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**Was Policy Moderation key to Stabilising the
French Revolution?**

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Abstract

According to Jeremy Popkin, 'the Revolution shattered the equilibrium of French society'.¹ After the 'Radical' phase of the Revolution was ended in 1794, France's new rulers set about trying to restore some political stability to France. In 1799, Deputy Jean Grenier advanced his own view on how to achieve this: 'it was necessary for us to be revolutionary to commence the Revolution', he said. To end the strife, 'we must cease being so.' This paper interprets his claim as a call to 'moderation' – with 'moderation' being the practice of negotiation and making concessions so that the status quo is broadly acceptable to most in society, so that they may co-exist peacefully under the same authority. To avoid moving into abstractions, we shall assess the validity of Grenier's claim by comparing them to the methods which were actually deployed to restore stability to France between 1794-1804 and analysing whether political moderation was a core component of them. It will conclude that whilst both the Directory and Consul Napoleon deployed the rhetoric of 'moderation', and occasionally did use moderation successfully, the key methods used to stabilise France were rather economic and institutional reforms and authoritarianism.

This paper uses the definition of political stability as laid out by Daniel Kaufmann – an absence of major political violence, combined with functioning institutions and the rule of law.² The five-man 'directory' that governed France from the fall of Robespierre to Napoleon's coup in 1799 did, as Peter M. Jones and Noah Shusterman both argue convincingly, succeed in restoring basic stability to France.³ The revolts in the Vendee and Brittany were ended, whilst urban riots were suppressed. The organised judicial-violence of the Reign of Terror was reduced, with the repeal of the Law of 22 Prairial

¹ Jeremy D. Popkin, *A Short History of the French Revolution*, (London, 2020),

² Daniel Kaufmann, *Governance Matters II*, (World Bank Publications, 2002), pp. 4-7

³ Peter M. Jones, *The French Revolution: 1787-1804*, (Abingdon, 2017), pp. 80-81

and the abolition of the Revolutionary Tribunal.¹ Furthermore, basic governmental institutions recommenced operations.² Upon coming to power, they declared they would uphold the Republic, yet also stressed that 'calm' was required to restore peace and 'public order.... instead of the chaos inseparable from revolutions'.³ Thus, they were signalling a 'moderate' position. Whilst they were not counter-revolutionaries, they would not tolerate the radicalism of the Jacobins. The desire for 'vengeance' would be 'annihilated', and the cycle of radical violence ushered in by the Jacobins would stop.⁴ However, upon coming to power, the Directory immediately began a purge of radical Jacobins who were considered responsible for the Terror, undermining their narrative as stabilisers and peacemakers. Notwithstanding this, the Directors would make a few attempts at moderation. For instance, they repealed the radical economic policy of the 'maximum', which capped prices and wages artificially, and thereby return to a more 'standard' and free economy.⁵ However, rather than stabilise France, this resulted in considerable inflation and destabilised the economy. Thus, their 'moderation' proved counter-productive.

Another method utilised by the Directors to restore some stability to France was reform of the currency. As B.P. Cutsinger has demonstrated, the paper currency 'assignats', introduced by the radicals, led to massive hyperinflation which continued into the rule of the Directory.⁶ The ballooning debt was financed by the paper assignats, which were printed in huge numbers. By November 1795, nineteen billion were in existence and their value had dropped by 99%, whilst the price of commodities had increased six fold, placing great strain upon people at the bottom of society.⁷ This led directly to bread riots and violence, such as the 1795 'Germinal Uprising', which nearly overthrew the government, thus demonstrating the political instability caused by the spiralling prices.⁸

Thus, immediately after coming to power, the new Directors ordered an assessment to stabilise the economy. They concluded that metallic currency should be re-introduced and the assignats essentially scrapped.⁹ This reform was implemented and generally successful, as inflation declined, providing an example of how 'ceasing to be revolutionary' did play a role in the Directory's attempts to stabilise France, as the paper money had been a core policy of the radicals.¹⁰ However, whether this can be

¹ Noah Shusterman, *The French Revolution: Faith, Desire and Politics*, (New York, 2013), p. 272

² *Ibid*

³ *Manifesto of the Directors*, (1795), in Micah Alpaugh (ed.), *The French Revolution: A History in Documents*, (London, 2021), p. 239

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Shusterman, *Revolution*, p. 272

⁶ B.P. Cutsinger, "The Politics and Dynamics of Hyperinflation in Revolutionary France", *European Economic Review*, vol. 157, (August, 2023), pp. 5-6, 14

⁷ Jones, p. 82

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ Cutsinger, pp. 5-6, 14

¹⁰ Popkin, *Short History*, pp. 58-59

seen as 'moderation', as Cutsinger outlines, is open to interpretation. Indeed, as Peter M. Jones has demonstrated, the shift to metallic currency was prompted more by economic necessity than any desire to please the political right. Indeed, the Directors introduced their own paper currency – the 'mandat', in 1796, demonstrating that opposition to the assignat was more down to its worthless state, rather than its status as a revolutionary symbol.¹

Initially, the new government also attempted to use 'moderation' to negotiate a peaceful end to the counter-revolutionary rebellion in the Vendee and Brittany, by offering the rebels amnesty and freedom of worship in 1795.² This achieved some success in the Vendee, but fighting continued north of the Loire, and conflict recommenced with the Quiberon Expedition in 1795, which had to be suppressed with military force. Stability was only brought to the Vendee after General Hoche was sent with around 150,000 troops in 1796, and defeated the remaining rebel forces and executed their leaders, including General Charette. This incident demonstrates the limitations of moderation in ending the revolutionary turmoil in France. Likewise, it reflects arguably the key method the Directory used to restore stability to France – authoritarian measures.

When radical 'sans-culottes' attempted to overthrow the Directory in 1795, stability was only maintained by military repression.³ The Directors also maintained stability after voters elected a 'neo-Jacobin' government in 1798 not by coming to a balanced agreement with the new deputies, but by throwing out the results and ignoring the democratic vote.⁴ Yet the use of authoritarian methods was also deployed to prevent threats to stability from the right. The royalist 'Vendemiaire' revolt in 1795 was suppressed not by moderation but by military force. Likewise, when voters returned conservative and counter-revolutionary deputies in the 1797 elections, rather than accept this shift to the right, the majority of Directors, led by Paul Barras, staged a coup backed by the military – and ignored the election results. Barras then placed large swathes of rural France under military rule, and suspended normal trials. Harsh anti-emigre laws were enacted, whilst attacks against Christianity continued, as Lefebvre demonstrates.⁵ Thus, whilst they began by using the language of 'moderation', rather than 'ceasing to be revolutionary', a degree of stability was achieved in France under the Directory primarily by authoritarian methods, and not by carefully balancing the desires of both factions.

Recently, Laura Mason has argued that rather than bringing stability, the Directory's authoritarian methods served to deepen divisions and promote more extreme

¹ Jones, *French Revolution*, p. 82

² Jacques Legrand (ed.), *Longman Chronicle of the French Revolution*, (London, 1989), p. 469

³ Shusterman, *Revolution*, pp. 271-273

⁴ Jones, *French Revolution*, pp. 91-92

⁵ Georges Lefebvre, *The Directory*, trans. Robert Baldick, (Paris, 1967), pp. 452, 441-442

radicalism – as people felt excluded from politics, and thus turned towards violence and the radical ‘Neo-Jacobin’ ideas of ‘Gracchus’ Babeuf.¹ Indeed, the suppression of elections did promote dissatisfaction with the electoral process, as Peter M. Jones demonstrates that turnout in the 1799 elections fell to record-low levels after the previous year’s results were ignored.² However, as W.A. Phillips argues, the ability for disapproval to translate into direct instability is less clear. After Babeuf’s arrest in 1796, only a few hundred people turned out to support him in Paris, and, after a failed attempt to rouse army units, dispersed.³ Thus, whilst the Directory’s methods were undoubtedly harsh, it is nevertheless true that they did result in the suppression of nearly all urban riots and rural revolts during this period – and thus helped stabilise France.

Upon coming to power in 1799, Napoleon continued the domestic stabilisation of France. In this, he was largely successful, as even anti-Napoleon contemporaries, such as liberal Francois Guizot, conceded that ‘everyone was convinced of its (the regime’s) strength ... there seemed so little possibility of future change.’⁴ Arguably the clearest evidence of ‘moderation’ being used by Napoleon was the ‘Concordat’ of 1801. In one of the most divisive episodes of the Revolution, the Republic had passed a series of anti-clerical laws that had resulted half of all priests being removed by the State and in the Vatican denouncing the Revolution.⁵ This had proven deeply unpopular in many rural regions, and had significantly contributed to rebellions in the Vendee and Brittany, with the rebels fighting as the ‘Royal and Catholic army’.⁶ Seeking to promote stability and end the link between Catholicism and Royalism, he negotiated a compromise with the Catholic church in 1801. As part of the agreement, Catholicism was recognised as the dominant religion in France and public worship recommenced.⁷ However, the church surrendered claims to confiscated lands and accepted close governmental oversight.⁸ The agreement thus sought to strike a balance between Revolution and tradition. However, rather than create stability, Philip Dwyer has argued that the concordat received substantial opposition from radicals that destabilised the situation, especially after Pope Pius VII himself participated in person in Napoleon’s coronation in 1804, which prompted a wave of anti-Catholic and anti-Napoleon pamphlets.⁹ Furthermore, some elements of the Army opposed it, considering it a betrayal of the Revolution’s anti-Christian policies, with one officer present at the coronation declaring: ‘it is a shame that the million men who got

¹ Laura Mason, *The Last Revolutionaries*, (New Haven, 2022), pp. 231-232

² Jones, pp. 91-93

³ W.A. Phillips, “Noel-Gracchus Babeuf”, in Hugh Chisholm, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, vol. 3, 11th ed, (Cambridge, 1911), pp. 92-93

⁴ F. Guizot, *Memoires*, in Popkin, *Short History*, p. 153

⁵ Popkin, *Short History*, p. 88, p. 137

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ *Ibid*

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ Philip Dwyer, *Citizen Emperor*, (London, 2013), p. 180

themselves killed destroying what you have re-established are not here', when Napoleon asked him what he thought.¹ Likewise, British visitor Henry Yorke found the spectacle unconvincing, in light of Napoleon's religious indifference.² However, as Popkin argues, the Concordat was largely well received by Roman Catholics, and resumed the relationship between the Catholic church and the state.³ Furthermore, Pius VII's participation in Napoleon's coronation in 1804 strengthened his legitimacy amongst Roman Catholics, who made up the majority of the population.⁴ Indeed, the Concordat remained in force until 1905, demonstrating its enduring support. As Popkin argues convincingly, those few *Ideologues*, radical anti-Christians, who attacked the agreement were safely ignored without any great protest or revolt.⁵ However, the Concordat was not universally welcomed by Catholics. 38 of the 93 Catholic bishops remaining from the *Ancien Regime* refused to sign it, whilst the new 'ultramontanist Petit Eglise' grouping detested the level of state control permitted under the Concordat.⁶ However, as Suzanne Desan demonstrates, their influence was limited during this period, and they were largely ignored by the mainstream church.⁷ The agreement also permitted general toleration of Protestants and Jews, and helped reconcile them to the new state. Finally, when a referendum was held in 1802 to make Napoleon Consul for Life, over 3 million voted 'yes' and only 8 thousand voted 'no', in what Popkin describes as a 'relatively honest' vote, which constitutes a 'genuine endorsement of the regime' and its policies for stability.⁸ Thus, it can be viewed as an example of 'ceasing to be revolutionary' successfully stabilising France.

However, the Concordat was only one of Napoleon's methods. Most were not focused on moderation. For instance, economic reform continued to be a cornerstone of the Consul's programme for stability, and in doing so he built upon the Directory's efforts. In 1800 he established the Bank of France, to regulate the Government's borrowing, which prevented a return to the chaotic debt crises of the Radical Republic.⁹ Furthermore, he continued the re-introduction of metal coins, culminating with the 'Gold Napoleon' in 1803, which completed the recovery from the destabilising inflation of 1792-95.¹⁰ The lack of major inflation helped keep prices stable for the population, and was a crucial reason behind the lack of any major bread riots in Paris during this period – in sharp contrast to the years of 1790-95.

¹ Jeremy D. Popkin, *A New World Begins*, (New York, 2019), p. 546

² Henry Redhead Yorke, *Letters from France*, (London, 1804), p. 269

³ Suzanne Desan, "The French Revolution, 1794-1815" in Stewart Brown, Timothy Tackett (ed), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 7, (Cambridge, 2008), p. 566

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Popkin, *New World*, pp. 546-7

⁶ Desan, 'French Revolution', p. 565

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 567

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ Popkin, *Short History*, pp. 134-135

¹⁰ *Ibid*

To fulfil Kaufmann's emphasis on the rule of law being a cornerstone of stability, we shall also examine the efforts of Napoleon to restore stability to the legal system. During the 1790s, the Republic cycled through four constitutions, three declarations of rights and over ten thousand new laws, resulting in a legal system where basic rules, rights and responsibilities were subject to political factionalism. The *Code Napoleon* (1804) helped restore the rule of law by codifying France's laws for the first time. Lynn Hunt has argued that the Code is an example of Napoleon 'ceasing to be revolutionary' in an effort to restore stability, and uses its rollback of women's legal rights as a demonstration of this.¹ Whilst this is true, Popkin demonstrates that the Code actually, in most regards, consolidated most of the Revolution's main objectives, including which he considers the primary goal of the Revolution – 'the determination to make the male individual the basic unit of society.'² The Code made the *biens nationaux* irrevocable, entrenched the abolition of feudalism and privilege, affirmed economic rights, established France as a secular state, whilst guaranteeing 'all Frenchmen civil rights'. Thus, it did not moderate so much as institutionalise most of the Revolution's primary demands. It was thus consolidation, not moderation, that established post-Revolutionary France's legal stability.

Finally, authoritarian methods played a key role in Napoleon's stabilisation efforts. Napoleon both censored the press and utilised it to promote pro-regime propaganda. As contemporary Madame de Stael noted, Napoleon's control of the press, in a nation where the demand for news was their version of 'bread and circuses', proved a 'great advantage' in stabilising his control of France.³ Furthermore, the 'Flying Columns' of Troops were expanded throughout rural France – and largely succeeded to ending any organised rebellions and bandit gangs.⁴ Collective bargaining by workers was banned, which reduced urban disturbances. Fouché was placed in charge of the Police in 1799 and greatly improved their efficiency - both in Paris and in the provinces.⁵ The new network of 'prefects', whilst formally administrators, acted as spies and reported back to provide early warning of potential disturbances.⁶ The strengthened Gendarmes conducted regular patrols and, as a result of a comprehensive spy network, often pre-empted riots. As a result of this, and the economic stabilisation, there were no major riots in Paris during the years of Napoleon's Consulate, demonstrating the importance of Napoleon's authoritarian acts, not efforts at moderation, in completing domestic stabilisation.

¹ Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, (Berkeley, 1992), p. 162

² Popkin, *New World*, pp. 548-549

³ Madame de Stael, *Considerations*, in Alpaugh, *Documents*, p. 252

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ Scott Haine, *The History of France*, (Westport, 2000), p. 91

⁶ Popkin, *Short History*, p. 134

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has argued that Grenier's assessment for how to achieve stability is lacking. Under the Directory, whilst some attempt to 'moderate' between the radicals and counter-revolutionaries was made, basic stability was primarily brought about through economic reforms and authoritarian suppression of dissent. Under Napoleon, more attempts at moderation were made, and they were more successful – with the 'Concordat' of 1801 successfully reconciling most French Roman Catholics to the state and damaging the link between Royalist rebels and religion. However, most of Napoleon's efforts were not founded upon 'ceasing to be Revolutionary'. Rather, stability was primarily achieved by 1804 through continuing and more efficient policing, press censorship, economic reform and the Code Napoleon – which stabilised France's legal system by institutionalising the most durable elements of the Revolution.

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