

NAPOLEON AND THE FOUNDATION OF THE EMPIRE

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ABSTRACT. *Historians generally discount the advent of the First French Empire as the result of Napoleon's personal ambition. Napoleon, however, could not have brought about the transition from republic to empire without wide support, not only among the political and military elite, but also among the French people. This article re-examines the reasons why, a little more than ten years after the execution of Louis XVI, moderate-conservative elements in the political elite opted for a monarchical-style political system, and why it was so widely accepted by ordinary people across France. It does so by examining the arguments in favour of empire in three 'sites of ideas': the neo-monarchists in Napoleon's entourage; the political elite, preoccupied with many of the same concerns that had plagued France since 1789; and the wider political nation, which expressed a manifest adhesion to Napoleon as emperor that was marked by an affective bond. The push to empire, it is argued, was an expression of a dominant set of political beliefs and values. Napoleon, on the other hand, only reluctantly came to accept the notion of heredity.*

Historians have sometimes asked 'Why the Coronation?', focusing in the process on either the actual steps leading to the proclamation of the Empire in May 1804, or on the coronation ceremony itself.¹ Few, however, have asked or adequately answered a decidedly simple question, 'Why the Empire?'.² Indeed, no attention has been paid to the support for empire among the political and social elites, or to the political rhetoric that surrounded its foundation. Historians have, in short, glossed over the transformation of the First Republic, or the seeming readiness of the French people to accept an emperor after having violently disposed of their king, Louis XVI, little more than a decade previously.

Explanations for the Empire vary, although not substantially. The general consensus is that Napoleon was able to take advantage of both the popular outpouring in his favour after a conspiracy against his life in 1802, and the renewed war against Britain in 1803, to consolidate power around his person. It led first to

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¹ Jean Tulard, *Le sacre de l'empereur Napoléon* (Paris, 2004), p. 5; Laurence Chatel de Brancion, *Le sacre de Napoléon: le rêve de changer le monde* (Paris, 2004), p. 7.

² Exceptions to the rule include Annie Jourdan, 'Le Premier Empire: un nouveau pacte social', *Cités: philosophie, politique, histoire*, 20 (2004), pp. 51–64; and Jean-Luc Chappey, 'La notion d'empire et la question de légitimité politique', *Siècles: cahiers du Centre d'histoire 'Espaces et culture'*, 17 (2003), pp. 111–27.

the Consulate for Life and the plebiscite on that question, which one historian recently described as a 'farce',³ and then to constitutional reform and the creation of a hereditary imperial dignity within the Bonaparte family. Motivation, in other words, was purely personal (Napoleon's ambition), while the justification was institutional, born of the need to preserve the gains of the Revolution through a dictatorship of public safety. The prevalent assumption is that the political elite, and the institutions to which they belonged, already purged in 1802 of oppositional elements, were either cowed and bullied into accepting the Empire, or were pandering to Napoleon's vanity.⁴ The members of the council of state and the legislative bodies – the senate and the tribunate – who favoured this transformation are thus viewed cynically as opportunists by historians, unconvinced of their sincerity or the arguments they used to justify the Empire.⁵ Historians have, in fact, been much more interested in the ways in which Napoleon used history to legitimate his regime, pointing to the parallels drawn between Napoleon and various historical figures – Charlemagne in particular but also an array of 'great men' from Alexander and Caesar to Henry IV and Louis XIV – than in explaining how empire came about in the first place.⁶

Existing interpretations of the processes leading to empire are clearly insufficient. Not only do they place far too much emphasis on Napoleon's role in shaping the French state, but they also ignore the loose-knit group of politicians and intellectuals committed to a return to monarchical forms, enthusiastic proponents of an institutional model that eventually garnered national political support. To

³ Charles Esdaile, *Napoleon's wars: an international history, 1803–1815* (London, 2007), p. 193.

⁴ For an example of the former, Alan Forrest, 'Napoleon as monarch: a political evolution', in Alan Forrest and Peter H. Wilson, eds., *The bee and the eagle: Napoleonic France and the end of the Holy Roman Empire, 1806* (London, 2009), p. 116. The latter interpretation is implicit in Jean Tulard, *Napoléon, ou, le mythe du sauveur* (Paris, 1977), pp. 168–73; and Thierry Lentz, *Le grand consulat, 1799–1804* (Paris, 1999), pp. 559–74.

⁵ Steven Englund, *Napoleon: a political life* (New York, NY, 2004), p. 231. Political opportunism is often used to explain changes in political adherence during this period. See Christine Le Bozec, 'Le républicanisme du possible: les opportunistes (Boissy d'Anglas, Lanjuinais, Durand-Maillane ...)', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 299 (1995), pp. 67–74. For a different approach that helps put rapid political changes in context see, Jean-Luc Chappey, 'Les idéologues face au coup d'état du 18 brumaire an VIII: des illusions aux désillusions', *Politix*, 56 (2001), pp. 55–6.

⁶ Valérie Huet, 'Napoleon I: a new Augustus?', in Catherine Edwards, ed., *Roman presences: receptions of Rome in European culture, 1789–1945* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 53–69, argues that Napoleon wanted to be an emperor in the Roman style, pointing to a number of parallels between Napoleon and Augustus. However, there appears to be stronger parallels between Bonaparte and Caesar than between Bonaparte and Augustus. See, 'Précis des guerres de Jules César', *Correspondance de Napoléon I (Corr.)* (32 vols., Paris, 1858–70), xxxii, pp. 88–9; Jean Tulard, 'Les empires napoléoniens', in idem, ed., *Les empires occidentaux de Rome à Berlin* (Paris, 1997), p. 365; and June K. Burton, *Napoleon and clio: historical writing, teaching and thinking during the First Empire* (Durham, NC, 1979), pp. 41, 100–6. On the use of Charlemagne as political symbol, see Robert Morrissey, *La barbe fleuri: Charlemagne dans la mythologie et l'histoire de France* (Paris, 1997). On the use of Henry IV, see Robert Herbert, 'Baron Gros's Napoleon and Voltaire's Henri IV', in Francis Haskell and Robert Shackleton, eds., *The artist and the writer in France: essays in honour of Jean Seznec* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 51–75. Almost all the sovereigns used by the regime reigned in times of political turmoil and played a role in unifying the country, or large masses of territory, in the face of religious or political factionalism.

discount their views is to overlook a number of important elements, including the intellectual progression that led to a revived form of monarchism in post-revolutionary France among both moderate and conservative elements in the political elite; the debates surrounding the future of the body politic; the desire to bring the Revolution to an end and to assure its continuity by grounding it on more solid institutional bases; and the groundswell of support among ordinary people across France for the idea of an hereditary ruler. In short, to comprehend the logic of the actors in question, the transformation from republic to empire has to be set within the political context, and an effort has to be made to understand the political language and the political beliefs of the adherents of empire, that is, to take the rhetoric surrounding the foundation of the Empire more seriously.⁷

It is also important to eschew a teleological interpretation of the political process leading to empire. In the months after the coup of Brumaire in November 1799, a number of alternative political models were competing for dominance, some admittedly more likely to succeed than others, which ranged from a restoration of the Bourbon regime, to various forms of republicanism,⁸ and to a new form of conservatism. There was, moreover, in the early days of the consular regime, a political movement led by a number of ideologues – a loose grouping of moderate lawyers, writers, scientists, and *philosophes* – who attempted, under republican forms, to create a balance between the executive and legislative powers that would guarantee the gains of the Revolution.⁹ This article examines why empire as a particular political model came to the fore, how it was presented to the French people, and how they reacted to it. It does so by examining the arguments in favour of empire in three ‘sites of ideas’.¹⁰ The first ‘site’, perhaps the most influential, consists of the neo-monarchists in Napoleon’s entourage, including some members of the political elite, who all urged Napoleon to adopt an hereditary system in the years leading up to the proclamation of empire in May 1804 in the belief that it was the best means of government at their disposal. Napoleon’s reaction to these urgings appears mixed, if not hesitant, when it came to adopting heredity, but he was eventually brought around to their way of thinking. The second ‘site’ incorporates the wider political elite and includes politicians and intellectuals, many of whom were still preoccupied with the same concerns that had plagued France since 1789, namely, creating a stable political system that would put the Revolution to bed once and for all. The third ‘site’, not as important as the other two but without whose support Napoleon and the

⁷ Jay M. Smith, ‘No more language games: words, beliefs, and political culture in early modern France’, *American Historical Review*, 102 (1997), p. 1416, has argued that ‘Embedded in the meaning of words are traces of the values, assumptions, and operating principles, in short, the beliefs of those who employ political language.’

⁸ Pierre Serna, *La république des girouettes* (Paris, 2004), esp. pp. 453–69. Serna refers to a diverse group of figures he has dubbed the ‘extreme centre’, a somewhat quizzical term that muddies the waters. See also Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining politics after the terror: the republican origins of French liberalism* (Ithaca, NY, 2008).

⁹ Chappay, ‘Les ideologues’, pp. 55–75.

¹⁰ I am grateful to Julian Hoppit for this suggestion.

imperial faction could not have hoped to proceed, was made up of various sections of the people of France, including the military and functionaries, as well as ordinary citizens, who expressed what can only be termed an emotional adhesion to the idea of Napoleon as emperor. It is this manifestation of popular support for the idea of a return to monarchical forms which enabled a smooth transition from republic to empire.

I

After Napoleon's return to Paris from the second Italian campaign at the beginning of July 1800, what can loosely be termed the neo-monarchists in his entourage – the most notable of whom were men like Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, Jean-Etienne-Marie Portalis, Michel-Louis-Etienne Regnaud de Saint-Jean d'Angely, Claude-Ambroise Regnier, Pierre-Louis Roederer,¹¹ Antoine-Clair Thibaudeau in the council of state,¹² Stanislas Girardin in the tribunate, and the journalists Joseph Fievée and Louis de Fontanes, not to mention Napoleon's own brother, Lucien – urged him to assume a more permanent political office by naming a successor.¹³ They did so on the assumption that a hereditary office – contemporaries generally spoke of heredity rather than a new dynasty¹⁴ – supported by an adequate constitution, was the best means of government, the best guarantor of peace.¹⁵ Some of these men, like Talleyrand and Roederer, who had been members of a group dubbed the *monarchiens* ('monarchicals'), partisans of a constitutional monarchy during the early years of the Revolution, had always remained favourable to a strong executive. *Monarchiens* and neo-monarchists were not necessarily made of the same cut, and indeed a distinction has to be drawn between contemporary notions of empire and monarchy,¹⁶ but there was certainly continuity as moderate revolutionaries, in search of a means to reconstruct the political space, contemplated the possibility of a 'monarchy' in the face of what one contemporary described as the 'convulsions' that had too often plagued the supreme magistracy.¹⁷

¹¹ For Roederer's ideas on monarchy during the Revolution, see Ruth Scurr, 'Pierre-Louis Roederer and the debate on forms of government in revolutionary France', *Political Studies*, 52 (2004), pp. 251–68.

¹² Antoine-Clair Thibaudeau, *Mémoires de A.-C. Thibaudeau 1799–1815* (Paris, 1913), p. 70.

¹³ Comtesse de Rémusat, *Mémoires de Madame de Rémusat* (Paris, 1968), pp. 55–6; Jacques-Barthélemy Salgues, *Mémoire pour servir à l'histoire de France sous le gouvernement de Napoléon Buonaparte et pendant l'absence de la maison de Bourbon (1760–1830)* (9 vols., Paris, 1814–26), v, p. 194.

¹⁴ Antoine-Clair Thibaudeau, *Mémoires sur le consulat, 1799 à 1804* (Paris, 1827), p. 236.

¹⁵ See, for example, the plea in favour of monarchy from Fontanes to Bonaparte, *Archive Nationales* (AN) AFIV 1041, 4 floréal an XII (23 Apr. 1804), in which he wrote that 'I have always preferred the system of a unique and hereditary leader because I passionately love liberty and because it appears better assured against factions under this system than under any other.'

¹⁶ Chappey, 'La notion d'empire', pp. 122–3.

¹⁷ Martin Gaudin, *Supplément aux mémoires et souvenirs de M. Gaudin, duc de Gaète* (Paris, 1834), pp. 21–5. See also Jean-Luc Chappey, 'Pierre-Louis Roederer et la presse sous le directoire et le consulat: l'opinion publique et les enjeux d'une politique éditoriale', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 334 (2003), p. 10.

Monarchists had always been present on the political landscape, but after the death of the dauphin in June 1795 and the Declaration of Verona by his successor, Louis XVIII, declaring that he wanted to re-establish the situation in France before 1789, it had become impossible publicly to espouse the cause of constitutional monarchy. Instead, monarchist ideas were wrapped in a veneer of republicanism.¹⁸ For them, the Republic was simply a useful tool through which order could be guaranteed at a time when it was impolitic to talk about re-establishing a form of monarchy. This situation changed dramatically, however, by the end of the Directory when republicanism was increasingly losing support and respectability. Thus, only months before the coup of Brumaire, a confidant of Talleyrand extolled to the Prussian ambassador the benefits of hereditary constitutional monarchy as the political system that held the most promise for stability in France.¹⁹ Looking back on the period many years later, Talleyrand asserted that ‘a temporary sovereign had to be created, one that could become sovereign for life, and then hereditary monarch. The question was not whether Bonaparte had the most desirable qualities in a monarch ... The real question was how to make Bonaparte a temporary sovereign.’²⁰ That is, how to make the executive power reside in Napoleon alone.

Evident here is not so much an interest in raising the man to the throne, but in resurrecting the idea of heredity. Some Brumairians began to do so only days after the coup, but Napoleon always avoided giving a definitive answer, telling his interlocutors different things at different times. He told Comte Thibaudeau, a staunch republican and member of the council of state, that the idea of heredity was incompatible with the sovereignty of the people.²¹ To Comte Roederer, a neo-monarchist and one of the proponents of heredity, he is supposed to have said that the French, ‘at this moment can only be governed by me’, and that if he died it would be a disaster for France, a self-serving view that played into the myth of Napoleon as providential hero.²² Yet on another occasion Napoleon is supposed to have told the minister of police, Joseph Fouché, that any opposition to his putting the crown on his head would be very weak.²³

From this one can surmise that Napoleon was either deliberately avoiding making a clear ideological commitment in favour of one system or the other,

¹⁸ Le Bozec, ‘Le républicanisme du possible’, pp. 70, 72.

¹⁹ Report from Sandoz-Rollin (28 Aug. 1799), in Paul Bailleu, ed., *Preußen und Frankreich von 1795 bis 1807: Diplomatische correspondenzen* (2 vols., Leipzig, 1880–1887), I, p. 330.

²⁰ Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, *Mémoires du prince de Talleyrand* (5 vols., Paris, 1891–2), I, pp. 274–5. See also Thierry Lentz, ‘Un parti autour de Bonaparte: les Brumairiens’, in Jacques-Olivier Boudon, ed., *Brumaire: la prise de pouvoir de Bonaparte* (Paris, 2001), pp. 72–5.

²¹ Thibaudeau, *Mémoires sur le consulat*, pp. 298–9; Thierry Lentz, *Roederer, 1754–1835* (Metz, 1989), pp. 134–40.

²² Pierre-Louis Roederer, *Mémoires sur la révolution, le consulat et l’Empire* (Paris, 1942), pp. 116–17, 126–7, 203–11; idem, *Œuvres du comte P.-L. Roederer* (8 vols., Paris, 1855–), III, pp. 331–3; Isser Woloch, *Napoleon and his collaborators: the making of a dictatorship* (New York, NY, 2001), pp. 97–9.

²³ Joseph Fouché, *Mémoires de Joseph Fouché, duc d’Otrante, ministre de la police générale* (2 vols., Paris, 1824), I, p. 304.

attempting to forge a path between political extremes, or that he had no clear conception of the future shape of the polity, and was indeed hesitant about accepting any sort of hereditary title.²⁴ Napoleon was a child of the Revolution and at this stage, that is, in 1802 and 1803, he considered an attack on the Revolution to be an attack on the state.²⁵ There is nothing to indicate that, initially at least, Napoleon looked favourably upon the notion of heredity or that, as some historians have asserted, he was bent on assuming monarchical powers from the start.²⁶ On the contrary, on at least two occasions he sanctioned members of his entourage who were pushing the case for monarchy a little too zealously.

The first of these occurred when Napoleon's brother Lucien was stood down as minister of the interior and sent to Madrid as ambassador at the end of 1800 after the publication of an apology in favour of heredity, the *Parallèle entre César, Cromwell, Monck et Bonaparte*, variously attributed to one of Lucien's protégés, Fontanes, Charles de Lacretelle, or Joseph Esménard.²⁷ The second instance involved Roederer, whose insistence on heredity irritated Napoleon to the point where he was transferred sideways to the senate in 1802.²⁸

This was Napoleon making a point of publicly marginalizing those who had adopted a position for which the French public was not yet ready. One can see the same reluctance on his part to adopt a change to the constitution during the debates over the Consulship for Life, an idea, moreover, that appears to have been as much Roederer's as Napoleon's.²⁹ We know that the political elite was divided over the issue of the Consulate for Life around which two factions formed.³⁰ On the one side, Talleyrand, Jean-Antoine Chaptal, Martin-Michel-Charles Gaudin, Alexandre Berthier, Roederer, Fontanes, and Jean-Frédéric Perrégaux formed what were dubbed the 'Constitutionals' and were in favour of a step that moved in the direction of a restoration of monarchical structures.³¹ They were purposefully seeking to cement the Brumaire settlement with a

²⁴ André-François, Comte Miot de Mérito, *Mémoires du comte Miot de Mérito, ancien ministre, ambassadeur, conseiller d'état et membre de l'Institut (1788–1815)* (3 vols., Paris, 1858), II, pp. 106–7.

²⁵ See, for example, *Corr.* VIII, p. 374 (24 June 1803), in response to a pamphlet by Jean-Baptiste-Claude Delisle de Sales that portrayed the Revolution unfavourably.

²⁶ Lentz, *Roederer*, p. 135, is one of the few to assert that at the end of 1800 Napoleon was reticent about heredity.

²⁷ The links between Louis Bonaparte and Fontanes were very close: Pierre-Louis Roederer, *Autour de Bonaparte: Journal de Cte P.-L. Roederer* (Paris, 1909), p. 50; Stanislas Girardin, *Mémoires, journal et souvenirs* (2 vols., Paris, 1829), I, p. 197; Norbert Savariau, *Louis de Fontanes: belles-lettres et enseignement de la fin de l'ancien régime à l'Empire* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 273–5. For a different take on this pamphlet, see Bernard Gainot, 'L'opposition militaire: autour des sociétés secrètes dans l'armée', *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 346 (2006), pp. 57–8. Gainot argues that the text presents Napoleon as a bulwark against an alliance of demagogues, anarchists, and the military.

²⁸ Comte Remacle, *Relations secrètes des agents de Louis XVIII à Paris sous le consulat (1802–1803)* (Paris, 1899), p. 63; Lentz, *Roederer*, pp. 140–5.

²⁹ Woloch, *Napoleon and his collaborators*, p. 95.

³⁰ Baillet, ed., *Preußen und Frankreich*, II, p. 47.

³¹ Joseph Fievéé dubbed these people 'royalistes d'intérêt', as distinct from 'royalistes d'opinion'. The latter were pro-Bourbon and would not accept any other form of monarchy; the former were prepared to accept a 'monarchist system' regardless of the sovereign. See Joseph Fievéé, *Correspondance et relations de J. Fievéé avec Bonaparte, ... pendant onze années, 1802 à 1813* (3 vols., Paris, 1837), I, pp. 11–14;

hereditary succession, and led a campaign in the press between March and June 1802 in that vein.³² On the other side, people like Fouché, Thibaudeau, Pierre-François Réal, and Théophile Berlier, dubbed the ‘Conventionals’ and often made up of former Jacobins, were opposed to the move (they all later came to support the Empire).

Despite pressure being put on him by the likes of Lucien and Talleyrand, and despite a ‘good many voters’ suggesting that he become an hereditary ruler in the plebiscite of 1802 on the Consulate for Life,³³ Napoleon nevertheless hesitated to adopt the right to name his successor and declined to accept the offer from the council of state and the senate.³⁴ This view of a ‘hesitant’ Napoleon is at odds with accounts that either assert he thought of consolidating his power around a more imposing title that, after the assassination attempts made against him, would render his person inviolable,³⁵ or describe Napoleon as feigning a show of disinterest when it came to the idea of naming a successor, suggesting that on the contrary he desired heredity from the start of the consulate.³⁶ It is more likely, however, that Napoleon overcame whatever opposition he may have had for such a system, and resigned himself to it.³⁷ The year 1802 then was decisive; it was the year Napoleon came down on the side of the ‘Constitutionals’. From that time on, republicans and liberals were increasingly marginalized.

II

In the literature surrounding Brumaire, Napoleon was linked to images of ‘re-generation’; he was portrayed as a kind of phoenix that arose out of the ashes to save the Revolution.³⁸ By 1804, it was commonly understood that Napoleon had saved the Revolution and brought back France from the brink of chaos.³⁹ A similar imagery was used in the lead up to the Empire when Napoleon was again

Michael Polowetzky, *A bond never broken: the relations between Napoleon and the authors of France* (Rutherford, 1993), p. 96.

³² Roederer, *Mémoires*, pp. 126–7.

³³ Malcolm Crook, ‘The plebiscite on the Empire’, in Philip G. Dwyer and Alan Forrest, eds., *Napoleon and his Empire: Europe, 1804–1814* (London, 2007), p. 17.

³⁴ Remacle, *Relations secrètes*, p. 66.

³⁵ Miot de Mérito, *Mémoires*, II, pp. 160–1; Tulard, *Le sacre de l'empereur*, p. 9; David Chanteranne, *Le sacre de Napoléon* (Paris, 2004), pp. 30–7.

³⁶ See the introduction by Thierry Lentz in *La proclamation de l'Empire ou recueil des pièces et actes relatifs à l'établissement du gouvernement impérial héréditaire* (Paris, 2001), p. 7.

³⁷ Miot de Mérito, *Mémoires*, II, p. 162.

³⁸ Katia Sainson, ‘“Le régénérateur de la France”: literary accounts of Napoleonic regeneration 1799–1805’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 30 (2001–2), pp. 11–13. See, for example, Joseph-Balthazar Bonnet de Treyches, *Tableau politique de la France régénérée* (Paris, 1800); F. D. de Compiègne de Mouton, *L'accomplissement des prédictions, ou les destinées de Bonaparte* (Paris, 1801); Louis-Joseph-Marie Robert, *De l'influence de la Révolution française sur la population* (Paris, 1802).

³⁹ Jean Chas, *A la nation française* (Paris, an XIII (1804)), pp. 25–7; Jean-Gabriel-Maurice Rocques, comte de Montgaillard, *De la France et de l'Europe sous le gouvernement de Bonaparte* (Paris, 1804), pp. 3–4, 12–13, 14–15, 23–4, 57; Louis Dubroca, *Les quatre fondateurs des dynasties françaises, ou histoire de l'établissement de la monarchie française* (Paris, 1806), pp. 71–2; Jean Sarrazin, *Le onze frimaire, ou discours analytique de la vie, des exploits mémorables, et des droits de Napoléon Ier* (Paris, 1804), pp. 49–53.

portrayed as the saviour of the Republic in the face of the coming war with Britain.⁴⁰ Images like these, however, would never have been enough to justify the founding of a new empire. Some sort of theoretical justification for the change in regime had to be postulated. Napoleon consequently ordered one of his secret councillors, Joseph Fiévée, to co-ordinate the task of convincing public opinion that an empire was a necessity.⁴¹ In the course of this campaign, some of the intellectual elite willingly fell into step with the regime and proclaimed the benefits of, first, monarchy, and, later, the Empire. This can in part be explained by the fact that Napoleon had courted artists and intellectuals ever since he had appeared on the political scene, and in part as a contemporary expression for monarchy, some of it inspired by the regime and some of it a spontaneous reflection of what might be called the monarchical impulse. As with the iconography, however, Napoleon did not always control the literary output. It is worth dwelling on the themes that recur in this literature, the expectations the wider political elite projected on to Napoleon, and the form of hereditary power that was being proposed.

The question had divided the Thermidorians,⁴² but there was nevertheless a good deal of support for a strong executive among republicans. It was one of the goals pursued by the Brumairians.⁴³ In a series of articles that appeared in the *Décade philosophique* on the eve of Brumaire, the author, probably Pierre-Claude-François Daunou, a member of the tribunate, argued in favour of a ‘conserving power’, with ‘monarchical efficiency’, that would put an end to the ‘perpetual struggle between the executive power and the two councils (he was referring to the Directory and the Council of Five Hundred and the Council of Elders)’.⁴⁴ Immediately after the coup of Brumaire, Regnaud de Saint-Jean d’Angely published an essay in the *Gazette de France*, ‘To the Council of Elders and to Bonaparte’ (*Au Conseils des Anciens et à Bonaparte*), in which he declared that France

⁴⁰ The image found an echo in the political literature of the day, whether in the petitions from the various civic and military authorities or the speeches of the Tribunes published in the *Moniteur universel* in March and April 1804. See, for example, Maximin Isnard, *Réflexions relatives au sénatus-consulte du 28 floréal an XII* (Draguignan, 1804), pp. 7–8, in which he declares that France would be lost if it were not for Napoleon.

⁴¹ Jean Tulard, *Joseph Fiévée: conseiller secret de Napoléon* (Paris, 1985), pp. 117–29.

⁴² Paolo Colombo, ‘La question du pouvoir exécutif dans l’évolution institutionnelle et le débat politique révolutionnaire’, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 319 (2000), pp. 12–20.

⁴³ Roederer, for one, had argued in favour of a strong executive throughout the Directory (Jainchill, *Reimagining politics*, p. 209). See his ‘Du gouvernement’, in *Œuvre*, vii, p. 28; Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis, ‘Quelques considérations sur l’organisation sociale en générale et particulièrement sur la nouvelle constitution’, *Œuvres philosophiques de Cabanis, texte établi et présenté par Claude Lehec* (2 vols., Paris, 1956), II, pp. 1–65. See Pierre Serna, ‘Barère, penseur et acteur d’un premier opportunisme républicain face au directoire exécutif’, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 332 (2003), pp. 101–28.

⁴⁴ *Décade philosophique* (10 and 20 Brumaire an VIII), pp. 249 and 315 (in the foreign affairs section). Other contemporary examples in favour of a strong executive include Nicolas-Pierre Gilbert, *Du pacte social, ou examen raisonné de la constitution de l’an VIII* (Paris, an VIII (1799)), 41; and Charles-Louis Cadet-Gassicourt, *Cahiers de réformes, ou Voeux d’un ami de l’ordre adressés aux consuls et aux commissions législatives* (Paris, an VIII (1799)). See also Jainchill, *Reimagining politics*, pp. 234–5, 238–9.

wanted something ‘great and durable’. ‘Instability lost it, it is fixity that it invokes.’⁴⁵ It was soon followed at the end of 1799 by a pamphlet by Marc-Antoine Jullien, who had once been the editor of one of Napoleon’s newspapers in Italy, the *Courrier de l’armée d’Italie*. In it, the author argued in favour of a strong executive, usually referred to in terms of a government that is ‘fixed and durable’.⁴⁶

From about 1802 onwards, pamphlets started to appear reflecting on the question of hereditary power, some of them rejecting the electoral principle as having led to ‘factions and crime’.⁴⁷ That same year, Colonel Bonneville Ayral published a pamphlet entitled *My opinion on the reward due to Bonaparte*, in which he urged the French people to renew the Salic law and proclaim Napoleon emperor of the Gauls.⁴⁸ In 1803, V.-R. Barbet Du Bertrand suggested that no other dynasty had its origins in a family that was ‘surrounded by so much glory’, and that an appropriate title for the head of the French Empire might be Sublime President of the Empire and of the Republic of the Gauls, although a more ‘modest’ and popular title would simply be that of ‘emperor’.⁴⁹ Another pamphlet in the same vein was intent on demonstrating that it was important to base the government on solid foundations – sacred and hereditary.⁵⁰

This type of thinking was mirrored in political treatises of the day. Louis Bonald’s *Théorie du pouvoir politique*, which first appeared in 1796, but which was re-edited in 1803, was one of the most important and may have inspired Napoleon’s thinking on the question of heredity.⁵¹ The book draws a parallel between society and the family and argues that the social family is similar to the natural family. In this binary analysis, society is thus based on a hierarchical principle of God, sovereign or father – with the mother acting in the same role as legislative or intermediary bodies – and subjects or children.⁵² The authority of the head of the family is hereditary and should exist, argued Bonald, in order to avoid any possible disorder that could come about by not assuring the succession.

The same themes are to be found in a pamphlet published by Maximin Isnard, a former deputy during the Revolution and the Directory, and a member of the tribunate purged in 1802. The pamphlet touched on several issues, namely: the accomplishment of 1789; overcoming dissensions within by re-establishing social harmony; hereditary monarchy as the best political system for France; and

⁴⁵ *Gazette de France*, 19 Nov. 1799 (25 Brumaire an VIII).

⁴⁶ Marc-Antoine Jullien, *Entretien politique sur la situation actuelle de la France et sur les plans du nouveau gouvernement* (Paris, frimaire an VIII (1799)).

⁴⁷ Chas, *A la nation française*, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Cited in André Cabanis, *Le sacre de Napoléon* (Paris, 1970), p. 239.

⁴⁹ V.-R. Barbet Du Bertrand, *Les trois homes illustres, ou dissertations sur les institutions politiques de César-Auguste, de Charlemagne et de Napoléon Bonaparte* (Paris, 1803), pp. 257–8, 264–5, 269–70.

⁵⁰ J.-G.-M.-R. de Montgaillard, *La France sous le gouvernement de Bonaparte* (Paris, 1803).

⁵¹ According to Chatel de Brancion, *Le sacre de Napoléon*, pp. 31–5, although there does not appear to be a demonstrable connection between Napoleon and Louis Bonald, *Théorie du pouvoir politique et religieux dans la société civile* (3 vols., Paris, 1796).

⁵² Chatel de Brancion, *Le sacre de Napoléon*, p. 32, argues that Napoleon went about constructing the social family in part by reorganizing the natural family in the Code Civil.

putting an end to the Revolution.⁵³ According to Isnard, the democratization that accompanied the Revolution in its early years had led the people further astray from the ‘salut de la patrie’, which was exclusively attached to the ‘perpetual unity’ of the government, that is, to monarchy.⁵⁴ In this rather contorted argument, a king had been overthrown but not the monarchy. It had always been there, vacant, indestructible, because it ‘was based on the general will, and because it had its roots in the heart of the French’.⁵⁵

III

It is impossible to know the extent to which this political-literary output was inspired by official channels keen to influence public opinion, whether it was self-interested, written by individuals pandering to the regime, or whether indeed it was the product of sincere advocates of a monarchical model, the expression of a certain anxiety in the face of a power vacuum if Napoleon were to die. The same dilemma faces the historian wading through the outpouring in favour of heredity and the Empire, that is, it is hard to recover the thinking of those moderate revolutionaries who advocated a hereditary model. Some no doubt had their own personal interests uppermost in their minds, fearful perhaps of incurring Napoleon’s wrath or of losing their privileges, in which case their political rhetoric becomes somewhat hollow.

It would, however, be unwise entirely to dismiss as empty the rhetoric of the entire cast of political characters.⁵⁶ As has been shown for a somewhat later period, apologists and eulogists can just as accurately represent the ‘ritualized expression’ of enthusiasm for a political cause as heartfelt supporters.⁵⁷ Instead of asking whether the adherents of empire, especially in the legislative bodies, were sincere and whether they meant what they said, it is much more useful to examine the ‘political language’ used by both deputies and citizens in the debates surrounding the foundation of the Empire. Without going into the details of the actual processes leading to the proclamation of the Empire, already adequately described in a number of works, it is nevertheless worth pointing to the arguments most commonly used by members of the consulate’s ruling bodies preceding the proclamation of the Empire to justify the change in regime.

The Empire was, according to one Tribune, Jean-Claude Gillet, a means of reconciling Napoleon’s power with the Republic.⁵⁸ Jean-François Curée, on the

⁵³ Isnard, *Réflexions relatives au sénatus-consulte*, pp. 6–7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 15, 16.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁵⁶ As does, for example, Patrick Gueniffey, *Le dix-huit Brumaire: l'épilogue de la Révolution française* (Paris, 2008), pp. 320–1, when speaking of the petitions of congratulation sent in for 18 Brumaire, which he describes as ‘that toadying literature’ (*cette littérature flagorneuse*).

⁵⁷ Corinne Legoy, ‘Les poètes et les princes: figures et postures des thuriféraires du pouvoir sous la Restauration’, *Revue d'histoire du XIX^e siècle*, 35 (2007), pp. 35–49, here p. 40; *idem*, ‘La gloire et le temps’, *Revue d'histoire du XIX^e siècle*, 25 (2002), pp. 165–70.

⁵⁸ Gillet in *Proclamation de l'empire*, pp. 39–44.

other hand, argued for a new dynasty that would act as a barrier against a return to ‘the factions of that House [the Bourbons] which we proscribed in 1792’.⁵⁹ Jaubert argued that, given past experiences, France could not ‘rely upon a state of definitive calm except through the institution of hereditary power’.⁶⁰ These arguments were repeated in one form or another by many of the Tribunes that followed. Much of the rhetoric was about assuring the stability of the government, of maintaining the Republic – Jacques-Thomas Lahary for one argued that other than a change in name everything would stay the same⁶¹ – of reassuring people about the future after the convulsions of the Revolution, of completing the work begun in 1789 by putting the Revolution to bed once and for all – ‘We have been drawn back by the irresistible pull of events to the point openly indicated by the national will in 1789, and where the Constituent Assembly itself had left off’⁶² – and of combining elements of a republic and a monarchy in order to create a new regime that would ‘increase the majesty and carry the glory and destiny of France to the highest level’.⁶³ It was not only a reflection of a nationalist and patriotic discourse but, as one historian has put it, it sacralized the Grand Nation.⁶⁴

A related theme that consistently arose during the course of the speeches made to justify heredity, and hence the Empire, was the desire to bring the ‘excesses’ and the ‘abuses’ of the Revolution to an end.⁶⁵ ‘We will finish it [that is, the Revolution]’, remarked the Tribune Joseph-Jérôme Siméon, paraphrasing Montesquieu, ‘we will pass from one government to the same government’.⁶⁶ The desire to end the Revolution was expressed in the belief that they had returned to the point where the Constituent Assembly had left off,⁶⁷ which would allow them to return to some form of monarchy: ‘There is not one Frenchman who after so many upheavals ... does not feel that we should now trust in a part of those institutions from which we have strayed.’⁶⁸ The best way to do this was to adopt a hereditary system which, in the words of the Tribune, Jean-Jacques Duvidal de Montferrier, was ‘a port where the vessel of the empire could find a sanctuary for centuries to come’.⁶⁹ That message, namely, that ‘heredity should be established in conformity with the principles developed at the beginning of the Revolution’,⁷⁰ was argued often and forcefully. It was not only considered ‘the

⁵⁹ Curée in *ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶⁰ Jaubert in *ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶¹ Lahary in *ibid.*, p. 101.

⁶² Curée in *ibid.*, pp. 27, 28, as well as Jaubert, pp. 30, 34.

⁶³ Lahary in *ibid.*, p. 90. Similar sentiments were expressed by Delaistre, p. 173, and Delpierre, p. 187. For the views of the president of the Corps Législatif, Fontanes, see, Savariau, *Louis de Fontanes*, pp. 324–9.

⁶⁴ Jourdan, ‘Le Premier Empire’, 59.

⁶⁵ *Proclamation de l’empire*, pp. 86, 91, 165, 167, 264.

⁶⁶ Siméon in *ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 30, 46, 144, 147, 149, 154–5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 46.

⁶⁹ Duvidal de Montferrier in *ibid.*, pp. 37, 38. See also the declarations on pp. 46, 143, 97, 101, 129, 171, 177, 180, 187–8, 202.

⁷⁰ Woloch, *Napoleon and his collaborators*, p. 109; *idem*, ‘From consulate to empire: impetus and resistance’, in Peter Baehr and Melvin Richter, eds., *Dictatorship in history and theory: Bonapartism, Caesarism, and totalitarianism* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 44.

government which best suits a great body of people', but also one in which the greatest certitude and the greatest political and civil liberty could be procured.⁷¹

Given the persistence with which the elite renewed the idea of monarchy and the consistency with which arguments in favour of the principles of 1789 were used as the rationale for a return to monarchical forms,⁷² a certain amount of weight should be given to them, regardless of whether contemporaries understood those principles or not.⁷³ One of the cornerstones of the Revolution of 1789 had been constitutional monarchy. This is not to say that the Tribunes and Senators of 1804 wanted a return to the basic principles of 1789, but rather that they were using the argument of putting the Revolution to bed as justification for empire. This was not then about a group of toadying politicians exalting Napoleon as individual – even though, it has to be said, flourishes of flattering rhetoric can be found throughout their speeches – but rather about the foundation of a political system that would outlive one man. They did, after all, try to put obstacles in Napoleon's path (even if they were not very successful), that would prevent the emperor from assuming too much power, and that would act as a constitutional counter-weight.⁷⁴ Moreover, they approved of the Empire in the belief that certain conditions would be met: the independence of the institutions of the state; the vote on taxation; the guarantee of property; individual freedom; freedom of the press; elections; the responsibility of ministers; and the inviolability of the constitution. All of this so that the 'social pact' (*pacte sociale*), as they referred to it, would remain intact.⁷⁵

If Napoleon's ascension to the imperial throne appeared ineluctable by the beginning of 1804, then it was up to the political elite to make sure that he respected the political foundations laid by the Revolution. What Napoleon and the political elite in effect instituted in May 1804 was a constitutional monarchy, of sorts, exactly what conservative and moderate political thinkers had wanted since the beginning of the Revolution in 1789. 'The time has come', Duvidal de Montferrier proclaimed in the tribunate, 'to leave the sea of dreams and to approach the empire of reality ... The crown of Charlemagne is the just heritage for the one who has known how to imitate him.'⁷⁶

The little opposition that existed within the political elite was drowned out in a sea of approval. There were five or six members of the tribunate who voted against the Empire. The most important dissident voice was that of Lazare

⁷¹ Savoye-Rollin in *La proclamation de l'Empire*, p. 143.

⁷² It can be seen also in the addresses to Napoleon asking him to assume the imperial title. See, for example, *Moniteur universel*, 9 May 1804 (address from the first division of Dragons), 10 May 1804 (address from the municipal corps of the town of Paris).

⁷³ Woloch, *Napoleon and his collaborators*, p. 109 and n. 33, whose chapter on the transformation from republic to empire is perhaps the most thorough analysis to date, argues that the members of the legislative chambers deliberately distorted the principles of 1789 – Nation, Law, King – and the doctrine of popular sovereignty.

⁷⁴ Isnard, *Réflexions relatives au sénatus-consulte*, p. 36.

⁷⁵ See the memoir attached to the senate's response in *La proclamation de l'Empire*, pp. 217–21.

⁷⁶ *Moniteur universel*, 3 May 1804, p. 1012; Robert Morrissey, 'Charlemagne et la légende impériale', in Jean-Claude Bonnet, ed., *Napoléon, les arts et les lettres* (Paris, 2004), p. 340.

Carnot, who made a number of critical observations during the debate on the issue.⁷⁷ Pointing to the United States as an example of a working Republic, he declared that he would not vote for the re-establishment of the monarchy, but nonetheless watered down his oppositional stance by stating that if the Empire were adopted by the French people, he would adhere to it. Carnot's association with the Committee of Public Safety and with the Directory took some shine off his aura of moral rectitude. Besides, given the number of Tribunes who scrambled to undo Carnot's message by extolling the virtues of Napoleon, it appears not to have made much of an impact.

IV

Once he had accepted the idea of hereditary power, Napoleon had to convince the French people that the transition to empire was not only fitting but also desirable. To this end, representatives of the state and the army were mobilized to show their support for Napoleon, most of whom did so eagerly. General Soult, for example, commander of two large military camps, at Montreuil and Saint-Omer, was asked to provide information about how the army would react to the idea of Napoleon becoming hereditary ruler.⁷⁸ On 10 April, only weeks before the official proclamation, Soult wrote a letter to Napoleon indicating that the army 'desired and demanded that you be proclaimed Emperor of the Gauls' and that heredity be established in his family.⁷⁹ It was shortly after that the official petitions in favour of heredity were supported by declarations from the army. This aspect of the public relations campaign appears to have been orchestrated by the minister for war, Alexandre Berthier, who first ordered that a report, written by the minister of justice, Claude-Ambroise Régnier, on the Cadoudal-Pichegru plot, be read to the troops,⁸⁰ but it is also possible that Napoleon's brothers, Joseph and Lucien, may have been behind this initiative.⁸¹ Many commanders understood what was expected of them, as a result of which an outpouring of public support from the army for Napoleon duly came forth.⁸²

⁷⁷ Lazare Carnot in *La proclamation de l'Empire*, pp. 63–9. On Carnot's opposition and the response to it see, Woloch, *Napoleon and his collaborators*, pp. 105–9.

⁷⁸ Although the official *Correspondance* does not contain a letter from Napoleon to Soult (or any other army commander) with this request, there is an allusion to such a document in a letter from Soult to Napoleon in which the former states, 'You ordered me, general, to report, in the greatest detail, on the opinion of the army' (Soult to Napoleon, AN AFIV 1599, 27 Germinal an XII (17 Apr. 1804). I would like to thank Michael J. Hughes for sharing his archival notes and for pointing me in this direction.

⁷⁹ Soult to Napoleon, AN AFIV 1599, 21 Germinal an XII (10 Apr. 1804).

⁸⁰ Woloch, *Napoleon and his collaborators*, p. 111; Claude-Ambroise Régnier, *Rapport du grand-juge au Premier Consul, et communiqué au Sénat dans sa séance de germinal, contenant toutes les pièces de la conspiration tramée par le gouvernement britannique, contre les jours du Premier Consul!* (Paris, an XII (1804)).

⁸¹ At least according to Lentz, *Le grand consulat*, p. 563, but there does not appear to be a great deal of support for this assertion.

⁸² AN B II 850A, 850B, 850C, and 851A. Woloch, *Napoleon and his collaborators*, p. 113, has discerned three types of petitions. For an example of an officer feeling obliged to sign a petition in favour of the creation of the Empire see, 'Mémoires du capitaine Godet', *Carnet de la Sabretache*, 10 (1927), pp. 174–6.

This was a top down process. We know, for example, that some army commanders circulated model petitions to their troops,⁸³ and that a number of the top military brass petitioned Napoleon to adopt the 'title of Emperor that Charlemagne carried'. 'Does it not belong by right to the man who recalls it to our eyes as a legislator and warrior'?⁸⁴ This expression from the army has been interpreted by some historians as an attempt to intimidate the legislature.⁸⁵ However, there is nothing to suggest that the army as institution was behaving any differently from any other institution in their reclamation of an emperor. Moreover, in one recent analysis of letters and diaries written by the troops during this period, few expressed any reservations about the proclamation of the Empire.⁸⁶

A similar process took place in the administration, much of it supposedly orchestrated by Fouché.⁸⁷ In March and April 1804, in the wake of the Cadoudal-Pichegru plot against Napoleon, dozens of letters from individual prefects, judges, mayors, towns, electoral colleges, *commissaires*, *conseils généraux*, *conseillers-d'état*, and indeed from just about any official or branch of the administration that one can think of were published in the *Moniteur*. Most of these petitions simply lamented the dangers facing the First Consul, confounded the good of the nation with his personal well-being, and offered him their thanks, support, and sometimes love.⁸⁸ They express solidarity with Napoleon, often portray him as 'saviour' and hero, but most of all express a desire to exact vengeance, a word commonly used, on those held responsible for the assassination attempt, that is, the British. 'Do they ignore', wrote the sub-prefect of the department of the Aisne, 'that heaven protects our *patrie* and that the vastness of faithful citizens forms an impenetrable rampart around the First Consul against the attacks of perfidy?'⁸⁹ In a letter to Napoleon from François Louis Marguet, who described himself as a 'simple citizen' from Besançon, the outrage against 'perfidious England' is palpable. He declared that Napoleon's death 'would be a public calamity. The fatal day which takes you from the French people will be the last day of their liberty and their happiness.'⁹⁰ As such, this particular aspect of the petitions can be seen as an attempt on the part of the consular regime to garner support for the coming war with Britain and, indirectly, to consolidate Napoleon's personal hold on power in the

⁸³ AN BB/II/850B.

⁸⁴ AN BB/II/850A, 22 floréal XII. Also cited in Woloch, *Napoleon and his collaborators*, p. 112.

⁸⁵ For example, Woloch, *Napoleon and his collaborators*, p. 114.

⁸⁶ Alan Forrest, *Napoleon's men: the soldiers of the Revolution and Empire* (London, 2002), p. 100.

⁸⁷ *Corr.*, IX, n. 7683 (14 Apr. 1804); Annie Jourdan, 'Le sacre ou le pacte social', in *Napoléon le sacre* (Ajaccio, 2004), p. 27; and idem, 'Le Premier Empire', pp. 51–64.

⁸⁸ A change came about on 21 Mar. 1804, when the editors announced that the number of petitions coming through was so numerous that they were going to abandon publishing them in their entirety and instead print extracts. Many of the letters sent to the authorities and not published can be found in the series AN F/1CIII.

⁸⁹ AN F/1CIII/Aisne 12, 2 ventôse an XII (21 Feb. 1804).

⁹⁰ AN AFIV, 1953, 12 ventôse an XII (2 Mar. 1804). Other examples include a letter from the civil magistrates of Marseilles to Napoleon, F/1CIII/Bouches-du-Rhône 8, 4 ventôse an XII (23 Feb. 1804).

process. The rhetoric used was based on two sentiments: overwhelming *enthusiasm* for Napoleon and the apparent gains that had been made in French society since his coming to power; and the *fear* of losing those gains if he were to disappear.⁹¹

At first there was no mention of heredity or empire in any of the petitions from the country's most important institutions.⁹² The only time the word 'empire' was at all mentioned, in a petition from the president of the electoral college of Sésia in Italy, was a general reference to the 'vast empire' that Napoleon governed.⁹³ One can find, however, a vague reference in the petition from the department of the Roër to Napoleon receiving, in the country of Charlemagne, 'the just tribute of love, respect and recognition' which was his due, and which points to the possibility of a higher office. But that is the extent of it. It is not until the lead was given in the tribunate by Jean-François Curée, published in the *Moniteur* on 1 May, demanding that Napoleon should be named emperor, that the process was officially set in motion.⁹⁴ This was the first time that someone in an official capacity had openly spoken out in favour of the title. Shortly after that, petitions started to appear demanding that heredity and the executive power be united. As we now know, the prompting for Curée's declaration came from Napoleon, that is, the process was inspired from above, but that does not diminish the fact that from this time on the floodgates were opened and that what follows cannot be simply discounted as a propaganda coup organized by a few men behind the scenes.

After the declaration of the Empire, a number of these letters played on the same themes that we have already encountered among the political elite, that is, that France had been 'lost' since the convocation of the estates general by 'ambitious innovators'. In this particular letter, the commercial tribunal for the town of Soissons was convinced 'by its own experience' that an heredity leader 'can alone assure their happiness [the French people] in consolidating the power of the nation'.⁹⁵ Some professed to having been 'always for the government of one man' but that, up until then, that opinion had been fatal and that they had not been able to do anything to win acceptance for the idea.⁹⁶

⁹¹ For this see, Elaine Williamson, 'Denon, la presse et la propagande impériale', in D. Gallo, ed., *Les vies de Dominique-Vivant Denon* (2 vols., Paris, 2001), 1, pp. 154–5.

⁹² The assertion by Jourdan, 'Le sacre', p. 27, that the petitions pleaded in favour of heredity or that, more specifically, the electoral colleges of the Var, the Yonne, the Nord, the Hautes-Pyrénées, and the Roër (found in the *Moniteur universel*, 14 Apr. 1804) 'begged' Napoleon to accept the crown is simply not borne out. There is at most a vague hint in the petition from the Yonne that 'It is time to merge without reserve your [that is, Napoleon's] destiny and that of the state'.

⁹³ For example, *Moniteur universel*, 19 Mar. 1804.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 1 May 1804.

⁹⁵ AN F/1CIII/Aisne 12, letter from the 'tribunal de commerce' of Soissons (no date but probably end of floréal an XII (May 1804)).

⁹⁶ AN F/1CIII/Bouches-du-Rhône 8, prefect of the department to the minister of the interior, 9 prairial an XII (28 May 1804).

Among everyday citizens, one can find an open adhesion to empire that cut across socio-economic categories, and that took on evident emotional dimensions rarely discussed by historians.⁹⁷ Once the Empire was declared, thousands of private individuals wrote to express support not so much for the idea of empire as for the idea of Napoleon – ‘the greatest of conquerors, the most perfect of men’ – as emperor.⁹⁸ Some of these documents are collective petitions containing a brief letter of support and congratulations, followed by a list of signatures that may or may not have been entirely voluntary.⁹⁹ Some are letters from individuals attempting to curry favour with the regime, such as one from a *commandant d’armes*, P. Jh. Leone, who was once in the army of Italy, but who now found himself unemployed and who did not hesitate to ask to be in Napoleon’s service once again.¹⁰⁰ The vast majority of letters, however, defy this kind of logic. On the contrary, they display a manifest adhesion to Napoleon and the idea of empire often marked by an affective bond that appears to escape rationalization.

In a letter to Napoleon from a woman in Avignon named Carrié, for example, one can find the following phrase, ‘The supreme being has exorcised my prayer, God who can do all grant that the good and perfect health of our Emperor, who is closer to a Divinity than a man, be ever lasting’. Or again, a letter from an eighty-five-year-old man, which reads, ‘The Grande Nation has recognized in Your Majesty the same qualities as Titus and the courage of Marcellus; and it has rightly raised you to the first throne of the universe.’¹⁰¹ Napoleon was often compared to a divinity, as in this letter from the ‘woman Garnier’, from Oberingelheim, who declared that ‘Your Majesty was in my eyes, and in those with tender hearts, a tutelary God actually your empire by the grace of God [sic]’.¹⁰² As well, dozens of poems, sometimes printed, often handwritten, more often than not of a mediocre quality, are dedicated to Napoleon’s ascension.¹⁰³ Much of this material traces the life of Napoleon in flattering terms as well as presaging his rise to power as inevitable. These documents are less an irrational expression of support for Napoleon than a spontaneous political response to the predicament facing the French nation – the threat of war with Britain and the possibility of losing what many now considered to be the Saviour of the Revolution through assassination.

Here, too, we find material that implicitly rejects the Revolution as democratic experiment and supports, if not the idea of monarchy, then at least the notion of

⁹⁷ Corinne Legoy, ‘Les marges captivantes, de l’histoire: la parole de gloire de la Restauration’, in Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini and Dominique Kalifa, eds., *Imaginaire et sensibilités au XIX^e siècle: études pour Alain Corbin* (Paris, 2005), pp. 115–24, here pp. 119–20.

⁹⁸ The quote is from a letter by Pierre Hartmann Richard, Lyons, no date, in AN AFIV, Fond de la secrétairerie d’état, 1951. A few examples from these cartons have been used by Natalie Petiteau, *Les français et l’empire (1799–1815)* (Paris, 2008), pp. 160–6.

⁹⁹ AN AFIV 1951, P. Barrere to the minister of the interior, 25 floréal an XII (14 May 1804).

¹⁰⁰ AN AFIV, 1953, Paris, 3 ventôse an XII (22 Feb. 1804).

¹⁰¹ Both letters in AN AFIV 1953 (no dates). ¹⁰² AN AFIV, 1953, 24 priarial an 12 (14 June 1804).

¹⁰³ A printed example is *L’avènement de Napoléon à l’empire; stance lyrique par J. B.* (Paris, 1804).

a strong executive centred around one man. ‘Fourteen centuries of monarchy’, one can read in a pamphlet by General Jean Sarrazin, ‘even if often feebly administered, speak more eloquently in favour of the throne than fourteen years of misfortune and setbacks for the republican state.’¹⁰⁴ General Henry, writing from Nantes, argued that he was ‘convinced by experience that under the Republic, the supreme power remained too long divided between the hands of many’, which had resulted in constant anarchy and disorder, and that the centralization of power was best suited to empire.¹⁰⁵ The desire to see order restored was a constant; a surrogate to the tribunal of the first instance at Versailles wrote, for example, that, even if the consulate was able to ‘dissipate the deep darkness of night’, certain souls remained troubled. ‘It is time’, he continued, ‘to revive the social order, [and] that sovereign power is reunited in the hands of one man.’¹⁰⁶ There is, moreover, a prevailing sentiment among many of these letters that Napoleon deserved the throne through his actions, and that it was a ‘just homage of the recognition of the French people’.¹⁰⁷

There are so many letters and poems – and even a recipe against poison¹⁰⁸ – that one can postulate that the movement towards empire revived monarchical tendencies that had lain dormant during the years of the Republic. The types of sentiments expressed often fall within the logic of what might be called a monarchical reflex, that is, a resurgence in the belief in the sacred nature of the monarchy.¹⁰⁹ This is not the same, however, as the notion of sacrality that existed in *ancien régime* France; it had now taken on a slightly new form, founded on notions of individual destiny (Napoleon’s), as well as the sovereignty of the people. Hence the constant references in these letters to ‘Providence’ or the ‘hand of God’ having placed Napoleon on the throne, or of having saved him from assassination attempts so that he could continue his work,¹¹⁰ or to the title ‘emperor’ as a reward for Napoleon’s services to the state (often in conjunction with the assertion that he saved France from ruin),¹¹¹ or to the assertion that France could only be saved from domestic and foreign enemies when hereditary power resided in one family.¹¹² There are, moreover, references to Napoleon as

¹⁰⁴ Sarrazin, *Le onze frimaire*, p. 80.

¹⁰⁵ AN B II 850B, letter from the adjudant commandant of the Army of St Domingue, General Henry, Nantes, 13 floréal an XII (2 May 1804). ¹⁰⁶ AN AFiv 1953, Lafontaine, 2 May 1804.

¹⁰⁷ AN AFiv 1953, the widow Maillet (no date, no place).

¹⁰⁸ AN AFiv 1953, Jean-Baptiste Chabrier, Mirmande, 14 ventôse an XII (4 May 1804).

¹⁰⁹ Petiteau, *Les français et l’empire*, pp. 165, 170, argues that this period sees a reinvention of relations between monarch and subject and that we are seeing a return to a new kind of sacralization of the monarchy, less superstitious, than that which preceded the Revolution.

¹¹⁰ AN AFiv 1953, Pradier, from Castres, Department of Tarn, 30 germinal an XII (15 June 1804).

¹¹¹ AN AFiv 1953, Jean-Aime Lautour, 7 floréal an XII (26 Apr. 1804); Egron, retired commandant de Place, 11 floréal an XII (30 Apr. 1804); Jean-Jacques Nicolas André, 27 floréal an XII (16 May 1804); Jacques Nicolas André, lawyer, Turin, 27 floréal an XII (16 May 1804); and Sarrazin, *Le onze frimaire*, pp. 83–4.

¹¹² AN B II 850B, General Henry, Nantes, 13 floréal an XII (2 May 1804); B II 851A, letter from the camp of Montreuil (no date); F/1CIII/Aisne 12, letter from the sub-prefect of the Aisne, floréal an XII (Apr. 1804).

father of the people,¹¹³ remarkably similar to the kinds of patriarchal discourse one could find prior to 1789. Consequently, one cannot but conclude that the words *and* the people who used them embodied a set of beliefs and values that were profoundly embedded in the cultural practices of the day, notwithstanding the Republic and the execution of the king in 1792.¹¹⁴ The push to empire was, in a very large sense, an expression of a dominant set of political beliefs and values.

V

In spite of the public outpouring in favour of empire, support was by no means unanimous. There was never a concerted intellectual or political opposition to empire, but resistance to it can be found throughout its existence.¹¹⁵ Most of it was unstructured, and either came from republican elements in the military,¹¹⁶ or from former Jacobins. General Verdier, for example, a friend of the defunct General Kléber, was at Leghorn when news of the proclamation reached the army through the *Moniteur*. He was so angry that he tore up the newspaper in front of several other officers (he was denounced and disgraced for three years).¹¹⁷ At Nîmes, during the night of 7–8 August, a group of opponents calling themselves the *Implacables* posted insults against Napoleon on the public squares of the town.¹¹⁸ At the camp of Boulogne, where the gathered army was predominantly republican, the proclamation of the Empire represented for many a return to old monarchical structures. Despite this, few officers refused to sign the petitions in favour of empire and those that did were sometimes relieved of their commands.¹¹⁹ Even some of those who admired Napoleon were a little worried about the extent of his ambition. It was thought that ‘He only wanted supreme power to break all the chains that, as First Consul, he still encountered ... Why did we have a bloody revolution to return [to the monarchy] so quickly?’¹²⁰

¹¹³ See, for example, the letter from a notary in the Tarn, Pierre Guibert, in AFIV 1953, in which he refers to Napoleon as the father of the French people, called on to conserve the glory and prosperity of the Empire. Also, F/1cIII/Lot/9, adjunct mayor of the town of Caussade, department of Lot, to Napoleon, 19 floréal an XII (8 May 1804); AFIV, 1953, François Louis Marguet, Besançon, 12 ventôse an XII (2 Mar. 1804); and Lieutenant Boutaud, Paris, 15 floréal an XII (4 May 1804).

¹¹⁴ Smith, ‘No more language games’, p. 1426.

¹¹⁵ Petiteau, *Les français et l’empire*, p. 123.

¹¹⁶ François Arago, *Histoire de ma jeunesse* (Brussels and Leipzig, 1854), pp. 52–3; Remacle, *Relations secrètes*, pp. 53, 74–5.

¹¹⁷ *Souvenirs du général baron Teste* (Paris, 1999), pp. 100–1. He described the swearing of the oath to the imperial regime as a ceremony in which a ‘sad and gloomy silence’ reigned.

¹¹⁸ Natalie Petiteau, ‘Insultes et hostilités politiques sous le consulat et l’Empire’, in Thomas Bouchet, Matthew Legget, Jean Vigreux, and Geneviève Verdo, eds., *L’insulte (en) politique: Europe et Amérique latine du XIXe siècle à nos jours* (Dijon, 2005), p. 213.

¹¹⁹ Auxonne-Marie-Théodose de Thiard, *Souvenirs diplomatiques et militaires* (Paris, 2007), pp. 128–9; Gilbert Bodinier, ‘Officiers et soldats de l’armée impériale face à Napoléon’, in *Napoléon, de l’histoire à la légende: actes du colloque des 30 novembre et le 1er décembre 1999* (Paris, 2000), pp. 215–16.

¹²⁰ J.-N.-A. Noël, *Souvenirs militaires d’un officier du premier empire (1792–1832)* (Paris, 1895), pp. 34–5.

On 19 May 1804, only a few weeks after the execution of the duc d'Enghien and on the eve of the proclamation of the Empire, Henri-François de Carrion-Nisas, a member of the tribunate, put on a play at the Théâtre-Français that was ostensibly about Peter the Great but which, in effect, was a thinly veiled plea in favour of the establishment of the Empire.¹²¹ In a rare public display of displeasure, the audience booed and kicked up a racket from the opening right up to the moment during the fifth act when someone had the common sense to bring down the curtain. That kind of display could not stop the inexorable march towards the Empire. That same evening, at the Opera, a new work written by Jacques-Marie Deschamps, with music by Jean-François Le Sueur, received a much more warm welcome. When the lines 'This day will be prosperous/Your support is a hero' were heard, the audience broke out into applause; it was meant to demonstrate approval for Napoleon and his regime.¹²²

Napoleon and the Brumairians may well have announced that the Revolution was 'finished' shortly after the coup that brought them to power,¹²³ but the political elite was still thinking and talking about ending the Revolution in 1804. They used it as a justification for putting Napoleon on the throne, a realization, as they saw it, of the political principles of 1789 – constitutional monarchy, sovereignty of the people, and freedom of religion among other things. In the months and years after the coup, Napoleon sought a new ideological stance to neutralize political opponents and to cement together what, in effect, was already a territorial imperium, albeit divided and disparate. He did this by portraying himself above factional politics and was convincing enough to rally the moderate political elite around his person – something that should be seen within a longer political tradition of moderation, of governing from the centre by opposing fanaticism¹²⁴ – and by repressing both the royalists and the neo-Jacobins, a clear sign that he was opting for a middle-of-the-road policy. The consulate was a post-ideological regime,¹²⁵ that deliberately adopted pragmatic solutions to the political and social issues that had marred the French landscape since the early days of the Revolution. That post-ideological, pragmatic approach to politics enabled Napoleon to get ahead with the task of consolidating the gains of the Revolution, restoring law and order in provinces that had been in rebellion for years (admittedly by ruthless methods), and bringing back a degree of political stability the likes of which the French had not seen in years (even if it was at the cost of popular sovereignty). Given those gains, it was then necessary for the elites to think in terms of durable political systems and the one that most sections of the French population seemed prepared to accept was a return to some kind of monarchy.

¹²¹ F. W. J. Hemmings, *The theatre industry in nineteenth-century France* (New York, NY, 1993), pp. 82–3.

¹²² Alphonse Aulard, *Paris sous le Premier Empire: recueil de documents pour l'histoire de l'esprit public à Paris* (3 vols. Paris, 1912–23), I, p. 100, 'Ce jour te sera prospère/Ton soutien est un héros.'

¹²³ *Corr.*, VI, n. 4422 (9 Nov. 1799).

¹²⁴ See Serna, *La république des girouettes*, p. 20.

¹²⁵ The term is from Philippe R. Girard, 'Napoléon Bonaparte and the emancipation issue in Saint-Domingue, 1799–1803', *French Historical Studies*, 32 (2009), p. 589.

As such, the foundation of the Empire was not so much about the ambitions of one individual as about founding a stable political system, about creating a new political synthesis.¹²⁶ It was the expression of a particular group within the elite with shared values and goals, and was presented as a kind of political and juridical synthesis, a hybrid regime, which recalled the past and was driven by the will to placate the country and to bring the Revolution to an end.¹²⁷ Moreover, the extent to which Napoleon was recognized as the ‘father of the people’ by ordinary citizens demonstrates the extent to which *ancien régime* attitudes towards the ‘supreme authority’ were deeply embedded in the French *mentalité*. In short, personal ambition cannot explain the transition from republic to empire, all the more so since the image that is now emerging of Napoleon during the consulate is of a man who often hesitated between various political options before coming down on one side or the other. Other factors are much more important: the push for a monarchical system within Napoleon’s entourage and the government itself; the plots against Napoleon’s life and the perceived threat to the stability of the political system; and the desire to re-enter the European family of states. In order to do so, the French elite had to renounce that ‘vain abstraction’, the Republic, and embrace a new form of government.¹²⁸ The notion of empire was, in any event, flexible and evolved with the further conquest of territories. In 1809, for example, the *Institut de France* suggested that the titles ‘Augustus’ and ‘Germanicus’ be inscribed on the Arc de Triomphe. Napoleon rejected the idea, but it demonstrates that elite sentiment in favour of a Roman-style empire existed.¹²⁹ In 1804, Napoleon had in effect taken a ‘third way’ between Revolution and Restoration, a bizarre combination of what was supposed to resemble a monarchy and the vestiges of a republic. The fact that it was not a true constitutional monarchy in which vigorous political debate was possible, and the fact that the notion of heredity was never firmly entrenched in the minds of the elites, as can be seen from their behaviour in 1814, means that the French Empire, like Alexander’s and Charlemagne’s, collapsed when Napoleon disappeared from the scene.

¹²⁶ A similar view is expressed by Pierre Serna, “‘Gouvernement du lion ... ou règne de de l’astre brillant?’ Le 18 Brumaire au regard des historiens contemporains du Premier consulat (1800–1802)”, in Jean-Pierre Jessenne, ed., *Du directoire au consulat: Brumaire dans l’histoire du lien politique et de l’état-nation* (4 vols., Villeneuve d’Ascq, 2001), III, p. 366.

¹²⁷ Jean-Marc Olivesi, ‘De l’impossible porphyrogénèse à un rituel de légitimation: le Sacre’, in *Napoléon le sacre* (Ajaccio, 2004), p. 10; Chappey, ‘La notion d’empire’, p. 117. The phrase ‘hybrid regime’ is from Jacques Bainville, *Napoléon* (Paris, 1931, re-ed. 1995), p. 172.

¹²⁸ On this point, Marc Belissa, *Repenser l’ordre européen (1795–1802): de la société des rois aux droits des nations* (Paris, 2006), p. 178.

¹²⁹ Richard Koebner, *Empire* (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 279–84.