

The 'Société des Observateurs de l'homme'
and the history of French anthropology (1799–1804)
How Napoléon Bonaparte ended the French Revolution

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I would like to thank Pietro Corsi for this kind invitation, and also to thank all of you for your attendance. Please forgive me for my very poor English.

My major field of research deals with the intellectual and political history of France from the end of the Ancien Regime to the end of the Restoration, more precisely from 1780 to 1820. This time-span covers some of the most tumultuous and creative years in French history: tumultuous if judged in terms of purely political events, and creative – and here more than it is usually supposed – if evaluated by its intellectual ideas and institutions. Traditionally, the French Revolution is considered as a turning point or, as historians like to say, a transition more or less brutal in the history of ideas, as in so much else. Michel Foucault, for one, considered these years as inaugurating a new paradigm (or regime), a new age in discourse and knowledge. Many recent works confirm and precise this statement. For my part, I am chiefly preoccupied with what some historians like Robert Darnton or Daniel Roche called the 'Social History of Ideas', with placing ideas and knowledge in their political and social context, with understanding in the largest sense of the notion the relationship between theory and practice.

Among the intellectual institutions that have excited my interest are the literary and scientific societies, those of the Ancien Regime, already widely studied, and those less well known of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic eras. The revolutionary period is usually represented as a true rupture between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The famous law of 8 August 1793 ordering the suppression of all Academies and literary societies officially recognized by the Nation might symbolize (and has been cited as symbolizing) the disappearance of organized intellectual life during the period. Yet, and here much of my work is intended to demonstrate this, formal intellectual activity was far from dead, as abundant archival sources reveal. I have examined in this respect the papers of scientific societies in Paris, their correspondence and technical publications that show, convincingly, that an interest in these matters was active, indeed, flourishing behind the facade of more strident political debate and action. Specifically, the National Museum of Natural History, the Ecole Normal, and the Ecole Polytechnique, themselves all creations of the Revolutionary period, founded between 1793 and 1795, are only one side of the story. I have tried to discover the 'Grub Street' of the scientific and intellectual world, without forgetting the major luminaries themselves. We can say that the scientific and literary societies have a bad reputation.

As many of you may already know, historians such as Roger Hahn and Dena Goodman have emphasized – to my mind, over-emphasized – the exclusively political aspect of these institutions. By relegating these institutions and their members to the purely political realm, their scientific dimension has been minimized or completely ignored. The entry into these institutions of a new generation of men previously excluded – a movement that mirrors a similar change in the political elite of the Revolution as a whole – has been seen by some historians as nothing less than the opening of the doors to a group of subversive men whose principal aims were political, not scientific or literary. Hence the notion, which is more widespread among historians than it should be, of a pack of socially ‘frustrated’ parvenus (studied by Robert Darnton) ambitiously taking over the posts of their elders. My current research aims to correct this misconception. By studying the different minutes of the ‘Great Institutions’ as well as the lesser (in the sense of less well-known, private literary and scientific societies), one can easily end up with a very different, much revised vision of the intellectual life of the period. I have necessarily been fascinated by the various social and intellectual networks, as one has studied political networks, among these men and women of letters and sciences. And not surprisingly, these personal relationships were fraught, as so often, with embittered conflict – political, social, and scientific. My work on the Society of the Observers of Man stems from these general reflections. Indeed, this learned society was the first scientific institution devoted exclusively to the study of man. Perhaps the most enduring contribution of this society was to establish and institutionalize the science of anthropology as a discipline in France.

Now a few words about some suspicions concerning the ‘ancestors’ of French anthropology ...

My main conclusion is that generations of scholars have constructed and passed on a canonical history that rested on slender bases indeed. Since the end of the nineteenth century, the short-lived society was commonly regarded as the very first scholarly French institution to cultivate anthropology in the modern sense. In the context of a rivalry with their British colleagues, the members of the *Société d’anthropologie de Paris*, created by Paul Broca, claim the inheritance of the *Observateurs* who were exalted and celebrated as the glorious ancestors of French anthropology. For many specialists in anthropology and its history, this short-lived Société, whose projects included the ‘wild child of Aveyron’ and the Baudin expedition to Australia, had become a privileged precursor of the modern discipline. Historians of French Anthropology compared one of its members, the well-known philanthropist Joseph-Marie Degérando (who wrote *Considerations on the diverse methods to be followed in the observation of the wild peoples* [*Considérations sur les diverses méthodes à suivre dans l’observation des peuples sauvages*]) with Bronislaw Malinowski or with Evans-Pritchard and went so far as to argue that this scientific society was a pioneer of ‘participant observation’. Since this first rediscovery under the Third Republic,

there have been valuable studies by French or English historians (Blanckaert, Stocking, Jamin, and Copans among others). But these studies fail to place the *observateurs* in the context of the turbulent and swiftly altering political culture of the Directory and Consulat.

Unlike other learned societies of Paris, the *Observateurs* left no archives or direct sources except the rules of their society and some dispersed – and famous – papers containing the different instructions for travellers who were going to be members of the maritime expedition of Nicolas Baudin. The society never published a scholarly journal or even a list of its members. In spite of these difficulties, I have tried to place the members of the Society and their anthropological programme in the intellectual and political context of the Consulate. My approach is ‘austerely’ prosopographic and rests upon a close mapping of intellectual and political networks, their institutional crystallization, and their location in particular areas of Paris, the provinces (generally in the Midi), Germany, and the Swiss territories. Using a wide range of archival and printed sources, I established the social networks (*réseaux*) of the society’s members and placed their projects in complex scientific, political, and social contexts, possessing elements of striking specificity. I have shed light upon many of the key salons or circles of the Consulate (the salon animated by the Humboldts, for example) to explain what was the significance of the anthropology of those days.

A. Creation and success of the Société des Observateurs

It was the discovery of Victor, the ‘Wild boy of Aveyron’ (the hero of François Truffaut’s film) that provided Louis-François Jauffret with the occasion for bringing the society to the public attention. Established in January 1800, the society held its first public meeting in August of the same year. Within the space of two years, its rooms in the rue de Seine, near the Levraults’ library, saw the activities of a very heterogeneous group of scientists. Behind the name of ‘*Observateurs*’, we find scientists (naturalists, doctors, and those who treated mental disease) as well as philosophers, writers, historians of language, orientalists, and antiquaries. Although many of them were well known, the most important protagonists in the activities of the society were unknown or appeared to be minor writers or scientists (in French, I would call them the ‘*seconds couteaux*’). The first president of the society, Jean de Maimieux, was an ancient German military, who gained some reputation after publishing a project of universal language; the perpetual secretary, Louis-François Jauffret, was a ‘teacher’ who published small books for children and looked to supplement his meagre and uncertain salaries by undertaking a variety of editorial jobs. Although these actors were in not in the front rank, they played an important role in the organization and the activities of the society.

As far as their political trajectories were concerned, the common features of the group were very difficult to determine. The *Observateurs de l’homme* have been seen as the prototype of the heroes of the republic, a materialist and atheist effort to

exclude traditional philosophical or Christian accounts of man's physical and moral accomplishments. In fact, Society was regarded as a branch of the *Institut national* and the Class of the Ideologues. In the *Institut National*, a new model of citizenship was developed, a model that was important to construct in harmony with all its members, as opposed to the factionalized and fractionalized individualism or selfishness that had, in their view, characterized the Terror. Besides, the directorial years from 1795 to 1799 saw the development of a multitude of scientific societies modelled on the rules and regulations of the *Institut National*, all expected to be active participants in the great work of social regeneration and civic reconstruction. These societies were subsidized by the state precisely because of the political role they were expected to play. In spite of the claims of liberty that characterize this period, the Directory aspired to control these societies as the best way of promoting and ultimately managing intellectual life, which, if allowed too much liberty of expression, would paradoxically undermine liberty.

It was during this period that a group of loosely associated thinkers collectively known as the Ideologues (including Garat, Cabanis, and Destutt de Tracy) proposed a general scientific project to unite the entire intellectual community behind a common republican goal, a project that would mobilize and categorize knowledge to consolidate the ideal of a Republican State. Forming what Cabanis called the 'living encyclopedia' (*'encyclopédie vivante'*), all scientists, writers or artists were called upon to participate in the construction of the 'general science of man'. Using pensions or moral gratification, public authorities imposed a collective intellectual programme that was linked to the ideal of social perfectibility and political regeneration. Founded on the interaction of science and politics, this ideal had been considered as dangerous by contemporaries themselves: many of them criticize the 'empire of science' and the pretension of scientists to heal political and social diseases. Nevertheless, those who refused to collaborate in this project were considered enemies of the Republic. Republicanism during the Revolution (at any period of the Revolution after 1792) was far from being a coherent programme; as in the United States at the same period, republicanism could, and did, have a different meaning according to the person using it. The Ideologues, devoted as they were to republicanism, disagreed among themselves about the nature of this political concept. Although I would like to expand upon this project, I only have time to emphasize that the Ideologues wanted to build a science of man capable of becoming a scientific and political paradigm.

The society of the Observers of Man, following the highly successful interpretative line (endorsed, among others, by Michel Foucault, Sergio Moravia or Georges Gusdorf), represented the heyday of the ideologues' influence: one would suppose that notable *idéologues* such as Cabanis, Tracy, Garat or Volney has been *observateurs*, and indeed they have been said to belong to the Society. I refute this claim. Rather than amalgamating Observateurs and ideologues, my prosopographical investigation allowed me to trace the origins of the society within traditionalistic and conservative Catholic circles, fiercely opposed to the ideologues and to what they

regarded as the unchristian scientific values promoted by the republican authorities of the Directory. Among the different members of this networks involved, the abbé Sicard, the famous and politically experienced instructor of deaf and dumb children, fills a central place. Indeed, where the *idéologues* had championed the role of the doctor as surrogate priest for a modern society viewed physiologically, using precepts derived, among others theoretical influences, from the Montpellier school of medicine, the *observateurs* included in their ranks a significant number of priests or Roman Catholic sympathizers who balked at reducing the moral and the intellectual to the physical.

The creation of the society results from a long-term strategy designed to open a space for a Catholic comeback, culturally and philosophically, as well as, literally, the return of the members of Catholic intelligentsia in the context of the strategy of ‘reconciliation’ imposed by General Bonaparte. Nevertheless, the society was not a Catholic institution. From the end of 1800, the society attracted a variety of intellectual actors, some of whom indeed were sympathizers of the ideologues. I have studied the different logics driving various figures to take part in the project. The more celebrated professors (as Jussieu or Hallé) judged it worth their while to join the Society, and ended up dominating it. While these famous professors brought the society prestige and legitimacy, they also threatened the initial ‘equilibrium’ established around the abbé Sicard. For scholars (e.g. Degérando or even Cuvier), scientific societies provided opportunities to expand their social reputation and find patrons or clients who could help consolidate their scientific legitimacy. Especially for younger scholars, societies offered possibilities to go to the top of the social scale. Indeed, the constitution of a real scientific group with the object of ‘observing’ the physical, moral and intellectual dimensions of man had undeniable appeal in 1800 for a wide range of scholars. In the summer of 1800, the society attained a new level of success and public visibility with its official participation in the preparations for the Baudin expedition and with the accession to its ranks of a number of academic ‘strong men’ (Fourcroy, Millin, and Silvestre de Sacy). In time, sixteen of the society’s forty-five resident members belonged to the Institut national.

Indeed, my question quickly became: Given its disciplinary and social diversity, what would the society’s science of ‘anthropology’ look like? As I have shown how the membership was very heterogeneous and mixed, I will now describe their anthropology, not as a discipline, but as a hybrid science and programme. The concept of hybridization includes by definition some mutual interactions.

B. Looking for the anthropological programme

By placing ‘obligations’ and ‘constraints’ on its members, the society’s norms and rules were an attempt to resolve the tensions among them. The famous memoirs for the Baudin expedition, written by Cuvier, Degérando and Moreau de la Sarthe, were also attempts at cognitive and institutional normalization. As critics called for more

objective and unadorned reporting and fewer adventure tales, voyagers had increasingly to follow the norms of observation and the collecting mandates established by ‘sedentary’ scholars in Paris. One of my study’s conclusions is the impossibility of reducing the anthropology practised by the Observateurs to a well-specified discipline; instead, I tried to link it to a multiplicity of scientific practices and discourses. For example, I contextualize Degérando’s memoir within the varied and wide-ranging efforts of later eighteenth-century scholars and administrators to catalogue French territory and its inhabitants. Degérando, who held a post in the Ministry of the Interior, was clearly engaged in the overlapping discourses of medical topography, descriptive geography, and statistics in France as he outlined the study of savage people. The Observateurs’ anthropology, which was cogently articulated by Jauffret in 1801, was quite different from the science of man of the Ideologues. In line with the ‘encyclopédie vivante’, physiology provided the basis for the science of Ideologues. For Jauffret, in contrast, anthropology fit well with the anti-materialism of many of the Observateurs.

By 1802, even Degérando had broken with Cabanis over the question of physical and moral unity, arguing that sentiments and ideas could be autonomous. The eighteenth-century naturalist Buffon was an important figure in these debates over human nature. Buffon’s notion of natural history was generalist and descriptive, and his view of man was dualist: in ‘homo duplex’, the mind was not reducible to the body. Besides providing scientific ammunition for critics of materialism, ‘homo duplex’ was a position that could keep this very diverse group of scholars together in equilibrium. Disciplinary equality offered a secure space for those Observateurs without professional legitimacy, the theorists of universal language, the pedagogues, the voyagers, and the popularizers. Increasingly marginalized in academic culture, these Observateurs were promised an important place in the construction of the new discipline alongside the powerful naturalists and professors.

An area where ‘seconds couteaux’ were especially visible was the society’s civilizing mission to ameliorate the conditions of marginalized peoples. Their philanthropy was sometimes tinged with counter-revolutionary and anti-materialist moralism. But the Observateurs’ attitudes were also in line with universalist and optimistic Enlightenment discourse, and they were firmly opposed to the doctrine of polygenism. Indeed, anthropology, like the civilizing mission, was the result of an equilibrium between practical and theoretical aspects. The ‘moral’ treatment of Philippe Pinel, or the Sicards’ treatment of the deaf and dumb, was predicated upon a general project of universal inclusion, and therefore regeneration. Mention should be made not only of Victor, of the Chinese Tchong-A-Sam and the savage populations – all of these were isolated and unfortunate –, but also of the anthropological promenades, punctuated by improving discourses, conducted by Jauffret in the woods outside Paris which were conceived as a sort of moral therapy of socialization and pedagogy. In this regard, the ‘anthropological field’ was anywhere and everywhere.

Their anthropology, in conclusion, was ‘hybrid’ and not easily turned into a single, unified discipline.

Despite the retrospective acclaim by modern anthropologists, the society’s record was one of disappointment and failure. Why did the society dissolve? According to the historians, it fell, with the Ideologues, after Bonaparte’s decision to close the doors of the moral and political sciences at the National Institute in 1803. We now know that we can no longer explain its disappearance by reference to Napoleon’s tyranny. I have thus turned to the shifting boundaries of scholarly and social space at the end of the Consulate and early years of the Empire to explain this disappearance.

C. Questions of the disappearance of Anthropology and Observateurs de l’homme

By 1804, the society had faded away and was completely forgotten until its resurrection in the role of mythical precursor of the modern science of man. The study of the institutional reorganization and theoretical transformations were necessary to understand the ‘disappearance’ of anthropology. The society was the victim of several interrelated trends including the rise of new social cadres and ‘experts’; a reorganization of knowledge, reflected by the rejection of the encyclopedic ideal and the restructuring of the National Institute along the lines of the old and heterogeneous academic order, and growing disciplinary specialization. Other phenomena were also important: a resurgent Church and the creation of the Lycées played a role in the narrowing of the civic space in which to practice sciences and arts in general; new norms and constraints affecting publishing houses further marginalized the voyagers and vulgarizers.

It was not a propitious moment for learned societies, and many either disappeared or became appendages to the major official institutions of learning. In this new landscape, there was no place for the Observateurs’ encyclopedic anthropology. The Bonapartist State played an important role in the logic of professionalization and specialization of forms of knowledge which made impossible the encyclopedic and anthropological project defended as much by the Observers as by the Ideologues. Napoleon Bonaparte strove to impose order and stability in the intellectual realm, as in other sectors of his Empire. He largely succeeded. He re-established a close professional relationship between the writer, the scientist, and the State by a system of carefully controlled patronage, reinstating a form of hierarchical order within the intellectual world. In this sense, he contributed in his own highly personal way to stabilizing the tumult that was the Revolution by introducing a higher degree of professionalization among the disparate groups and individuals aspiring to the status of men of letters or science. This was essentially accomplished by redefining the nature of patronage, and by founding new intellectual institutions to replace those closed by the Revolution. This shift affected, and was brought about by, profound changes in the personnel occupying posts of responsibility and power. What was at

issue during the agitated years of the Revolution was nothing less than the restructuring of the intellectual world as it existed under the Ancien Regime – albeit with major differences, as we will see later.

Under the Empire, the Sciences were no longer considered as instruments for the improvement of mankind. In the new order, scientists were sent back to their barracks and collections, implicitly and explicitly invited by the new ruler to leave the science of man and society to those who knew how to run consciences and people. In 1807, the government decided to publish the books of the two ancient members of the Society of the Observers of Man: the observations of savage populations by François Péron and the final results of the education of Victor de l’Aveyron by Jean-Marc Itard. Did these Observateurs betray the ideal of Enlightenment? No, but reading these books, we can understand how far in the past the revolutionary period has sunk: on the one hand, after measuring their muscular strengths, Péron insist on the natural inferiority of the savage population; on the other hand, after devoting six years caring for him, Itard abandoned his studies on the ‘wild child’ – who became a ‘mad child’ – and devoted the rest of his career to a practical medicine specializing in deaf-mutes. As Michel Foucault showed, a kind of ‘reduction of the visual field’ was then attained and with it the disappearance of a general approach towards man. Itard’s inability to cure Victor is emblematic of the failure of the sciences in general and of the ‘science of man’ in particular. More typical is the judgment on Victor given in 1812 by the ‘phrenologists’ Gall and Spuzheim, who claimed to assess people’s character flaws and capacities by analyzing the shape and protuberances of their skulls. They concluded succinctly that Victor was an imbecile because of his cranial anatomy. The ideal of regeneration had thus become anachronistic; at the same time, hospitals and prisons were now considered punitive rather than therapeutic institutions.

The new organization of the sciences was deemed capable of effacing revolutionary memories. The double disappearance of Anthropology and Ideology was not only a scientific event but also a real, political one: in the context of the publication of the *Génie du Christianisme* in 1802, Bonaparte actively repressed the revolutionary and republican idea of progress defined as the possibility to changing man and society. If Napoleon presented himself as the heir of the republican spirit and claimed he was continuing the Revolution, the political regime under the Consulate and the Empire constituted a rupture with the programme of republican regeneration. Napoleon brought the realms of Science and Literature under his personal control, and banished notions of equality and any collective search for the improvement of society in order to achieve republican ends. He re-established in his own inimitable way hierarchies and privileges as instruments of his politics of personal domination in the realm of the intellect, as in so much else.

We can now fully appreciate the harsh criticism Chateaubriand levelled against the ‘empire of the sciences’ and the ‘power of the sciences’: for the ‘holy writer’, they were not able to bring about social and political happiness; on the contrary, the ‘science of man’ was condemned and accused of fostering a degrading humanity.

Facing these attacks, the supporters of the Sciences abandoned the discourse of regeneration. This process reveals some important transformations in social and political organization. Cuvier's famous *Reports to the Emperor on the progress of the sciences, the letters and the arts since 1789* presented in 1808 came to legitimize the new divisions between the various domains of knowledge, the new epistemological foundations and the new positions of power. Under the Empire, the ideal of the encyclopedic unity of knowledge disappears and with it the possibility of building a general science of man. The progressive specialization of the various forms of knowledge focusing on man would end, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in a phenomenon of disciplinarian organization: the project to achieve a general science of man became anachronistic and appeared as a defeated scientific and political ideal.

We know that during the nineteenth century, in France, the conditions and the modes of the identification of the individual and of its social location underwent deep change. The Napoleonic order proved a very important step in these transformations. Social identity was naturalized on the basis of the new categories and classification of the sciences, a trend that revealed the political aim to close for ever the revolutionary book. The new concepts and theories that were on the rise in the intellectual world – analysed by the work of Jan Goldstein on the transformation of the ‘post-revolutionary self’ – were capable of building, behind the apparent chaos and the attributes or status, a new order of identities that could be seen and presented as objective, scientific and fundamental. As the case of Georges Cuvier shows, comparative anatomy appeared to be, for many contemporary commentators, a powerful tool for such an enterprise. In the light of this, the official sciences (statistics, anatomy or phrenology) inspired views about women and men formulated in the semiological register of the signs of identity, as well as in the naturalistic and causal register of the organic roots of dispositions and behaviours. In my opinion, the scientific debate between Cuvier – and the fixity of the natural order – and Lamarck – who introduced the theory of ‘transformisme’ – was in fact a real political debate: Cuvier became the strong and official naturalist because his theory participated in the new discourse of political and social authority; he established a social, economic, and political order preventing transformations. Comparative anatomy was capable of providing legitimacy to the new categories of domination.

The new republican calendar did not survive long after the consolidation of the Empire, nor did the ideal of a unified republican scientific community and the project to improve the society at large. Some of the new scientific terms (e.g. *gasteropodes*) or the names of new disciplines (e.g. technology and biology) were kept. Changes in the nomenclature or definition of new disciplines that were introduced (and at times reintroduced) during the Napoleonic period had an impact on scientific life and research that has lasted up to the present day. What one might call the scientific discourse was used to justify institutions such as the *Code Civil* and the re-establishment of slavery. Hardly any aspect of society escaped this desire to quantify and control. And scientific research was often put at the service of social and political

notions that were anything but scientific: studies in female hysteria were made to serve the purpose of male domination; anthropological reflections were often used to justify slavery or the most preposterous racial theorizing. The new science of statistics emphasized differences rather than similarities; society as a whole became the object of vast enterprises of quantification. Under the Restoration, several thinkers (e.g. l'abbé Grégoire and Auguste Comte) advocated the ideal of community and the encyclopedic organization of knowledge: it is not difficult to see that this claim was giving expression to a political project. The rediscovery of the Society of the Observers of Man by theoreticians of the Third Republic did not happen by chance. At the end of the nineteenth century, Republicans turned to the Ideologues and the Observers of Man to justify and legitimize their project of civilization grounded on the school system and the colonial administration.

I hope I have succeeded in explaining my motivation in studying the relation between several fields: the social and political history on the one side, and the intellectual history on the other. I am presently engaged in exploring this intellectual history in a more thorough and systematic way, by working on the minutes of the Société d'histoire naturelle de Paris and accounting for the complexity and heterogeneity of the group of 'naturalists' active during the decade of the French Revolution. Thank you very much for your attention.

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