The Intellectual Origins of the Nation

Political and Historical Nationhood in France and Germany 1789-1809

By

Miguel A. Vecino

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To my wife, and our children Alexis and Anais,
the three lights of my life.

Contents

So Little trouble do men take in the search after truth;

So readily do they accept whatever comes first to hand.

(οὕτως ἀταλαίπωρος τοῖς πολλοῖς ἡ ζήτησις τῆς ἀληθείας, καὶ ἐπὶ τὰ ἕτοιμα μᾶλλον τρέπονται.)

(Thucydides. I, 21.- trans. B. Jowett,)

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Without both of them, this book might have been probably written anyway. But it would undoubtedly have been worse.

To both of them, who encouraged me to continue at every step, my deepest gratitude.

And of course, all the mistakes are mine.

Paris, November 2025.

Foreword

The origin of these pages lies in a reflection on the idea of the nation. The conclusions are the result of reading numerous historical works, with a particular focus on the concepts of nationhood in France and Germany.

The large amount of free time that my profession as a diplomat, for a country that does not have a foreign policy, has allowed me to dedicate a large part of my 36 years of professional in-activity to studying, reading, observing, analyzing and, always, expanding my knowledge.

I have been fortunate enough to live in different societies, diverse situations, in various democratic systems and from a far-right dictatorship to a "people's democracy" regime. In all these societies and regimes, the idea of nation was used and exploited, and was comprehended to varying degrees of accuracy, but in any case it was evolving and never clearly explained, because its meaning was intuited, felt, even imagined, but never defined.

The nation has been of essential importance in history since the 18th century, as explained by François Furet, "The nation is the European innovation par excellence... Through the nation, all European cultures have been formed and all the great ideas of which we are the children have been born" (1993, p. 73). The nation is not an entity that creates, it is not a matrix idea that arose ex nihilo: the nation is the creation of a particular community at a precise moment in its evolution. Precisely for this reason, when it has been applied to societies whose evolution was not the same as that of the West, its existence has been ephemeral or, at the very least, controversial, and sometimes causing more

division and confrontation than existed when no one spoke of a 'nation'. What factors contribute to the formation of a group of individuals, presumed to constitute a society, who collectively aspire to establish themselves as a nation?

As Mannheim asserted, society is defined as "the confirmation of the existence of a human group that shares certain principles, beliefs and ways of life" (1948). It is essential to note that the existence of society is predicated on the sharing of ways of life, beliefs and principles. The fundamental question that needs to be addressed is whether it is possible for an individual to exist in a state of alienation from their nation of origin, while simultaneously being a member of this nation's society. Indeed, it is imperative to draw a distinction between the concepts of society and nation, as these are not synonymous. For instance, Europeans have the capacity to reside within any of the societies of the European continent, given the shared commonalities in terms of principles, modes of existence and convictions ([1]). However, this does not imply that one must be a constituent of each of the nations that compose Europe, as this would necessitate the 'feeling' of considering oneself a spiritual part of it, perceiving a connection that is more intimate than the set of principles, beliefs and customs of society. This sentiment is pivotal in fostering a sense of national belonging, which, it must be noted, is distinct from actual membership of the group. It is through this process that an individual is recognised and accepted by their peers as an integral component of the national entity. It is insufficient for a person to merely aspire to be a constituent of a nation; the nation in question must also express a willingness to welcome him as a member.

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[1] Except Albania and Kosovo: according to my own experience living in those two countries, there is no society in the western sense.

If we take a look at the consideration of what a nation is, few concepts have been as manipulated, falsified, distorted, perverted, and adulterated as that of nation. The reason being that the nation became the fundamental element of community life, as communities underwent a transformation into entities of greater significance, endowed with an insurmountable meaning for their members, irrespective of their alignment with reality. As Goethe said to Eckerman in a conversation: "A fact of our life has value not insofar as it is true but insofar as it means something". It is precisely through its meaning, arbitrary of course, that the fact takes on a life of its own, explaining the inexplicable, justifying the unjustifiable, through elevating the idea or fact to the level of myth, whose purpose is eminently practical. In this regard, George Orwell wrote illuminating pages in his essay on nationalism, "Notes on Nationalism".

A society that has no myths, that does not rely on identifying symbols, is a society without reference points. This is because human beings need images and symbols, with a meaning, of the group or community to which they belong, representing everything that is not representable *per se*, whether object or person. For example, a piece of red cloth is a piece of red cloth until it becomes the symbol of the declaration of martial law, and then the flag of the proletariat, of a party, of the Soviet Union, of China, etc. It is the same piece of cloth, the same colour, but at the head of a demonstration or on a flagpole, it is the emblem of a class, a nation, an ideology: it has a meaning. It is by rising up as the image of an ideal that it becomes charged with symbolism, and that is why crowds follow that piece of cloth in a demonstration or in battle; a highwayman is a criminal until he becomes a mythical hero of the people; an individual who plants bombs is a terrorist until he becomes the leader of a country. Symbols and myths, are the pillars on which a society and a nation are built.

We will return to the importance of symbols and myths in the nation, both politically and historically.

In France, the deputies of 1789 took over a pre-existing concept, the nation, giving it a new meaning, vague in itself, but essential to fill a void that, in turn, served to sustain other concepts, in order to create a 'myth' that explained and justified everything: the revolution. Evidently, official French historiography (unlike numerous Anglo-Saxon studies) does not consider myth to be an integral part of 1789. From the nation (a purely legal-political concept) another concept emerged, the fatherland, which took on a previous, entirely sentimental meaning: the common home, the common history, the common land, which the concept of nation lacked. The fatherland was the human, intimate, personal side of a specific kind of nation.

Before this French idea of nation, two other parallel but not identical concepts already existed in Europe and America: the people, and the *Volk*, which we will study later. Thus, a different interpretation of the nation emerged in other communities, and specifically where it would be moulded in its origin with a more precise meaning. In the Thirteen Colonies, the idea of nation, either historical or political, was inconceivable, and from the outset, a concept was used that was easily understood by everyone because it represented everyone: *we, the people.* In Germany, the nation became inseparable and inter-changeable with the idea of *Volk*, which would end up supplanting it, because this concept appeals much more to feelings, to a sense of belonging, of common roots, than that of a political nation.

I will demonstrate in these pages that between 1789 and 1809, two ideas of nationhood emerged in Europe: the political French idea and the historical German idea. In France, the nation served to cement profound changes, but there was no "revolution" that brought them about, rather the opposite: in the end, and despite what historio-

graphy has conveyed, the changes brought about a revolution. This was a consequence, not an origin or a cause.

In Germany one finds the most perfect construction of the historical nationhood. During the 18th and early 19th centuries, Leibniz, Hamann, Herder, and Fichte planted the seeds of what would become the historical nation in Germany, based on assumptions that were totally different from those of the French and which, unlike the latter, would not be established in a specific text, but would develop slowly but continuously, throughout the 19th century, in a permanent search for identification and assimilation of everything that, whether myth or symbol, legends or music, served to unite the entire Germanic world in a common identity.

However, even before France and Germany, a national awakening occurred among certain populations that were subsequently overlooked in the development of the nation concept, despite having been pioneers, as was the case of Bulgaria. Small peoples should not be dismissed as unimportant, as Herodotus wrote, "For many states that were once great have now become small: and those that were great in my time were small formerly. Knowing therefore that human prosperity never continues in one stay, I will make mention alike of both kinds" (*τὰ γὰρ τὸ πάλαι μεγάλα ἦν, τὰ πολλὰ σμικρὰ αὐτῶν γέγονε· τὰ δὲ ἐπ' ἐμεῦ ἦν μεγάλα, πρότερον ἦν σμικρά. τὴν ἀνθρωπηίην ὧν ἐπιστάμενος εὐδαιμονίην οὐδαμὰ ἐν τὠυτῷ μένουσαν, ἐπιμνήσομαι ἀμφοτέρων ὁμοίως.*) (Herodotus, 1920, I. 5).

During the 19th century, two versions of nationhood, the political nation in France and the historical nation in Germany, Central Europe and the Balkans, gradually converged, with each concept adopting characteristics of the other. This development made it even more challenging to define what is meant by 'nation', and in turn, the two

concepts became intertwined in analyses, resulting in a distorted idea of nationhood that deviates from what it corresponded to originally.

The origin is precisely what these pages deal with.

Paris 2022-25

Introduction

We live in turbulent times, difficult to understand and consequently, even more difficult to define. The tectonic shifts that are affecting all societies in one way or another, have brought to the fore concepts and ideologies that had been hidden for decades, to the point that they were believed to have disappeared. Bernard Michel was not wrong when he wrote on the Eastern European states: "it would be inaccurate to speak of an awakening of nationalities after 1989. They have existed since 1945 as a living and compelling reality. Only the ignorance of journalists and politicians who talk about these countries [of the Soviet bloc] without knowing them has prevented journalists and politicians from perceiving the visible signs" (1995, p.7). The same can be said of the idea of nationhood. For political reasons, in order to defend the interests of specific groups, it has been made to believe that the idea of nationhood had disappeared, that it belonged to the past, that the nation was dissolving in Europe. But as demonstrated in the referenda in Denmark in 1992, France in 2005, Ireland in 2008, the Netherlands in 2016 and, finally, in the United Kingdom in the same year, and currently with the growth of nationalist parties in many states of the European Union, it would be more accurate to say that the nation was dormant, but by no means forgotten or dead. Given the sentimental aspect of the idea of nationhood and its symbols in today's societies, the ruling classes have not hesitated to manipulate it in order to tightly control the masses.

The evolution of events, the tortuous paths of history, its undoubted advances, but also its undeniable setbacks, have reintroduced many of these concepts to the forefront of current affairs, often changing their names to give an image of innovation, or, worse still, using the same term with completely different meanings, attempting to erase

the original sense and convey, as in the previous case, the idea of innovation. Thus, not only is the present manipulated to serve certain dominant interests of the ruling class, but the past is falsified by reinterpreting it, turning it into a justification for the here and now, like Orwell's John Smith writing and rewriting the same facts over and over again, to adapt them to the moment.

The underlying idea in all manipulation, and specifically in the events of 1789 and thereafter, is to attempt to demonstrate that there was an inexorable historical force that decided what was the only possible path, the only possible idea, the only possible interpretation. The 'here and now' thus becomes the *'only* here and now' imaginable. By interpreting history in order to serve the needs of the moment and of a particular ideology, history ceases to be history and becomes propaganda.

Sometimes, each of these concepts inevitably brings with it others directly related to it, like fragments of a whole that are nevertheless shown to us in their constituent parts, rather than in their entirety. Events are presented separately, as if one had nothing to do with the other, analysing contemporary and parallel events according to divergent interests. But as Som Raj Gupta wrote, what determines the meaning of words is their situation in a context and not merely the words that precede or follow them, but the whole. Each concept, in its original univocal sense, belongs to an era, a system of values, a specific social structure, in short, to a particular worldview that gives a specific meaning to words, a meaning that is the vehicle for conveying a description of reality. As Wittgenstein wrote, "When language-games change, then there is a change in concepts, and with the concepts the meanings of words change"([1]). Failure to respect this

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[1]) Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On Certainty* (G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright, Eds.; D. Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). Basil Blackwell.

belonging to an origin and its unambiguous meaning leads to the adaptability of history to the interests of the moment. History disappears to make way for ideology.

The period that began in France in 1788, with the convening of the Estates General, was an indisputable cascade of concepts and words that would, more or less quickly, materialise into decisions and events and, in so doing, were given a different meaning from that which they had when they were exclusively concepts: for example, in theory, the real nation was all the inhabitants of France except the nobles, but in reality only those who paid taxes. The inconsistency that is discovered between theory and practice when studying this period, stems precisely from the gap between what was proposed and what was done, between the concept and its realisation, between what is believed to be the meaning of the concept and the meaning given to it according to the dominant interests. This is a gap that official French historiography has concealed and only very few authors in the past have rejected, while others are now discovering it more openly.

But the truth is that language is essential because the world we analyse, perceive and understand is an interpreted world, because without interpretation there is no perception, and that interpretation is understood through language. Without identifying the meaning of words, there can be no dialogue or transmission of knowledge: "Language is used according to certain agreed rules. And the rules are determined by people's way of life, by their life context. We should remember, continues Som Raj Gupta, "that the rules do not imply precise connotations in themselves". The way of life includes the identity of meaning of a term for both the sender and the receiver. A word is a sound or written sign whose meaning comes from the context in which it is used. Therefore, the word must always be interpreted in its context so that it has a meaning that is understood in

the same way by the sender and the receiver: in John Smith's world, "war" was "peace", and senders and receivers understood this, but in today's reality, that is not the meaning.

As far as we are concerned, we will find ourselves faced with the urgent need to elucidate the question of meaning, because a confusion that distorts history has been deliberately created. To continue with the same question, the word 'bourgeoisie' did not have the same meaning in the Middle-Age or the 18th century as it did in the 19th or 20th century. However, the term has been retained, but not the meaning, which has been modified according to the moment and intention of its use, so that, applying this concept to known facts, we must elucidate whether or not there was a bourgeoisie in 18th century England and, later, throughout the 19th century in Europe, and if it truly existed in France in 1789 or if a class that did not fit that term, as used in England, was called the bourgeoisie. Sieyès, for example, uses the term "bourgeois" to refer to a person who lives in the city, earns a living through their work, and is assumed to have no master. The ambiguous use of concepts distorts history, as if we were looking at it through concave lenses. The concept thus loses its proper meaning, being used with any intention and in any sense: in the example at hand, it is clear that the intention to turn the propertied class of 1789 into a 'bourgeois' class, initiator of the 'bourgeois' revolution, suited the nascent bourgeoisie in France in the 19th century to legitimise its right to hold power. But it also suited rising Marxism, by making this supposed bourgeois revolution the necessary precursor to the future proletarian revolution. Later it turned out that the 'proletarian revolution' broke out in a country that had not undergone a bourgeois revolution: "I do not see the French Revolution as having been achieved by or as having brought to power a bourgeoisie in the Marxian sense. Capitalism was only in its childhood in France in 1789, and the capitalist class was small if not unconscious of itself as a socio-

economic group, and not particularly active in the Revolution" (Sewell, p. 39).

This raises the question of whether, since words are the expression of an interpretation, they always obey ideological principles, that is, whether it is inevitable that interpretation distorts reality in order to force it to conform to the constraints of a particular school of thought. Such a case has occurred with the 'woke' trend, the most recent example of the manipulation and use of concepts to adapt them to a particular way of thinking which, of course, becomes exclusive, just as the French interpretative orthodoxy in 1789 was exclusionary. If, for example, we cannot use the racial term 'black' to define a part of the population, we cannot talk about the slavery of 'blacks' because they simply did not exist or, if another version is presented, it loses the original meaning of slavery. If the meaning of words is subordinated to the political, economic or ideological interests of the moment, history loses its original significance.

To continue with the same example, if in 1789 there was a bourgeoisie in France and another in England, and both states had different economic situations, the question arises as to whether there really was a bourgeoisie in France, and if there was, why was there no economic evolution as there was in England. If, on the other hand, there was no such 'bourgeois' evolution in France, why are two social classes that did not have the same way of life, interests, objectives or evolution referred to by the same term? Therefore, the anachronistic or arbitrary use of concepts leads to the distortion of the past and, inevitably, of the present. Thus, as we shall see in another work, the official doctrine has maintained that a 'bourgeois' revolution took place in France even though there was no bourgeoisie. New terms must be proposed to describe realities that have been incorrectly named, so that the term has a specific meaning, returning to a univocal meaning of the terms

"Amid the shifting sands of an uncertain and uncritical social terminology, the historian of eighteenth-century France has too often been content with broad generalisation possessing even at the time only a very rough relation to social realities, and how distorted by all the overtones of nineteenth-century sociological thought and present-day social conditions. The first necessity for writing the social history of the revolution is therefore to abandon the existing terminology" (Cobban, 1976, p. 21). In this regard, P. Campbell rightly denounced that "the potential for ambiguity was heightened by the fact that the concepts and vocabulary of any particular discourse carry with them various elements of their previous history, in terms of definitions and associations. This creates the opportunity for ambiguous under-standings and rhetorical manipulations" (2007, p. 25). Therefore, on these pages I shall refer to the so-called bourgeoisie as the 'owning' or 'proprietary' class.

To understand and comprehend the whole, one must study its components, like a solar system, in which the study of the star, although it dominates the scene and creates the dependence of its planets, does not prevent one from having to study each of them separately, while always being aware that the system is an entirety. It is the knowledge of each part, when merged into the knowledge of the whole, that shows what the totality really is, and this is understood starting from the parts, but with the comprehension that the aggregate produces an effect and is more than simply the sum of its parts. If we use, for example, the term 'nation' to describe the new subject of national sovereignty in 1789, we must clarify what we mean by it and, above all, who was part of it. There we will see in due course that the Constitution of 1791 reduced the idea of nation in such a way that it never included all the inhabitants of the country, as was, however, believed and has been believed until now.

Precisely among those concepts and ideas that have resurfaced is that of 'nation', undoubtedly transformed, exacerbated with a strong populist and xenophobic, and often racist charge, which unearths a concept dependent on it, bringing back to memory some of the darkest hours of history: nationalism. However, as we shall see in due course, just as no distinction has been made between the two origins of the nation, no distinction has been made between 'national sentiment' and 'nationalism', even though these are two terms that encompass different ideas. By failing to differentiate between them, it has fallen into the easy amalgamation of sentiments that helps to distort the past in order to better serve the ideologies of the present, or to hide the inability to understand ways of thinking that do not fit into traditional stereotypes: loving one's own country makes one, automatically, an aggressive nationalist.

The modern concept of nation, as a political creation, emerged with the events that took place in France following the convening of the Estates General in 1788: "During the 18th century, this word [nation] retained its original Latin meaning, designating the inhabitants of a country. During the election campaign for the Estates General in early 1789, a new meaning emerged, that of a political entity formed by the inhabitants of a country" (Furet & Ozouf, 1988, 1002). This idea was undoubtedly the most important innovation brought about by the events of 1789, as a radical transformation of the political concept of sovereignty, and served as the basis for other equally essential developments, alongside the separation of Church and State and the selection of individuals on merit to occupy positions in the State Administration etc. Without the idea of national sovereignty, it would not have been possible to introduce the democratic principle, even if it was based on census suffrage. Without the 'political nation', sovereignty would have remained in the hands of the monarch,

because the beginning of the change was precisely the replacement of the repository of sovereignty.

Before the idea of the political nation, and from the mid-18th century onwards, another current had begun to emerge based on principles that were totally different from those of the French, taking no account of the political question or sovereignty: it was the idea of the nation based on the past, on the *Volk*, on ancestral roots and, first and foremost, on language; this was the historical nation, at the opposite pole to the rupture imposed by the French political nation. From these two ideas of nationhood, two distinct lines emerged which, although different at first, gradually converged during the 19th century, each absorbing elements from the other. Studies on the nation have been carried out precisely with the confluence of both nations. However, a principle that became clear within a few years of the emergence of both concepts is that the rupture-based nation: the nation without historical meaning, with no roots, no chance of survival, locked in a legal-political conceptualism with no real connection to the people, as will be analysed in the next chapter.

The political line would emerge from the work of Lacretelle, Volney and Sieyès, adapted to the interests of the owning class in the Estates General in France and reflected in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789 and the Constitution of 1791. The other line will be the 'historical nation', which developed gradually before and after 1789 and accelerated due to the French wars of aggression and conquest, a development driven by opposition to the political nation, represented by France and 1789. The historical nation will be of great significance. In light of the prevailing political conditions in Europe, which have been shaped by the legacies of three empires and the disunity of communities that perceived themselves as being part of a unified aggregate, the concept of the historical nation will be more

readily comprehensible to the people. It will be embraced as a response to their aspirations for unity and independence. In contrast, the political nation will rapidly dissipate, as evidenced by the fact that it will no longer be the custodian of national sovereignty in French constitutional documents, following the year 1791. The political nation will never transcend its artificial character. Meanwhile, the historical nation will develop relentlessly, creating an increasingly widespread and profound sentiment that will prevail over other ideologies of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as internationalism, cosmopolitanism, globalisation, etc. The fact that certain ideologies appropriated and manipulated the historical nation in the 20th century does not mean that we should disregard what it was originally and the sentiment it created in the societies that embraced it before its ideological manipulation.

The events of 1789 have given rise to countless studies and analyses, new concepts, ideas, transformations, and so on, but these have always followed a path traced during the 19th century in France, forming a doctrine that has never been attacked from that country (remember the curse that Aulard placed on students who dared to question the 'official' version of the *Revolution,* i.e. relying on or citing Taine's work), but fortunately there was a more serious and less ideological analysis in the Anglo-Saxon world, Anglo-Saxon studies and criticism to which French historians have been totally impervious to this day.

With regard to the nation in particular, the studies that have been carried out do not correspond to what the political nation meant in 1789, but have instead focused on its subsequent evolution. In my opinion, the error stems from having taken as the starting point for analysis 'the emergence of nationalities', that is, the revolutions of 1848, because, although there have been different approaches to what

the 'nation' is (excellent summary in Bonachi, 2022, pp. 31-34), all of them focus on the idea of the 'historical nation', ignoring the essential difference it had with respect to the 'political nation', precisely because the basis of the analysis is the sudden explosion of the historical national sentiment. Furthermore, there has been a continuous tendency to extrapolate concepts and ideas from their original cradle, in order to adapt them to the needs of the moment in which they were written and, as we shall see in the following pages, there has been a desire to make the events in France in 1789 such a historically significant event that some 19th century scholars have not hesitated to tell the story in reverse, to make 1789 the origin of events that took place much earlier: Guizot did not hesitate to write that "the English Revolution that dethroned Charles I took on its full meaning in the French Revolution" (1854, vol. 1, preface), which took place 200 years later. In any case, there is no doubt that the modern nation was shaped in the period 1788-1809, when the foundations were laid that would structure both the political and historical nation.

This does not mean that movements in the same direction did not already exist outside France and Germany, but they did not become political theory except in the formulations of French deputies and German theorists. In other countries, such as Greece, Serbia, Bulgaria, Poland, etc., the situation was not the same as in France, but rather that of Germany. Leaders seeking to establish independent nations within their communities, drew inspiration from the French example with regard to political demands. However, the reality they faced was similar to that of Germany, as they sought to revive nations that, at that time, were merely parts of the Turkish, Habsburg and Russian empires. In this sense, their ideology was entirely German.

The purpose of these pages is not to study the evolution of the nation, but rather to examine the original concept of the political nation

created by Pierre-Louis de Lacretelle, Constantin-François de Volney, and Emmanuel Sieyès in his pamphlet *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers-État?* This idea of nation was included in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789, as well as in the first French Constitution of 1791. On the one hand, there is the political nation, and on the other, the historical nation, as presented by Johann G. Fichte in his work *Addresses to the German Nation*, which was inspired by two earlier works: *The Vocation of Man* and *Characteristics of the Present Age*. However, while Sieyès' pamphlet included the ideas that inspired the French deputies, a few years earlier the philosophers Leibniz, Hamann and Herder had already begun to sow the seeds of the nation in Germany. Not to mention the influence that Martin Luther had on Fichte in particular, and on the concept of community.

However, before delving into the study of the nation in particular, it is necessary to make a point about the studies that deal with 1789.

The events that took place that year and in subsequent years, were defined and have gone down in history under the name 'French *Revolution*', a name that raises the need to clarify many aspects, from the very concept of 'revolution' to that of 'bourgeoisie', 'democracy' or 'freedom'. The events of 1789 had and continue to have such an impact that the history and subsequent era of France history have been essentially constructed around them. Many authors have also considered that the previous events were a prelude, a preparation, the antecedents that led to what would be mistakenly called the 'French *Revolution'*, as an inevitable and logical consequence. In other pages, I will demonstrate that there was no "revolution" in 1789, because originally no one wanted it, as there was no "bourgeoisie" seeking to seize all power, nor was the French people an educated people seeking freedom, among other things because they did not know what freedom was. These are all part of the myths that have been created to

serve the interests of the bourgeois class and Marxist ideology that emerged in the 19th century, and whose questioning has been unthinkable in France, until very gradually, starting in the 1960s, and preserving in any case the principles unaltered.

For now, I will point out that accepting this deterministic approach to the inevitability of 1789 would mean considering historical events, these or any others, as inevitable, and history would be limited to being the narration of a succession of predestined events. No, history is not predestined, nor does it change course because nothing is fixed and controlled in advance, just as human beings do not always control the evolution of the actions they initiate, and since there is no predestination, there is nothing to change. As the Spanish poet Antonio Machado said, "wayfarer, there is no path, only trails in the sea". The oft-repeated phrase that this or that event 'changed the course of history' makes no sense; it is typical of cheap and uneducated thinking of journalists and politicians who want to hide their errors of prediction by claiming that what should not have happened did happen. But such an excuse is unworthy of serious history.

The chain of events, caused by their own evolution, should not be confused with a supposed predetermination that would force us to admit that the events that occurred had to happen inevitably: there was nothing to foresee the delay in the flight to Varennes, nor the discovery of the iron cabinet, nor the assassination of Marat, nor Barnave's resentment for the offence suffered in his childhood, etc. Events can be linked together both by human impulse and by circumstances. The study of history demonstrates that the initiation of a movement does not guarantee its outcome. This is evidenced by the experiences of those who supported 1789 at its inception, who, despite their initial optimism and belief in the ideals that inspired them,

ultimately ended up with their heads severed from their bodies. This demonstrates that events often follow their own course, regardless of the factors or parties involved in their initiation.

History is a narrative in which we do not always read on the next page, what we thought we were going to find. No one can predict the future, but millions know how to explain the past in such a way that it seems 'obvious' a *priori* what happened ([2]).

Unfortunately, facts are adapted and interpreted *a posteriori*, with a specific aim that explains and justifies what happened, transforming them to suit a political ideology or certain interests. Thus, interpretation can become both a mythification of the facts and clearly serve to support an ideology. In a later chapter, we will discuss in detail the question of myth in both the political and historical nation, as it has special relevance in both, even though French historiography has, until very recently, flatly refused to consider that there was anything mythical about the 1789 events. However, myth is a necessity for every society.

Using anachronistic terms, attempting to describe events by adapting vocabulary and interpretation to the present world, or accommodating present-day vocabulary to describe past situations, only leads to confusion caused by the distortion of the meaning of words and, consequently, of history. Thus, concepts have been used to describe events, political and social structures, and modes of production that did not correspond to the period in question and are incomprehensible to those who lived through that period. The aim has

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[2]) On more than a few occasions in my professional life, I have seen how events can evolve in a direction totally different from that anticipated by their initiators, reaching conclusions far removed from the original objectives.

been, and has largely succeeded, to manipulate the history of these events, making it serve spurious interests.

Indeed, the leaders of 1789 wanted to create a new scenario, a new era for humanity. Despite the fact that the world did not undergo immediately such a total and profound transformation, and, from 1815 onwards, it reverted to what one author has termed "the persistence of the Ancien Régime" (³), it is undeniable that these leaders initiated a series of developments that would slowly unfold during the subsequent century. The concepts, methodologies and even the very structures that were initially established in 1789 found direct parallels in 1917. They did not change the world because their lofty theoretical aspirations were greatly diminished when it came time to put them into practice: for example, the second paragraph of Article 8, Title VII of the 1791 Constitution, which begins with the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, stipulates: ″The French colonies and possessions in Asia, Africa and America, although they form part of the French empire, are not included in this constitution." Clearly, the text did not refer to the "colonies" but to their inhabitants, Asians, Africans and Native Americans who, despite the grand words of the Declaration "men are born and remain free and equal in rights", Article 1, continued slaves and unequal. The claim to liberty, equality, etc. remained just that, a claim, and as the movement of 1789 sank deeper into difficulties, controversies and practical challenges, it moved further away from the grand principles it had set out.

As I mentioned briefly earlier, the origin of the problem that has determined the erroneous French perspective on studies of the events of 1789 is twofold. On the one hand, there is the aspiration of the

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³) Arno J. Mayer**.** *The Persistence of the Old Regime.* Pantheon Books. New York. 1981. p. 368.

nascent bourgeoisie. On the other hand, since the early 20th century, when the chair of French Revolution studies was created, these studies have been dominated by an unquestionably Marxist approach, first, and then Marxist-Leninist, or as Baker and Kaplan put it: "a popular, socialist and Leninist reading of the Revolution" (⁴), the fact that all the directors were ideologically communist or pro-communist had an obvious impact. From around the 1960s onwards, a questioning began in France from non-communist points of view of what had until then been the official doctrine about 1789. This questioning had already begun in the Anglo-Saxon world a decade earlier, with the work of A. Cobban and R.R. Palmer, and continued well into the 21st century with authors such as Sarah Maza, among others. However, the mark left by Marxism on the concepts used has not been questioned. This does not mean that Marxism should be ignored, as doing so would be to fall into the same error as historians who only considered Marxism to be the working tool. Rather, it should be used as an approach, a method of analysis, undoubtedly one of the most important, but not the only valid one. The Marxist approach led to the claim, for decades, that the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in 1917 was the logical conclusion of 1789: in a way, it is to argue that what happened in Paris was the work of the *sans-culottes*, ignoring the fact that it was the propertied class that dominated the scene, imposed its ideology (at least in economic, political and legal terms), and crushed the people. The analysis must be rethought without ideological-political approaches, without believing that everything is a desired consequence, without anachronisms that explain a posteriori what was or was not or what is.

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⁴) Cf. Editor's note by K.M Baker and S. I. Kaplan to the work of W.H. Sewell Jr. (Baker & Kaplan, 1994, p. xii).

Undoubtedly, as Cobban wrote, "the right approach is determined only by the nature of the question the historian is asking and the right answer by the material of which he asks them" (1973, p. 9). But the question and the answer themselves must be the subject of reflection, because the question and answer may already have been asked and answered, so the interest lies in the innovative approach, that is, whether there is something new to contribute, and the novelty must be, first and foremost, the result of reflection. Precisely in a world in which, by dint of always thinking about time, time is wasted thinking about how to make the most of time, simplification is inexorably becoming widespread, inevitably leading to the monotony of repetition which is the prelude to mediocrity. Thus, today, in this age of haste, innovation and a new enriching approach, are essential elements that an author must focus on when writing. The question is not to describe a fact or a character for the umpteenth time but, to paraphrase Max Scheler, *"to discover its place in the cosmos"*. To do this, the first thing is not to consider the pages being written as an object for sale, nor to think about confirming to the reader what they presumably already know, but to reach the certainty that, after reading many works on the subject, there are no unresolved doubts, unasked questions or unanswered questions left within the author. Thus, as Marx wrote, "we were all the more willing to abandon the manuscript to the gnawing criticism of mice because we had achieved our goal of seeing clearly within ourselves" (1859/1965, p. 11), because when one sets out to write a story, one must take the word history (*ιστορία)* in its original sense: investigation, searching for what lies behind the obvious, in short, attempting to find the intrinsic meaning of every historical event.

History must always be a search, never a repetition. "If words are no better than silence, do not speak", which, applied to our case, would mean that if what is written does not encourage us to think beyond

what has already been written and thought, nor offer a new field of research or sow reasonable doubts about certainties, then it is not worth writing. After all, what is good or bad is relative, as has been demonstrated so many times in history. However, the truth is not always evident and, therefore, we must not stop searching for it. That is *ιστορία* and it is that inquiry that makes a book valuable: always going beyond the known path in search of getting closer to the truth.

I hope that this book on the origin of the nation will be such a case, and that its pages will inspire reflection. Because the truth is, perhaps far far away.