

Frontiers, Ethnicity and Identity in the French Revolution:

Catalans and Occitans

Peter McPhee

We know an enormous amount about the ways in which regional populations participated in and responded to the French Revolution,¹ but far less about shifts in self-definition, about the ways in which people defined themselves individually and collectively. Most historians who have addressed the issue agree, however, that the French Revolution was a critical period in the forging and contesting of collective identities among the linguistic and ethnic minorities who together made up a majority of French people.² Their argument is predicated on two general propositions.

First, France before 1789 was a society in which people's main allegiance had been to their particular region or *pays*: France had a unity only because of the monarchy's claim that this was its territory and the people its subjects. Most people did not use the French language in daily life and looked to elites in provincial capitals such as Toulouse, Rennes and Grenoble to defend them against the increasing claims of the royal state for taxes and conscripts. The strength of local loyalties was reinforced by economic practices which sought to meet the needs of the household and exchanged produce mainly within local markets. Since the twelfth century, the cost to the monarchy of establishing territorial control over France had been to accept a patchwork of regional and local privileges, exemptions and rights. On the eve of the Revolution, every aspect of the institutions of public life—in administration, customs and measures, the law, taxation and the church—was still marked by regional exceptions and privileges: provinces also had their own law codes, degrees of self-government, levels of taxation, and systems of weights and measures.

Peter McPhee is Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) of the University of Melbourne. His most recent book is *The French Revolution 1789-1799* (Oxford, 2002). His current research is on the impact of the French Revolution on daily life. He wishes to acknowledge the contribution of Emily McCaffrey to this paper.

¹ Much of this information is synthesized by Michel Vovelle, *Découverte de la politique. Géopolitique de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1993).

² See, for example, Peter McPhee, *A Social History of France 1789-1914* (London, 2004), chap. 5; and the essays in Pierre Nora, ed., *Rethinking France: Les lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1, *The State*, trans. Mary Trouille (Chicago, 2001). The brilliant study by David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), emphasizes the pre-revolutionary roots of nationalism but sees nation-building to have been an elite project alone.

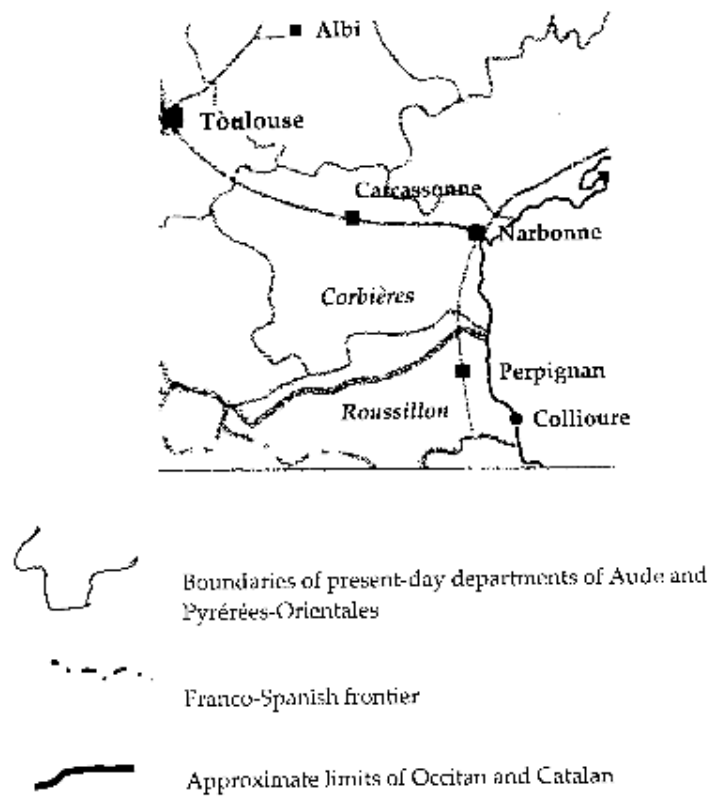


Figure 1 – Languedoc-Roussillon

Second, in 1789-91 revolutionaries reshaped every aspect of institutional and public life according to principles of rationality, uniformity and efficiency. All French citizens, whatever their social background and residence, were to be judged according to a single uniform legal code, and taxed by the same obligatory proportional taxes on wealth. The years of Revolution and Empire engendered a new political culture of citizenship and the celebration of national heroes drawn from antiquity or the revolutionary struggle itself. Most obviously, the practice of popular sovereignty at a time of national military crisis underpinned the shift from subject to citizen. Not only was the Revolution a turning-point in the uniformity of state institutions, but, for the first time, the state was also understood as representing a more emotional entity, “the nation,” based on citizenship. In the process, many ethnic and linguistic minorities came to accept themselves as part of a nation of French citizens. It is for this reason that the French Revolution is so often seen by historians as the seed-bed of modern nationalism, the classic example of Benedict Anderson’s concept of “imagined community” as the basis of national identity.³

While recognizing the significance of the French Revolution, Peter Sahlins has seen the origins of popular assumptions about national identity—at least in the border lands between the French and Spanish Cerdagne—as the result of local communities maneuvering for advantage along State territorial boundaries: in part a process “from below.”⁴ Historians from within ethnic and linguistic minorities have, however, tended to see this as a process of “francisation d’en haut,” often characterized as imposed and even destructive.⁵ This is the case throughout the frontier regions of France, but this paper takes as its case-studies the contiguous regions of the Corbières, part of France since the thirteenth century, and the Roussillon, incorporated only after the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659. (Today these regions are known administratively as the southern part of the department of the Aude, and the Pyrénées-Orientales.)

The major debate among historians of the Roussillon today concerns when and how the region became *francisée*: what have been the processes by which the specific ethno-cultural identity of Northern Catalonia has been eroded by institutional, linguistic and economic *francisation* from Paris? The question goes to the very core of the history of this region and is inextricably linked both with the current situation of the Roussillon within the European Union and with the ways in which this fashions the dialogue of historians with the past. Most local historians see the *francisation* accelerated by the Revolution as exclusively a repressive and linear process imposed on the region from the outside and “from above.” Michel Brunet, for example, has evoked an image of internal colonization:

Before 1789, the state organization of the monarchy was only a distant and relatively benevolent entity which it was customary to side-step: [afterwards] the French nation became concrete in dramatic fashion ... with methods prefiguring those of the well-intentioned colonizers of the following century.⁶

3 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

4 Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, Calif., 1989), esp. chaps. 4-5.

5 A useful collection covering all linguistic minorities is the special triple collection of *Les temps modernes* 324-325-326 (1973).

6 Michel Brunet, “Les armées de la Révolution et la population roussillonnaise, 1791-1794,” *Annales du Midi* 83 (1971), 225-233; see, too, *Le Roussillon. Une société contre l’Etat 1780-1820* (Toulouse, 1986), esp. 537-46.

Jean Villanove has decried the Revolution similarly, as a disaster pure and simple, “une inquisition laïque,” during which republican terrorists waged war on Catalan identity as much as on the Spanish army.⁷ For Roland Serres-Bria, the famous act of collaboration with the Spanish army by most of the inhabitants of the border community of Saint-Laurent-de-Cerdans in 1793-94 was a deliberate strategy designed to free the Roussillon from this secular, oppressive, republican yoke.⁸ Its decision to side with Spain is for Brunet “the ferocious defense of ancient customary village freedoms against the violent intrusion of the modernity of the Jacobin state.”⁹ The implication of such arguments is that the tragedy of the period lies in the failure of the Spanish army to win the war.

Such a view is also expressed by historians of Languedoc, albeit less frequently, and is placed in the context of the annexation of the region after the crushing in the thirteenth century of the Albigensian heresy, the religious activities of the Cathars. According to Henri Jeanjean, “a well-defined ethnic entity, Occitania, was conquered militarily by another ethnic entity. This military conquest would be followed by the systematic destruction of the culture of the colonized who would be, moreover, exploited economically.”¹⁰

This is how many local historians view the past, but how did the rural population among ethnic minorities define themselves within the French polity at that time? Was there a phenomenon of “francisation d’en bas” as well as one from above? Equally important, how did they define members of neighboring ethnies? This paper looks at the evidence of how Catalans and Occitans viewed each other—and themselves—across the frontier between Languedoc and Roussillon, and how they represented the Catalans south of the border.

The paper is based on the evidence in the *cahiers de doléances* of 1789, both in the Corbières region of Lower Languedoc and just across the linguistic border in the Roussillon.¹¹ There is a fundamental methodological problem in such a study, and not just because of the well-known limitations to the *cahiers* as transparent statements of rural attitudes. They vary sharply in detail: the few lines in a mixture of French and Catalan from the parish of Serrabone in the foothills of the Pyrenees contrast with the elaborate statements from Estagel and Portel. In addition, almost all of the *cahiers* from the Corbières have been lost: we have complete or partial lists of grievances from twenty-nine of the 129 communities.¹² Most importantly, those at the centre of the story are prevented from speaking directly to the historian not only because the great majority of them were illiterate; their views have to be read through the filter of a French language few understood readily and fewer still spoke. As the Amis de la Constitution of Carcassonne put it early in the Revolution, “In the town and surrounding villages, the people understand French; but the majority speaks patois. In more distant places, only patois is spoken, and French is less understood.”¹³

7 Jean Villanove, *Histoire populaire des Catalans*, vol. 3 (Perpignan, 1981), chap. 5.

8 Roland Serres-Bria, *Itinéraire catalaniste pour le Roussillon* (Saint-Estève, 1989), esp. 146-64.

9 Brunet, *Le Roussillon*, 195.

10 Henri Jeanjean, *De l’utopie au pragmatisme? Le mouvement occitan 1976-1990* (Perpignan, 1992), 18.

11 Etienne Frénay, ed., *Cahiers de doléances de la province de Roussillon (1789)* (Perpignan, 1979); Gilbert Larguier et al, eds, *Cahiers de doléances audois* (Carcassonne, 1989).

12 Peter McPhee, *Revolution and Environment in Southern France: Peasants, Lords, and Murder in the Corbières 1780-1830* (Oxford, 1999), 42.

13 *Poètes audois dans la tourmente. André Chénier, Venance Dougados, Fabre d’Eglantine* (Carcassonne, 1993), 17.

Despite a lively sense of regional identity in the Corbières communities, however, the rural *cahiers* express an assumption of French citizenship within a regenerated nation. There were frequent hopes expressed for a reformed and permanent provincial Estates, following the model of the Dauphiné, but none of the *cahiers* implied that Languedoc should enjoy a measure of special autonomy. Like others who have studied them, such as Emily McCaffrey and Gilbert Larguier, I have found words like “patrie,” “nation” and “citoyen” studded throughout the *cahiers*. Assumptions of a secular citizenship as the basis of a regenerated public realm inform the *cahiers* at every turn. The peasants of the Corbières had developed an understanding of society as composed of people of equal dignity, articulated in the repeated call from practicing Catholics that the king accord his “non-Catholic subjects the civic status and prerogatives of French citizens,” which was based on “civil and individual liberty for all citizens.” The citizens of Ornaisons, for example, reminded themselves that, “animated by a truly National spirit, let us recall that we are to concern ourselves, not with the respective pretensions of the three orders, but with the rights of all citizens.”¹⁴ Georges Fournier in fact suggests that “French” is the key word in these *cahiers*, indicating not only the *pays* but also the king, his subjects, the people, the nation and the *patrie*, already profoundly marked by a sentiment of attachment.¹⁵

Occitans were conscious of the ancient linguistic and territorial division which separated them from the Roussillon, and occasionally still described themselves as living on a frontier, which they had until 1659. The southernmost Occitan parish, Leucate, fulminated against the inhabitants of the Catalan village of St. Laurent and asked why they had to pay to fish in the *étang de Salses* while the privileged Catalans did not. This feeling of “otherness” became particularly acute after the declaration of war on Spain on 7 March 1793. On the suggestion of the district of Quillan, the Committee of Public Safety ordered the formation of a legion of “Braconniers montagnards” from the districts of Quillan and Lagrasse. Resplendent in brown and green uniforms, these 1,800 men were specifically charged with guarding the gorges leading from the Cerdagne and Capcir down the valley of the Aude. As the military situation in the Roussillon rapidly deteriorated, this “Légion des Corbières” was dispatched south, much to the chagrin of most of its soldiers, who had assumed they would never be too far away to help with the coming harvest. The Legion was stolidly reluctant to go any further than Estagel and Maury, on the southern edge of the Corbières. Throughout the period of the military crisis, the inhabitants of the Corbières exhibited a preparedness to enroll in the army, even as volunteers, equally matched by a prudent desire to defend the highlands rather than descend to the plain of the Roussillon.¹⁶

But if Occitans were ambiguous about whether their neighbors in the Roussillon were really French, they had no doubts about the Catalans south of the territorial border, seen both as part of a different nation and as an economic threat to the textile industry. The *cahier* of Montlaur insisted that local wool was as good as

14 McPhee, *Revolution and Environment in Southern France*, 47.

15 Emily Chester [McCaffrey], “Identité régionale et identité nationale. 1789 dans le Roussillon et le Bas-Languedoc,” (MA diss., University of Melbourne, 1995); Gilbert Larguier, “Nation, Citoyen, Patrie. Vocabulaire et concepts des cahiers de doléances du Languedoc et du Roussillon,” in *L’an I de la liberté en Languedoc et en Roussillon. Actes du colloque de Béziers* (8-9 Dec. 1989) (Béziers, 1990), 50-72; Georges Fournier, “Le Languedoc et la guerre avec l’Espagne (1793-1795),” in Jean Sagnes, ed., *L’Espagne et la France à l’époque de la Révolution française (1793-1807)* (Perpignan, 1993), 112.

16 McPhee, *Revolution and Environment in Southern France*, 97-101.

that of England or Spain, while that of Montolieu stressed that Languedoc wool should be used in local textile factories rather than that from Spain. That of Portel-des-Corbières claimed that “the Spanish are involved in a trade which is ruinous for France.”

While the *cahiers* of the Corbières reveal an acceptance of the French state, this after all was a region which had been part of the kingdom for over five centuries. What of their Catalan neighbors to the south who had been incorporated in the French state for only 130 years? There, too, linguistic particularity was obvious. As the abbé Chambon expressed it in 1790, “Country people do not know how to speak French ... To destroy [the Catalan language] it would be necessary to destroy the sun, the cool of the evenings, the type of food, the quality of water, in the end the whole person.”¹⁷

The evidence suggests, however, that Brunet’s “benevolent” monarchy had succeeded before 1789 in laying the ground-work for the acceptance of the idea of the French polity. Ever since 1700, for example, all public acts in the Roussillon had to be written in French. As in Languedoc, there was an ingrained assumption of belonging to a French polity. This is revealed in the economic demands of the parish *cahiers* of the Roussillon. That of St-Michel-de-Llotes demanded “That trade should be free throughout the kingdom;” that of Mont-Louis asked “That obstacles to commerce and trade in the interior of the kingdom should be removed, that every subject should have full and complete freedom to transport or have transported merchandise from one province to another.” One of the communities on the very frontier with Languedoc—Vingrau—insisted both that the two provinces should be divided by “visible and permanent” markers and that all taxes and charges should be uniform throughout the kingdom

Unlike Michel Brunet, according to whom Catalans always opposed integration into France and wished for independence, Emily McCaffrey has stressed the Catalans’ willingness to surrender taxation privileges and has concluded:

The appeal for a single national taxation system is revealing in that it demonstrates that Roussillonnais were prepared to sacrifice their privileged fiscal position as a *pays d'état* so that the national taxation system might be more simple, more just for all the king’s subjects and for the State. All the evidence suggests then that the Roussillonnais wanted to participate in the construction of a new national political life.¹⁸

The *cahiers* also reveal, like those from Languedoc, a sense of otherness towards Catalans south of the border, of belonging to a kingdom with natural borders. The community of St-Laurent-de-Cerdans—which was to welcome the Spanish invasion in 1793—requested a ban of the export of iron ore to Spain: “while our community is becoming impoverished, Spain is rising up and becoming rich.”¹⁹ The parish of l’Ecluse complained that “Straw continues to go to Spain. It’s only six months ago that the export of wheat was banned ... and that only when there was almost none left.” In the process, these communities were defining their fellow Catalans as Spaniards and therefore as “other.”

In Collioure, similarly, longstanding competition with fishing and trading ports south of the border had deeply ingrained an assumption that their Catalan-

17 Jean Sagnes, ed., *Le Pays catalan* (Pau, 1983), 571.

18 Chester [McCaffrey], “Identité régionale et identité nationale,” 44.

19 Peter McPhee, “Counter-Revolution in the Pyrenees, Spirituality, Class and Ethnicity in the Haut-Vallespir, 1793-1794,” *French History* 7 (1993): 313-43.

speaking neighbors were “Spaniards;” the people of Collioure were French Catalans. Here there is a significant contrast with Languedoc, for the “French” were also seen as different. The Colliourenes who gathered in the former church Notre Dame des Anges to hear the Jacobin constitution of 1793 translated into Catalan—and who approved it unanimously—were, whether they realized it or not, also voting to be part of the French nation, centralized, secular and uniform, but through the medium of their own language. Unlike Occitans, however, they did not see themselves as “French,” just as they referred to people from the Corbières as *gavatx*. After the horrific experience of the Spanish occupation in 1793-94 the Société Populaire appealed to Paris in these terms in August 1794:

For too long the soil of this commune has been infected by the impure presence of the slaves of the Castillian despot, but finally three months ago it was returned to our dear homeland. Many thanks be given to the genius of the French who seconded and supported the energy of our brave brothers in arms.²⁰

A similar conclusion has been reached for the Cerdagne (or Cerdanya), in the mountains to the west of the Roussillon. In Peter Sahlins’ words:

The experience of the Cerdanya under the Old Regime suggests that the adoption of national identities did not necessarily displace local ones, and that the process of nation formation was not simply the imposition of politics, institutions, or cultural values from the top down and the center outward. Rather, the evocation of national identities ... was grounded in local economic interests, and in a local sense of place.²¹

The evidence considered in this paper suggests that in Lower Languedoc and Roussillon, similarly, assumptions of “Frenchness” had become accepted before the Revolution of 1789: neighboring regions were different—as in the Catalan term of “*gavatx*” for those from the north—but it was those from south of the border—even if they spoke Catalan—who were the “other.” *Francisation* was thus a process which occurred from below—a change in self-identity—as much as it was the result of the integrating policies of the state and of the capitalist economy.

On the other side of the country, in Alsace-Lorraine, David Hopkin has found a remarkable absence of the *patrie* in popular attitudes to the army in his case-study of this eastern frontier region, incorporated into France only in 1766.²² Soldiering was everywhere evoked in popular imagery, but as an alternative passage to manhood rather than as service to a regime, or even to the nation. But, as in other frontier regions, francophone peasants here had long come to define their identity in opposition to the “other,” in this case German speakers, whatever side of the border they were from: they did not need the state or the army to teach them about national identity.

There is no shortage of evidence of pejorative attitudes and attempts to eradicate local languages and customs during the years of military crisis after 1792. The emotional power of the nation-state often led revolutionaries in Paris to claim

20 Peter McPhee, *The French Revolution in a Mediterranean Community: Collioure 1780-1815* (Melbourne, 1989), 86.

21 Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 164-65.

22 David M. Hopkin, *Soldier and Peasant in French Popular Culture, 1766-1870* (Woodbridge, Sussex, and New York, 2003).

that French alone was the “language of liberty” and that minority languages were part of the archaic ancien régime which had been overthrown. In fact, however, popular attitudes to the Revolution among the ethnic minorities who together made up a majority of the population varied from enthusiasm to outright hostility across time and place.

The hopes expressed for the Estates-General by Occitans and Catalans may have been a type of maneuvering, but their *cahiers* do suggest that their hopes for the future were indeed invested in reforms to the French polity. Certainly, the Revolution and Empire everywhere had a profound impact on collective identity, on the *francisation* of the citizens of a new society. The years after 1789 represented an acceleration of the process of *francisation*, whereby they came to perceive themselves as citizens of the French nation as well as Alsatians, Bretons, Catalans, Occitans or Basques. This occurred regardless of whether speakers of minority languages were enthusiastic or hostile towards revolutionary change.

The cultural shift which I have been investigating is of fundamental importance, since it involves the way people understand who they are. Unlike autonomist local historians, I have argued that this process did not begin in 1789, nor was it unidirectional: it came from below as well as above and was incomplete. Finally, this cultural shift should not be exaggerated, especially in the Roussillon, where there was a more durable sense of ethnic distinctiveness. For all ethnic and linguistic minorities, this “double identity” was limited to an acceptance of national institutions and the vocabulary of a new, French politics. There is little evidence that popular cultures and minority languages were thereby eroded. French remained the daily language of a minority of people and France a land of great cultural and linguistic diversity throughout the nineteenth century.