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A New Awareness of The Border

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Aurore Chéry

- 1 When Louis XVI left Paris on June 20th 1791, he wrote a “Déclaration à tous les Français”. The text is well known because it was broadly spread out and the original document was discovered in the United States in 2009. If it is alleged to give the reasons why the king departed, there are still many ambiguities in it. What were the true intentions of the king if he had succeeded in his plans? And above all, did he really intend not to leave the kingdom as he claimed afterwards? Although it appeared as an essential issue as soon as he was arrested, the question of the border was totally neglected by the king in his text. Felt as a betrayal, Varenes rightly indicates a rupture for historians, that is to say the final divorce between the king and his people. It is what allowed the republican movement to gain a new legitimacy. But Varenes probably also hides another kind of rupture. Indeed, if the fear of foreigners in time of war or sudden reactions of violence as during the “Grande Peur” in 1789 were not new, Varenes initiated a very special link to the idea of border. For the first time, the reasons to fear did not appear unrealistic insofar as they resulted from an action of the executive power, which gave them a kind of official validation. As a consequence, the response had to be official too and the legislative power had to legislate for the whole nation, giving so its own validation to fear. Thus, Varenes gave birth to a national legislation on identity that could be the first steps to the one in use nowadays.

The border issue, an essential one

“The king did not want to leave France!

- No sirs, the king said speaking with volubility. I was not getting out, I stated it and this is true”¹.

- 2 Such are the first words attributed to the royal family when a delegation of deputies from the National Assembly joined them after the arrest in Varenes. The king immediately prevented them from uttering a word by protesting his good will and his loyalty

regarding the border issue he had missed out up to the moment. The reading of the report of the arrest, written on June 27th 1791, allows us to understand how it gradually became the central issue.

- 3 Once Louis XVI was recognized, he hastened to touch the right chord by provoking emotional demonstrations that were worth the bourgeois dramas of the time:

“And by an explosion of his tender and fatherly soul, he embraced all the ones who surrounded him. This moving scene won him over looks filled with a fire of a love his subjects knew and felt for the first time, and that they could only characterize through their tears”.
- 4 Yet, the almost filial feeling the king tried to arise was not up to obstruct the fear of the foreign invasion his departure could be the signal of. It is at this precise moment that Louis XVI became aware of it. In spite of emotion, he was still prevented from pursuing his way to Montmédy, and he was compelled to declare that: “on his king’s honour he would not leave the kingdom and that one could accompany him”. He was about to win the fight when the arrival of the messengers sent by the National Assembly challenged everything. They reminded the Varennois “how much danger there was to stay longer so close to the borders”. The threat suddenly brandished by Paris revealed another border, a one terrifying to the point to worry the nation in its whole.
- 5 Back in Paris, Louis XVI was questioned about the motives of his trip. He argued mainly focusing on the border issue: “If I had wanted to get out of the kingdom”, he said, “I would not have sent, on the same day, a declaration to the National Assembly; I would have waited to have crossed the border. I have always desired to go back to Paris. This is the way the last sentence of my dissertation must be understood: *Frenchmen and you, he called the inhabitants of his good city, come back to your king; he will always be your friend...*” He added, in another example: “I have only taken a passport to Frankfort because, at the Foreign Affairs Office, there was none issued for the interior of the kingdom; and the itinerary that was mentioned was not even followed”².

Varennes, an operation of communication?

- 6 Let us accept here the hypothesis Louis XVI did not lie and that he actually did not want to cross the border. Then, what meaning could this trip have had for him? Actually, some clues can be found in his “Déclaration à tous les Français”. Two excerpts peculiarly allow us to consider how much he felt concerned by his own image. For instance, he regards as an insult the fact that Necker was given a triumphal reception in his presence.

“They [the factious people] took advantage of the kind of enthusiasm that existed for Mr Necker to give him, under the very eyes of the king, a triumphal reception all the more brilliant as, at the same time, people they had bribed for it, pretended not to pay any attention to the presence of the king”.
- 7 Furthermore he was so convinced of his popularity that when it was not openly expressed, he thought it was ought to a devious influence.

“While the king was determined to bring words of peace to the capital city, people who stationed all along the road took care to prevent the cries of ‘long live the king!’ so natural to the French people and the harangues he got, far from expressing gratefulness, were only filled with a bitter irony”.
- 8 Actually, throughout the Revolution, Louis XVI liked to sound out his popularity. This is why in December 1790 he went for a walk in Faubourg Saint-Antoine in Paris where he

prided himself to be welcome⁵. Consistent with himself, the same way of thinking must probably be operating in his idea of a trip outside Paris. He hopes to find in the provinces the support he is deprived from in the capital-city because of the devious influence or even the intimidation of the ones he considered as factious. Taking it into account, what use was it to go abroad? It would have meant more damages than advantages for his image. It is also why he regretted the departure of his brother, Comte d'Artois, in 1789, which was perceived as “a flight, a conspiracy, an attack”⁶. Besides, unlike his other brother, Comte de Provence, who left Paris at the same time as him, he paid attention not to choose an itinerary that would have led him outside the kingdom.

- 9 Yet the fact remains that Montmédy, the final destination, is an ambiguous choice since it is very close to the border. But it was mainly dictated by circumstances: the need to find loyal troops and that was not so easy since the Nancy mutinies in August 1790. Louis XVI made a strategic choice by placing his departure under the protection of the troops led by the Marquis de Bouillé, the very one who repressed the mutinies. All the more than Bouillé was himself very popular which drove the king to congratulate him in a letter sent after the repression: “Take care of your popularity; it can be very useful to me and to the kingdom. I see it as a sheet anchor and this is what will be able to restore the order one day”⁷.
- 10 But if Louis XVI did not actually want to cross the border, how can we explain the existence of documents contemplating to settle the royal family at the Orval abbaye? Was Louis XVI aware of them? For Timothy Tackett, it was only a wish expressed by Bouillé and the queen who hoped to finally convert the king to it. They were apparently not as confident as him in his popularity.
- 11 Yet, if the king kept denying he wanted to cross the border, Bouillé, who took refuge abroad, acted very differently when he sent a letter to the National Assembly whose tone is a prelude to the famous Brunswick manifesto:

“You answer for the days of the king and queen to all the kings of the universe; if one of their hairs is taken out of their head, there will not remain a single stone in Paris”⁸.

A post-Varennes legislation

- 12 Acknowledging the new danger the border represented, the National Assembly passed, as soon as June 28th 1791, a decree to reinforce the control of people about to leave the kingdom. Foreigners and merchants could only cross the border freely but not without a passport. Moreover, passports were also reviewed in order to allow a better identification of their holder:

“All passports will mention the number of people they will be given to, their names, their age, their description, the parish inhabited by the ones who got them, which ones will be compelled to sign on the registers of passports and on the very passports”⁹.
- 13 As a servant of Baronne de Korff, Louis XVI had been able to travel without having his physical description mentioned on the passport. Besides, if he had signed it, it was only as king to approve of the delivery. By reinforcing the control of identity, the Assembly wanted to resort to this failure. This way they intended to reduce the number of emigrants. But another form of psychosis the Assembly tried to reason with was developed in the areas close to the borders.

- 14 On June 29th, rumours claimed the coasts of Poitou were threatened by the English. Letters read in the Assembly “even state this raid has already been carried out in part; that the king’s flight was the signal for the malicious people”¹⁰. Even if they were proved to be only rumours, they had positive consequences: on July 3rd, the English ambassador complained to Montmorin, Minister of Foreign Affairs, about some national guards who had taken away the sails of two English ships in Nantes harbour. They had not given them back from then on¹¹.
- 15 Still on June 29th, a letter from Pau heralded the entry of the Spanish “through three different places”, which forced the Spanish ambassador to deny it. He invoked: “some rifle shootings between smugglers from the two kingdoms”¹². It was the perfect opportunity to call to an elucidation of the line of the border as the deputy, Mr. d’Arreing, was asking: “I am taking advantage of the circumstances to notice to the Assembly that there were divisions between Basque and Spanish people about the border, and to ask to take measures to put an end to them”¹³.
- 16 After Varennes, these English ships and Spanish smugglers suddenly changed the familiar figure of the foreigner into a traitor and an enemy.
- 17 But gradually, the threat took another form: the enemy appeared as being already inside the kingdom while the debate about the inviolability of the king got bogged down. Who really was the foreigner? If almost everybody agreed on the fact he was to be identified with the ones who opposed to the completion of the Constitution, not everybody pointed out the same people. While the republicans were accusing the king and his betrayal, the municipality of Paris incriminated the demonstrators who called for the deposition of the king on the Champ de Mars on July 17th.
- 18 “The members of the municipality, informed that factious people, that foreigners paid to sow disorder, to preach rebellion, propose to form large gatherings with the culpable hope to lead the people astray and to induce them to reprehensible excesses”¹⁴ decided to forbid all demonstrations. The foreigner appearing now as the absolute evil, this is the image in which any opponent had to be enclosed.
- 19 After the violent suppression of the demonstration, it was more than urgent to favour concord. The Assembly then stressed the completion of the Constitution that was finally accepted by the king on September 14th.
- 20 In the new Constitution, two articles deal with the foreigner issue:
- “Article 2: Are French citizens: those who were born in France from a French father; those who, born in France from a foreign father, established their place of residence in the kingdom; those who, born in a foreign country from a French father, settled down in France and took the civic oath; at last those who, born in a foreign country, and are descended, at any degree, from a French man or woman expatriate for a religion cause, come to reside in France and take the oath.
- Article 3: Those who, born outside the kingdom, from foreign parents, reside in France, become French citizens after having established their residence in the kingdom for five continuous years if they have also purchased some buildings there or married a French woman or created an agricultural or a commercial establishment and if they have taken the civic oath”.
- 21 This way the Constitution consecrates a kind of ground soil that gives place to benevolent hospitality. It also cancels the passport measures that were taken after Varennes and restores the free movement of people as specified in article 5: “The National Assembly

decrees that no permission or passport, whose use had been momentarily established, will be required anymore”.

22 The aim of these measures was clearly to bury the quarrels that appeared after Varenes and that could have been fatal for the Constitution. Yet there was no real answer to them and that is why they came out very soon again for even if the deputies agreed not to reduce the foreigner to the enemy, the border paranoia still existed. This was particularly noticeable when a group of natives from Brabant arrived in Douais and Lille on December 16th 1791. As Sophie Wahnich¹⁵ already developed the subject, I will only sum up the story.

23 As they arrived as a group, they produced a mass effect resulting in suspicion. From then on, the question was: Are they really the persecuted patriots they claim to be or do they have hostile intentions? There was indeed no particular event that would have justified their sudden exile. Yet, if they seem to have chiefs, they have no arms. So many contradictions that one does not want to take lightly anymore. The time is far when Sauce, prosecutor and receiver in Varenes, could boast about the importance of his town on June 20th. Flattered by the presence of numerous officers in Varenes, he wrote:

“Sixty-four dragoons instead of fifty arrived yesterday, which makes hundred and twenty-two altogether; all are conveniently accommodated and all are pleased. General Volgta [Goguelat], aide-de-camp of general Bouillé is here and shows me his satisfaction of the gracious way we had placed his troop. He told me he had just visited the Rhine line and he assured me that the enemy was not ready yet and that we could cope with him in case of alarm, and that we were going to settle a camp near Montmédy very shortly. He is waiting here for Monsieur de Bouillé who should arrive tomorrow. [...]

See now if we are not a major town: generals, aides-de-camp, colonels, here are the ones who visit us. And you still believe that we are not a true capital-city!”¹⁶

24 In December 1791, it was rather concern that prevailed in front of the unknown and that is why the authorities chose strictness by legislating. On December 17th, a decree from the directoire du département du Nord stipulated that:

“Foreigners who will come to the entry of towns will be lead to the municipality that will examine their passport and rule if they have to stay or not in their territory.

In municipalities, the census of foreigners living in respective towns and the list of the foreigners will be sent exactly to the district of the arrondissement so that the aforementioned district will render an account to us about the measures that will have been taken to prevent the gatherings of foreigners”¹⁷.

25 Consequently, when the rumour becomes a reality with the effective presence of foreigners, when it goes beyond the point of the traditional border quarrels, it is the institutionalization of the surveillance that prevails. If the Assembly had advocated rationalization and temperance before, faced with the rumours and against their wishes, the deputies are more and more lead to answer to the psychosis by the law. This is what is clearly noticeable in the legislation of February-March 1792 that restored passports:

“Article 1: Any person who wants to travel in the kingdom will be required to bring a passport as long as no different order is given.

Article 2: Passports will mention the name of the people they will be delivered to, their age, their profession, their description, the place of their residence and their quality of Frenchman or of foreigner. Any passport will be personal”.

26 As Varenes is still remembered, it caused the deputy Lacroix to ask for a “penal measure against the ones who would travel under an assumed name”. The description does not seem enough to him because “when the king was arrested in Varenes, he did not travel

under the name of Louis XVI". The measure finally passed and even if Louis XVI managed to make the Assembly wait for his signature until the end of March, he ended up giving official recognition to the decree.

Varennes, a foretaste of Sedan?

- 27 Alleged to be temporary and due to special circumstances, the post-Varennes legislation set a precedent that permitted to specify a notion of identity that, as Vincent Denis's work stated¹⁸, was latent since the second half of the 18th century. When studying Varennes from this point of view, I also found some echoes with the work of Laurent Dornel¹⁹ about the Third Republic, the situation being quite similar to the one that resulted from the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. In both times the traditional borders conflicts took another shape and paranoia appeared. For instance, let us not forget that Alain de Monéys was tortured at Hautefaye as a Prussian. During the following years, the xenophobic speech particularly hostile to German people became commonplace. As the most numerous foreign community in France, they are suspected of industrial spying. And if the National Assembly tried to resist the psychosis as well as in the time of the Revolution, the deputies were lead to pass more and more restrictive laws with the success of general Boulanger. In 1886, in spite of the reluctance of the Internal Affairs Minister, the "Carnet A" and "Carnet B" were introduced which enabled to increase the control of all foreigners. A war following the other, the exception tended to become the rule and the First World War permitted the creation of the identity card for foreigners in 1917. Consequently, the exception measures that were imagined at the time of Varennes became an ordinary way of defining and controlling identity in the 20th century.

NOTES

1. Quoted in MORTIMER-TERNAUX, Louis, *Histoire de la Terreur, 1792-1794*, t. I, Paris, 1868, p. 357.
2. In Jean Eugène BIMBENET, *Fuite de Louis XVI à Varennes*, Paris, 1868, p.138-139.
3. « Déclaration du roi, adressé [sic] à tous les François, à sa sortie de Paris », dans *Journal des débats et des décrets*, n° 763, Paris, Chez Baudoin, 1791, [tiré à part], p. 19.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
5. Mathurin-Adolphe DE LESCURE, *Correspondance secrète inédite sur Louis XVI, Marie-Antoinette, la Cour et la ville de 1777 à 1792*, t. II, Paris, 1866, p. 487.
6. « Lettre au Comte d'Artois du 7 septembre 1789 », in Louis XVI, *Œuvres*, Paris, 1863, p. 97.
7. « Lettre de Louis XVI à Bouillé du 1^{er} septembre 1790 », in *Le Procès de Louis XVI, collection complète des opinions, discours et mémoires des membres de la Convention nationale, sur les crimes de Louis XVI*, t. VII, Paris, 1795, p. 170.
8. « Lettre de Bouillé du 26 juin 1791, lue à l'Assemblée dans la séance du 30 juin », *Le Moniteur universel*, n°182, 1^{er} juillet 1791.
9. *Le Moniteur universel*, n°180, 29 juin 1791.
10. *Le Moniteur universel*, n°184, 3 juillet 1791.
11. *Le Moniteur universel*, n°186, 5 juillet 1791.

12. *Le Moniteur universel*, n°185, 4 juillet 1791.
 13. *Le Moniteur universel*, n°186, 5 juillet 1791.
 14. Ibid.
 15. Sophie WAHNICH, *L'impossible citoyen*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1997, p. 86-97.
 16. Quoted in BIMBENET, *Fuite de Louis XVI à Varennes*, op.cit., p. 88-89.
 17. Quoted in WAHNICH, *L'impossible citoyen*, op.cit., p. 96.
 18. Vincent DENIS, *Une histoire de l'identité, France 1715-1815*, Société des Etudes robespierristes, Champ-Vallon, 2008.
 19. Laurent DORNEL, *La France hostile, histoire sociale de la xénophobie, 1870-1918*, Paris, Hachette, 2004.
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ABSTRACTS

L'arrestation de Louis XVI à Varennes en 1791 a été étudiée de multiples points de vue, mais paradoxalement, elle l'a rarement été en relation avec l'histoire de la frontière et de l'identité. Or, à sa suite, l'étude des débats à l'Assemblée témoigne d'une résurgence de cette problématique. Elle débouche sur la création d'un dispositif d'exception visant à définir une politique de l'identité qui préfigure celle mise en place au moment de la Première Guerre mondiale.

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