

Liberté, Égalité, Solidarité?

Some thoughts on the French national motto

by Gerda Bikales

While very few Americans can tell you right off the bat what their nation's motto is,¹ no Frenchman will hesitate a moment when asked for his: *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* — Freedom, Equality, Brotherhood. He'll also tell you that this triad harkens back to the Revolution of 1789, and that it embodies the deepest aspirations of the French Republic.

Of the three principles enunciated, the first two appear to have emerged almost spontaneously in the minds and on the lips of 18th century French philosophers and revolutionaries searching for a succinct statement of their ideals. Settling eventually on *Fraternité* to round out this summation proved to be less easy. It was felt all along that for the motto to carry its weight a third concept had to be added, and not only for philosophic reasons. A solemn declaration of guiding principles must also have the right cadence, verbal balance and flowing alliteration, since the quality of literary expression matters to the French about as much as philosophy.

It took another Revolution, that of 1848, for the formal adoption of the motto we know today. In the intervening years, *Fraternité* encountered some tough competition from other ideals strongly associated with revolutionary fervor, most notably from "Nation" and "Justice." *Liberté, Égalité, Nation? Liberté, Égalité Justice?* Noble sentiments both, but neither could deliver the requisite rhyme and punch of *Fraternité*.

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Not only was *Fraternité* the best literary candidate for the end position, but it was arguably the best philosophic one as well. Without it, the duo "freedom and equality" leads to an impasse, for these two concepts are not in a relationship of complementarity but of contradiction. Freedom implies a right to exploit one's talents and energies to surpass others in the national community, while the quest for equality would tend to restrain such personal ambitions and promote standards of mediocrity to which everyone in the society can reasonably aspire.

The addition of brotherhood in the motto moderates the inherent tension between the ideals of freedom and equality. It proclaims that the citizens of France are brothers and sisters, members of a defined family, with unquestioned right to inherit and benefit from their common patrimony. Within the family one is expected to make

sacrifices for the sake of the other family members. To keep the peace in the household, one learns to temper the urge to make too many demands. Willingly or reluctantly, one shares available resources. In return, one rightly expects protection, acceptance and help from the brotherhood.

In France today there is talk about freedom and more talk yet about equality. It is brotherhood that is barely mentioned. The rhetoric now is all about "*Solidarité*" — the Labor Department is known as the Ministry of Work and Solidarity, and the sizeable inheritance tax is called the "solidarity tax" as its revenues are clearly marked for social services. The word pops up routinely in writings and discussions, in various social contexts. It never fails to be invoked whenever schemes of resource redistribution are in the offing.

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village is my brother, then I have no brothers. Globalization has also brought all the world's people to France in large waves of immigration, resulting in a blurring of what once defined the mythical French family of citizens. For *Fraternité* never was a brotherhood of blood, but one of a common language, values and history, and of a shared love of country. Can he still be a brother who rejects the intellectual and cultural dimensions of that imagined French family's patrimony, to lay claim only to its material dividends?

Solidarity, we recognize, fits in nicely with the sensibilities of our times in a way that "family" no longer does. It bespeaks of a much wider empathy for others in difficulty, that can be made to stretch to those at the margins of society, and to countries near and far. The trouble is that, unlike love of kin which is deep and enduring, empathy tends to be shallow and shifty. It is not an emotion the State can always rely on to smooth the way as it quests for perfect equality through one redistribution plan after another. When *Fraternité* gives way to *Solidarité* the national motto loses its former internal balance along with much of its affective power.

Until quite recently the national motto — *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* — was prominently proclaimed at the entrance of every official building in the country. Its lofty ideals graced the walls of every school, every police station, every town hall in the country. It was ubiquitous, a part of the French landscape. Today its profile is lower — newly built schools sometimes skip the proclamation, and others allow theirs to fade away and become illegible. In the newer buildings of government entities that still feel obliged to acknowledge the tradition, it is done unobtrusively. One has to look for the familiar words to find them.

This is indeed a practical and honest way to deal with a nation's outmoded slogan. Why keep on affixing a public reminder that there was a time, within living memory, when the citizens of France thought of themselves as brothers? **TSC**

NOTE

¹ For readers who are curious it is: *e pluribus unum*, "out of many (thirteen colonies) one (nation)."