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Reciprocity and the French Revolution

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Keywords: citizenship; duties; morality; National Assembly; patriotic gifts; physiocracy; political economy; public debt; rights; subsistence; Terror

La base de notre moralité n'est pas la religion [...]
c'est la réciprocité

Rétif de la Bretonne, *Les nuits de Paris, ou Le spectateur nocturne* (1789)

Reciprocity is not a concept that readily springs to mind in thinking about the French Revolution. It tends to be associated with pre-modern 'gift' societies, not modern 'market' ones. But as this paper shows, the term emerged in the Enlightenment and shaped political imaginations and practices during the Revolution. At its inception, it was not invoked to describe past or 'primitive' societies as it would be after cultural

anthropologists, most famously Bronislaw Malinowski and Marcel Mauss, appropriated it in the 1920s. (Malinowski, 1922; Mauss, 2000) Rather, reciprocity was used to work through the contemporary problems of political economy, rights and citizenship.

What did reciprocity mean? First, it is important to note that the noun, which was new, carried conceptual freight that the age-old adjective did not. Before the Enlightenment, groups in society were sometimes thought to have ‘reciprocal’ obligations, but that did not mean that those obligations were considered commensurate. Hierarchy, not equality, structured how obligations were imagined. With the rise of the noun, the mere qualifier ‘reciprocal’ was turned into a full-blown principle of society. In the 1750s, when the Bordeaux magistrate Charles de Lavie set out to abridge and modernize Jean Bodin’s *Les six livres de la République*, he invoked the term to convey an idea that would have been alien to the sixteenth-century jurist: ‘L’union ne subsiste que par la réciprocité; si on la viole, la société cesse’. (Bodin and Lavie, 1755) The conceptual world of ‘reciprocity’ privileged ‘individuals’ and ‘society’ over castes or corporations, and individuals were generally assumed to be moral equals (gender and racial hierarchies notwithstanding). Reciprocity was thus bound up with the development of the concepts of ‘society’ and the ‘individual’, the evolution of which has been traced by Keith Baker and Louis Dumont. (Baker, 1994; Dumont, 1976, 1986) In short, ‘reciprocity’ provided a term through which to rethink social bonds as religion, hierarchy, privilege and corporatism became contested.

In discussions of political economy, some Enlightenment thinkers invoked reciprocity to convey the notion of exchange equivalence through the barter, in which putative equals transacted their ‘reciprocal utilities’. Moreover, for liberal political economists, material reciprocity was to be achieved, not through political will, but through de-politicized, self-regulating markets (a concept brilliantly analysed by Karl Polanyi, albeit not in the context of the French Revolution). (Polanyi, 1944) For other thinkers, however, reciprocity implied not equivalent exchange, but generosity and sacrifice. It meant giving without necessarily receiving, or at least not immediately or with expectations of a return gift. (In this sense, eighteenth-century conceptions of reciprocity resemble Marshall Sahlins’s notion of ‘generalized reciprocity’ in *Stone Age Economics*. [1972])

In addition to appearing in tracts on political economy, reciprocity was invoked in discussions of rights and duties. Although historians have written much about rights of late, less attention has been paid to duties. For contemporaries, the two were interdependent and mutually reinforcing. One set without the other, they worried, would lead to anarchy or despotism. Responding to criticism that revolutionaries had failed to promulgate a declaration of duties in 1789, Thomas Paine assured his readers: 'A Declaration of Rights is, *by reciprocity*, a Declaration of Duties'. (Paine, 1985)

How did these various ideas about reciprocity work out in the Revolution? The period between June and October 1789 is revealing in this regard. On the day that the National Assembly came into being (17 June 1789), deputies chose to address two of the most pressing demands at the heart of the Revolutionary crisis: interest payments on public debt (rents) and subsistence (bread). They realized that the Assembly's legitimacy depended on their ability to satisfy these demands, but they chose to approach each of them differently. In light of impending bankruptcy and the breakdown of tax collection, they sought to encourage citizens to make patriotic gifts. These contributions were conceived of as forms of reciprocity, sometimes as equivalent exchange (the just price for receiving freedom and rights), sometimes as civic sacrifice (the virtuous citizen puts the nation's interests before his or her own). In October, deputies institutionalized patriotic giving, calling on citizens to voluntarily give twenty-five per cent of their income to the nation in formal declarations made before tax receivers. When, in March 1790, this campaign proved to be insufficient, they made the patriotic contribution obligatory. As it turned out, revenues remained meagre until the outbreak of war and terror between 1792-1794. Historically significant in all this was that, in initially making contributions voluntary, the National Assembly moralized the problem of finances. Stinginess – the opposite of reciprocity – soon smelled of treason, and patriotic generosity became a litmus test of loyalty to the new regime.

If revolutionaries opted to moralize and politicize the problem of finances (and distributing rents on public debt was their greatest priority), how did they deal with the problem of food? As Judith Miller has shown, national deputies remained divided on the matter. (Miller, 1999) Some believed that subsistence, like finances, was a matter of

political will and that access to it was a right. Many of the model rights declarations circulating in the summer of 1789 included economic and social rights: the rights to work, to subsistence and to aid for the aged and infirm. Often these rights were framed, implicitly or explicitly, in terms of reciprocity. In the end, however, deputies omitted social and economic rights from the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of 1789. In lieu of such rights, they passed a law liberalizing the grain trade. Proposed on 22 August and passed a week later, the law sought to reconcile moral reciprocity, which called for political will, with material reciprocity, which necessitated market freedom. (As Emma Rothschild shows, eighteenth-century political economists had often tried to reconcile the two. [Rothschild, 2001])

The text of the law began with gushing fraternalism, much like what one would expect from Jacobins three years later. It reminded citizens of their duty to provide ‘reciprocal aid’ to their ‘brothers’ and stressed the sacredness of subsistence. Its language echoed that found in formulations of economic and social rights, and given that the law was proposed during debates on the declaration of rights one surmises that it was meant to compensate for the absence of those rights in the final draft of the declaration. In any case, the text suddenly and quite remarkably veered off into market-economics. After explaining the theory of ‘supply and demand’, it insisted that only complete market freedom could ensure efficient and fair provisioning. The law concluded on a decidedly un-fraternal note. It threatened anyone who interfered with free-market forces, be they citizens or officials, with the capital crime of *lèse-nation*. Some individuals were charged with this crime later that year. The law was reiterated in 1792 but was fiercely debated on 10 March, the day Danton declared terror to be the order of the day.

During the Revolution, reciprocity also shaped ideas and practices concerning rights and citizenship. Although historians tend to stress national identity and the ‘natural right’ tradition, contemporaries more often than not based their thinking on these issues on reciprocity, that is, on ‘give-and-take’ and sacrifice. Arguments in favour of extending active citizenship rights to disenfranchised groups (Jews, women, slaves) emphasized more their contributions to society than their essential humanity. ‘Reciprocal’ thinking had practical implications. Receiving state pensions or a *certificat de civisme* in 1792 and 1793, for

example, required proving that one had made a *contribution patriotique*. By the time of the Terror, failure to give was grounds for suspicion and arrest, and in several parts of France, suspects were released from prison after paying a ‘patriotic gift’. Moreover, when individuals appeared before local committees of surveillance to request something to which they had a legal right (protection from violent attacks, a *certificat de civisme*, the return of seized property, etc.), they often enumerated their civic acts of generosity, as if those acts offered a better justification for making demands than the law. In some extreme cases, patriotic generosity could even save one from the guillotine. When only two of thirty-one general tax farmers were acquitted of corruption charges (the others were executed) in the fall of 1793, authorities justified their decision on the grounds that the two men had provided food for the poor and uniforms for soldiers. In short, citizenship was a moral (and not just legal) matter, and reciprocity expressed how contemporaries imagined morality in an increasingly secular and egalitarian world.

By examining the various meanings of ‘reciprocity’ in late eighteenth-century France – as equivalent exchange or as generosity; as requiring moral and political will or as resulting naturally through the self-regulating market – we can better appreciate the philosophical, moral and political tensions of the Revolution. It was from these tensions, I believe, that rival conceptions of society – liberal and social – took form.

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