is transformative. "The will of man does not make laws," Barnave explained. "It is the nature of things ... which distributes power" in its concrete forms; "it gives it, according to space and time [*suiwant les temps et les lieux*], to one, to several, to all, dividing it in various proportions." Those who have received power establish laws to exercise it, and maintain it through the political mediations of force: the military, property, and the "empire of opinion." These forms do not so much represent the "reality" as express it symbolically, and therefore these forms are constantly evolving in order to express more adequately the forces they articulate.

¹⁹ Jean Jaurès (ed. Albert Soboul), *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1968), 4 volumes, in particular the section "Barnave et la théorie économique de la Révolution," I, 184-97. Also, see Harold J. Laski, *The Rise of European Liberalism* (London, 1962), pp. 150-52.

Gradually the advances of the social state create new sources of power, weaken the old ones, and change the balance of forces. Then the old laws cannot long endure. Since new authorities have appeared in fact, new laws must be established to allow them to act and reduce them into a system. (1988, p. 46)

Law, then, is not merely a supplement to the "nature of things" but its actual voice in space and time. Law specifies order, and therefore is not merely an imposition of some kind. However, it is this inevitable *distance* between force and appearance which creates the potential for tension and deviation. This is the ground of Barnave's revolutionary theory and one crucial element often ignored when trying to interpret his seemingly "conservative" and pragmatic political practice.

Barnave's history of Europe, as related in *De la révolution*, is a story of struggle and conflict, depicting the painful development of individual societies. The "social body" has a distinct physical evolution that structures its relationship with circumstances (climate, geography, international relations) as well as its internal dynamic. While Barnave's discussion inevitably takes an economic turn, it will become clear that these foundational economic relations are not simply rigid underpinnings of social activity, but rather the basic conditions that allow certain developmental processes to take place in the cultural, civil sphere. The forces produced by these processes are what cause tensions within the social body, since the only expression of these forces are through the forms which are established as the framework of political and social life. In other words, these forms must be renewed and transformed to accommodate increased social energy, or there exists a risk of total social disruption. These moments of *transition* mark the crisis points in a nation's history, and, as Barnave often demonstrates, the accidental causes that spark the transformation of society and politics are often external, interventional events which crystallize an internal impasse. Barnave's analysis of European history, then, is a complex interplay between the evolution of social energy, and the unpredictable obstacles that hinder and sometimes occasion the expression of this energy.

In Barnave's history, the first phase of human existence, the hunting and gathering stage, functions as the state of nature. The concept of property is scarcely known, and since "all the land is common to all" no land belongs to anyone in particular. If any political institutions exist, they have no basis in property relations, and for this reason are essentially negative: authority repels attack from the outside. The first form of monarchy is the "war chief" and the first aristocracy is based only on the "authority of knowledge." For Barnave, the first human "community" is a democracy marked by "natural independence and equality." The community organization is less the positive expression of identity than the absence of any consistent threat (1988, pp. 47, 51).

The transition to a more tangible community structure is occasioned by the increase in population: there is a need for "a less precarious and more abundant subsistence," and this leads to a pastoral way of life, the taming of animals. Once property is established, society undergoes a radical change. Or rather, property can only be established once this change takes place. The institutions *protecting*

property make property possible in the first place. Independence disappears with the introduction of these institutions, and, significantly, at this point "poor and rich cease to be equals." In the state of nature, there was no real definition of wealth, since everyone was entirely independent. It is only within a framework that defends property that it can become a principle defining relative status. This status of wealth, made possible by the introduction of an internal civil authority, also serves as the mark of power, fixing the political in the hands of those it serves to define (1988, pp. 47-48).

Once population pressures force the wandering pastoral peoples into an agricultural existence, the stage is already set for the hierarchical division of society and the distribution of powers. Thus the "extreme simplicity" of early agricultural peoples is not, Barnave explains, the foundation or origin of democracy. Following Rousseau's analysis of the origins of inequality in the *Second Discourse*, Barnave shows rather how the aristocratic power of wealth established in the pastoral stage is expanded and strengthened: the "distribution" of land within the community is rarely done equitably, and is usually founded on the existing structures of economic organization. And inevitably, smaller holdings are gradually engulfed by larger ones, as relations of indebtedness evolve. Eventually, Barnave writes, life does become stationary and essentially tranquil in these agricultural societies, but this stability is not entirely positive. Without the development of the dynamic energy of industry, and the evolution of new economic relations of supply and demand, regions will always remain largely self-sufficient. The feudal stage of European history is for Barnave an unnatural development, caused by such accidental factors as invasion. In the feudal period, commerce is not allowed the opportunity to provide the basis for uniting small, independent communities into larger more productive units. As a consequence, Barnave tries to show, the majority of the population for the most part will remain in a position of submission and ignorance, existing in a hazy zone of social development, "having lost the natural sagacity, the natural boldness, that characterizes man wandering in the woods," while not yet having "acquired the knowledge and confidence of thought which wealth and the progress of the arts allow to enter into all classes of society" (1988, pp. 48-50).

Barnave's picture of feudal aristocracy emphasizes its rigid regionalism where any larger national unity is really only a transitory, unstable federalism. But this pattern of organization harbours within its structure of fragmentation a nascent identity that was lost but must now find its way into the open. The arts of industry were reborn in Europe, stimulated by the remnants of Ancient culture preserved in the East, the "debris" of the arts and sciences. As well, Barnave writes, the "practical arts" quietly progressed within the very heart of feudalism, albeit slowly. Eventually, the emergence of commercial and industrial energy would threaten the foundations of the old order.

[O]nce the arts and commerce have succeeded in penetrating the people and creating a new means of wealth in support of the industrious class, a revolution in political laws is prepared. Just as the possession of land gave rise to the aristocracy, industrial property increases the power of the people.

A second democracy appears, this time founded on strength and not independence. Whereas in those states which are founded on agriculture the "social bond" is very weak, and "cohesion" among the parts lacking, the continual exchange of goods and capital that marks an industrial society reunites the isolated organs of the social body: "distances diminish, [and] a continual circulation is established among all the parts of an empire" (1988, p. 62).

The new energy created by the progress of the mechanical arts and the development of commercial relationships within the social body necessarily creates a new structural framework. This new organization is not merely a reflection of the new civil relations, but arises out of that situation itself. As Barnave describes it, the increase in industry and commerce, along with the rise in population in towns and cities, brings people together in new ways and occasions the appearance of a new "public opinion" that transforms the nature of social and political activity.

With the [practical] arts, which enrich us and increase the numbers of men by increasing the means of subsistence, are born those higher forms of knowledge [*connaissances plus sublimes*] which expose credulity to the light of reason; boldness of thought, like all types of courage, is the product of the feeling of force; it arises naturally in a wealthy and numerous people; opinion arises naturally from the collectivity [*l'accumulation*] of men, from their ease and comfort. It is like a spiritous substance which is born and developed by fermentation in a large gathering of men. (1988, p. 64)

As the society develops, the spiritous substance of opinion breaks down the old foundations of authority, which already have outlived their usefulness since the economic progress which occasioned this very opinion has in the mean time freed the body of men in fact from the "feudal" arrangements of domination. The dialectical structure of truth and error in history appears in a social form. The truth of one historical form becomes an error once it outlives its specific context of meaning. The form then becomes extremely fragile. Barnave can show, then, that the authority of an institution like the Catholic Church broke down not because of innovative and devastating theological ideas, but instead because its authority, rooted in landed property and maintained by a "general ignorance," had diminished in *fact* with the rise of commerce and the liberation of monarchical power, and this new structure demanded a new form to replace the aberrant one. "The immense edifice" no longer had a foundation, and "thus the first words of Luther were like a spark that fell on [a heap] combustible materials" (1988, p. 66). Eventually, old forms of political authority, founded on aristocratic landed property relations, would break down in a similar fashion.

The question, for Barnave, was how to prepare for these *inevitable* transformations of true and errant social forms, and it is this problematic that links the essential concept of error we have traced in the late Enlightenment with Barnave's "conservative" political practice during the Revolution. Barnave was clearly not interested in conceptualizing ideal forms for the state and for society; he realized the importance of working with the *historically constituted* forms that were

engendered by the local conditions of a specific era. At the same time, he did not lapse into a focused pragmatism that sought only to control disorder within the state through the imposition of force. The forces of social progress, along with the fermentation of opinion, would *always* break through the old forms of legal and social order. The political task was not to resist this movement but to channel it and stabilize it. The energy of social development was, in a sense, essentially errant. In breaking through form it could not always *institute* its own perfected forms. This energy needed a framework, however imperfect, in which it could be adequately expressed.

Barnave did not believe in repressing the rise of the social body, nor did he advocate maintaining ancient forms out of tradition, and this is why he was such an ardent revolutionary. But he did see the dangers in the complete absence of form, which would always lead to the violent explosion of energy and the total destruction of all structural elements. This is why Barnave, as a revolutionary, avoided the radical consequences of popular sovereignty and emphasized continually the need for almost repressive (or at least “anti-democratic”) institutions. Just like the weakened individual who is predisposed to illness, and becomes sick at the slightest cause, there are, for nations, “times of plethora where the government which exists can no longer contain it, where plenitude and the fermentation which follows it prepares, and requires, an explosion.”²⁰ The “patient” who has undergone such a radical and violent transformation must be cared for with extreme caution.

As we read in the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert, the medical conception of “health” in the eighteenth century emphasized the notion of equilibrium. Health is “the natural accord, the proper disposition of the parts of the living body, allowing the exercise of all its functions.” Crucially, this equilibrium must be defined with respect to the concrete conditions of the body: age, sex, individual temperament, the climate in which it lives.²¹ There is no ideal “form” of health, just as there is, for Barnave, no ideal “form” of social structure or government. So illness would be equally concrete, characterized as some kind of disruption of health and not some discrete event. It is a “state of imperfection” in between life and death, as the *Encyclopédie* puts it, a “vicious disposition, an impediment of the body or one of its organs, which causes a lesion that is more or less sensible.” Significantly, though, the body is subject to illness only because it is susceptible to numerous *changes* which alter the state of health itself — an interesting parallel to Barnave’s conception of economic and social transformations. So what is illness exactly? According to Sydenham, it was an “extraordinary movement” that worked to *disengage* the obstacles to health; it was a “crisis” that acted to restore health to the body. However, it was also clear that not all illnesses were so salutary, and the *Encyclopédie* notes that an illness can be defined as any disruption in the “proportion and order” of the bodily functions, whatever positive

²⁰ Barnave, “Aperçus et réflexions sur l’ordre social dans ses divers périodes,” appendix to Barnave (ed. Rude), *Introduction à la Révolution française*, pp. 71-73.

²¹ *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des arts, sciences, et métiers*, Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert (eds.), 17 vols. (Paris, 1751-72), s.v. ‘santé.’

or negative effects it might produce.²² In other words, the pathological turn is a very concrete situation. "It is absurd to pretend to consider and define illness stripped of its symptoms; this metaphysical abstraction . . . would serve only to obscure the knowledge of illnesses in leading us away from the phenomena that characterize them."²³

These medical concepts seem to underlie Barnave's conception of the social body, with its inevitable distortions and sometimes unpredictable progressions that afflict it in its dynamic adaptation to new circumstances and conditions. Barnave described the dangers of a dissonance between *content* and *form* in a nation by using the imagery of eighteenth-century pathology:

One can, under a certain point of view, consider these things, population, wealth, customs, enlightenment, as the elements and the substance which forms the social body, and see in the laws and government the tissue which contains and envelops them. In every state of things, it is necessary that the one and the other be in a proportion of force and extension; if the tissue expands as the volume of the substance augments, the progress of the social body takes place without violent upheaval; but if, instead of an elastic strength, it offers a brittle rigidity, the moment will come when all proportion will cease, and it will be necessary that the humour be consumed, [or it will rupture] its envelope and extravasate. (1988, p. 65)

Like the "liberated spirit" of the individual must be *disciplined* in order to remain on the path to enlightenment, the liberated energy of the social body must be given a structured voice in order to stay the course of progress, that movement toward the fulfillment of unity and the "highest [*dernier*] degree of civilization" (1988, p. 50). Thus the successive stages of social evolution are not graded on a scale of adequacy to an ideal form of social organization.

It is clear that Barnave sees French history before the Revolution as an example of what happens when the tissue of government fails to adapt to prevailing developments within the state, when it maintains *error* against all evidence to the contrary. As society moves out of feudal organization, Barnave explains that aristocratic power eventually diminishes and either small republics or modern monarchies are formed, depending on the size of the nation. France was inevitably on the course toward the ideal form of government for a country at this stage of social development: a strong, unifying central force in the monarch, allied with the people, who would exercise their power in the economic sphere, and in national representative institutions. What derailed this transition was the failure of the crown to deal adequately with the aristocracy. The real political power of the feudal aristocracy was essentially destroyed by the time of Louis XIII and Richelieu, yet there remained within the state a myriad of judicial bodies harbouring vestiges of former aristocratic influence waiting to be reborn. Moreover, by the eighteenth

²² *Ibid.*, s.v. "maladie."

²³ *Ibid.*, s.v. "pathologie."

century, the crown consistently sought to raise money by selling offices in the very structure of government, and as a result the bureaucracy itself became "noble, feudal, refractory," instead of a rational, efficient administration. The only way the monarch could oppose the judicial bodies and aristocratic resistance to central policy-making was by arbitrarily exercising its power, with, for example, *lettres de cachet*, or "extraordinary tribunals" (1988, p. 92-95). This haphazard political practice allowed the aristocracy to maintain some power, while blocking the natural evolution of social and political forms, an evolution spurred by the structural transformations in French society.

IV. The perversion of forms and the democratic revolution

This spirit of opposition provoked the aristocratic reaction at the end of the century, yet once set in motion, this radical opposition to the crown could only spark the emerging democratic forces that had been building in France throughout the century. The crown failed to realize that the aristocracy was coming between the nation (as embodied in the Third Estate) and the monarchy, interfering in a natural alliance. In a pre-revolutionary pamphlet, published anonymously, Barnave argued that the Third Estate and the "magistracy" were to *deliver* the "royal power from the chains of the aristocracy." The king, swayed by bad advice, saw these two groups as antagonists, and did not recognize that the very power of the crown was "created" by them.²⁴ The aristocratic power, on the other hand, had no real foundation, and the attempt to return to old forms of organization, such as the divided Estates-General, was obviously inadequate, given the degenerative history of these institutions. At best, the crown hoped to reduce all opposition by inciting the orders to quarrel among themselves, Barnave felt. In 1788, in an unpublished manuscript, Barnave wrote:

The baneful practice of separating the orders within the Estates, and of giving three bodies of representatives, three organs and three wills, was born in ignorance and the vestiges of the 16th century. It is also why their resolutions will be characterized by error and feebleness.

They were not, for Barnave, innovative moves forward, but an imitative repetition of outmoded errors. From the beginning, Barnave believed that "the nation is only one politically, the Estates can have only one single organ and can form only one deliberating body."²⁵

The revolutionary moment was created once the opportunity for democratic power appeared, since this power inevitably was to make its appearance at some

²⁴ Barnave, *Esprit des édits enregistrés militairement au Parlement de Grenoble le 10 mai 1788*, (Dauphiné, 1788), p. 1.

²⁵ Cited in René Fonvieille, *Barnave et la pré-Révolution (Dauphiné-1788)* (Grenoble, 1987), p. 78.

point in time. If, as Barnave writes, the government had immediately rejected privilege and opened all careers up to the third estate, perhaps the tissue might have held and the expansion of the social body would have occurred without the violence of both action and method (1843, II, 28-29). Intervening at precisely this point, Barnave the revolutionary politician sought to organize the forms that would discipline this dissipation of social energy in the most productive way. Like the eighteenth-century doctor, the revolutionary politician had to decide on the course of action. The health of the body was not automatic. As the *Encyclopédie* warned, in the article "Health," "The means to conserve *health* consist in the proper use of non-natural entities."²⁶ And of course disease was always problematic. While Enlightenment physicians believed that some diseased organs would, of their own accord, heal themselves over time, other situations required intervention. This was the choice between an "active" and an "expectant" medicine; a choice that depended on whether the particular illness required "prompt and energetic aid."²⁷ For Barnave, certain developments in society lead naturally to new forms of organization, but these transitional forms are not historically guaranteed. If the political force cannot supersede the organic structure of the social body, it had a very important active role to play in maintaining, or restoring, a healthy "order and proportion."

Looking at the emergence of a new economic force in France, it was clear for Barnave that the industrial class had developed to such a point that something had to give within the ossified structures of the *Ancien Régime*. A democratic revolution had been made "inevitable" by the state of civilization. The "fermentation" of public opinion had led France to a crisis point (1843, II, 28). In his analysis, there were only three possible modes of action to deal with this "plethora" within the social body.

In order that the progression of the plethora does not lead to a violent explosion, it is necessary that the humour diminish either: by some other cause, such as a war, the discovery of America by the Spanish, the Crusades, the plagues of Constantinople; or, through a great increase of force in the government, which first contains the principle of explosion, and then slowly consumes its substance; or, finally, by an expansion or change of government, accompanied by much prudence and precautions.²⁸

It was clear that France's excesses in energy were not going to be dissipated in externalized forms. The colonies were already established, and the sheer extent of the social evolution in France made any exodus unrealistic. There were really only two options: make the Third Estate "retrogress," or negotiate with them, that is, destroy them as an enemy or *accommodate* them (1843, II, 28). Of course, the government had no means, in 1789, to destroy the Third Estate. Not only because,

²⁶ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. "santé."

²⁷ For a definition of these eighteenth-century concepts, see Philippe Pinel's later articles "Expectation" and "Agissante" in *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* (Paris, 1820).

²⁸ Barnave, "Aperçus," p. 72.

as Barnave later explained in *De la révolution*, the experience of the American War of Independence had accustomed the public force, the army, to “civic virtues” and the idea of democracy, meanwhile bankrupting the government in the process, but also because repressing the Third Estate in France would have required “ravaging industry,” and “moving opinion backward,” both of which were impossible tasks, Barnave claimed (1988, p. 103-4).

The difficulty, then, was defining the modes of negotiation. The new power of the Third Estate could not be successfully integrated into old forms, especially the degraded forms of a monarchical structure which refused to assert its independence from the now irrelevant aristocracy, and accept the people as its natural ally. Thus the Estates General were bound to fail. For Barnave, the opportunity opened up in 1789 was a chance to return to the natural course of evolution, where the vitality of a commercial nation is ordered and strengthened by a strong central authority. As he wrote in 1789, in a pamphlet criticizing Calonne’s various attempts to save the government from ruin, “the division of orders, the ignorance of time, the perfidy of government, the weakness [*légèreté*] of the nation, stripped us of all our rights.”²⁹ He saw the fundamental political basis of a large, modern nation such as France in a strong monarchy in alliance with the people, a people who would exercise their opinion through elected representatives in national assemblies.

For Barnave this was in essence the *historical* origin of monarchical power, and so this reform would be a return of sorts to the natural division of power between the national body and the crown, not a philosophical deduction. Even before the Revolution Barnave was lyrically describing the bond between a free people and its strong monarch, looking as far back to Charlemagne: “rallying in his hands the scattered threads of an immense administration, he reigned for forty years in the midst of the acclamations of a *peuple législateur*.”³⁰ Recent history (from Louis XIV on) had deviated from this basic fact, the symbiotic relation of the monarchy and the nation. “The exercise of this right [of consent] disappeared with the national assemblies; but the right itself could not perish.”³¹ The “ancient right” of the Franks, indeed of all peoples, was the right to consent to laws, the very mark which distinguishes the citizen from the slave. This right “is written in the annals of monarchy, as it is in the code of nature, and in the intimate feeling [*sentiment*] of all those who have not lost the imprint of their dignity.” A newly regenerated representative system would have prevented an “explosion” of the people by transforming the framework of politics that had wandered from the right path and distorted the development of the nation. “Call, call — it is time for it — your faithful people to deliberate with you,” Barnave implored the king. “Open your eyes, sensible and good king, see the deep abyss into which your unworthy servants have pushed your empire.”³²

²⁹ Barnave *Coup d’oeil sur la lettre de M. Calonne* (Dauphiné, 1789), pp. 10-11.

³⁰ Barnave, *Esprit des édits*, p. 19.

³¹ Barnave, *Coup d’oeil*, p. 11.

³² Barnave, *Esprit des édits*, p. 9.

The failure of reform in 1789 created a new and unstable revolutionary situation that heightened the political crisis, in Barnave's terms. The intensity of the democratic spirit, coupled with the tension of repression and conflict, meant that any spark could ignite the forces of change. And yet, this force did not as yet have any positive articulations or expressions. "In these times, peoples are very susceptible to diversions; their restlessness is more a general disposition than a [particular] will, or a fixed desire for a certain event."³³ Opinion had seized power in 1789, but it had no means to institute it. In fact, Barnave later reflected,

democratic revolutions assume the intensity [*chaleur*] and even the blindness of sectarian enthusiasm in [people's] minds [*esprits*]; political opinions are established there in the manner of superstitions, that is to say more by passion and faith than by reasoning. (1843, II, 33-34)

It was crucial, then, for the revolutionary leaders to create the right conditions for the expression of this passionate energy in order to preserve some sense of order in the nation. The truth of the social identity had broken through the errors of political order, yet this social energy had no intrinsic form of expression.

The early phases of the French Revolution were, for Barnave, efforts to stabilize the transition from a largely aristocratic government to a democratic polity, and as a politician, he personally had extraordinary success in this period. Difficulties came to Barnave precisely as the radicalization of revolutionary activity came into conflict with his measured theoretical principles which were in many ways *historically* and not metaphysically grounded.³⁴ Barnave was inevitably seen as a pragmatist or hard realist who resisted the basic philosophy of the Revolution. In fact, Barnave's efforts to moderate the revolution, while certainly at odds with the rapid progress of revolutionary action, were a reflection of his acute awareness of the gap between principles and the forms that must envelop them. Barnave saw the Revolution as preparing the nation for its movement toward its own fulfillment of identity, an identity that needed a stable form in order to grow in a disciplined manner. Whatever his personal misgivings about Louis XVI the person, Barnave never wavered from his belief in monarchical power for France, even after the flight to Varennes, a decision that was eventually to cost him his life. Not only did Barnave feel that a monarchy was necessary in a large democratic state, he also realized that in a revolutionary crisis, the stability of the crown was even more important. Thus, in July of 1791, less than a month after the king's flight, Barnave criticized the Republican ideal as a fanciful notion without foundation in fact. Critics of monarchical government, "who perhaps look to make novel-writing out of politics, because it is easier to work at this than to contribute to the real, positive utility of their country," tried to use America as an example of a large republic which could serve as a model for France. Barnave, though, tried to explain that America was at a very different stage of social and political development. Lacking in population,

³³ Barnave, "Aperçus," p. 72.

³⁴ See Ran Halévi, "Feuillants," in Furet and Ozouf (eds.), *Critical Dictionary*, pp.347-9.

with no powerful neighbours, with only the forests at its borders, engaged in agricultural life, the Americans, wrote Barnave, had "all the habits, all the simplicity, all the sentiments of an almost new people," which made them "natural and pure" without the *passions factices* which created revolutionary situations.³⁵ Stability for France, a large nation bursting with conflicting passions and energy, could only come through real unity, and this meant fixing the Constitution and the government, not opening up ever new opportunities for radical change.

If the revolution had been necessary, it was no longer safe for the social body, which needs equilibrium to survive. "Thus it is not our weakness that I fear, it is our force, our agitations, the prolonging of our revolutionary fever." The rupture of what Barnave called the "humour" that was French society was not an event to be institutionalized. And so Barnave asked: "Are we going to end the Revolution, are we going to start it over again? If you defy the Constitution one time, at what point will you stop, and more important, where will your successors stop?"³⁶ Without denying the "right" of the people to define themselves, Barnave says that the people do not make a revolution because of "metaphysical maxims." The revolution of the people is one of realities, of "tangible advantages." The best remedy, then, for what he often termed the "fever" of the times was the respect for stability; "the distinct character of the free man is essentially in the religious cult of the law."³⁷

Consequently, Barnave saw any attempt to subvert order in the new state as anti-national. He divided France, not into revolutionary and anti-revolutionary camps, but into two opposing *interests*:

the interest of those who want to preserve the existing state of affairs because they see in it well-being combined with property, life [*existence*] with work; and the interest of those who want to change the existing state of affairs because the only means of support for them is in a succession of revolutions, since they are beings which fatten and grow, as it were, in troubled times, like insects in putridity!³⁸

Again, the pathological imagery is crucial. The restriction of participation in the democratic process which Barnave outlined in this speech was based on his idea that the Revolution had not fulfilled national identity and that threats to the fragile "tissue" of order that was trying to accommodate social expansion, still existed. The process of democracy was always defined in terms of the nation, not the rights of any one individual. The position of elector was a *function* of the state, a function, he argued, which must at all costs not be exercised by the remnants of the aristocratic order, nor by the extremely poor classes that have yet entered the productive forces of the nation. "I want therefore that the electors be taken from this

³⁵ Barnave, speech of 15 juillet, 1791, *Archives Parlementaires de 1770 à 1860* (Paris, 1862-), XXVIII, 327-8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 329.

³⁷ Barnave, speech of 18 juillet, 1791, *Archives Parlementaires*, XXVIII, 402.

³⁸ Barnave, speech of 11 août, 1791, *Archives Parlementaires*, XXIX, 367.

general class of honest and industrious men," who have the enlightenment and the independence from need that would steel them against corruption, the industrious middle class.³⁹ The form of government must be identified with the very essence of national identity, and not the extraneous, deviating elements that would destroy the vitality of France.

In a sense, though, Barnave recognized that the threat of disruption was ever-present, mainly because there was a lag, he felt, between the appearance of power and its institution in adequate forms. Therefore, he believed that the creation of the Constitution was a crucial task. The Constitution was a way of creating a national character to preserve its identity through changing conditions. The Revolution was an effect of "full sovereignty," which resulted in the formation of a "constituting power," a revolution necessary to "free an oppressed people"⁴⁰ but one which could not establish a durable liberty. This particular moment, when the people had given its sovereignty to the legislators, had to be taken advantage of, but with extreme care. Barnave emphasized the need to discourage the opportunities for the pure expression of sovereignty in the future, and criticized the idea of inserting revolutionary moments directly into the Constitution (that is, outlining the regular succession of constituent powers). It was impossible to formalize or legalize the expression of the people, as Sieyès had already powerfully demonstrated in his *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers État?* As early as 1788, Barnave was writing:

Without doubt, insurrection is the common resort of all oppressed peoples, but it is the last resort and the worst of all. The worth of a constitution is not that it is based on insurrection, but on the assurance and perpetuation of liberty without this terrible assistance.⁴¹

Thus the mandate of the representatives in the National Assembly included the preparation of the law to *prevent* the need for these new constituent powers, "to prevent, by peaceful and conservative means, taken from the Constitution, the provocation of this spontaneous will [*voeu*] of the people, which only ever appears by the successive sufferance and alteration of constituted powers."⁴²

It was necessary to place within the necessarily imperfect machine that was the Constitution the means of reform. The freedom of total expression would be channeled into limited forms; liberty would, in a sense, be taken away so as to preserve it in the long-term. The repeated rejection of constituted powers in favour of newly established constituent powers is the "perpetual cause of revolutions," and must be avoided. The voice of the people must always have a disciplined form of expression. Without these forms, the tissue of law and order would constantly be pierced and ruptured. The appearance of the unexpected problem would either force government to surpass its legally constituted limits and illegally alter prevailing

³⁹ Ibid, p. 367.

⁴⁰ Barnave, speech of 31 août, 1791, *Archives parlementaires*, XXX, 115.

⁴¹ Barnave, *Esprit des édits*, p. 5.

⁴² Barnave, speech of 31 août, 1791. *Archives Parlementaires*, XXX, 113.

forms of power, or force the people to rise again and destroy present frameworks. Barnave saw the essential form of public expression as the *election*, not the insurrection. Expanding the Rousseauist idea of the “cancellation of differences” into time, Barnave suggested that reform take place only after three successive assemblies had approved a change.⁴³ The nation as a whole could, like the individuals that make it up, veer from their true interests, especially in the midst of seductive forces.

Barnave mistrusted the particular wills of the people. “The people are sovereign,” he wrote, “but in representative government, its representatives are its tutors, and can alone act for it, because the people’s own interest is almost always attached to political truths of which it cannot have a precise and profound knowledge.”⁴⁴ If the “truth” of the national identity could not err, as Rousseau had already said, it was also true that the concrete expression of this identity, the individuals who constituted the “mass,” could waver from the truth from which it was separated. Therefore, for Barnave, the *mission* of the government during the revolutionary moment was the stabilization of the constitution, precisely to protect against total deviation and the subsequent collapse of the nation. The people did not have the right to commit mistakes. It was the duty of the representatives to form a disciplined framework for national activity to avoid the dissolution of constituted powers in turbulent times.

I am convinced that the people must have the faculty to reform its government and its constitution, in assembling a national convention. But I do not believe that this proceeding should be the product of fermentation, nor should it take place when the people would not be moved by the sentiment of its needs, but by intrigue and the influence of evil ambitions to change the system of political, constitutional, and national laws. I therefore believe, from this point of view, that the mission of an electoral body ... will necessarily lead the nation away from its consent, during these times, to make frequent changes to its constitution, for which it could later be sorry. (1843, I, 229-30)

To identify a healthy national identity in the midst of crisis, one needed to have, like the doctor, the experience that would reveal this identity. “*La morale* precedes ... politics, and serves as an introduction to its study; it demonstrates the bonds of the political body, their origins and their progress” (1843, IV, 8).

This constituted the paradox of political action, since the newly freed democratic forces had, by definition, almost no *experience* in matters of state. This fever of revolution could only accomplish so much. As in medicine, the “regime” of a disciplined program for the conservation of health relied not on metaphysical abstraction but a focussed analysis of signs and symptoms, and comparisons with

⁴³ Ibid, p. 114. See on this point Furet, “Introduction,” *Terminer la Révolution*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ Barnave, speech of 31 août, 1791, *Archives parlementaires*, XXX, 114.

previous occurrences of illness.⁴⁵ The physician had to “penetrate” with his insight into the interior of the body, to reveal any hidden “derangements,” and this required extensive experience and talent.⁴⁶ Similarly, in the political context, experience was essential if order was to be restored to France. This was extremely problematic, as Barnave explained to a close colleague in 1792:

the religion, the superstition of the constitution doubtless does not suffice to get the machine running, at a moment when perhaps nothing would be capable of communicating to it the regular movement that time alone — experience and instruction — can bring about.

The problem which Rousseau elaborated in his discussion of the legislator in *The Social Contract* confronts Barnave at this point. Even the elevated tutor of the people cannot easily avoid the difficulty. For a nation still on the often errant path toward unity and self-identity, self-government presumes the effect of the cause.

A man of genius who would be charged with giving France a constitution would always find that, since to be free the nation must itself carry out a large part of its affairs, in order for these affairs to go well, it is necessary that [the nation] has had the time to learn to administer them.⁴⁷

This was the idea behind Barnave’s obsession with stability. He was not advocating a rigid order defined in strict metaphysical categories. He allowed for the gradual, unpredictable, even errant course of national development and progress toward unity and cohesion, and simply tried to prevent the radical *rupturing* of order, an order that could ground the first tentative steps of progress. The monarch (or even a life appointed senate) could provide a strong, unifying force (one not open to ambitious competition),⁴⁸ while the people moved, however hesitantly, toward their own identity.

The danger of a republic, for Barnave, is that it dissolved the dynamic of liberty and order that a strong, unchanging force integrated into a free, industrious social body, could produce. If the people could act through their representatives against these central forces, a healthy movement could occur, one that allowed expansion and transformation, yet preserved the tissue of legal order. Inevitably, this opposition would become, in a republic, the opposition between the people and its assembly. Consequently, state order would disintegrate, because in this structure, the people would not have any *legal* means of action, and could speak only through “insurrection” (1843, II, 44). The path to identity is defined by the acceptance of

⁴⁵ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. “santé.”

⁴⁶ *Encyclopédie*, s.v. “pathologie.”

⁴⁷ Barnave, letter to Alexandre de Lameth, 4 avril 1792, in Georges Michon, *Essai sur l’histoire du parti feuillant: Adrien Duport; [avec] correspondance inédite de Barnave en 1792* (Paris, 1924), pp. 494-95.

⁴⁸ See Patrice Guennifey, “Terminer la Révolution: Barnave et la révision de la Constitution (août 1791),” in Furet and Ozouf (eds.), *Terminer la Révolution*, p. 162.

limitation, the obeying of laws to which one has consented. Without this structure, which creates the discipline of national character, the people would not have any limitation to their action, no proper form of expression (however inadequate) and would thus recognize no *limit* to its power but its own strength; this would ultimately lead to violence and terror (1843, II, 31). Barnave was distinguishing between total random errancy of the social body and a working through error in a disciplined, if not entirely predictable and linear, path.

V. History and the fulfillment of identity

The redemptive aspect of Barnave's theory of political action, and its relationship to national identity, is revealed in his idea of national character. In many ways, the return to the natural course of social evolution is a process of purification. In *De la révolution*, Barnave described the negative impact of international interventions, the loss of national characteristics, in the history of European civilization. The invasions of the northern peoples into central and southern Europe created a chaotic mixture of civilizations and peoples, to the detriment of individual societies. For Barnave, the intermingling of national identities (without total assimilation) marked the deviation of natural development toward "unity and cohesion." The recovery of European identity in the Renaissance, Barnave implies, is an illusory one, as he notes in *De la Révolution*.

Unhappy circumstance which, with so many others, has dictated that in our arts and sciences, as in our languages, morals, and institutions, nothing is indigenous, nothing is primitive, but [is] the fruit of a thousand different sources, altered and corrupted by one another! (1988, p. 19)

The re-emergence of commercial society, adapted to the individual nature of each social body, marks the real renaissance, for Barnave. Whatever its wayward course, the implicit identity of the nation will eventually find itself, given proper discipline and the rejection of imitation. This is the real importance of stability

There is an epoch in nature where the enlightenment of reason, aged by the long duration of empires, finally applies the happy remedy to the corruption of an old people. There is an epoch, in this empire, when barbarous institutions, when incoherent prejudices of the diverse peoples which have formed us, must disappear in time, and leave for discovery the original character, decorated with the fruits of experience and the gifts of philosophy.⁴⁹

The original character, the unalloyed metal, the truth in its purity, will gradually shed the accidental accumulations of circumstance, and reemerge from its errant

⁴⁹ Barnave, *Coup d'oeil sur la lettre de M. Calonne*, p. 16.

forms. In the meantime, however, the nation must draw from the “amalgam” the deviated, but still useful, powers of a situated and developing identity.

If the Revolution was an appearance of this identity, it was a momentary revelation and its effect had to be preserved in the institutions of the new France. The ideal of a unified and indivisible national body had to be mediated through a confrontation with obstacles, errors, and illnesses, along with a recognition that the body of society was itself a *dynamic* entity that often needed active intervention. For Barnave, as for other revolutionaries, this intervention would be legitimated by the idea of “health,” the primacy of the spirit of unity over the differentiated realm of specific groups, organs, functions, and institutions. If we take seriously the self-consciousness of revolutionaries like Barnave, then the failure of this revolutionary model of government, as well as the failure of the Constitution of 1791, and of more radical democratic institutions in the Terror, might be understood less as the failure of early revolutionary thought than a consequence of the fragility of “French” identity after the collapse of royal power and the disappearance of the state in 1788-89. That is, it seems likely that it was not so much the “idea” of political unity that was to blame for the violent and destructive turn to civil war in France, but rather the lack of any real and substantial unity that could bind together the new nation in a time of crisis. Barnave’s pathological model of politics and history warns us that the history of democracy is never a mere intellectual or even institutional problem, but instead a question of *locating* a genuine political community.

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