

# Citizen Brutus: Rome, Sparta and the French Revolution

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"Aux urnes, citoyens!" That was the exhortation with which the French government plastered the nation's hoardings in the spring of 1789, as part of a campaign to get the electorate to the polls. It is a slogan which encapsulates the difference between our homegrown, do-it-yourself democracy and the French republican tradition which is fed on the rhetoric and symbolism of classical antiquity. For a start, how is it to be translated? "To the booths, citizens"? How can one exhort people to rally to anything so prosaic as a booth?

Urn is a different matter. Though to an Englishman it is something to put flowers in – or, in the last resort, ashes – for the Frenchman, as for the Athenian, it is the receptacle of a citizen's most sacred trust: his vote. As for "citizen", the word lacks the reverberation of the French "citoyen", a title as proud as the Latin *civis*. It was to Rome, in fact, rather than Greece, that the leaders of the French Revolution looked for inspiration. Whereas English politicians of the late eighteenth century drew on Horace or Cicero merely to adorn their style, the French took their classics seriously.

## Past virtue and present vice

The stage had been set for this classically inspired revolution earlier in the century. Montesquieu and Rousseau used Livy's Rome and Plutarch's Sparta as the models for their ideal states. Artists also turned away from the amorous frivolities of the Rococo to sterner subjects illustrating Stoic virtue and civic morality, which they found abundantly in the same authors. A study of the classical curriculum which was almost uniform throughout France in the years leading up to the Revolution reveals the forces which were eventually to undermine the foundations of the Bastille. It was a curriculum based on Latin, rather than Greek, and the same texts recur again and again: Livy, Books 1-3; *Aeneid* 1-6; Sallust, *Catiline*; Cicero's speeches, above all the *Philippics* and the *Catilinarians*; Tacitus, *Agricola*, *Histories* and *Annals*.

What the prose authors have in common is an emphasis on present vice and past virtue and a passionate loathing of autocracy which were bound to strike a chord in the minds of restless young Frenchmen. When they found Sallust, for instance, denouncing the corruption of the *nobiles*, they read him as a contemporary. Ironically it was Livy – the most conservative of historians, Augustus' mythographer laureate – who provided most fuel for the revolutionary flame. The introductory sentence of Book 2, where Livy marks the solemn

transition from monarchy to republic, were in a French context positively subversive: "Henceforward I am to treat of the affairs, civil and military, of a free people, for such the Romans were now become; of annual magistrates, and the authority of the laws exalted above that of man".

For Livy, as for the revolutionaries, all that was politically desirable was summed up in the word *libertas*, all that was hateful in the word *regnum* or *dominatio*. Of the three ideals of the revolution, then, the first – Liberty – was one which could be fuelled in abundance from Roman history and oratory. Fraternity was more difficult, though the Stoic Cicero could be cited on the brotherhood of man. Equality, of course, figured not at all in the Roman authors, who preferred the more selective concept of "equity".

### **Et tu, Brute?**

It was L. Junius Brutus, the traditional founder of the Roman republic and its first consul, who became the patron saint of the French revolution. In 1788 the painter J.-L. David chose as the subject for a major painting the scene (based on Livy's narrative) when the bodies of Brutus' sons, handed over by their father to the state for execution because of their treason, were brought back to his house for the funeral rites. The original motives for David's choice of subject appear to have been artistic rather than political, but the year of the picture's completion and exhibition coincided with the fall of the Bastille, and in the excitement of those heady days the Brutus myth took on a new life. Brutus, after all, was the archetypal republican who had expelled the last King of Rome, Tarquin. It was not long before Tarquin was identified with Louis XVI, and when in 1791 Louis made his unsuccessful attempt to escape to Austria, the parallel between that flight and Tarquin's defection to the Etruscan camp was easily made. When his sons were convicted of collaborating with Tarquin, Brutus had sacrificed his paternal feelings to his patriotic duty and had handed them over for execution as enemies of the people. So when at the King's trial in 1792 Camille Desmoulins demanded the death penalty it was Brutus whom he invoked: "It only remains for you to prove, as Brutus did to the Roman people, that you are worthy of the republic by pronouncing the same judgment: *I, lictor, deliga ad palum; go, lictor, and bind (them) to the stake*".

### **Death before slavery**

Brutus now became the sacred icon of revolutionary devotion. A bust of Brutus was set up in the National Assembly so that the regicide deputies could gaze at it for inspiration, just as Caesar's assassin, the tyrannicide M. Junius Brutus, had gazed at the bust of his illustrious ancestor in the family *atrium*. In 1793--4 in the Paris region alone, three hundred infants were registered with the name. Voltaire's tragedy *Brutus* was performed up and down the country, achieving an almost ritual status, and when the actors reached the famous line

"Dieux! donnez-nous la mort plutôt que l'esclavage!", a frenzy of applause broke out. The play and the painting brought about a revolution in dress and even in hairstyles, as wigs gave way to a simple "Roman" coiffure, adorned with fillets.

The Jacobins looked to classical antiquity for a whole range of symbols to replace the Christian ones. Livy offered them an alternative Bible, and Plutarch a new *Lives of the Saints*. Notre-Dame was replaced as the centre of the national cult by the Pantheon, which had been planned before the Revolution as a neo-classical church to be dedicated to St Genevieve, but which now became the mausoleum of the republic's heroes.

### **The Cap of Liberty**

The most popular of the new symbols was the cap of liberty which still adorns the head of Marianne, the personification of the republic, on French stamps and coins. In Rome the closely fitting cap (*pileus*) which slaves received as the outward sign of their manumission had come to be an emblem of liberty. It featured, for instance, on the coins issued by Brutus and Cassius after Caesar's murder, and later it is said to have been worn by the Roman crowds celebrating the news of Nero's death.

But the cap of liberty adopted by the Jacobins was modelled not on the rather featureless and un-chic *pileus* but on the more fetching and jaunty Phrygian cap, whose historical origins were very different. The Phrygian cap borrowed by the Romans from the east was basically a soft, collapsed version of the stiff, tall and pointed headwear worn by oriental despots and hierarchs and which, *via* the Jewish high priests, ended up on the very un-revolutionary head of the Pope of Rome. The Jacobins, therefore, had the right idea but the wrong hat. Wrong or not, as the "bonnet Phrygien" it became *de rigueur* for the true republican believer.

As Christian names (in the literal sense) went out, Greek and Roman names came in. A particular favourite was Scaevola, after Livy's C. Mucius Scaevola who after failing to kill Porsena demonstrated his indifference to pain by holding his hand in the fire – just the role model for the young followers of Robespierre. The radical Francois-Noel Babeuf changed his name to Caius Gracchus, as a tribute to that proto-revolutionary. Perhaps the oddest of the revolutionaries went under the splendid name of Anacharsis Cloots, so-called after the Scythian sage mentioned by Herodotus, The Revolution gave all these young men the opportunity to assume in reality the roles they had studied at school.

## **A Gallic Lacedaemon**

Plutarch's *Lives*, long familiar to French readers in Amyot's fine translation, had just the right combination of moral didacticism and visual rhetoric to appeal to the young idealists of the Revolution. They had read Plutarch for pleasure, often from an early age. The Jacobin Mme Roland recalled in her memoirs the illicit thrill of the day during the Lent of 1763 when she took her Plutarch to read in church in place of a prayer book. She was then nine years old. She recalled also weeping for sorrow that she had not been born a Roman or a Spartan.

Of Plutarch's Greeks, it was the Spartans, not the Athenians, who appealed to Mme Roland's contemporaries. They admired Solon and Aristides, but Pericles did not figure among their official heroes. Athens was too bourgeois a model, particularly for the more extreme Jacobins, who found the rigorous discipline, the military ethos and the puritanism of Sparta more to their taste. In the years 1792-1795 France had to maintain a high state of military preparedness against enemies within and without their boundaries, and for that reason alone Sparta was a more attractive model than Athens, which they regarded as decadent. Pericles' proud boast that the Athenians had the best of both worlds, a living proof that the good life was quite compatible with discipline, would not have appealed to austere and high-minded men like Saint-Just.

## **Spartiate fraternity**

For these reasons it was Plutarch's Lycurgus whom the ideologues of the Revolution took as their patron. They believed that if revolutionary ideals were to survive, a new generation of public-spirited citizens had to be created in a new educational system designed to attach the child to the state rather than to the family. For this, the Lycurgan educational system offered a ready-made model, particularly because of the part played in it by martial music and dance, gymnastic competitions, and parades, which satisfied the revolutionary appetite for rhetorical spectacle. A system of boarding schools was proposed in which French youth would be trained to a life of "Spartiate fraternity", through character-forming activities such as reading Plutarch while listening to "warlike marches".

The organisation of public games and spectacles was an important part of official propaganda throughout the country. At Boulogne, for instance, in 1791 there was (according to a contemporary record) a festival "worthy of the fairest days of Lacedaemon", at which the "elders" of the town were "publicly dined". Afterwards "young pupils of the fatherland scattered flowers about the veterans, while lavishing upon them the most tender caresses". The pensioners involved must have been rather bemused by these goings-on.

## Striking Attitudes

The description just quoted reads more like the description of a painting or a tableau than of a real event. It is an example of how far, in revolutionary activities, life imitated art. There was another instance of the same phenomenon in 1789 when a group of patriotic Frenchwomen, the wives and daughters of artists in sympathy with the Revolution, solemnly donated their jewels to the republic. The inspiration for this grand gesture came ultimately from an incident in Plutarch's *Life of Camillus* when a group of Roman women performed the same selfless deed, and the scene had become a part of the neoclassical artistic repertory.

Again, when the representatives of the French Commons took their famous "Tennis Court Oath" in 1789, by which they vowed not to disperse until they had acquired a Constitution, they would have been conscious of the precedent of the oath of the Horatii which had been the subject of a famous painting by David a few years earlier. When David came to immortalise the scene at the tennis court he represented the deputies as striking attitudes identical with those of the Horatii.

Even after the end of the National Convention in 1795, with the advent firstly of the Directory and then of Napoleon as "first consul", the actors on the French political stage continued to invoke Roman and Greek precedent and iconography, but increasingly this was reduced to a mere matter of style. The first consul would later imitate Caesar in making himself the master of the republic, and he went further than Caesar by eventually "accepting" a royal title. Brutus must have turned in his grave .

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