The French Republican Calendar: Time, History and the Revolutionary Event

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Abstract: This paper recovers the power, real and symbolic, that the French revolutionaries associated with calendar time. The Republican calendar was crucial in establishing the French Revolution as an irreversible rupture with the past but never succeeded as a viable time-frame. Drawing on this double-sided aspect of revolutionary time, this paper demonstrates some of the difficulties in conflating revolutionary rupture with a ‘modern’ experience of time. It does so by contrasting the Revolution’s intentional time-frame, which was global and cosmological, with the shorter historical time-frame of revolutionary events, in which the Revolution failed to institute a total rupture with the past.

Keywords: French Revolution, calendars, rupture, cyclical time, modernity, cosmology

The increasing engagement with ‘modernity’ as a historical construct has led a number of prominent scholars, in a variety of fields, to voice the conviction that time and history need to be thought of together. One effect of this rethinking has been an increased scrutiny of the impact of the modern time schema – which today is inseparable from a globalised Gregorian calendar – on our historical account of events in the past. But the Christian calendar was never the only candidate for the modern time schema. As the famous example of Year I of the French Revolution demonstrates, other competing calendars were imagined as being more directly linked to a ‘modern’ understanding of history as a rupture and break with the past.

The French Republican calendar in particular tried to do what no other calendar had done: to make time express the intentions of history. Lifting the Revolution from the existing timeline, it established 22 September 1792 as the beginning of Year II. Months were named after the seasons, and the seven-day week was replaced by the ten-day décade, modelled on the recently instituted metric system. Gone was the day of the Sabbath, when God himself took a rest. Human time was now the material through which a break with the religious and political structures of the past was to be accomplished. By separating an ‘egalitarian’ and ‘secular’ experience of time from a ‘hierarchical’ and ‘religious’ past, the French Republican calendar played a crucial role in proclaiming the French Revolution as a ‘threshold’ event that for ever separated the ancien régime from a modern experience of time. The effects of the calendar’s premise of total rupture 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 Reinhart Koselleck so well articulated, part of what was new about the French Revolution was precisely this historically unprecedented determination to change calendar time.
But while the Republican calendar remained a potent symbol of political, scientific and religious power for nearly thirteen years, it never succeeded as a viable time-frame. Instituted by the Jacobin government in 1793, and revived by every single revolutionary government up to and including Napoleon, the calendar, as Mona Ozouf has shown, played a crucial role in consolidating the Revolution as an event that existed ‘en bloc’. However, its long demise makes equally clear the difficulties of conflating the revolutionary premise of rupture with a ‘modern’ experience of time. It forces us to acknowledge that, even as the French Revolution heralded a new understanding of history as something consciously shaped by human will, it did so within an intellectual context and time-frame that did not survive the revolutionary period. Indeed, it is precisely this double legacy as both success and failure that makes the Republican calendar a privileged object to reassess the relation between rupture and continuity during this period. How did a revolution that had first conceived itself as restoring the cyclical and natural time of planetary revolutions come to imagine itself as a linear and irreversible change?

In what follows, I want to recover some of these competing definitions of ‘new time’ suggested by the Republican calendar. Rather than assume our current understanding of the French Revolution as an event that unfolded exclusively in the linear, chronological time of history, I want to consider how our understanding of the French Revolution might change if we took seriously its own imagined time-frame. Most studies of the French Republican 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 rationalisation, revolutionary regeneration or even the utopian Enlightenment. This essay seeks instead to recontextualise the Revolution’s premise of rupture within the full range of significance associated with a natural, cosmological time. It seeks to show how the calendar, precisely because it incarnated values and aspirations, reveals multiple trajectories relating past and future. Even if not all of these trajectories ended up materialising, they nonetheless form an essential aspect of how the revolutionaries perceived their own present as a potential present, open to futures other than the one that eventually came to pass. As I will suggest, any analysis of revolutionary time must take into account two different time-frames: the global and cosmological calendar time that was the Revolution’s intentional time-frame and the much shorter, local, time-frame of revolutionary history in which the Revolution failed to institute its premise of a total break, and rupture, with the past.

I. Calendar Time

We cannot understand the magnitude of change attempted by the French Revolution without understanding the deep fixity of the concepts it tried to abolish. With the French Republican calendar every aspect of people’s relation to time – religious, political, social and scientific – was to be overturned. That the revolutionaries chose to represent their ambition for fundamental change in the form of a calendar should come as no surprise. A calendar, after all, has synthesised scientific knowledge, religious belief and political will for millennia in almost all cultures and civilisations around the world. If we further consider that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Julian and Gregorian calendars were both officially in use (with Protestant countries only slowly accepting ‘Papal’ reform), then this search for a universally applicable calendar based on reason rather than religion appears not just compelling but also eminently sensible. What is
surprising, however, is that they thought they could substitute a calendar that had evolved incrementally, over millennia, with a new calendar representing a new time.

To understand how this came about, we need to situate the origins of the Republican calendar within two understandings of ‘new time’ operant in the eighteenth century: first, ‘new time’ understood as ‘une ère nouvelle’, the fixed point from which a new chronology commences, analogous to the originary or ‘first’ time of a new civilisation (‘ère chrétienne’, ‘ère musulmane’); and second, ‘new time’ in the more colloquial sense of ‘une nouvelle’, designating whatever was newest and most up to date. Both of these stem from an eighteenth-century understanding of calendar time. In erudite circles the calendar was hailed as the most archaic historical artefact, capable of going ‘beyond’ history to the original time of human civilisations, while for the wider reading public the popular almanac became a privileged vehicle not just to communicate whatever was ‘new’ but also to challenge the political and cultural construction of time. In what follows, I will show how the idea of restructuring authoritative time-frames emerged in the context of a more general reflection on the union of religious and political power through calendar time among radical eighteenth-century writers and activists.

As Penelope Corfield has noted, although there have been many different calendars throughout human history, all calendars ‘share natural parameters that influence the shape of time across civilizations’. These natural measures are associated with the length of the day, month and year. Since the beginning of human civilisations, synchronising these three cycles has always been a challenge. Some cultures have opted for a lunar calendar (for example, the Mesopotamian, early Roman and Muslim calendars), others for a solar calendar (notably the ancient Mayan and Egyptian calendars). The Christian calendar, exported around the world today, is essentially a solar calendar, the lunar months being merely a symbolic vestige of an older way of calculating time. Its origins are multiple: the twenty-four-hour day and planetary gods are Mesopotamian; the length of the solar year is Egyptian; the celebration of the Sabbath on the seventh day is Jewish. Its evolution was very long. It achieved its Christian form in AD 325, when Constantine instituted Christianity as a state religion by renaming the days of the week, fixing the calculation that determined the date of Easter, attributing saints to the days and establishing Sunday as the official day of rest. But it was not until the medieval period that the days were numbered and that a new chronology, dating from Year I (the year of Christ’s birth), was finally established.

For thinkers in the eighteenth century, to posit a common measure of time was to posit a universal standard that allowed the different cultures and civilisations of human history to be compared. Thanks to their universality and convertibility, calendars were hailed as outstanding source documents that enabled thinkers to go beyond the historical record to consider the conditions under which literate and calendar-based civilisations first emerged. It is hard to imagine today just how heated the debate over calendar time was in the eighteenth century. Ever since the discovery of the New World and of new calendars – some of which, such as the Chinese calendar, had timelines longer than the Christian chronology – there had been an increasing awareness of the deficiency of the Christian calendar. The ability to compare different calendrical systems not only cast doubt on Biblical chronology; it also necessitated the development of a universal frame of reference that encompassed all religions and civilisations.

Erudite thinkers such as Antoine Court de Gébelin popularised the notion that the astronomical calendar was one such universal frame, enabling a new ‘rational’ interpretation of religion. In his best-selling Histoire du monde primitif he argued that the almanac was the original allegory of all civilisation because it joined together astronomy
and agriculture. Claiming that ‘une histoire complète de l’Almanach seroit donc un précieux canevas pour l’Histoire du genre humain’, Court de Gébelin associated ancient calendars with the original time of state formation, which he traced to the development of agrarian societies in the ancient Near East. From festive cycles to mythology, from religion to labour, all aspects of social organisation were synchronised by calendar time. Court de Gébelin even derived the political organisation of ancient societies from the astronomical revolutions of the planets, arguing that in ancient societies kings considered themselves children of the sun, inscribing their names on to the twelve months of the year.

Court de Gébelin was not the only one privileging calendar time as the key to unlocking a lost, historical past. Struck by the concordances between the ancient calendars of peoples who otherwise had little historical contact, the astronomer and future mayor of revolutionary Paris, Jean-Sylvain Bailly, speculated that the first astronomical calculations derived from India. Like many thinkers, he was fascinated with the centrality of the zodiac in different religions and cultures of the ancient world. Whereas Bailly wanted to find a single historical origin for the zodiac dating from a specific time and place, his friend and interlocutor Rabaut de St Etienne insisted on an allegorical understanding of the zodiac and other mythologies from the ancient world. Despite their differences, the two men shared the conviction that the calendar suggested common civilisational origins because it represented the dual constraints of society and nature, valid for all civilisations. There might be as many different calendars as there were cosmologies in human history, but in each case a calendar ensured that natural patterns and social roles intertwined.

By piecing together the fragments of antiquity into one globalising framework – one original, uniform time – calendars enabled erudite thinkers to transfer a concept of totality from religion to society. In their speculative accounts of the origins of civilisation reason replaced religion, but this reason was still imagined as belonging to a cosmological totality, in which natural constraints were taken to be cognitive and social constraints. This enabled thinkers to combine a sceptical attitude towards the ‘authority’ of religion with a belief that nature functioned as an enabling constraint on historical development. In this way the myth of an original golden age, whose evidence was derived not from any verifiable historical record but from the myths and fables of antiquity, received validation from the latest findings of astronomy and science.

But it was perhaps Constantin-François Volney who developed most fully the implications of calendar time for an ‘enlightened’ understanding of the relation between religion and reason. In his *Les ruines, ou méditation sur les révolutions des empires* Volney argued that the synchronisation of the solar year with the lunar months was a key technology that enabled the emergence of large-scale agriculture and centralised state organisation in the ancient world. Complex solar calendars enabled control over the harvest – that is, over cycles of abundance and famine – which, in turn, led to the emergence of a central authority and an ‘official’ great religion which ensured that astronomer-priests also controlled the economic means of production. He located the beginnings of civilisation over 15,000 years ago in ancient Egypt, one of the earliest literate societies, where the world’s first solar calendar emerged.

That the Egyptian priests chose to keep the true length of the solar year a secret, relying on a different ‘religious’ calendar for civil use, was just one more proof, for Volney and other like-minded thinkers, that control over time was essential for the emergence of a transcendental religion and centralised authority. This scandal of the two calendars – a solar, natural one that was kept secret and a religious calendar that was used for civic
time – was a recurring trope in the eighteenth century. It was central to the master narrative of enlightenment, in which religious phenomena were unmasked as projections of political power: in particular, the coercive authority wielded by priests. It was not just in ancient Egypt: the lunar calendar of ancient Rome had also been rife with abuse. By controlling when the extra twenty-seven-day month was added, the pontifices, the body of priests, also controlled when assemblies met, wars were fought, taxes paid and officers elected. Indeed, the Julian calendar was instituted precisely to establish a universal time that would be independent of priests or kings. According to Denis Feeney, Caesar’s calendar (itself based on a solar calendar imported from Egypt) represented a ‘watershed’ in the organisation of time, eventually extended to the modern world, because it was the first to associate the calendar ‘exclusively with measuring time’.

If the solar calendar had been restored once before, it could happen again, once the Gregorian calendar was stripped of its religious symbolism to reveal the natural calendar that lay beneath it. Radical writers such as Charles-François Dupuis and the Baron d’Holbach took this logic one step further, postulating that all monotheistic religions originated in a solar myth and a calendar of natural time. Implicit in this radicalisation of the solar myth was an anthropocentric conception of the universe. If man created religion to reflect the social order to which he belonged, then he could also intervene and change it.

Here we find thus two aspects of the revolutionary will – voluntarism (the belief that one can change the course of history) and determinism (the belief that, given the past and the natural order, there is one unique future for the world) – articulated in the context of an extended thinking on calendar time. These beliefs, which at first glance appear incompatible, are compatible if considered from the perspective of both history and nature. One changes the course of history by going back to its origins, for the earliest stages of history are both closest to nature and indicate most clearly how history could be otherwise. The solar myth was thus not simply hailed as a universal code, a key to unlocking the basic structures of all religions; it also stood for freedom from a religious control over time – that is, for a return to a prior time that would be the groundwork for a new beginning.

Given this backdrop vision of time and history, we can better discern the legitimacy the revolutionaries hoped to obtain from calendar time. First, it cannot be emphasised enough that these solar myths were not intended to be innovative but aimed to restore the true source of time in the astronomical layer of the Julian calendar that preceded the calendar’s Christianisation. Second, this ideal of a uniform ‘transparent’ time was directly associated with self-governance. Mona Ozouf has traced the origins of the revolutionary calendar to an entire ‘festive literature’ of enlightenment that evoked this myth of a natural time in which, outside the periodic changes of the seasons and the natural stages of human life, nothing marked the hours. When Rousseau waxed lyrical about a civil religion based on purely natural sentiments or Bernardin de St Pierre evoked almanacs of ‘natural time’, freedom from spiritual and temporal authority took the form of a reinsertion of human history into a cyclical, and cosmological, time of nature. New time in this sense was associated not with endless historical differentiation but with a return to a unitary, trans-historical measure. Third, and finally, a reformed calendar enabled the convergence of a naïve belief in the coercive power of nature with a cynical attitude that any political order that claimed to reflect a divine, eternal hierarchy was itself just another ‘myth’ or deception.

But perhaps the most salient point about all these theories of a ‘new era’ was that they were imagined by thinkers and writers who could in no way foresee or imagine the actual
events of the French Revolution. As a result, the birth of a new time was conceived in a manner that was resolutely backwards-oriented as well as performative in nature. Humans could enact and relive it because this original time had always been there, the eternal substrate of all genuine sociability. This desire to combine theory and practice became the mandate of the Musée de Paris, an erudite society that was an offshoot of the famous Loge des Neuf Soeurs, founded by the astronomer Jérôme-François Lalande and inspired by Helvétius. Like the larger and more famous Loge des Neuf Soeurs, the Musée de Paris opposed the hermetic, occultist pretensions of the other Masonic lodges in favour of the kind of rational, symbolic and allegorical understanding of antiquity promoted by Court de Gébelin, Lalande and other eminent members. Many of the future supporters of calendar reform would have gathered there, and today the society is chiefly remembered for the role it played in the establishment of France’s higher education system after the Revolution. (Eleven of its members would go on to constitute the Institut National.) This erudite society not only debated the merits of the various calendars; it also claimed to embody a natural sociability based on a natural time. In addition to practising an egalitarian solidarity, the society celebrated the summer solstice,\textsuperscript{23} and its resident poet, Jean-Antoine Roucher, devised an epic calendar poem, entitled \textit{Les mois}, which included an appendix outlining all the various erudite debates on the solar myth, citing the Abbé de la Pluche, Court de Gébelin and others.\textsuperscript{24} That this poem was recited to much acclaim during Voltaire’s funeral celebrations demonstrates the centrality of calendar time to the social and intellectual debates of the late enlightenment.\textsuperscript{25} As Michael Meinzer has observed, it is precisely because the Republican calendar reflected the cultural assumptions shared by the new ruling elite that something as radical as a new calendar came to be adopted with so little political opposition.\textsuperscript{26}

In this regard, the desire to reform the calendar, as expressed in French radical circles, differs from other challenges to the Gregorian calendar across Europe, most notably when Pope Gregory XIII attempted to correct the Julian calendar, which was eleven minutes too long for the solar year. As is well known, the Protestant countries initially rejected Gregory’s reform as an unacceptable intrusion of papal power into civil time.\textsuperscript{27} If resistance to the Papacy meant that Protestant countries such as England floated schemes for a radically reformed calendar almost a century before the French Republican reform,\textsuperscript{28} it was mainly in order to keep civic time independent of spiritual authority. With the French Republican calendar, however, the task became altogether something more. The solar myth was evoked not simply as a way to keep civic time independent of spiritual authority, but against religious authority \textit{tout court}.

However, in seeking to re-inhabit a solar myth that had been diverted, proponents of calendar reform ended up reproducing many of the characteristics of the Christian calendar that they defined themselves against. This included privileging a cyclical understanding of historical time and sharing the belief that a calendar functions as an authoritative structure by setting itself against history, against the passage of time, even as it glorifies the experiences of a specific historical group.\textsuperscript{29} In the Christian calendar authority was wielded by appropriating natural referents (the seasons, the sun, the moon) in the service of socially constructed units of time. Its chief units of time were the liturgical cycle, based on Christ’s life and passion, and the Judeo-Christian seven-day week – the one unit of time that, as Eviatar Zerubavel has noted, has no natural correlate.\textsuperscript{30} The Christian year reproduced the order and succession of Christ’s life, death and resurrection. The weekly cycle celebrated Mass or the Eucharist each Sunday, commemorating Christ’s last supper. Finally, the saints’ days reminded followers of all who contributed to the founding of the Church and the dissemination of the Christian faith. As
I discuss below, the future revolutionaries would eventually seek from astronomy and science a very similar experience of calendar time – of social unity, harmony between natural and agricultural cycles, and an emotional attachment to a totalising life-world.

So far, I have emphasised the intellectual origins of the revolutionary calendar in erudite circles in which the myth of an original calendar time was used to undermine the authority of the Church. But the revolutionary calendar also had roots in a more popular conception of time that had always existed alongside the liturgical calendar. This was the time of the almanac, the first secular ‘book’ to be widely published and read alongside religious literature. Readily available and consulted by all, the almanac was one of the first genres to express the temporality of everyday life. It is here, in an increasingly polemical almanac culture, that the organisation of the year came to be understood as something socially constructed and hence open to contestation. Let us now consider the second meaning of new time encapsulated by the calendar structure, as whatever was latest and most up to date.

II. Revolutionary Almanacs and Sylvain Maréchal

In the beginning the almanac was not much more than a simple calendar, marking the months, the days and festivals of the Church. Over the course of several centuries, and especially with the development of the printing press, it developed into an independent genre in its own right. Unlike the liturgical calendar, which was primarily concerned with rendering visible and palpable a religious belief that found form in the narrative of Christ’s life, death and resurrection, the almanac focused on imparting essential knowledge about life as it was lived. Designed for people who read little or not at all, the almanac associated time with concrete activities, with the ‘popular’ reason of those who could barely read but who could nonetheless reason and think. In the almanac the primary temporal unit was not Christ’s life and death, nor the linear conception of history that it implied, but quite simply the calendar year. This was reflected allegorically, insofar as the four seasons reflected the four stages of a man’s life, and practically, insofar as each season was associated with work and labour. By offering predictions, advice and everyday hints about what to do in each month of the year, the almanac provided some semblance of control over time. An unforeseen and unpredictable future was thus rendered less terrifying by being more livable.

By the eighteenth century, the calendar structure of the almanac was used to communicate all sorts of ‘news’ about the preceding year, often taking the form of gossip, stories, satires and songs. Overlapping with both the journal and the pamphlet – both novel kinds of print media – the almanac stood out for its ability to register changing attitudes to time. As the Encyclopédie notes, by the eighteenth century almanacs had started to function as personal agendas. Smaller and cheaper, they began to resemble something more like our pocket calendars today. Ever since Henri III forbade astrological predictions in almanacs, telling time had become a scientific endeavour. Whereas previously almanacs advertised themselves as containing the predictions of Nostradamus, medical doctor to the king, or other famous astrologers, now they prided themselves on following the calculations of Tycho Brahe or Johannes Kepler. As the Encyclopédie proclaimed, perhaps too optimistically, ‘quoique nous voyions encore plusieurs almanachs remplis de ces sortes de prédictions, à peine le plus bas peuple y ajoute-t-il quelque foi.’

The fact that the reading sphere of the almanac – the sphere of ‘popular’ or ‘people’s reason’ – was wider than that of the bourgeois public sphere made almanacs the ideal vehicles for communicating new political and social ideas. Already before the Revolution
the wide variety of almanacs indicated the extent to which the organisation of time had become something of an individual choice, a trend especially pronounced in libertine almanacs that prided themselves on a frivolous, even subversive, attitude to authority.\(^{35}\) With the Revolution, almanacs quickly became associated with the rival opinions of various political groups, all of which claimed to represent the ‘true’ meaning of current events.\(^{36}\) Indeed, one important reason why the Republican calendar would eventually have such problems in projecting itself as an ‘official’ and ‘universal’ representation of time, is that it too was the offspring of this polemical almanac tradition.

The prototype of the revolutionary calendar is the *Almanach des honnêtes gens* of 1788, devised by the future revolutionary militant Sylvain Maréchal. An important revolutionary figure in his own right, Maréchal would go on to become the editor of the *Révolutions de Paris*, the Revolution’s most radical newspaper, choreographer of the revolutionary festivals under Robespierre, author of the most notorious play of Year II and co-author with Babeuf of the *Manifesto of Equals*. This almanac, part of a series of publications designed to attract notoriety, was the first to represent the contemporary present as the beginning of a new epoch. Dated ‘Year One of the Reign of Reason’, it erased the Christian chronology and also replaced the saints of the Gregorian calendar with secular and non-Christian figures in an attempt to revise the very foundations of Christianity. The venerable saints were substituted by a panoply of figures that ranged from materialist philosophers (Hélvetius, Toland) to avowed or suspected atheists (Fréret, Bayle, Spinoza) to courtesans (Ninon de Lenclos) to revered kings (Henri IV, Louis IX). Moses featured alongside Mahomet, Diogenes shared a day with Rousseau, and Agnès Sorel, the mistress of Charles VII, found a place alongside Brutus, slayer of Julius Caesar. Jesus Christ was even made to share his birthday with Newton, also famously born on 25 December.

All the elements that would characterise the subsequent Republican calendar were already present in this almanac: the ten-day week, the ‘numerical’ months, the secular festivals, the beginning of the new year in springtime and the belief that rupture would release a new source of time that would regenerate all of mankind. In Maréchal’s almanac a wilfully personal construction of time was turned against the authoritative time-frame of the Christian calendar. Where the Christian calendar had established its cultural hegemony over a long process of acculturation, Maréchal’s almanac claimed to make history anew by the stroke of a pen. Where the Christian calendar went forward in time, naturalising its authority by adding to the astronomical layers of the Roman calendar and adapting itself to pagan festivals already in place, Maréchal’s almanac worked backwards, stripping the Christian calendar of its significance to reveal the purely astronomical time beneath it. Finally, where the Christian calendar established Christ’s birth as Year I of a new chronology after many centuries, when the entire Western world had come to sense the need for a new timeline, Maréchal’s almanac declared the year to come as a new beginning. With complete disregard for the immense historical process presupposed by the Christian calendar (and probably all calendars), his almanac privileged the time of a perpetual present. There were no peaks or troughs, no distinction between sacred and profane days. Instead, an empty grid of identically repeating days indicated that time was equal for everyone.

The enormous changes to the measurement and experience of time that were established slowly and unevenly over the course of several centuries\(^{37}\) now appeared as social values. David S. Landes has described how scientific determinism, the increasing ability to measure and control time, went hand in hand with voluntarism, the increasing ability to orient oneself in time without obeying the dictates of the Church.\(^{38}\) Units of time
were measured with ever greater precision. They became quantitative, as opposed to qualitative, categories that could be used by everyone individually rather than embodying a public, and communal, experience of time. In Maréchal’s almanac these changing attitudes towards time were directed against the authoritative framework of the Church calendar. Proclaiming that even this calendar was open to revision, Maréchal called upon everyone to order their own time and values voluntarily. His almanac worked best, he told his readers, if everyone made their own. As an example he pointed to 21 October, a day dedicated to his own father, and advised everyone to make such a calendar for use in their own homes.

Maréchal’s almanac shows how the cyclical structure of the calendar year enabled eighteenth-century thinkers and activists to keep together aspects of ‘new time’ that, from the perspective of the modern time-schema, appear incompatible. Today the ‘neutral’ empty grid we associate with calendar time is a vital component of our ability continually to revise and rewrite history. It is because dates are associated with a homogenous, linear, empty time to be cut up at will (rather than, say, important symbolic events) that we can go back and privilege different dates as historically important. In Maréchal’s almanac, on the other hand, the linear chronology, however brazenly it sought to begin history anew, was subordinated to cyclical time because the aim was to replace one totalising representation of time (a hierarchical, religious one) with another equally totalising representation (in which people are equal because time is equal for everyone). Unlike the modern timeschema, in which the calendar remains empty because it is simply an instrument for telling time, Maréchal’s almanac represented a new life-world in which all previous ways of commemorating social values were entirely forgotten. Far from being empty, his almanac was thickly populated with celebrities who were shown to share the same cultural values and lifestyles. Within this alternative ‘universal’ society, freedom from the social dictates of time was still expressed as a reinsertion of time’s authority; a new historical beginning remained subordinated to a cyclical understanding of moral regeneration.

This suggests that the innovation of a new timeline – which would later become the Revolution’s privileged symbol of rupture – cannot be exclusively associated with a ‘modern’ experience of time. Rather, as I have tried to show, it emerged in a social and intellectual context dominated by what is perhaps the oldest understanding of new time in human civilisation – the rebirth and regeneration of the calendar year. Five years later, when the official Republican calendar was established, this same representation of time would reappear. However, by now the utopian genre of a ‘revolutionary calendar’ would be used for new ends: to commemorate the Republic’s historical birth. A revolutionary calendar that had first emerged under very different historical conditions would thus be used to resolve an entirely new problem: how to ensure that the Revolution went forward in time.

III. Year I and the Problem of Revolutionary Intentionality

By 1792, the year the calendar was established, the Revolution had already celebrated multiple beginnings and had declared numerous endings. Events such as the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789 were immediately hailed as Year I of Liberty. In 1790 the Fête de la Fédération was similarly declared as the Revolution’s true moment of regeneration. Two years later, the Parisian insurrection that deposed the king and paved the way for the establishment of the French Republic was spontaneously proclaimed as Year I of Equality. This coexistence of multiple timelines suggests that orientation in time was a challenge and that no one timeline played the role of an historical absolute.
At first the problem was merely that of reconciling revolutionary time with the Gregorian calendar. On 2 January 1792, not knowing how to stamp its coins and new medals, the Legislative Assembly posed the question: should the Revolution count Year IV of Liberty from 14 July 1789, according to the revolutionary chronology, or from 1 January, according to the calendar year already in place? If they counted from 14 July, this meant that Year II of Liberty would have lasted only six months. On the other hand, retaining 1 January as the official beginning of the year had the advantage of conceding to popular usage of revolutionary chronology while avoiding fully fledged calendar reform. The assembly voted for the latter option. They found persuasive such arguments as the one made by the deputy Ramond de Carbonnières, who pointed out that the Revolution had multiple beginnings, including the memorable dates that preceded 14 July 1789. It was not until the autumn of 1792, when the Revolution appeared to have two competing origins – Year I of Liberty and Year I of Equality – that the committee on calendar reform was assembled. Headed by Gilbert Romme and including the eminent scientists Gaspard Monge and Jean-Louis Lagrange as well as the literary figures Marie-Joseph Chénier and Fabre d’Eglantine, it was given the task of resolving the problem of the Republican era forthwith. By the time the committee reported back to the Convention nine months later, the demand to fix the Republican timeline had turned into a proposal for the complete restructuring of the calendar.

But it is one thing to synchronise a timeline and quite another to institute a new calendar. What problem, then, did the establishment of a new calendar attempt to resolve? Clearly the conflicting timelines were symptomatic of a deeper problem. As Mona Ozouf has pointed out, between the time the committee was assembled and the time the proposal was delivered, the king had been executed, the revolutionary tribunal declared and the Girondins purged, all events that perturbed the claim of the government to have terminated the Revolution. The calendar’s protracted institution was similarly fraught. While back-dated to 22 September 1792, the calendar was first presented to the Convention in late September 1793, accepted in its final form on 5 October 1793 and definitively decreed on 24 November 1793, all dates that were themselves milestones in the elaboration of the first de-Christianising phase of the Terror, beginning with the suspension of the Constitution on 10 October 1793 and the celebration of the festival of reason in Notre-Dame on 10 November the same year. The longer the Revolution continued and the more conflicting interpretations of events it accrued, the less self-evidently the narrative of Revolution mapped on to the chronology of events.

By providing new dates, new holidays – a new shared experienced of time – a new calendar seemed like an obvious solution to the problem. After all, if the old calendar integrated celestial patterns, biological rhythms, the seasons and cycles of social life into a collective experience of time, why could a new calendar not do the same for the Revolution? A new calendar – or so the revolutionaries reasoned – would transform the ongoing political struggles that threatened to capsize the new Republic into a common experience of time itself. Instead of a revolutionary history that consisted of many striking events, and diverging interpretations of them, the new calendar would correlate all dates with respect to one event, that of rupture, which, thanks to its consecration in a new timeline, could now appear as a historical absolute. The calendar thus marked a crucial moment in which the events of the French Revolution could be seen as belonging to their own time, the time of History, as it was to be objectively and universally understood.

However, by projecting a universal time-grid not yet in place, the Republican calendar effectively exacerbated the difference between events and dates, symbols and their
'objective' correlate. If we compare Romme’s initial proposal with Fabre d’Eglantine’s final version, we can see how the relation between history and nature came to be posed as an exclusive one: a calendar either of history or nature. Inspired by the Christian calendar, Romme’s proposal reinterpreted the entire course of revolutionary history by mapping key events on to the calendar year. This directly imitated the Christian liturgical calendar, which derived its festive cycle by mapping the historical narrative of Christ’s birth, Passion and Resurrection on to the first three to four months of the year, from Christmas to Easter. In Romme’s proposed version the calendar began on the spring equinox, in the month now called régénération (corresponding to 21 March–19 April on the old calendar). This was followed by the months réunion (20 April–19 May), celebrating the opening of the États Généraux, and jeu de Paume (20 May–18 June). The last month named after a specific event was La Bastille (19 June–18 July). Romme’s narrative then accelerated by three years, so that the months formerly associated with July, August and September were now associated with the events of the summer of 1792. They were renamed Peuple (19 July–18 August), la Montagne (18 August–21 September) and la République (22 September–21 October). The remaining months of the year were named after abstract political concepts: l’Unité (22 October–20 November), la Fraternité (21 November–20 December), la Liberté (21 December–19 January), la Justice (20 January–18 February) and Egalité (19 February–20 March). Romme thus used the calendrical device to impose, if only in a fictive way, a logical connection between events that had occurred contingently and in succession. Just as a tableau classified and ordered objects found in space, so Romme used the calendar to classify and order events and symbols in time. By transforming events into date-concepts that could be mapped on to a systematic and synchronic understanding of the Revolution, the calendar provided the closure that history alone could not. But it would be Fabre d’Eglantine, to whom we owe the famous revolutionary months named after the seasons, who established the official Republican calendar as a perpetual calendar of nature rather than one of history. To achieve this, Fabre d’Eglantine abandoned Romme’s historical narrative in favour of the natural image – that is, in favour of a theory of the imagination that believed that man’s reason could be moulded through the senses. According to this theory, the calendar would achieve what the methods of the Church had done for the ancien régime – indoctrinate people by establishing a sentimental and affective bond to the new order. The Republican calendar would thus usurp the empire of the Church by replacing the icons of the religious calendar with the ‘intelligible and visible signs taken from agriculture and rural economy’. Whereas Romme’s calendar struggled to maintain an awareness of history, Fabre d’Eglantine’s insight was to realise that, for the Revolution to appear as a cataclysmic rupture with the past, it needed to produce a new totalising system, one based on a complete forgetting of that past. It is precisely around the issue of historical intentionality – the desire to give history a vector – that the Republican calendar breaks down. This is because, contrary to its religious counterpart, the Republican calendar was consubstantial with the historical events it sought to date and classify. The Republican calendar dated events from the axial moment of Year I – in this case taking the opening of the Convention on 22 September 1792 as the foundational event – even though it usually takes years, if not centuries, for a calendar to establish a foundational event as the basis of a new timeline. If all historical intentionality is a retroactive projection, then the paradox of the Republican calendar lay in its attempt to mark an absolute coincidence between its theoretical starting-point and a real historical event. Here was a calendar that attributed historical intentionality to events whose meaning was still open to contestation, that still existed as a field of
possibilities and not yet as the only future for the Revolution. The calendar, while consecrating 22 September 1792 as the Revolution’s theoretical origin, also drew attention to other equally valid candidates for the status of foundational event. If axiality could be attributed to this particular moment, then why could it not also be attributed to other equally symbolic dates, such as the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789, the Fête de la Fédération on 14 July 1790 or even 10 August 1792 (which, as we have seen, was already renamed Year I of Equality)? The problem did not just concern the Revolution’s own past. As the dates 9 Thermidor or 18 Brumaire or even the First Year of Empire would eventually make clear, the candidates for rupture could belong equally well to the future.

By attributing to the future a linear progression of time that the Christian calendar had only achieved retroactively, the revolutionaries were able to combine what François Furet has identified as two essential, if conflicting, revolutionary beliefs: the belief in a necessary progress in history and that in a break in time.48 First, the calendar was used to represent the French Revolution as a slice of the cosmos, even though such a vision of history precluded an awareness of an ‘open future’, a future that could be radically different from the past. Second, the new chronology affirmed the irreversibility and necessity of rupture, even though secular history only gained meaning as it went forward in time. And yet as the eventual failure of the Republican calendar made abundantly clear, the attempt to combine a secular understanding of history with the cyclical patterns of nature revealed precisely what was excessive about the Revolution’s demands for change. As Reinhart Koselleck has observed, the calendar’s failure derived from a fundamental contradiction: namely, the attempt to combine a secular understanding of history, predicated on an open and unknown future that is always ‘new’, with the everyday lived experience of time, which depends on repeatable patterns derived from nature.49

IV. The Calendar’s Piecemeal Decline

As the makers of the Republican calendar soon realised, secular history may try to attribute axiality to this or that event, but it can only count the years from scratch without this affecting the cosmological value of the calendar. Nowhere is this dispersive effect of ‘modern’ history more evident than in the piecemeal way the calendar declined. It lost its festivals on 30 Brumaire Year VIII (21 November 1799) and then the ten-day week, first when the décadi (the new calendar’s equivalent to Sunday) was stipulated for civil use only on 7 Thermidor Year VIII (July 26 1800) and finally when Sunday was re-established as the official day of rest, on 28 Germinal Year X (8 April 1802). Finally the calendar itself was abandoned on 1 January 1806, ostensibly in the name of reintegrating France within a European time-frame of trade and commerce. What is surprising, however, is not that the calendar failed but that it lasted as long as it did. For twelve years, two months and seventeen days French history unfolded according to calendar time.50 Even Napoleon’s coronation and the first year of Empire took place on the Republican calendar. What sort of legitimacy, then, did the calendar continue to provide?

There is no easy answer. Certainly enforcing observance of the calendar enabled the new state to solidify its administration of everyday life. Marriage, for example, continued to be ratified on the décadi, and Michael Meinzer has suggested that the calendar contributed to a new understanding of the weekly cycle as an abstract timetable that persisted even after the Christian week returned.51 The calendar was also used to wage what was probably the most effective assault on Catholicism, forcing it to go underground or to be practised as a purely ‘private’ religion, from which it never did quite recover.52
Finally, it enabled the government to represent itself not as a faction or party but as the universal Republic incarnate, based on reason and nature. Above all, the Republican calendar ensured the legitimacy of the Revolution itself. It guaranteed that there was no going back, that history remained forward-looking and that rupture was irreversible. It succeeded in doing so, however, not because it expressed a ‘modern’ understanding of history as a series of irreversible events taking place in a linear, chronological time. On the contrary, it aggressively resisted this very linear experience of time and the accumulation of historical meaning that it entailed. The fact that the calendar was revived at every important political junction over the entire lifespan of the first French Republic demonstrates the validity that the revolutionaries expected to obtain from cyclical time. Indeed, although the calendar eventually failed to establish itself as a viable time-frame, it proved remarkably effective in ensuring that revolutionary history retained a sense of necessity and logical progression. This association of revolutionary time with a kind of ‘extra-historical’ exemplarity is evident even today when historians routinely use Republican dates, such as 18 Brumaire or 9 Thermidor, to designate important ‘turning points’ of revolutionary history. That these dates continue to exist in the absence of a viable time-frame demonstrates the ongoing attraction of a ‘threshold narrative’ in which dates are used to signify not just events but also ‘periods’ of time.

And yet the fact that these orphaned revolutionary dates and timelines existed for so long in the absence of any collective experience of calendar time also reveals their singularity. Unlocalisable, unrepeatable, they exist as a kind of ‘imaginary’ present never to be reintegrated into an objective historical time. Whether in the works of Auguste Comte, who devised his own calendar of humanity dating from Year 61 of the French Revolution, or under the Commune, which considered itself to be in Year 79, or even under the Soviets, who considered reforming their own calendar, the revolutionary calendar continued to hold out the promise of an absolute rupture with the past. Thanks to the calendar’s cyclical structure, the historically and nationally limited event of the French Revolution would become a universalisable structure of history, applicable to all people and all places.

What, then, does this competing vision of calendar time tell us about the ‘modernity’ of the French Revolution? As I have tried to show, understanding the history of the French Revolution from the perspective of its contemporaries involves recovering the kind of power, real and symbolic, a successful calendar would have allowed them to establish. By modelling their new Republic on a solar myth of a natural calendar, the revolutionaries hoped both to divert the symbolic power over time away from religion and to achieve the same sort of social unity, cohesion and emotional attachment as the Christian calendar had done for the Church. And yet, because they adopted many of the characteristics of the calendar that they defined themselves against, their imposition of a ‘modern’ linear timeline, predicated on a rupture with the past, remained predominantly cyclical and backward-oriented. The result was a paradoxical convergence of linear and cyclical time, in which the calendar maintained the Revolution’s legitimacy as an irreversible rupture with the past only by aggressively resisting the historical consciousness that had made such a rupture possible in the first place.

Thus although the French Republican calendar (*pace* Koselleck) heralded a new perspective on history, it also differed from our ‘modern’ assumptions about historical time as linear, homogenous and universal. As I have argued, the continuity between a revolutionary understanding of history and the so-called ‘modern’ experience of time breaks down precisely around this promise of a ‘total rupture’ that would reorganise the very structure of calendar time. The result is a dual legacy of both success and failure of
the Republican calendar. Insofar as we persist in appealing to ‘thresholds’ and ‘epistemic ruptures’ to describe the modern experience of time, the Republican calendar remains very much with us. But insofar as it did not survive the emergence of our modern time schema, it also provides a useful corrective to our tendency to take the Revolution’s premise of world-historical rupture for granted. For its contemporaries, the French Revolution may well have been experienced as the birth of a new era, but this birth was mediated by older conceptions of time that did not survive the very rupture they helped accomplish.

NOTES


7. In its earliest formulation ‘une nouvelle’ designated a public rumour (1549). In the eighteenth century it signified general information or ‘news’ communicated to the public via diverse media, including les nouvelles à la main (1751) and les journaux (1799). See Le Robert: Dictionnaire historique.


9. The practice of dating from the year of the Incarnation was started by Dionysius Exiguus (Denis le Petit) in the first half of the sixth century but took several centuries to become established. In 957 the pontifical chancellorry adopted it for official use, but widespread use in France did not occur until well after the millennium, when Western Christendom sought to distinguish itself from the Roman world. See Robert Favreau, ‘La datation dans les inscriptions médiévales françaises’, in Construire le temps: normes et usages chronologiques du moyen âge à l’époque contemporaine (Paris and Geneva: Champion and Droz, 2000).


19. This definition of determinism was most famously formulated by Pierre Simon Laplace, a prominent supporter of the Republican calendar: ‘Une intelligence qui pour un instant donné, connaîtrait toutes les forces dont la nature est animée, et la situation respective des êtres qui la composent […] embrasserait dans la même formule, les mouvements des plus grands corps de l’univers et ceux du plus léger atome: rien ne serait incertaine pour elle, et l’avenir comme le passé, serait présent à ses yeux.’ Essai philosophique sur les probabilités (Paris, [1795] 1814), p.2.


23. For example, the important celebration of the summer solstice by members of the lodge, which Mme Hélvétius continued after the death of her husband. Louis Aimable, Une loge maçonnique d’avant 1789 (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1897), p.17.


25. No mean feat given the spectacular theatrics, which included thunder and lightning, an operatic score and the unveiling of a reconstructed pyramid. See Aimable, Une loge maçonnique, p.87.


27. The Protestant states of Germany and Netherlands and the Protestant cantons of Switzerland did not accept Gregorian reform until 1701, England and Wales until 1752, and Sweden until 1753. Interestingly, when the Quakers adopted the Gregorian calendar along with the rest of England, they replaced the months named after the pagan gods with numbers.


35. An example is the rise of the étrennes érotiques, often designed to take the form of a prayerbook to be read secretly during service.


42. Ozouf, ‘Republican Calendar’, p.540.

44. Ozouf notes this, but without relating it to a more general problem of secular history: ‘Republican Calendar’, p.542.


46. See Bazcko, ‘Le calendrier républicain’, p.81.


49. Koselleck, ‘Remarks on the Revolutionary Calendar and Neue Zeit’.

50. On 3 Brumaire IV (25 October, Year IV) a law decreed that all festivals henceforth take place on the décadi, except those of 22 Vendemiaire and 9, 10 Thermidor. On 13 Fructidor Year VI (30 August 1798) the décadi was re-proclaimed as the only official day of rest. On 30 Brumaire Year VIII (21 November 1799) Laplace reinforced the Republican calendar while abandoning the decadal festivals.

51. Meinzer, *Der französische Revolutionskalendar*, p.156.

52. Napoleon’s Concordat in an important sense completed the original intent of calendar reform by taking away religious authority over time. See Article Organique XLI, which stipulates that, with the exception of Sunday, no religious holidays could be celebrated without government permission. See also Noah Shusterman, ‘Une loi de l’église et de l’état: Napoleon and the Central Administration of Religious Life, 1800-1815’, *French History* 21:3 (2007), p.313-38.

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