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**FAMOUS CRIMINAL PHRASES: LIBERTE, EGALITE,
FRATERNITE**

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Abstract

The history of mankind has recorded numerous proverbial phrases of great cultural significance. The present study aims to highlight some of them by focusing on phrases with socio-political significance. By enumerating some of them, we will retain only one for further discussion, considering the example chosen enlightening for our intention of carrying out a much broader study. From the ancient divide et impera or the mediaeval limpieza de sangre, under the scrutiny of the Inquisition pyres, moving on, to the modern age, to find phrases such as liberté, égalité, fraternité, arbeit macht frei, что делать?, or time is money. Beyond the universal “loudness” of these phrases, they conceal discrimination and crimes against humanity and, at the same time, speak volumes of the character of the peoples from which they emanated. In order to illustrate these theses, the present paper will focus on the phrase Freedom, Fraternity, Equality.

Keywords: freedom; equality; republic; revolution; crime;

1. INTRODUCTION

The French Revolution, with its complexity and dilemmas, has remained a vivid historic event in European consciousness, having never ceased to produce interpretations and reinterpretations among historians, most of the time, beyond scientific curiosity and exigencies of objectivity. With their deeds, the protagonists of the Revolution have left a matrix source to posterity, a source of legitimizing the action that they dreamt to imprint on the present. Thus, both republicans and socialist revolutionaries would conjure the Jacobin or Thermidorian spirit, the conservatives, that of a constitutional monarchy, which is not only valid for France, but also beyond its borders. Even though the Revolution has been always synonymous with the Republic in the French consciousness, one still notes that the revolutionary waves constantly brought Monarchy to the shores in the nineteenth century, as it dominated that century. This is a significant fact which can be explained from the perspective of the attempt at national reconciliation and regaining of historical identity, but also from that of the failure of the Revolution or its continuity from 1789 until the defeat of the Paris Commune (May 1871).

When does the French Revolution commence and end is still an open issue, as it is still a part of contemporary history, which it moulds, unable to free the scholar from pure and neutral reflection. Along

its course, it was marked by political crimes, sometimes bordering genocide, as is the case with repression in the Vendée. This dramatic episode of the Revolution proves how much present it still is in France's present-day political and scientific life. Everything started in 1986, with the publication of the book *A French Genocide: The Vendée* by Reynald Secher. There has been constant debate ever since between those who regard Vendée as "the first genocide in modern history" and the leftist trend, which rejects this statement.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In what this study is concerned, we attempt to grasp the phenomenon of the crimes of the French Revolution, which started under the generous aegis *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, without placing ourselves on any ideological platform, without supporting one historiographic trend or another. We are exclusively interested in facts, which is why, an attempt will be further pursued at answering the question, how could such generous values of humanity patronize genocide?

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Are the values, in truth, the causes of political assassination?

The slogan *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* (Liberty, Equality, Fraternity) entered the revolutionary circuit on December 5th, 1790, with the speech delivered by Maximilien Robespierre, *On the Organisation of the National Guard*, distributed at a national scale by the popular societies. It was not the only slogan of the Revolution, but one out of many, such as: *La Nation, la Loi, la Roi* (The Nation, the Law, the King), *Union, Force, Vertu* (Union, Strength, Virtue), *Force, Égalité, Justice* (Strength, Equality, Justice) or *Liberté, Sûreté, Propriété* (Liberty, Safety, and Property)

Antoine-François Momoro, typographer and radical revolutionary, who would end up under the guillotine in March 1794, against the background of Federalist revolts and foreign invasions, imposed in 1793 the slogan *Unité, Indivisibilité de la République; Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité ou la mort* (Unity, Indivisibility of the Republic; Liberty, Equality, Fraternity or Death), which was first engraved on the facades of all public buildings in Paris, and then across the country. During the Jacobin dictatorship, other phrases were also imposed: *liberté, unité, égalité; liberté, égalité, justice; liberté, raison, égalité*. The Thermidorian reaction to terror excluded fraternity from the revolutionary discourse.

The phrase *liberty, equality, fraternity* completely disappears under the Empire and the Restoration, returning on the lips of the revolutionaries of 1830 and subsequently imposing itself as the official slogan of the Second Republic, after the 1848 Revolution. On July 14th, 1880, the Third Republic consecrates this formula as the official symbol of the state. It will remain as such until the Regime of Vichy, which adopts a new symbol: *work, homeland, family*. After the liberation, the republican formula is enforced again, being inscribed as a national symbol both in the 1946 and the 1958 Constitution.

This brief inroad is intended, aside from providing us with a vision on the natural selection of the values produced in revolutionary times, to give us a framework of the constant, decisive options to which the French society has always aspired: this is what defines its national specificity. A specificity that we must not regard as a historical given but sooner as a process and product of a historical experiment.

While analysing, in turn, the three types of values, it is necessary that we should trace their nature and the extent to which they can be compatible and able to form social balance.

Liberty and equality were born at the dawn of the Revolution. The Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen defines these values from its very first article: "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions can be founded only on the common good." Articles 4 ("Liberty consists of doing anything which does not harm others: thus, the exercise of the natural rights of each man has only those borders which assure other members of the society the fruition of these same rights. These borders can be determined only by the law") and 5 ("The law has the right to forbid only actions harmful to society. Anything which is not forbidden by the law cannot be impeded, and no one can be constrained to do what it does not order") state the nature of liberty, which is political. From the same first article of the Declaration, one infers the juridical nature of equality: the law must be the same for all citizens ("men are born equal in rights").

As far as fraternity is concerned, it is not defined by this document, but is inferred by experts from the oath taken by deputies on June 20th, 1789, that of not separating until they have elaborated a Constitution. The fraternity of the deputies, as a radical form of opposition to Louis XVI's attempt at dispersing the assembly of the deputies of the Third Estate will be the revolutionary step that transfers the power from the King to the nation and to its representatives. Five days later, the deputies of the Third Estate proclaim, as a result of the "fraternity of rebellion", the National Constituent Assembly.

While liberty and equality are constantly called upon in the development of the revolution, fraternity only rarely reaches its discourse. It is probably because this value, pertaining to community and not to individuality, was perceived as incompatible. However, the engine of the French Revolution is represented by social discrimination, not by fraternization. Hence the crimes of this revolution. When the passion of the events cools off and their being reflected upon becomes possible, fraternity better defines its nature and acquires its legitimate right of being harmoniously placed together with the other values. Thus, it is understood that it belongs to the domain of moral obligation, and not to that of law or justice, that it moulds interpersonal relations, determining the formation of a balanced social body. This value will be the most mature and the remotest gain of the French society, which had to pay for it the price of unimaginable crimes and atrocities.

Before we understand this crimes, let us answer the question opening this paragraph. The values are not the causes of the political assassination. The answer can only be negative, and this, not only because they do not represent an existential subject, but precisely as a result of their nature. They are the product of human aspirations and have a universal nature, in the extent to which aspirations can be universalized. However, in the beginning, the protagonists invoked liberty and equality, which actually overlapped the large aspirations of the enlightened classes. Fraternity was not for these protagonists to invoke, it will smoulder in the hearts of the folk, and it is only the demagogy of the political fractions what takes it to the surface of history, in moments of crisis, until it finally imposes itself in the system of the aspirations of the French society.

4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

How can we explain the crimes of the French Revolution?

The weakness shown by Louis XVI created the awareness of a power vacuum, of the fact that there was power to take. François Furet, in his *Interpreting the French Revolution*, emphasises the fact that, if in the Old Regime, the power was the owner of the society, at the moment zero of the Revolution, the society became aware that it was the owner of power: "power belongs only to the people, that is, to nobody" (Furet, p. 69). In 1791, the National Constituent Assembly finishes its work, and the King takes the oath to respect the Constitution and ratifies it. Apparently, France has a democratic, constitutional government, based on representative legitimacy. Nevertheless, before the elaboration of the Constitution, at the same time with the Assembly, various popular and patriotic societies carry out political activities. Spontaneously born out of the enthusiasm of freedom, they claim a form of direct democracy, as an alternative of the will of the people. Between representative democracy and direct democracy, opinion settles – the power of the word legitimized by the people. It is on this political background that the revolutionary slogans flourish, mobilizing "the people" in moments of crisis. Equality is the key word and it first and foremost means the dissolution of the privileged social classes. The enemies of the revolution are momentarily identified, the aristocrats and the king himself are associated with their plot. Without this plot to be exposed, aristocrats make it obvious with their mass emigration, and the king, with his attempt to leave Paris – which opens his path to guillotine – confirming the idea of the existence of counterrevolutionary forces. Along this path of separation between the good and the bad, the aim was the formation of a new collective identity.

The Revolution has an unlimited field of action with the proclamation of the Republic. Direct democracy imposes itself through the power struggle which starts between the camps of various Societies, all with the same ideology: action in the name of the people. The will of the people, just like the plot, is "a delirium on power" – they make up the two facets of what can be called "the democratic imaginary of power"; for the Revolution, the plot is "the only adversary of sufficient stature to warrant concern, since it

was patterned on the Revolution itself. Like the Revolution, it was abstract, omnipresent and pregnant, but it was secret whereas the Revolution was public, perverse, whereas the Revolution was beneficial, nefarious, whereas the Revolution brought happiness to society” (Furet, p. 76). The legitimacy of the power of the clubs leaves representativeness on a second plane, as it functions based on the efficiency of denouncing the aristocratic plot. Not only do aristocrats fall in this process, but also some democrats, who, in the ardour of the power struggle, become adversaries. If they manifest weakness (“moderation”), they are accused of plotting with the aristocracy and sent to the guillotine. Paradoxical is the fact that “the obsession with conspiracy is a general discourse employed by both parties. By those excluded from power in order to conquer it. By the men in power, to denounce this constant and formidable threat of the other power, less fragile than their own, in front of the people” (Furet, p. 78).

Robespierre had the most insightful ability of manoeuvring this ideological mechanism, eliminating, in turn, all his political adversaries and unavoidably instituting the Reign of Terror. The discourse of the Incorruptible, of this “fanatic of morals” on equality and virtue which give significance to the action of the people is founded on the death of the guilty ones: “the guillotine is the instrument of separating the good and the bad”.

Furet frames the Terror in the logic of this power mechanism: “the common, successive project of the revolutionary groups, which consists in radicalizing the revolution, that is, of making it consistent with its discourse, arbitrates the political struggle at all times and ends up bringing the purest figure of this discourse into power. (...) Space of the power struggles, instrument of differentiation between political groups, means of integrating the masses in the new state, ideology ends up being, for a few months, coextensive with the government itself. Since then, any debate has lost its reason to exist, as there cannot be another space to be occupied between idea and power, nor another place for politics except for consensus or death” (Furet, p. 93).

During this frozen consensus, although the guillotine spread equality every day, everywhere in France, the Thermidorian Revolution was still possible. The initiative belonged to the National Assembly, the representative organism of the nation, which used the same dialectics of the people and the plot in overthrowing the tyrant. Bronislaw Baczko, in his work, *Ending the Terror: the French Revolution after Robespierre*, draws our attention to the absurdity of the accusations: Robespierre wanted to proclaim himself king, to marry Louis Capet’s daughter; as evidence, rumours were spread that a seal with the lily flower had been found, that the nuptial contract had already been concluded, etc. Vadier, President of the Committee of the General Security and one of the artisans of the overthrowing of the Jacobin dictatorship, asked many years after the event how could they invent the seal and all the other absurd evidence to unmask Robespierre as king, replied: “the fear of losing one’s head stimulates the imagination”.

It is indeed impossible to create unanimous consensus around values. And the illusion of the French Revolution was actually based on this credo, which reached its peaks during the reign of terror, when the society was divided into two classes: fear-inspiring and fearing. Tallien, one of the members of the Convention that forbade Robespierre to speak on Thermidor 9, an agent of the terror himself, but living the terror at the same time, made the following confession from the stand of the parliamentary forum, not long after the decapitation of the tyrant: “The terror degrades the man and turns him into a beast; it is the degradation of all physical forces, the commotion of all moral faculties, the derangement of all ideas, the destruction of all affections... being an extreme affection, the terror is susceptible of no more and no less. But a government cannot spread terror and manages to make everybody tremble only by constantly threatening them with this punishment... only by threatening against any form of action and even inaction” (Baczko, 66). Thus, the terrorised terrorists were those who plotted to overthrow the system on Thermidor 9.

At this moment of the revolution, the representative government takes the stage. The Jacobin club is effectively shut down, and this association’s right to manifestation is restricted to the public space, without access to the political one.

Walking in Furet’s footsteps, Baczko remarks that the year 1789 did not open the French society towards a pluralist political system, this being represented as a unitary space. The democracy invented by the revolution combines individualism and unanimity, the representative rule with the refusal of the right to representation for any interest against the general interest, the wish for a transparent political life with

the obsessive chase after plots. The protagonists “are not capable, at any stage of the Revolution, to agree to disagree in order to accept that, at the basic principle of the functioning of the society is its conflicting nature and not a vice that need be eradicated” (Baczko, 133). Neither did the 9 Thermidor Revolution abdicate from the principle of excluding the adversary in the name of the Nation or of the Republic. Not only did the restoration of the representative system perpetuate this principle, but also added a revanchist policy to it, targeting the terrorists and the agents responsible for the reign of terror. Although calls to pardon and forgetfulness were generously declaimed, hatred and the wish for revenge prevailed. Although the abolition of the death penalty was brought into discussion, it was postponed until the day when the general peace was pronounced. Sporadically, the guillotine continued to function as an instrument of reactionary justice, of the repression of the sans-culottes riots or of the conjurations of the equals.

The relative peace and social stability inaugurated by the Directorate and continued by Napoleon, General, Consul and Emperor, put an end to the equality by guillotine, deviating it towards the battles of France with the Kings of Europe. Thus, the values of the French Revolution, going beyond the borders of the eighteenth century, also crossed the borders of their homeland.

5. FINDINGS

There is a balance, although the exact number will never be known, of those sacrificed in the Revolution, of those fallen during the war, of those who await for their sacrifice in the name of liberty, equality and fraternity, in all revolutions of the 19th century, but especially in the Bolshevik revolution and in what followed. As in wartimes, during radical and violent changes, the loss of human lives is inevitable. But to find in this game of conflict manifestations of bestiality, acts of cruelty against the civil population – women, children, elders - , and torture induced for the sake of the show or as a pathological form of jouissance is not honourable for the historical event and especially for mankind as a species. The French Revolution had its knightly honour translated in the symbolic formula: “Robespierre, knight of the guillotine”.

7. CONCLUSION

In the fourth chapter, “The Part Played by the People in Revolutions” in his work, *The French Revolution and the Psychology of Revolution*, Gustave Le Bon underlines the idea that the mind of a people is formed by centuries-old slow accumulations of traditions, sentiments, ideas and prejudices, all combined determining its strength. This aggregate must acquire certain stability, without crossing the limit that would make malleability impossible. The author infers the following: “without rigidity, the ancestral soul would have no fixity, and without malleability, it could not adapt itself to the changes of the environment resulted from the progress of civilisation. Excessive malleability of the national mind impels a people to incessant revolutions. Excess of rigidity leads it to decadence” (Le Bon, 33). England is given as an example of a society that has experienced the balance of stability and malleability, despite of its going through two revolutions.

The author does not pursue an in-depth analysis of the French national specificity, but along the book, just like in other studies, he insists on the malleable nature of the Latin mind. Drawing from Le Bon’s perspective, one could construe the Old Regime as having closed itself in a fatal rigidity, refusing to find support in the representative organism, the Estates General, for almost two centuries. The whole political power emanated then from the royal councils and offices. During this period of time, the society excluded from power evolved along the lines of philosophical and scientific creation, producing a coryphaeus of rationalism, as is Descartes, or a European trend of rethinking the society, as is the Enlightenment. While the political mind remained rigid, the French national mind, through the civil society, was connected to the idea of progress, change, renewal of the social contract, without having experience or historical tradition in this respect. The affirmation of the values of liberty and equality is produced on this moving theoretical ground and, when the rupture occurs, they become the banner of the

Revolution. We have traced the way in which only the incessant revolutions will give authentic significance to these values, so as to make them national symbols of France, but at the painful cost of the crimes.

Both in the Old and the New Regime, France was and remained a country of values. This made possible for its people to affirm them against demagoguery, manipulations and impieties, at the same cost of the sacrifice by which they succeeded in asserting themselves.

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