Conscription, Citizenship and Identity Politics in 19th-Century France

1. Military Service links the specifically modern idea of citizenship with practices of social discipline. In contrast to other institutions which were developed or generalized at the turn of the 18th and the 19th century – at the beginning of the period which we usually call “contemporary history” – military service establishes an existential relationship between the state and the individual, i.e. a relationship that involves the possibility of the individual’s death for the sake of the state. On the other hand, military service, especially in the French understanding, is one of the most important characteristics of modern citoyenneté. If we accept Max Weber’s definition of state power as the monopoly of use of legitimate violence, this link between military service and citizenship becomes clear. The modern state power does not rely on others than of the whole of its “subjects”, i.e. its (male) citizens. Military service – institution of bodily submission to disciplines imposed upon the individuals by the state on the one hand, and promise of political liberty through civic participation on the other – is profoundly paradoxical, yet emblematic for the definition of the relation between the individual and the modern state.

From there on, the interpretation that stresses the “democratic character” of the institution of military service becomes understandable. It should not be forgotten, however, that military service has been one of the means of promotion of an aggressive nationalism and militarism in the population. In my perspective, military service has to be analyzed as

1 “Staat ist diejenige menschliche Gemeinschaft, welche innerhalb eines bestimmten Gebiets [...] das Monopol legitimier physischer Gewaltsamkeit für sich (mit Erfolg) beansprucht.” Max WEBER, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie, Tübingen, Mohr, 1972

both, as an issue of citizenship as well as for subjectivation. The theoretical “dilemma” of military service is thus its ambiguity between two characteristics. On the one hand, the institution is the expression of citizenship, i.e. one does military service because one is a citizens, which means that the basic function of the state, the legitimate use of violence, is exercised by no one else than by the whole of the citizens. Military service, in this understanding is a civic duty, moreover, a civic right. On the other hand, however, military service implies the denial of the very essence of citizenship, i.e. the institutional guarantee of some basic political rights and liberties. Military service as an institution of social discipline, or, as a French anti-militaristic writer put it, a “school of servility”. It is my methodological conviction that this ambiguity, moreover: this dichotomy, should not be reduced. It has to be clearly affirmed that military service involves both, citizenship and subjectivation, civic rights and their denial, discipline and political autonomy.

In addition to this, however, there is a historical movement that should be noted. In the period between the French Revolution and World War I, we see a “shift” concerning the institution from a political invention that was strongly assimilated to the revolutionary experience towards a means of aggressive nationalism and militarism. It is along these two, partly contradicting lines of arguments – the constitutive ambiguity on the one hand, and the historical shift from one pole to the other – that the history of this institution should be apprehended. Being an institution that “integrates” the individual directly into the sphere of political “power circulation”, military service provides a field for a “nominalistical” analysis of the construction of state-power and national identities in the 19th century, i.e. an analysis that takes into account the experiences, feelings and thought in which the individuals problematized their relationship to the community. As the construction of states in Europe historically means construction of nation-states, and as the relationship between the state and the individual is thus inextricable from the relation between the individual and the “nation”, we have, therefore, to consider a triple relationship, between the individual, the state-power, and the nation.


2 “Il faut sans doute être nominaliste : le pouvoir, ce n’est pas une institution, et ce n’est pas une structure, ce n’est pas une certaine puissance dont certains seraient dotés c’est le nom qu’on prête à une situation stratégique complexe dans une société donnée.” Michel FOUCAULT, La volonté de savoir. (Histoire de la sexualité 1) Paris, Gallimard, 1976 ; p. 123

3 “Nation” is here to be understood in the sense it had during the French Revolution, i.e. the community of citizens
This “problematization”, however, poses some theoretical problems. If we do not accept the conception of rationalistic transparence of social relationships, we have to affirm that social live, in its essence, relies on “imaginary” relations nourished by passions such as hope and fear and by bodily impressions. However, these relations, these “passions”, and this political commitment of the body is always assessed in actual individuals, i.e. they involve a certain type of subjectivity. Accordingly, stress will be laid on the construction of a certain type of “political subjectivity” through military service. The terms “subject” and “subjectivation” are particularly useful in this respect because they cover both the aspect of “citizenship” and the aspect of “subjectivation”.

Military service involves thus three poles: the individual soldier, the state and the nation. For the individual, military service means a relation of personal belonging and service to the nation-state that involves paradoxically the possession of certain political rights. The conscript is subject to military discipline, which means that his basic civic rights are denied as long as he is in the army. But the conscript is also a citoyen, which means that he is – together with all the other male citizens – the sovereign. For the state, military service is basically the political answer to the problem of the French Revolution, i.e. the “nation in arms”, which meant popular armament. As a state exists only if it effectively controls the use of violence on its territory, military service was the means to do both – to maintain the idea of the nation armée and to preserve its existence as a state. The nation, finally, is the necessary link between these two: on the one hand, the nation-state is constructed as the expression of a collective will, and on the other, the control of the central state function lies in the hands of the collectivity of the citizens.

From there on, three levels of the analysis of the processes of subjectivation should be distinguished. First there is discipline, i.e. the production of a “social body”. As well as the army produces a unified “fighting body”, on the scale of society as a whole, a unified “social body” is the purpose of these processes of discipline. In this respect, it can be said that the individual’s body is not only “socialized” but also “nationalized”. Exactly in the same way as Pascal described the production of religious faith, military discipline produces political, social, and national “belongings” as a kind of “bodily knowledge”, i.e. in the form of a socially organized “imagination” by bodily submission. The second level is the one of subjection (in contrast to subjectivation). The questions on this level turn around the possibilities of autonomous action. How can it be explained that military service, with its

---

1 Alain EHRENBERG, Le corps militaire: Politique et pédagogie en démocratie. Paris, Aubier Montaigne, 1983

3
discipline and devotion to the state, originates in popular armed uprisings during the French Revolution? And more generally: what does political autonomy mean? It is my working hypothesis that the determinate factor for subjection is the identification with a community. Community, in this sense can cover many historical realities: in the first stage of the French Revolution, for example, reference was made to the community of all human beings as such. However, the historical impact of the national community, of class or local communities can not be overestimated. I propose to call the third level the “teleology of political subjectivation” in the modern state. This teleology implies the destruction—integration of belongings to local communities and the construction of “national” and “social” forms of integration to the state. Military service represents a means to achieve a greater national synthesis, in which regional, social and other differences are overcome. In this very respect, military service has been called the “school of the nation”, it is the place where Rousseau’s “total alienation, of each associate, with all his rights, to the community as a whole” takes materially place.

However, the way in which the national state and the individuals have defined their mutual relationship cannot be analyzed without taking into account the related “identity constructions”. The impact of conscription for feelings of appartenence to a national community is the first point. Appartenence becomes real by the “embodiment” of the community’s signs, symbols, and ceromonies, like flags, uniforms, oaths etc. but also simply by exposing one’s body and entire person to the “military machine”, and, as a limit case, to death “pour la patrie”. Being an institution that concerns only men, “school of viril vertus”, military service is on of those places where masculinity (and thus gender identities and their difference) is produced and reproduced, both in a psychic and in a political sense. As a part of every man’s life conscription links the conscript to a specific community of experience. Women, on the other hand, are not admitted: their exclusion from political rights corresponds with their exclusion from the community of military experience. The institution of military service has been, all along the 19th-century, the battleground where the republican aspirations for universality and equality affronted the particularisms of regional and, above all, class interests. The historical analysis of exonorations, of exemptions of entire professional groups and regions, and the constant tendencies to “nationalize” the army provides a useful tool for the study of the relation between republicanism and class antagonisms. The

2 R. Claire SNYDER, Citizen-Soldiers and Manly Warriors: Military Service and Gender in the Civic Republic Tradition. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 1999
fundamental question is thus how the “political subjectivity” of free and equal citizens is related to national, gender, and class identities. I want to argue in this paper that there was a constant struggle about the definition of this political subjectivity; or, to put it in other words, the “universal” – the political organization of free and equal citizens – was constantly “invested”, i.e. defined and foreclosed by identity constructions.

2.
modern conscription and military service – with the identification of the citizen with the soldier – were first conceived in the French Revolution. It is, therefore, essential to consider the development which led from the first call for bourgeois volunteers in 1791 to the institutionalization of military service with the loi Jourdan in 1798. This development goes hand in hand with other basic transformations of the relationship between the individual and the state – a transformation that may best be described as the “invention of citoyenneté”.

As we shall see, this period already contains most of the essential issues of the debate on conscription for the following century. I will particularly insists on the impact of revolutionary debates on military organization, because of the discursive importance of quatre-vingt-treize that was constructed as the “origin” of the French République.

Military organization, or, more generally, the organization of the force publique was an important issue in French politics since the very beginning of the Revolution. Since 1789, National Guards were formed spontaneously almost everywhere in France, but these National Guards were no army but a sort of auxiliary police force. It is important to remember, however, that participation in the National Guard was reserved to “active citizens”: the distinction between “active” and “passive” citizens was a prime constituent of the 1789 political system in which universality in political participation was not intended. In the deliberation for the new constitution, military affairs were on the agenda since December 1789. By the time of the gathering of the General Estates, even most of the army officers were convinced of the necessity of a change; and so were the deputies in the Assembly. There was a common consensus, furthermore, that the “military constitution” had to reflect the changes

\[\text{see les réclamations des officiers of different regiments in the Archives de la Guerre M.R. 1907 claiming the access to civic rights for soldiers (p. 17). Military discipline should no more be based on “the slavery of fear” but on the “hope for the nation” (p. 4)}\]
of the political system. Everybody agreed even about the “philosophical” principle that “each citizen is the defender of his fatherland”. There is a basic principle of the “political association” that follows from the nature of the “social contract”, namely that “it is necessary that all the being that belong to it, live and die together, and consequently each citizen owes military service” to the community. There was equally a consensus about the fact that recruitment had to be considered as the core-piece of the “military constitution”. There was hardly any parliamentary discourse that did not open by underlining the central importance of military recruitment for political organization as a whole.

The adversaries of conscription agreed with its promoters that in theory it is a duty for “all citizens, without distinction” to defend the State, but the former argued that “an important distinction should be made in the application of this truth”. “The direction, both of the duty and of the right of the citizens should be combined by the legislator in such a manner that the political liberty of the citizens, related with the liberty of the Constitution, is conserved among them without alteration”. An arrangement between two contradicting principles of political value – the defense of the country on the one hand, and personal liberty on the other – needed thus to be conciliated and this compromise should consist in a well-ordered separation of tasks between the “different political classes”.

This was exactly what the supporters of conscription denied. Their position may be resumed as a criticism of all “separations” in the realm of politics, and first of all, of the

1 “This important matter [military organization] should be, in a certain way, the crowning of your work, the link, the ciment of the constitution. It was your first duty to establish a new order; it was the second to create the means to maintain this order” RABAUT, Rapport sur l’organisation de la force publique, fait au nom du Comité de Constitution & du Comité militaire, le 21 Novembre 1790, par M. Rebaut. Paris, Imprimerie nationale 1790; p. 1

2 Thus GOUPY DE MORVILLE who nevertheless argued against conscription: “Since the matter is the defense of the State, all the Citizens without distinction, are to be ready for its help, all the citizens enjoy of an equal right for this honorific task to be its defenders.” Vues générales d’un plan politique concernant une nouvelle constitution de l’armée nationale française, et un projet de finance relatif, pour l’anéantissement futur de toutes Pensions Militaires. Présentées & soumises au jugement du Roi et des Etats-Généraux. Paris, Philippe-Denys Pierres, 1790, p. 9

3 DES POMMELLES, Mémoire sur les milices. Paris, 1789; p. 2

4 “La formation de l’Armée est, dans toute espèce de Gouvernement, un des points essentiels de la Constitution; c’est celui qui en lie les différentes branches & qui assure la solidité de toutes. [...] De toutes les parties qui forment l’ensemble de la constitution militaire, toutes, sans doute, dépendent les unes des autres, le mode de Recrutement est celui que l’on peut regarder comme la plus essentielle.” LIANCOURT, Opinion sur le mode de recrutement pour l’armée... Paris, Imprimerie nationale, Décembre 1789; pp. 1-2

5 LA TOUR DU PIN, Mémoire lû par M. le comte de la Tour du Pin, Ministre & Secrétaire d’Etat de la Guerre au Comité nommé par l’Assemblée nationale. Paris, Imprimerie royale, 1789; p. 3

6 GOUPY DE MORVILLE, Vues générales... op. cit. p. 10
separation into the two “classes” of military and civil society. It was argued that the concentration of arms and of knowledge about military affairs in a restraint group is constitutes a danger for the state’s liberty. Moreover, conscription tended to put into question one of the basic principles of the 1789 political constitution, the separation between “active” and “passive” citizens. Dubois-Crancé put it in these words: “each citizen should be soldier of the Constitution; the only difference that exists between an active Citizen, & the one who is not, is that the service for the fatherland is an obligation for the former, & will be a recompense for the latter. [...] Thus, either we do not need National Guards at all, or each Citizen should be part of it”. In this logic, even the separation between service in the National Guard, which was for active citizens, and the voluntary service in the army had to be overcome. Otherwise, if these separations were not be overcome, a disintegration of the commonwealth, where “private passions” prime over the “general interest” would be the consequence. Being excluded from the service in the National Guard, the passive citizens would loose the attachments to the nation; if, on the other hand, the regular army would continue to be recruited among volunteers, which meant in practice among the very poor, then it would cease to be the “public force” of the mother country: “our armies are composed of the most indigent, I almost said, the basest class of the Nation [...] I will ask if one can count on such an army; if one can hope to find much patriotism, and perhaps even any constant value in men picked up at random, deprived of all property, and thus without Fatherland”.

The supporters of conscription argued with a completely different conception of “liberty” than their adversaries. If, for the latter, conscription was the “height of despotism”, absolutely contrary to liberty, the former held that liberty was not so much a personal, than a “political” matter, closely linked to the existence of the “public force”, i.e. to a strong state for

1 Thus DES POMMELLES argues that originally, from the time of the “Visigots” until the reign of Carles VII “la nation entière étoit soldat; ici, elle se divise en deux classes; celle qui cultive, consent à sacrifier une partie de ses récoltes, pour nourrir & entretenir celle qui consacre sa vie & son temps à la protéger.” Mémoire sur les milices. op. cit. p. 8
2 “... il est par conséquent de l’intérêt de la nation Françoise de ne plus concentrer la possession des armes & de la science militaire dans un petit nombre d’hommes voués par état aux volontés du pouvoir exécutif.” Art. “Conscription militaire” in: Encyclopédi militaire... art. cit. p. 201
3 Discours sur la force publique... op. cit. p. 11
4 Dubois-Crancé was, in fact, thus arguing for what some years later took actually place, namely the “amalgame” of the bataillons of “National Volunteer” with the units of the regular army.
5 CESSAC (capitaine) et Chavelier de SERVAN (Major d’infanterie), Projet de constitution pour l’armée des François, Présenté au Comité Militaire de l’Aemblée Nationale, par l’Auteur du Guide de l’Officier en campagene, et par celui du Soldat Citoyen. Paris, Baudouin (n° 426), sans date; p. 18
“it is a chimera if the stronger one can with impunity oppress the weaker one." It is, therefore, both a “holy duty” and a right for each citizen, to resist to this kind of oppression. But this means that, for the maintain of liberty, the “public force” has to be subordinated to the volonté générale, which, according to Rousseau’s dictum can never go wrong. It is even admitted that in a tyrannical statecraft, conscription would be the “excess of despotism to be obliged to carry arms to oppress oneself." But if the “nation” reigns, i.e. if the laws are the expression of the General Will everybody is sure to obey to autonomously proclaimed laws, or, to put it in other words, to obey to oneself. In this respect, conscription is “the true palladium of French liberty." In other terms, the significance of the concept of political “liberty” has to be measured at the degree of equality in political participation. However, not only liberty but also the notion of war changes it’s signification; according to Dubois-Crancé, “this perpetual simulacra of war” is not only necessary to the conservation of liberty but also to that of peace.

Dubois-Crancé’s proposition, in any case, was voted down in the Assembly: trapped between their fight against the monarchy on the one hand and against direct democracy on the other, the Assembly affirmed that each citizen’s duty was to do military service – although general conscription was nevertheless rejected. Instead, a volunteer system of military recruitment was established. It was the dramatic political development in these years that led to the end of the resistance of the revolutionary party towards a conscription system. The interferences between the different series of events – the declaration of war, the disintegration of the Royal Army, and the political radicalization – let gradually to an extension of military rights and duties to the whole of the male population. In 1793, the

1 Dubois-Crancé, Discours... op. cit.; p. 8; then he goes on: “Mais la liberté publique ne seroit encore qu’une chimère, si l’armée despotiquement soumise à l’autorité d’un seul, pouvoit devenir, dans la main du Chef de la Nation, un instrument de vengeance & d’oppression.” (p. 9)
3 ibid. p. 200
4 cf. Jourgniac de Saint Méard, Mes dits, Troisième Lettre d’un Volontaire de l’Armée Citoyenne de Bordeaux, à un Colonel de la même Armée. s.l. 1790
5 Dubois-Crancé, Observations sur la constitution militaire, ou bases de travail proposées au Comité militaire... Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1791; p. 58
decree about the levée en masse claims that “all Frenchmen are soldiers”. For the first time in modern history it can thus be said that a relationship of personal belonging and service between the individual and the state was established.

It is essential, however, to underline the importance of the disagreements within the revolutionary party regarding military organization. The levée en masse was, principally, an objective of the Parisian sans-culottes, i.e. of the extreme left of the Revolutionary party. In the Parisian sections, the idea of such a general mobilization emerged since the beginning of July 1793. Robespierre and the Convention, on the other hand, were against the project because they feared a “disorganization of the commonwealth”. The ambivalence of the word levée (uprising or levy) had a concrete political sense. The antagonism can be resumed as one between the poles of the “people in arms” with its “anarchic” effects, on the one hand, and the maintenance of the “revolutionary order”, thus the construction of state-power. In the eyes of the government, “direct democracy” – the principle of the “armée délibérante”, that was actually practiced in the army from 1792 until the autumn of 1793 was the main problem. Since October 1793, however, the military organization of the Jacobean

---

1 Moniteur t. XVII, p. 478
2 A recent study on the topic considers this special relationship, potentially involving all male national citizens, as the “the very essence of citizenship”. Annie CRÉPIN, La conscription en débat ou le triple apprentissage e la nation, de la citoyenneté, de la République (1798-1889). Arras, Artois Presses Université, 1998; p. 23
4 The idea may be found in the procès-verbal of the section du Luxembourg on 6th July, on 28th July in the section de l’Unité, it is debated on the 29th July in the Jacobean club, revendicated in the number 265 of Hébert’s Père Duchesne etc.
6 cf. BERTAUD, La révolution armée... op. cit. p. 16
7 CESSAC (capitaine) et Chavelier de SERVAN (Major d’infanterie), Projet de constitution pour l’armée des Français... Paris, Baudouin (n° 426), sans date [BNF : 8-LF50-72]; CHAVARDÉS, Liberté, Égalité. Moyens très-prosects pour établir la plus grande discipline dans l’armée de la République française, ... par le citoyen CHAVARDÉS, de Cers, district de Béziers, département de l’Hérault, le août 1793, l’an deuxième de la République française. A Paris, chez Guéffier jeune, 1793; COURTOIS, E. B., Adresse aux départements et aux armées de la République française, Présentée à la Convention nationale, au nom des Comités de Gouvernement, le 8 Prairial, de l’an troisième de la République. Par E. B. Courtois, Député par le Département de l’aube, à la Convention nationale. A Paris, Chez Desenne, Imprimeur-Libraire, Maison Egalité; Extrait du
commissars imposed instead a more strict discipline. The outcome of the levée en masse was thus somehow paradoxical: the élan patriotique of the revolutionary war wanted by the sans-culottes contributed to strengthen the Jacobean conception of military and civic discipline.

The participation of women in revolutionary wars is another striking phenomenon in the context of revolutionary redefinition of the civic universal. In official discourses before 1793, it was never question of expanding rights of political participation to women, and even less to allow them to carry weapons. In contrast to this, the first public act of the movement of female republicans was to claim the permission to organize a "female national guard". Not surprisingly, the calls for "republican volunteers" since 1791 were addressed to men only. Nevertheless, there was a certain number of women who chose to participate actively in the "defense of the revolution" in war. As women were officially not admitted in the armies, they got enrolled disguised as men. Some of them were elected officers and some others served until the wars of the Empire – despite the decree of April 30, 1793 (8 ventôse an II), that banned women from the armies. The reason that was given for this decree was the threat to morality and discipline in the army: the presence of women was perceived as a destabilizing factor for the construction of an homogenized corps de troupe.

The loi Jourdan of 5th September 1798 (19 fructidor an VI) on conscription should be considered as the institutionalization of the revolutionary experience. According to the spirit of the legislator, this law introduces a radical break with pre-Revolutionary recruitment.

---

1 Adresse à la convention nationale par les défenseurs de la république une et indivisible; prononcée par le citoyen ROUSSILLON, commissaire-rédacteur, électeur de la section de Marseille, commissaire du conseil exécutif. Paris, Imprimerie des patriotes, (1793)
2 Lynn HUNT, Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution. Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1984; p. 72
3 "Pétition lue par Pauline Léon à la barre de l'Assemblée Législative le 6 mars 1792"
4 "Les donatrices font souvent part de leurs regrets de ne pouvoir offrir que ces faibles sommes, et non, comme leur compagnons, leur vie à la Patrie, qu'elles jurent cependant de défendre au péril de leurs jours si besoin est. Ce ne sont pas là paroles gratuites et il existe une réelle amertume de ne pouvoir servir la République les armes à la main". Dominique GODINEAU, Citoyennes Ticoteuses : les femmes du peuple à Paris pendant la Révolution française. Aix-en-Province, Aliéna, 1988
5 It is impossible to be sure about their number; the existence of some forty women in the revolutionary armies is certain. The lack of explicit sources makes it very difficult to analyze the phenomenon very precisely.
6 Jean-Paul BERTAUD, La vie quotidienne des soldats de la Révolution. 1789-1799. Paris, Hachette, 1985
7 Bulletin des lois, n° 223 2e semestre de l'an VI, "Loi relative au mode de formation de la de terre" n° 1995
policy, since before 1789 the armed forces served essentially to maintain a despotic regime. It was now instead up to the representative government to create a “truly national army”. More precisely, it was not even necessary to create it, since it already existed; it was thus necessary merely to coordinate and provide a legal framework for the patriotic movement that made Frenchmen join the army in order to defend their liberty and their fatherland.

On the one hand, the text of the law clearly reaffirms that equality must be the guiding principle for all recruitment policy, but, on the other, in order to translate the idea of equality into institutional reality and to have it socially accepted and recognized, it was considered necessary for recruitment policy to become socially acceptable, too. In this way, and by a kind of dialectical paradox, the Jourdan law distinguished between equality as a principle and its realization: “Everybody is designated to serve in the army, but, probably there will be few who will actually serve”. 

Conscription in the narrow sense – giving name to the local military authorities – was universal, but actual military service was not. In this sense, Jourdan’s text gives an outline of the debate about conscription that was to mark French political life for more than a century. How were those among the “conscripts” who would actually do military service chosen? Selection according to age, through lottery, substitution, exonération, or military service for everyone have been the different ways to solve this problem.

On the ideological level, “civic virtue” is the most widely debated notion with regard to universal military service: does it consist in subordination to the hierarchy, or in the “public use of reason” – even in the army? What needs to be analyzed here is the opposition between the sans-culottes and the Jacobins from 1792 and their different conceptions of the framework that the state should provide in order to “contain” – in both senses of the word – the public force; it is this framework that conveys the definition of modern citizenship. The Jacobins, thus, consider that “private virtue” is an essential condition for the “civic virtue”


2 Archives Nationales C* I 120, Procès-verbaux du Conseil des Cinq-Cents, séance du 1er thermidor an VI
of the Republic. But as this idea of civic virtue is not shared by everybody, a “strong action” is needed to “destroy ancient prejudices, change antique habits [...] and extirpate inveterate vices”. But it is not sufficient to bring the issue of virtue on the agenda, but it has to be institutionalized: “For a free people, public instruction is not just in schools, nor exclusively for children: it is addressed to all citizens. It is not just culture of the spirit, but purification of the heart, and propagation of republican feelings.” Citizens should thus “learn how to despise death in order to assure the triumph of the Republic [...] Death is a reminder of equality that a free people should institutionalize in a public act”.

Quatre-vingt-treize: political equality as a function of death? the formation of an “insurrectional universal” of revolutionary fight for freedom, equality and fraternity? or – the Jacobean solution – military discipline as “the basis of the education of free men”?

It can be observed in this discourse about “virtue” and the means to achieve it, the very notion of the “people” has become problematic. When, on the one hand, the “people” is the source of all sovereignty, it is, on the other, a permanent factor of social destabilization. This is the reason why institutions of social discipline are considered to be the necessary supplement of a democratic statecraft. “Virtue”, then, has a double signification: it directed, on the one hand, against “tyranny”, and on the other against the people’s barbarism. To become a citizen, a mastery of oneself is required and it is the role of educational institutions to enable the Citizen to control himself.

This applied foremost to the gender definition of virtue. Significantly, vice and virtue are conceived as gendered categories; Mably, for instance, clearly identifies virtue with masculinity and vice with femininity. The presence of women in society is thus a perpetual
threat to the establishment of a moral social order. However, as it is obviously not possible to get rid of women altogether, their presence has to be contained. If the feminine principle became too strong, manners would inevitably degenerate: “Nothing more is necessary to subjugate even the bravest man; and if we are tamed, you would have nothing than a republic of femmelettes. We would be the slaves of our women, they became the tyrants of their houses, and soon of the magistrates and the laws. [...] I defy you to cite one state where women have had power without destroying manners, laws, and the government.” Virtue is the central category of human sociability; vice on the other hand is asocial by definition. It follows from this that social life requires necessarily that not only women be excluded, but also that femininity as the principle of moral corruption be fought.

Consequently, virtue-politics has to be gender-specific, too. On the one hand, the influence of women has to be circumscribed, then, on the other, have to be strengthened in their masculinity. The realm of masculinity, however, involves physical exercises, sports, competition games, and, last but not least, military exercises. The last ones, however, are particularly important, because of the fact that they bring up the sense of “glory.” The feminine principle of vice is associated with the pursuit of personal interests; the masculine principle of glory, on the other hand, gives way to the formation an “ek-static” being: a citizen who is somehow more than himself, who is a “rival of spiritual substances” and experiences himself as God’s creature, and as a member of a community for which he would be glad to offer his life. In order to become a truly virtuous citizen, the individual has to

1 “Faute de connaître le penchant du sexe à la mollesse, et l’emprise qu’il y sur notre ame, la plupart des législateurs ont tendu un piège à nos mœurs en négligeant de régler celles des femmes.” MABLY, Entretiens de Phocion, sur le rapport de la morale avec la politique. in: Collection complète des œuvres de l’abbé de Mably. Paris, Desbriere, l’an III de la République (1794-1795); vol. 10; p. 109
2 MABLY, De la législation, ou principes des lois. in: Collection complète des œuvres de l’abbé de Mably. Paris, Desbriere, l’an III de la République (1794-1795); vol. 9; op. cit. p. 376
3 “… que la vertu lie les hommes en leur inspirant une confiance mutuelle; et que le vice, au contraire, les tient en garde les uns contre les autres, et les divise.” MABLY, Entretiens... op. cit. p. 99
4 “Elevez donc les jeunes filles à la modestie et à l’amour du travail.” MABLY, De la législation... op. cit. p. 376
5 “Que les jeunes gens trouvent du plaisir et de la gloire à porter des fardeaux, à courir, à nager, à lutter, à lancer des pierres et des javelots. Tantôt qu’ils creusent une tranchée, et que tantôt ils la comblent [...] Enfin, que les élèves de la République se familiarisent avec les armes qui doivent servir à la défense de la patrie, et exécutent avec la plus grande précision toutes les évolutions militaires.” ibid. pp. 373/74
6 “C’est en tenant éveillé dans notre cœur l’amour de la gloire, sentiment noble et généreux qui nous fait connaître la grandeur de notre origine et de notre destination: ce sentiment, par lequel nous sommes des rivaux des substances spirituelles, qui nous apprend que nous sommes l’ouvrage d’un Dieu [...] L’amour de la gloire semble en quelque sorte nous séparer de nous-mêmes; nous nous
become something else than what is originally is and, more particularly, he has to become rid of all his particular and separate identities and be an “abstract” incarnation of the ruling principles of the republican community.

Republican practice was not as “pure” as its theories. Tensions arose constantly between the political goal of universal citizenship on the one hand, and particular identities—nation, class, and gender, on the other. At the same time, neither the conception of the political universal, nor the contrasting identities, are to be considered as fixed entities; on the contrary, they constitute each other mutually in their conflictual relationship. Identity categories tend to define the universal in their particular fashion; the abstract form of the civic universal has to be filled with a concrete content. The norms of the universal, on the other hand, have an actual impact on the development and the transformations of identities.

oubliions par une sorte de prestige; prêts à lui sacrifier notre vie, l’image d’une belle mort s’empare de notre âme et l’enivre.” Mably, Entretiens... op. cit. pp. 125/26