Introduction

On 22 September 1793, the day of the autumn equinox, a new French Republican calendar was proclaimed. According to the gospel of the French Revolution, history began anew on the very day that a natural equality between day and night was observed. For Gilbert Romme, the calendar's chief architect, the calendar marked the epoch when the history of the French Revolution converged with nature itself, when natural equality and the power of human beings over their own history became one and the same. Thanks to the new calendar, the Revolution's rupture with the past was to be transformed into a wholly new experience of time, one made according to the joint dictates of nature and reason. Gone were the 'eighteen centuries' of despotism and tyranny. Sweeping away history in order to start time anew, the revolutionary calendar attempted to accomplish what had never been done before: make time express the *intentions* of history.

The scope of the new calendar's ambition was stunning. Lifting the French Revolution from the existing historical time line, the calendar established 1792 as the beginning of Year I. Months were renamed after the seasons. Brumaire was reminiscent of November fog; Germinal recalled the fecundity of an April spring; Thermidor, the heat of the July sun. Mirroring the recently devised metric division of space, the seven-day week was replaced by a new ten-day week called the *décade*. Gone was the memory of the Sabbath, when God himself took a rest. Time rejoined the secular world. Human time and its agents became the material through which a break with the religious and political structures of the past was to be accomplished.

The goal of the new calendar was nothing less than to create a new collective memory for the nascent French Republic. Under the ancien regime, each social order (aristocratic, religious, plebeian) had claimed to derive from different temporal origins. The aristocrats derived their origins from the Frankish invaders; the clergy administered religious time; the

plebeians were believed to have descended from the original inhabitants. Together they affirmed a pyramidal hierarchy of social relations that reflected the divine order of the universe in which the master was lord and the vassal, God's willing subject. The religious rites of the calendar unified these collective identities into one temporal order and gave them the appearance of belonging to a timeless, unchanging social order ratified by nature. The Republican calendar, in contrast, aimed to create a new collective memory based on the idea of a natural equality. It was only once the collective memories of the different social classes could be conceived as belonging to one and the same time – a universal time that had now become the time of the French Republican state – that the birth of a new society could be established.

The need, as one can imagine, was urgent. Already by fall 1793, when the calendar was first established, the French Revolution had celebrated multiple beginnings and had declared numerous endings. Unless the various interpretations could converge into one collective memory – a shared vision of both the Revolution's past as well as its future – the Republic's legitimacy was not established. This need was even more pressing with the overthrow and execution of the king. For rupture to be acknowledged as a symbol of regeneration, the past had to be globally rejected. To allow a variety of different memories was to suggest a return to different origins and allow the continuing threat of counter-revolution.

By providing the dates, the holidays – the *shared* experience of time – a new calendar seemed an obvious solution. This was because a calendar, in the words of Émile Benveniste, allowed the revolutionaries to create the experience that all these times belonged to one time, the same time, which is the sine qua non of collective life.[1] If the old calendar was able to integrate celestial patterns, biological rhythms, the seasons and cycles of social life into *one* collective experience of time, why could a new calendar not do the same for the Revolution? In a feat of revolutionary magic, the calendar was to transform the ongoing power struggles that threatened to capsize the new republic into a *common experience of time itself*. A new calendar, or so the revolutionaries reasoned, could provide a total vision of revolutionary time, one that would replace the past with a new source of time grounded in the French Republic. The calendar thus marks a crucial moment in which the events of the French Revolution came to be seen as belonging to their own time. Its goal – which, as Reinhart Koselleck has argued, later became that of historical narrative

[1] Benveniste, *Problems in general linguistics*, 71.

more generally[2] – was to reduce the multiple and competing narratives of the Revolution into a reflection of one time, the time of History.

Out of this epic struggle between two calendars – the one religious, upholding tradition, and the other remaking time according to the 'eternal present of nature and calculation'[3] and therefore secular – a new political order was established. Every single revolutionary government, up to and including Napoléon, relied on this calendar to mark a new, shared time. The Republican calendar therefore articulates, as no other artifact does, how a new political order attempted to establish itself through a new division of time. On the most general level, it shows how calendar time regulates the political and social order by providing us both with the time lines to synchronize historical events and the recurring patterns with which we remember the past. More specifically, it shows how calendar time played a crucial role in transforming the French Revolution from an event within the history of the French nation into a world-historical dividing line, a threshold separating an 'egalitarian' and 'secular' experience of time from a 'hierarchical' and 'religious' past. Its effects can still be felt today whenever the French Revolution is hailed as the beginning of a new 'world-historical epoch'; whenever rupture is defined as an essential feature of modernity; and whenever the French Revolution is said to have distinguished itself from all previous revolutions by adopting a new perspective on historical time. As Koselleck has so well articulated, part of what was new about the French Revolution was precisely this historically unprecedented determination to change calendar time.[4]

And yet despite its success in perpetuating the image of the Revolution as a unified historical event, the Republican calendar, as is well known, eventually failed to establish this new temporal order. This failure results in a somewhat contradictory situation: We have inherited the Revolution's premise of rupture and its claim to have inaugurated a new secular politics associated with a 'modern' time without taking into sufficient account the eventual failure of the calendar to institute this very premise, at least

[2] See especially Koselleck, 'Revolution, Rebellion, Aufruhr, Bürgerkrieg,' whose main points are reprised in 'Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution', 50: 'The first point that must be noted is the novel manner in which, since 1789, "revolution" has effectively been condensed to a *collective singular*. … As with the German concept of *Geschichte*, which is the form of 'history pure and simple' contained within itself the possibilities of all individual histories, Revolution congealed into a collective singular which appeared to unite within itself the course of all individual revolutions. Hence, revolution became a *metahistorical concept*, completely separated, however, from its naturalistic origin and henceforth charged with ordering recurrent convulsive experiences.'

[3] Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 624–5.

[4] See Koselleck, 'Remarks on the Revolutionary Calendar and Neue Zeit'; 'Time and History'.

in the way it was understood in its own present. The alleged triumph of secularism, in other words, masks its origins in a failed rupture with the past; modern time emerges out of the very religious and political conceptions it claims to leave behind.[5] Even less attention has been paid to the way that the calendar's failure exposes the many, and conflicting, ideas of revolutionary time that competed for historical prominence. After all, just because the revolutionaries invented a new calendar does not mean that the Revolution had in fact operated such a historical break with the past. The fact that the calendar was so successful in perpetuating the Revolution's self-image as a rupture with the past even as it failed foregrounds the difficulty of taking for granted any claims that the Revolution made about its historical origins. This book addresses this critical oversight by showing how the calendar can be used to undertake a task normally considered outside the purview of traditional historical narratives of the Revolution: the recovery of revolutionary time as it was experienced in its own present, in the absence of the historical narratives that would subsequently define its origins and outcomes and circumscribe the epoch to which it belonged.

This book's central claim is that the French Revolution, while often studied as a political, social, or cultural event, instead poses primarily a problem in the history of representations of time. Although a cliché, it is nonetheless true to claim that the French Revolution effectuated a rupture with the past and a new sense of time. From the informal and largely spontaneous proclamation of 14 July 1789 as the beginning of Year I to the institution of the actual Republican calendar in 1793, 'new time' was the order of the day. But while scholars have been sensitive to the symbolic aspect of new time – Lynn Hunt on revolutionary symbolism and Mona Ozouf on the Revolution's festivals are two prominent examples[6] – there has been little extended treatment of how the revolutionary calendar functioned as an 'intended future' for the Revolution.[7] This is all the more surprising given that the calendar, instituted by the Jacobin government in 1793 and revived by every revolutionary government for nearly thirteen years, remained a potent symbol of political, social and religious power for so long. Rather than take the failure of the Republican calendar for granted, this book argues that the calendar was abandoned not

[5] See Milo, *Trahir le temps (Histoire)*, for the role of the Republican calendar in popularizing the new division of time by centuries, even if this was not its intent.
[6] Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*; Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire, 1789–1799*.
[7] A notable exception is Baczko, *Lumières de l'utopie*, which I discuss later.

because it was bereft of meaning but because it had accumulated too many diverging interpretations of the Revolution. It thus turns the question of the revolutionary calendar on its head to ask: What would happen to our vision of revolutionary history if we took seriously the fact that the Republican calendar was in place for nearly thirteen years? And what does the calendar's relatively long decay tell us about the instability of the categories of 'past' and 'future' during this period?

The calendar's very failure to institute the premise of new time, I argue, transformed it into a living document that resonates with all the different struggles over the meaning of time that punctuated the Revolution's self-image. This monumental concentration of state energy over a calendar reveals the strength of the revolutionary belief in the symbolic power of time. To be sure, much of the support for the calendar derived from the elite and included some of the most prominent scientists, astronomers, artists, bankers, composers and writers of the late eighteenth century. While this might call for some more limited claims about the calendar's importance, I suggest on the contrary that this overwhelming support foregrounds precisely what is fascinating about this story: How could something as drastic as a change in calendar time come to reflect the cultural assumptions of an entire ruling elite? What did such a control over the experience of time mean for the revolutionaries? And what kind of power, symbolic and real, would a successful calendar have allowed them to establish? Galvanizing a flurry of speeches, pamphlets, decrees, and reforms the calendar served as a point of consensus as well as a heated source of dispute as each faction attempted to project its own concept of revolutionary change through it. And yet despite such emotional investment, the calendar was eventually discarded without so much as a whimper or sign of opposition. Nothing is more evocative of the extremely close relationship between the political elite and the changing ideology of the French Revolution than this calendar, which, as Michael Meinzer has observed, was instituted without opposition and abandoned without difficulty.[8]

By recovering the multiple and conflicting experiences of time during the revolutionary period, this book aims to go beyond conventional historiography to reconstruct what can be best described as a seismogram of revolutionary time. I do this by showing how the calendar carried the stain of events that were diversely perceived, embellished or repressed as they unfolded in time. The different dates that rose to prominence over

[8] See Meinzer, 'Der Französische Revolutionskalendar und die, Neue Zeit' 22–60.

the course of the calendar's many incarnations – some, like 9 Thermidor and 18 Brumaire, to remain; others to recede – appear as so many peaks or intensities of time. Moments that attract the most attention and amass the most interpretative energy stand as symptoms of the greatest divergence between the Revolution's ideal time and the lived experience of events.

But the Republican calendar is more than a simple testament to what Mona Ozouf has neatly characterized as the difference between 'temps voulu' and 'temps vécu'. For the calendar's metamorphoses also reveal how the temporal demarcations used in most conventional accounts of the French Revolution (Year II, 9 Thermidor as the 'end' of the Terror, 18 Brumaire as the 'end' of the Revolution and so forth) cannot be considered 'objective' because they originated as politically contested categories used by the various factions to distinguish themselves from each other. To give just one example, Françoise Brunel has shown how 9 Thermidor, conventionally understood to herald the 'end of the Terror', was only established as such after the fact, by revolutionaries seeking to disclaim responsibility for the events of the previous year.[9] That 9 Thermidor was followed by a renewed commitment to the *fêtes décadaires* demonstrates the extent to which any such 'turning point' was established not just by appeal to the logic of events but also to a time of commitment. Over and over again, the various revolutionary factions sought to regain control over the Revolution by reiterating their commitment to a total revolution, represented by the new calendar. (Significantly, this commitment was expressed as a unity of time precisely in those moments when it failed to materialize as a functional political space).

Beyond establishing the sequence of events, therefore, recovering this time of commitment requires a deeper engagement with the importance of the new calendar for the revolutionaries. Ozouf has shown the extent to which the Revolution attempted to recreate a 'festive enlightenment' in which outside natural changes, nothing marked the hours. But it cannot be emphasized enough the extent to which the solar myth – the age-old association of terrestrial with celestial power – is essentially a myth about calendar time. The revolutionary desire to re-establish human society according to natural measures is thus inseparable from a more widespread belief, common in the radical intellectual spheres of the late Enlightenment, that the origins of all social and religious institutions can be traced to a time in which man lived in harmony with nature; in which

[9] Brunel, *Thermidor ou la chute de Robespierre*, 41, 128.

life and death, work and rest, followed the natural rhythms of day and night, the changes of the seasons and the natural stages of human life from birth to death. Even as it embodied a natural, solar, cyclical time, however, the Republican calendar also transposed a Christ-like image onto the astronomical revolutions. The new time line marked the death of the old order and the birth of the new. In this sense, the Republican calendar was crucial in combining two aspects of revolutionary time that proved, in the end, to be at odds: the belief in history as linear progress and the desire for a collective moral and political regeneration that can only take place in a cyclical time. This double-sided aspect of calendar time thus raises further key questions addressed by this book: How did a Revolution that first staged itself as regeneration, that is, as a restoration of a better past, come to think of itself under the symbol of rupture? In other words, how did a Revolution that had turned to a new calendar in order to reintegrate history into the natural and cyclical time of planetary 'revolutions' come to define itself as an irreversible and linear change? And what was the process by which these many ostensibly 'natural revolutions' came to be reduced to the one Revolution that now moved in the linear and homogeneous time of History?

One of the principal aims of this book thus is to challenge the conventional periodization of the French Revolution by reintegrating the Revolution into its own intended time frame, which was cosmic and universal. Most studies of the revolutionary calendar have treated it as a historical object, whether narrowly attributing it to the historical moment of Year II or more broadly relating it to a cultural logic of rationalization, revolutionary regeneration or even the utopian Enlightenment.[10] This book, however, adopts a different approach. Rather than assume our contemporary understanding of the Revolution as an event occurring exclusively in linear, chronological time, I use the calendar to reintegrate the Revolution in its *imagined* time frame, in which it projected itself as an

[10] See Shaw, *Time and the French Revolution*; Shusterman, *Religion and the Politics of Time*; Meinzer, *Der französische Revolutionskalendar (1792–1805)*, 'Der Französische Revolutionskalendar und die, Neue Zeit'; Bianchi, 'La "Bataille du Calendrier" ou le décadi contre le dimanche: Nouvelles approches pour la reception du calendrier républicain en milieu rural'; Ozouf, 'Calendrier révolutionnaire'; Baczko 'Le calendrier républicain'; Marie-Hélène and Michel Froeschlé-Chopard, 'Le calendrier républicain, une nécessité idéologique et/ou scientifique'; Brotherston, 'The Republican Calendar: A Diagnostic of the French Revolution'; Friguglietti, 'Gilbert Romme and the making of the French Republican calendar', 'The Social and Religious Consequences of the French Revolutionary Calendar' (Ph.D diss); Zerubavel, 'The French Republican Calendar: A Case Study in the Sociology of Time'; Andrews, 'Making the Revolutionary Calendar'. For rationalization of the future see William Max Nelson, 'The Weapon of Time: *Constructing the Future in France, 1750 to Year 1*. (Ph.D diss. UCLA).

axis of world history. In other words, I am suggesting that any analysis of revolutionary time has to take into account two different time frames: the global and cosmological calendar time that was the French Revolution's *imagined* time frame and the much shorter local time frame of revolutionary history itself, a period crowded with almost too many conflicting dates and events.

By accounting for these two time frames, this book shows how the calendar neatly distils a phenomenon common to all revolutions, which is to posit both rupture and continuity, or a return to origins. What might remain a general methodological challenge in studies of the French Revolution – how to understand time from the vantage point of those who lived it, as well as the modern vantage point of historical distance – becomes, in the case of the French revolutionary calendar, an empirical struggle. It is not surprising in this regard that the Terror, as Jean-Clément Martin has observed, remains a period without clearly defined historical dates.[11] There is no consensus on either the beginning or the end of the Terror because it is impossible to separate the meaning and significance of events from their 'projected future'. The analytical lens of the calendar thus enables the recovery of two time lines – the conventional chronological time line of events as derived from the historical record and the imagined time frame through which the different revolutionary factions reinterpreted and realigned events in light of future expectations. To help the reader navigate these two time frames, I have appended a double chronology to this book. Every event is represented as belonging to both time frames, that of the Republican calendar with its endlessly reiterated 'beginnings' and 'ends', and that of our own Gregorian calendar, the conventional way for representing revolutionary history.

Calendar Time and the Problem of Revolutionary Intention

Calendars of course are about much more than history because they essentially concern the division and periodization of time itself. They oblige us to adopt a far longer timescale than the one normally associated with the French Revolution and to question the extent to which modern history presupposes, and indeed relies upon, a certain understanding of calendar time. In recent years, this increasing engagement with modernity as a historical construct has led a number of prominent scholars, in a

[11] Martin, *Violence et Révolution*, 189.

variety of fields, to criticize what they call 'presentism', the application of a contemporary perspective or time schema on events of the past.[12] Today this modern time schema is inseparable from a globalized Gregorian calendar. However, as the Republican calendar so well demonstrates, this was never the only candidate for 'modern time'. To understand how the Revolution was constructed in its own present, therefore, also means taking seriously a competing understanding of modernity than the one that has prevailed.

Scholars as diverse as Anthony Grafton, Lynn Hunt and Penelope Corfield have all recently insisted that calendars are about much more than simply measuring time.[13] It is because the calendar is both humanly constructed as well as dependent on forces of nature beyond human control that it defies the simple dualisms so often used to differentiate religion from history, history from nature, and linear from cyclical time. On the one hand, calendar time differs from historiography by relying on the recurrence of natural phenomena to measure what we experience in our lives as an unrepeatable flow of events. Throughout history there have been different calendars, but all of them rely on some form of cyclical time to provide standardized reference points: the solar cycle for the year, the lunar phases for the month or the alternation of shadow and light for night from day. These recurring rhythms not only regulate human life and social organization, but also guarantee the 'objectivity' and 'universality' of historical time.

On the other hand, the calendar does not just belong to the cyclical time of nature; it also belongs to human history. This is because all calendars presuppose a ground zero from which events are dated. All calendars, in other words, date their time line from a foundational event in human history, even though this theoretical starting point is usually

[12] A by no means exhaustive list includes Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité*; Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty*; Gumbrecht, *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time*; Sewell, *Logics of History*. Closer to the revolutionary period, Fritzsche has emphasized the emotional impact of revolutionary upheaval in European historical consciousness, *Stranded in the Present*; Hans Lüsebrink and Rolf Reichardt have reconstructed the multiplicity of symbolic meanings of rupture in *The Bastille*.

[13] See Rosenberg and Grafton, *The Cartographies of Time*; Grafton, *What Was History;* Hunt *Measuring Time/Making History*; Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History*; see also Elias, *Time: An Essay*, Maiello *Storia del calendario*, the highly influential earlier work by Pomian, *L'ordre du temps* and the more recent collection *Les Calendriers: Leurs enjeux dans l'espace et dans le temps*. There is a much more extensive literature on time in anthropology and sociology than in historical science proper, which has only recently seen an upsurge of interest. See Munn, 'The Cultural Anthropology of Time'. See also the discussion in Hunt, *Measuring Time/Making History*, 16–18.

only consecrated many years later.[14] This is the case of the Christian calendar, which was instituted several centuries after Christ's birth when the emperor Constantine Christianized the Julian calendar established by Julius Caesar, itself originally imported from Egypt where the true length of the solar year had first been established in the Mediterranean world. As Denis Feeney has noted, the Julian calendar represented a 'watershed' in the organization of time, eventually extended to the modern world, because it was the first to associate the calendar 'exclusively with measuring time'.[15] Whereas before calendars reflected the religious and civic festivals of cities and communities, all of which had their own separate calendars, after the Julian reform the calendar became what it is considered to be today: solely an instrument of measuring time.

Since this is the calendar that the revolutionaries tried to overturn, it is worth dwelling here a moment. In his bid to institute Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, Constantine renamed the days of the week, fixed Easter, attributed saints to the days and established Sunday as the official day of rest (this last was a compromise between Christians and the worshippers of Mithra, whose day was Sunday, and had the advantage of being distinct from the Jewish Sabbath). Christianizing the Julian calendar enabled Constantine to ground the first Christian political state in a geographical and temporal unity. Historical chronology, however, was still marked according to the reigns of emperors, indicating the subordination of religion to the political time of the state. It was not until after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, when a thoroughly Christian society was established in Western Europe, that a new chronology counting the years from the birth of Christ finally came into official use.

Martin Malia is one historian who has recently argued for the importance of analyzing the Revolution by going backward and forward in time. Adopting a millennial time frame, Malia traces the revolutionary impulse back to the year 1000, when a distinctive European civilization emerged and any revolt was directed at the church, the 'all-embracing unit of European society'.[16] Instead of remaining subordinated to the state, as it was under Constantine, Christianity came to replace the empire as the primary political and social force. As Malia notes, changes in the political order were marked by changes in calendar time. Years were now counted from the birth of Christ rather than using the regnal years of the

[14] Couderc, *Le Calendrier*, 49. [15] Feeney, *Caesar's Calendar*, 193–6.
[16] Malia, *History's Locomotives*, 19.