

**Militaristic national anthems and public ethics
Is it about time to revise *La Marseillaise*?**

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Introduction

National anthems & public ethics

All nation-states currently have a national anthem (Central Intelligence Agency). We hear those during public official ceremonies, at sports events, on broadcasting media, or even in schools. We may or may not know their lyrics, let alone the narrative behind them. Sometimes, we enjoy them simply for the stirring power of their tune, or because we were taught that we ought to feel and act respectful upon hearing them. National anthems are not like any other kind of songs. Undeniably, “the power of music [can] enhance the power of the nation” (Bohlman 81). Anthems provide us with “aesthetic pleasure, spiritual uplift, and a sense of shared ethnic and historical identity” (Stokes 47).

Though national anthems became common traditions only in recent centuries, there was already a theory of ethos in music in Antique Greece, which Aristotle used to discuss the power of music in education and politics (Riethmüller). Indeed, anthems are characteristically meant to be a representative and unifying symbol of a state. They serve “to affirm national, geographical, and institutional identities and the narratives that are thought to express the ethos of the collective” (Alperson and Carroll). But how are they supposed to achieve that? Besides its benefits, can an anthem cause harm, be it unintended? Are there or should there be normative prescriptions about national anthems? How can national anthems be ethically appraised? And who would have the legitimacy, authority and skill to address potential ethical issues?

French national anthem & public ethics

National anthems can be classified in different types, based on their tempo and the themes they cover. One type is the *march*, in which war is often mentioned. *La Marseillaise*, the French national anthem, is a vibrant example thereof (Colles). “To arms, citizens!” are the first

words of its famous chorus. The rest of the refrain and most of the stanzas contain words, expressions and descriptions referring to acts of brutality in martial contexts. Martial, as in war: “sustained coordinated violence between political organizations” (Levy and Thompson 5). The chorus powerfully ends with the climactic sentence “Let an impure blood... Water our furrows!” further confirming the belligerent tone.

La Marseillaise was first adopted as a national song in 1795, following a rapidly gained popularity (Mas 37). But the first critiques of its violent lines arose quite soon. Prominent French public figures such as Alphonse de Lamartine (writer, 1790–1869) and Jean Jaurès (politician, 1859–1914) found them problematic (Toulat 54–62). More than two centuries later, a number of contemporary celebrities still periodically express uneasiness with passages of the hymn interpretable as suggesting the natural higher worth of the French as opposed to their enemies' barbaric conduct, and as justifying murderous acts against foreign adversaries. From there flows the most serious accusation formulated by detractors: violence sung in *La Marseillaise* is xenophobic in nature, so chanting it comes to promoting racism (Toulat 88).

On the one hand, racism is morally wrong according to all modern philosophical schools of thought, be it from a virtue, deontological or utilitarian perspective. For Lawrence Blum, two attitudes are characteristic of racism: *inferiorization* (vilification of a group of persons based on alleged racial inferiority) and *antipathy* (hatred towards a group of persons, based on their inherited physical appearance) (Blum 8). Democratic governments condemn racism, and perpetrators of discrimination or violence committed on racial grounds can be sued and convicted by law. So, if a national anthem is found to be racist, it should be considered unethical.

On the other hand, the French national anthem is owned and shared by all French citizens. As a symbol of the country it is played or sung in numerous public circumstances on a

very regular basis: in the context of elementary school civic education, on the occasion of historic commemorations, during official ceremonies and political meetings, when opening and closing sports competitions, etc. Consequently, if *La Marseillaise* is a racist song, it is a moral issue, and that issue is relevant to public ethics.

Ongoing debate on La Marseillaise

When a French renowned personality passively or actively demonstrates his or her lack of support for the national anthem, it almost inexorably causes reactions of outrage from fellow citizens who judge such attitudes as despicable and anti-republican. Among the latest high-profile occurrences was that involving Christine Taubira, Minister of Justice, who did not sing the anthem along with choristers during a ceremony commemorating abolition of slavery, on 10 May 2014. She was vehemently criticized by right-wingers demanding her resignation (*Le Parisien*) while others approved of her attitude, like acclaimed actor Lambert Wilson, who spontaneously declared that he found the lyrics awfully xenophobic (Wilson). Patrice Gueniffrey said in turn that Wilson's interpretation was totally wrong, based on his expertise as a historian (Perrault)...

Beyond such isolated cases, there have been individual and collective initiatives to modernize the song and/or enhance the knowledge of fellow French citizens about their hymn, with the aim of stimulating a public talk about its (in)adequacy. These projects have included suggestions or actual production of alternate national anthems, with different musical arrangements or altered thematic content. The largest initiative ever attempted to have the French national anthem revised might have been conducted by an organization called "Pour une Marseillaise de la fraternité," under the leadership of Jean Toulat (1915–1994), a catholic priest, journalist, activist. A key output of that campaign was a compelling book that compiled personal

opinions of some French celebrities about the national anthem and extensively discussed the content of the song, from a pacifist perspective. After over 20 years of research and reflection on the topic, Toulat had reviewed national anthems from all continents and found that the French one was the most violent of all (Toulat 113).

The take-home message in his book was that the lyrics of *La Marseillaise* needed to be changed, to account for “the evolution of language” (Toulat 143). Many French citizens seemed to agree with the idea since the campaign organizers reportedly received “about 2000 letters of support and 174 essays for a revision of the national anthem” from the general public. However, despite the additional support of prominent public figures (including religious personalities, journalists, artists, intellectuals, and politicians), his plea failed to yield any amendment (Beydon and Charlionet). Nonetheless, the controversial debate keeps getting in and out of media scope, with sporadic emotional outbreaks and flickers of arguments, but nothing more than back-and-forth nudges from the *status quo* (Hardouin).

My thesis is that there are defensible ethical arguments to support the idea of revising the lyrics of *La Marseillaise*. In my essay, I will explore the ethics of that anthem by addressing a few major questions. Can violence expressed in *La Marseillaise* be justified? Are the lyrics xenophobic, making the anthem unethical? Are there stronger ethical arguments to support a revision of the lyrics or to maintain them as they are? I will use concepts from the *Just War Tradition* integrated with notions borrowed from Hegel’s *historicism* theory. I will conclude with potential solutions to the ethical dilemma raised, balanced with realistic considerations.

Philosophical frameworks

Just War Tradition

The moral debate around *La Marseillaise* appears to oppose two antithetical perspectives. In the conservatist view, the violent lyrics of the song are part of France's heritage and must be kept as they are. In the progressivist view, the anthem needs to evolve to reflect current people's values, including peacekeeping. The fact that extreme positions tend to have the loudest voice may partly explain why the debate keeps stalling. Consequently, this highly sensitive question calls for a sensible analytic approach.

As mentioned above, the French national anthem is a march referring to warfare circumstances and terminology. It is thus suitable to *militarism*, a view whereby war is rationalized for diverse reasons, be it economical gain, territorial expansion, or even peace. Though somewhat very utilitarian – the end justifies the means –, pure militarism is rather a concept of realism, a tool of *realpolitik*. As such, it has no moral pretense and does not concern itself with any ethical framework. In total opposition to militarism is *pacifism*, a moral view reprehending violence in all its forms (Frowe 4).

Because the violence sung about in *La Marseillaise* has militaristic features, the polarity in the moral debate about that song can be described as a clash between militarism and pacifism. Indeed, wars keep occurring despite the abundance of peacekeeping efforts, illustrating constant tensions between the two ends of the militarism-pacifism spectrum (Christopher 3). Somewhere in that spectrum are positions whereby, whether or not it is seen as an ideal, peace is not necessarily favorable, achievable or sustainable. In such circumstances, armed violence may be ethical. This way of thinking is the basis for principles and conditions under the umbrella of the *Just War Tradition* (Frowe 4).

Given that siding with either extreme position would fail to advance this contentious debate, a good start for a reasonable assessment could be to explore the possibility of some moral justification for the violence sung in the French national anthem. Being unaware of a previous analysis of *La Marseillaise* based on the Just War Tradition, I am hopeful that this essay will contribute some novel elements to the discussion on this hymn's ethical status.

Historicism

Though its current official version was adopted in 1887, *La Marseillaise* was written almost a century before, in 1792 (Assemblée Nationale). This was during the Revolution that broke out in 1789, a turning point in the history of France, that had strong and lasting political, social and cultural repercussions not only in that country but also in Europe and the rest of the world (Belloc 147). Pr. Frédéric Dufourg (born in 1964), a librarian with a doctorate in literature, is among the authors who critically appraised the meaning of these lyrics in their historical context (Dufourg 43–57). He provided interesting anecdotes and reflections though, unfortunately, without any bibliographical reference to support his many interesting statements. Julien Tiersot (1857–1936), an ethnomusicologist passionate about *La Marseillaise*, lived closer to the days of the French Revolution. He published a detailed historical account of the song's creation, based on extensive research of supportive evidence (Tiersot 48).

Such efforts for fact-informed contextual analyses can be related to historicism, a theory proposed by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the illustrious German philosopher (1770–1831). Interestingly, not only did Hegel live through the troubled period of the French Revolution, he was reportedly inspired by it in developing that theory (Curtius 4), he who aimed to “transform current events into theories” (Ritter)! In Hegel's view, one cannot fully understand (*verstand*) any individual, phenomenon, institution, or tradition outside of that object's society, and no

society can be fully understood outside of its historical context. Everything, everyone is a product of one's time. In that spirit, it is necessary to comprehend the circumstances in which *La Marseillaise* came to be, in order to have any decent discussion about its ethics.

That historical context is complex to analyze or even summarize because of the multiplicity of important and convoluted events that occurred. Yet, it is necessary to be aware of some key facts, as relevant to the ethics questions asked above about *La Marseillaise*. Armed (!) with that knowledge, the reader will better understand in what circumstances this song was born, how it became and remained the national anthem, how its lyrics can or should be interpreted, and whether or not it is ethical to use it as a national anthem today.

Reference texts in French

The current official version of *La Marseillaise* will be central to the discussion. Though I found evidence of an English translation commissioned by the Office of the President (Crozet), that text is not retrievable on its website (www.elysee.fr), suggesting the absence of an English version currently endorsed by the French Government. Other publicly available versions exist, but all have made assumptions or taken liberties in writing style that dilute or blur the spirit of the original text (e.g. version by Charles Hope Kerr, 1860–1944; version by Jennifer Wise in a 2012 article referenced in this essay).

I am hereby presenting my own translation, with no pretense for perfection, but confident in my ability to render a faithful transcription, thanks to my cross-cultural upbringing and my command of both metropolitan French and North American English languages. In Appendix is the French official version of *La Marseillaise* – as made available by the French Government – (Assemblée Nationale). Stanzas and lines are numbered for convenient referencing throughout this essay and the English version is aligned to the French one for easy cross language

comparisons. Quoted passages from other French references also result from my personal translation.

La Marseillaise in the 18th century

French Revolution and its wars

In 1789 France is a monarchy, as it has been since its initial unification in the 5th century A.D. The country is ruled by King Louis XVI (1754–1793) from the capital, Paris, while the members of the nobility enjoy numerous privileges owed to their social rank and the clergy of the Catholic Church benefits from a considerable political influence – plus related economical yields – through religious control. Meanwhile, the vast majority of the King's subjects, lower class commoners, work hard to pay heavy taxes that allow royals to maintain their extravagant life style. But the country finances are at their lowest due to excessive expenses and rampant mismanagement; the King is considering collecting more taxes but needs the collaboration of the people's representatives (Belloc 83–98). Tensions rise as people are increasingly hungry (harvests have been meager in recent years), resentment grows against the upper class and the royals, progressive philosophical ideas of the *Enlightenment* are gaining popularity, and economically successful commoners want more political power.

The generalized discontentment shapes into a Revolution, which is negatively perceived by Louis XVI, of course, but also by his allies outside of France, namely surrounding European kingdoms and Pope Pius VI who fear ripple effects on their own authority and institutions. In June 1791, the King of France, his Austrian wife Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna von Habsburg-Lothringen (better known as Marie-Antoinette, 1755–1793), their children and suite try to flee France *incognito* to join the troops of the Marquis de Bouillé, remained faithful to the monarchy,

at the border with Luxembourg. Other relatives and exiled nobles are across the border, and the King is counting on their help to repress the Revolution and reinstitute absolute monarchy (Tiersot 50–51). But the royals are soon intercepted, in the town of Varennes, and forcefully brought back to Paris. This flight attempt is considered as a serious breach of trust by the revolutionists and the people at large (Belloc 108–109).

Republicans become more pressing in their demands for reforms while the King is under a closer watch. Still, in September 1791, he reluctantly approves the first Constitution, and all seems to be fine for the revolutionary movement. Around March 1792, however, using the little influence he has left, Louis XVI manipulates governmental processes so as to trigger a war with Austria (Mas 28), one of the main European powers at the time, and then ruled by Emperor Leopold II, the French King's brother-in-law. While some revolutionists are dreaming of using the war to spread their republican ideas throughout Europe, the King secretly hopes that the French revolutionists' army will lose, and that Austrian forces will re-instate him into full power.

It is during this tense phase of the French Revolution that Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle (1760–1836), then a young captain in the French army, gets posted in Strasbourg as an engineer, in the summer of 1791 (Tiersot 56). Strasbourg is located in the plain of the Rhine River, at the northeastern border. The local battalion is called “Les enfants de la patrie” (Tiersot 83) and is under the command of Marshal Luckner. The city is vibrant with musical culture and Rouget de Lisle is a musician amateur (Mas 27). Owing to his artistic talents, he gets noticed by the Mayor, Baron Philippe-Frederic de Dietrich, favorable to the Revolution though of aristocratic lineage, and himself a music lover, who regularly entertains acquaintances in parties held in his house.

On 20 April 1792, the budding French constitutional monarchy, feeling the mounting menace of surrounding European forces, and under the pressure of Louis XVI, declares the war

to Francis II, son and successor of recently deceased Emperor Leopold II (Johnston 135). On the 25th, the news reaches Strasbourg, causing a great excitement in the city (Tiersot 77).

Combatants cheer each other up, getting ready to leave for combat. The Mayor holds a goodbye party during which the conversation errs from the newly declared war to patriotic music, with remarks that none of the Revolution-related folk songs circulated so far are of decent quality. Soon enough, the Mayor addresses Rouget de Lisle, in attendance, and whose talents have been publicly acclaimed before in the city, asking him to “find a nice song for this soldier-people who jumps out of all corners at the call of the endangered fatherland...” his guests joining him with insistence in this request (Tiersot 85).

It is reportedly over the following night that Rouget de Lisle composes the lyrics and melody of what he names “Chant de guerre de l’Armée du Rhin dédié au Maréchal Luckner” (Tiersot 77). In the morning of April 26, he rushes to the Mayor’s home to show him his work. The latter loves it and the pair produces the new song in the city in the following days, hitting an instant success with military and civilians alike. In May 1792, the text and music are printed for the first time, which will allow nationwide distribution (Tiersot 103). The last stanza is added a few months later, though its authorship will be questioned (Leconte 260).

From Paris, following the declaration of war, the government solicit the enrolment of volunteers from other regions who would come and defend the capital from an expected invasion by foreign forces. Many enthusiastic youth sign up. Among them are volunteers from the southeastern city of Marseille, who have been introduced to the *War Song of the Army of the Rhine* by fellow-volunteers from Montpellier, on June 21. They adopt it as a marching anthem, singing it out loud and with much theatrical emphasis, thrilling fellow citizens all along the long

trip up north to Paris, and upon entering the capital on 30 July 1792. Their passion is contagious and the Parisians nickname “their” song *La Marseillaise* (Tiersot 107–111).

Such were the circumstances of the birth of the French national anthem. They will serve as references for the next sections, which constitute an ethics analysis of the anthem lyrics, most specifically the violent phrases, through the lens of the Just War Tradition.

Jus ad bellum

Jus ad bellum “concerns the conditions in which the use of force is permissible and is primarily a political responsibility.” (Christopher 2) These conditions are like rules that “determine whether or not one has a just cause for war” (Frowe 5). Helen Frowe specified seven such prerequisites: just cause; proportionality; reasonable chance of success; legitimate authority; right intention; last resort; and public declaration of war (50).

“To arms, citizens! Form your battalions” (chorus, lines 1–2) was a call to the people of France, threatened by a menace of invasion. Indeed, as Rouget de Lisle wrote these words, in April 1792, foreign armies were at France's borders, together with French exiled antirevolutionist nobles determined to use force to get their privileges back. “Do you hear, in the countryside...? They're coming right into your arms” (stanza I, lines 5–7) describe the (expected) progression of the enemy into the land. War was then necessary as self-defense, a valid justification for war (Frowe 9). Despite the principle of sovereignty enforced by the *Treaty of Westphalia* as of 1648 (Levy and Thompson 25), surrounding European nations feared that revolutionists might propagate their influence into their own kingdoms, hence threatening their interests. Besides, the Queen of France, as a member of the Habsburg's dynasty, was closely related to the ruler of Austria: motivated biases might have played a role in the individual decision-making of the latter

(Levy and Thompson 141). So, there was definitely an imminent threat (Frowe 36) to the freedom of the people of France. The sixth stanza of the anthem – that sings “Liberty! Cherished Liberty, Fight along with thy defenders!” (lines 3–4) – stresses that there was a just cause for going to war: the fight of the French for their independence.

Since “ferocious soldiers...slit throats of [French] sons [and] women” (stanza I, lines 6 & 8), and plan on striking down [French] “proud warriors” (stanza III, line 4), it might have felt appropriate to respond by gathering armed battalions (chorus, lines 1–2). And shedding the blood of the attackers, as per one (progressivist) interpretation of chorus lines 4–5 (Wilson), seems to agree with the proportionality principle. However, I found no historical evidence of such horrific acts by antirevolutionists that would have been committed in the period up to the anthem’s creation. These phrases might have resulted from a perception of potential harm, considering historical unfair treatments inflicted to lower class subjects under the monarchy. Plus, it is a fact that in August 1791, Austrians and their Prussian allies issued the *Declaration of Pillnitz* whereby they stated in quite authoritative words that they would use military force in order to protect the French King, as necessary (Belloc 154). Yet, it was not until July 1792 that the *Brunswick Manifesto* was sent by the Austrian–Prussian coalition to the French revolutionists. This warning may support the idea that the fear of extreme violence was no misperception (Levy and Thompson 134–136):

...inhabitants...who may dare to defend themselves against [our troops]...shall be punished immediately according to the most stringent laws of war, and their houses shall be burned or destroyed... if the least violence be offered to their Majesties...[we] will inflict an ever memorable vengeance by delivering over the city of Paris to military

execution and complete destruction, and the rebels guilty of the said outrages to the punishment that they merit. (Robinson 457)

In spite of the perceived threat, “glory” (stanza I, line 2) is proclaimed even before any plan of attack is presented in the song! Likely, Rouget de Lisle meant to assure his companions that there was a reasonable chance of success. “Under our flags may victory hurry...” (stanza VI, lines 5–6); “Our vile enemies will fall” (stanza VII, line 14). Revolutionist military and volunteer combatants were animated by idealistic principles and by the certitude that they were fighting a just war. “Let’s be united! All’s possible” (stanza VII, line 13), they chanted. Yet, historical accounts suggest that they did not realize what they were getting into. The exile of thousands of regular soldiers greatly disorganized the national army (Belloc 113); yet only a minority of revolutionary leaders had internal problems as a priority and dared express their opposition to the war campaign against Austria (Johnston 132, 142). Despite some early victories like at the battle of Valmy (20 September 1792), and the surprising capacity of the revolutionists to rally volunteers, this initial war triggered international conflicts that pulled in other European powers against France (Belloc 112) as well as a civil war (Belloc 239).

French revolutionists strongly believed that absolute monarchy had been wronging them, with all sorts of abuses of power: “Against us of tyranny, The bloody banner is raised!” (stanza I, lines 3–4). Famine was real but the people were also hungry for justice. The Revolution was to abolish injustices, and put power in the hands of the people. French and other European absolute monarchies, together with their supporters, represented that tyranny and were then viewed as illegitimate authorities by Parisians and a critical mass of people throughout France. Conversely, the republican ideal was all about “Fatherland” (stanza I, line 1; stanza VI, line 1; stanza VII, line

9), “Liberty” (stanza VI, line 3), and “Honor” (stanza VII, line 8). So were the values advocated for by the revolutionist government, which contributed to make it a **legitimate authority**.

La Marseillaise gives no clear indication that the war against Austria was a **last resort**. However, some historical records suggest that the revolutionists made considerable efforts to negotiate a peaceful transition from absolute monarchy to a society with more distributive justice. Their initial goal, in 1789, was to establish a constitutional monarchy. They maintained Louis XVI as the King and granted him a voice in their decision-making processes. Even after catching him in his attempt to flee the country (June 1791), they still allowed him to contribute to political discussions and resolutions. Moreover, the revolutionists knew that foreign armies and exiled antirevolutionists were posted at their borders; they were also aware of the alliance formed between Austria and Prussia in support of Louis XVI when the *Declaration of Pillnitz* was circulated (July 1791). Notwithstanding the fragile trust he was still benefitting from, the King of France continued to play a double game when he encouraged the revolutionists to go to war against Austria. Still, it is only after Austria and Prussia solicited the involvement of other European allies (12 April 1792) that the revolutionist government made an official response to all these threats (Charney 81). As “magnanimous warriors” (stanza V, line 1), they had the decency of formulating a public declaration of war to put an explicit label on that situation of relentless tension, hence giving a last opportunity for their opponents to give up, and officially warning them of their readiness to fight (Frowe 63).

Finally, “It is us whom one dares plan to return to the ancient slavery!” (stanza II, lines 7–8) symbolized the horrible motives of the foe, and suggests the right intention behind the lyrical call to war. “That war that revolutionary France declare[d] to monarchical Europe [was] not about interests or dynasties, like these from the 17th and 18th centuries, but it [was] a war

about races, principles and independence, a national war as none other.” (Tiersot 78) It was not just about defending France autonomy, it was about a revolution aiming to abolish privileges based on descent and social rank, and to establish instead equality of rights for all citizens.

Jus in bello

French revolutionists would have been justified in preemptively striking their adversaries, since 1) the opponents' intent to harm had been clearly articulated; 2) opponents had armies of trained soldiers posted at the borders and ready to attack, posing an imminent threat; and 3) it appeared that it was riskier to do nothing than to fight (Walzer 81). But it is their opponents who launched the hostilities by invading France in August 1792 (Belloc 115), which is further justification for revolutionists since this constituted a case of self-defense. Nevertheless, according to *La Marseillaise*, the “Children of Fatherland” ought to remain just in the way they fight in war, as per *jus in bello* rules (Frowe 95). The French Revolution occurred way before the establishment of agreements on warfare such as *The Hague Convention* (1899, 1907) or the *Geneva conventions* (1949, 1977). Nevertheless, *La Marseillaise* describes who qualifies as a combatant and gives important indications regarding conduct in war, as exposed below.

On the just side, combatants are “heroes” (stanza IV, line 6), who are sublimely proud (stanza III, line 4; stanza VII, line 7), “magnanimous” (stanza V, line 1), and eager to die for their cause (stanza VII, line 5–8), as freedom fighters (stanza VI, lines 3–4). Some (conservatists) have interpreted the “impure blood” that is to be shed (chorus, lines 4–5) as blood sacrificed by lower class citizens willing to die for the nation – “impure” blood being opposed to the “pure” blood of nobles – (Perrault). In the same time, the terms “Children” (stanza I, line 1; stanza VII, line 9) and “young” (stanza IV, line 6) suggest a state of vulnerability, of innocence, of purity of the just combatants (Wise). Besides, all “citizens” potentially qualify as combatants

and all seem to be called to fight: “Onward, children of Fatherland!” (stanza I, line 1); “To arms, citizens” (chorus, line 1); “All is a soldier to combat you” (stanza IV, line 5). This was indeed the case in 1792 France, as many wholehearted volunteers enrolled to fight the invaders, and non-militarized citizens massively and actively participated in decisive events of the Revolution.

On the unjust side, combatants are depicted as ferocious (stanza I, line 6) but not in a glorified way: they are “vile” (stanza VII, line 14) “perfidious” (stanza IV, line 1) mercenaries (stanza III, line 3) behaving like “hordes of slaves” (stanza II, line 1). Their speech is odd: the verb “mugir” (stanza I, line 6) refers to the sound emitted by oxen (!), though a more general meaning expresses the production of “a prolonged thud” (larousse.fr). More concerning, unjust combatants are war criminals: they attack nonlegitimate targets (boys and women, presumably not fit to be citizen-soldiers due to age or gender?) and cut their throats! Notwithstanding, opponents are not necessarily to blame: among them are “sorry victims” who fight the justs with regret (stanza V, lines 3–4), maybe due to ignorance of the stakes of the war (Frowe 130–131).

Although they are seeking revenge (stanza VI, line 2), just combatants must take care of distinguishing such unfortunate opponents (moral equals) from morally inferior combatants wrongly convinced that they are fighting the good fight (Frowe 124–126). Consequently, just combatants must “bear or hold back [their] blows” (stanza V, line 2), as militarily necessary (Frowe 106), with a concern for proportionality (Frowe 107–112), depending on whom they face. Their real and ultimate target is “tyranny” (stanza I, line 3) an immaterial, nonpersonal target (Frowe 105), embodied in “bloodthirsty despots” (stanza V, line 5) assimilated to “traitors” (stanza IV, line 1) and merciless tigers (stanza V, line 7).

From a utilitarian point of view, *La Marseillaise* definitely served its original purpose, and way beyond what its initiator (de Dietrich) and its author (Rouget de Lisle) could have

imagined. That song and its music maximized faith, pride, and motivation in all supporters of the Revolution throughout the country, whether military or civilian. Even more impressive, archived testimonies attest that military commanders used the song in battle to effectively boost the confidence and heartiness of combatants, showing that *La Marseillaise* contributed to several military successes against anti-revolutionary forces (Leconte 19–21).

Jus post bello

La Marseillaise was born as a song of the 1789 Revolution and was officially recognized among “the civic airs and songs that contributed to [its] success” (National Convention, Bulletin of bills, Article II, 14 July 1795), owing to its immediate, widespread and sustained popularity as well as its unifying effect on the French nation. Though a war song, it finishes on a note of hope. The wish formulated is that French people will be united by their love for Honor and Fatherland, hence overcoming the enemy. The final words suggest that, then, they will not have to chant that war hymn any more (stanza VII, lines 16–17) for they will enjoy better times.

As far as justice after war (*jus post bello*) is concerned (Frowe 205), stable democracy was not established right away, although constitutional monarchy was finally abolished and the First Republic proclaimed as early as 21 September 1792. The 1789 French Revolution was a menace for Europe's stability and met the fierce resistance of surrounding established monarchies, occasioning a series of wars involving traditional rivals in the continent. This in turn aggravated an internal political crisis fed by tensions and conflicts among revolutionary leaders. The French government instituted a regime of *Terror* (1793–1794) in an attempt to keep things under control, occasioning thousands of arbitrary arrests (Leconte 209) and executions targeting any citizen whose support for the revolutionary cause was not convincing enough (Belloc 137).

This use of brutality to impose order led to abuses of power and set the stage for decades of political instability through which *La Marseillaise* was either acclaimed or forbidden (Dufourg 33–34), oscillating “between being a song of Republican subversion or establishment, depending on what regime held power” (McKinley). But interestingly, the hymn maintained its rallying power, especially among lower class populace in times of repression. Nonetheless, it took two other revolutions, in 1848 and 1870, to get France back on the track towards democracy, and the inspiring anthem played a role in both (Leconte 275–276).

Thus, political and social changes yielded by the Revolution did, eventually, lead to the stable republican regime that we know today (Frowe 211–212). Notably, the French Revolution saw the publication of a *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (August 1789), that would make France a champion in the realm of human rights in the eyes of established or aspiring democracies, and contribute to putting France in an influential position in the United Nations Organization. This further justifies the violence sung in *La Marseillaise*: it helped establish a better, more equitable France and even a more equitable world!

Ethical arguments for conservatism

Considering the analysis above, it appears that the lyrics of *La Marseillaise* reflected all key principles of the Just War Tradition, when they were written in 1792. They describe convincing motives to go to war, mention behavioral rules governing interactions with adversaries and combat itself, and conclude on the hope to establish a regime that would bestow more fairness and enduring peace. Thus, their militaristic tone can be morally justified.

Besides, *La Marseillaise* promotes commendable values and virtues that can be taught to both military and civilians, as per France’s motto (derived from Article 1 of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of 1789): *liberty, equality, fraternity*. Revolutionists were

freedom fighters; the spirit of their struggle was transmitted through generations until a stable republic was established, showing that perseverance warrants success for the just. Moreover, the anthem calls upon *all* citizens, highlighting egalitarianism among French citizens. And last but not least, the song suggests that adversaries are actually kinfolk, acknowledging brotherhood among all French and with the non-French.

The political transition from autocratic regimes to a democratic republic required drastic measures, and despite efforts of moderation by revolutionist leaders, violence became unavoidable. As a fervent supporter of the French Revolution, Hegel was confronted with the philosophical implications of the Terror, one of its most strikingly violent components. While he acknowledged its destructive character, he seemed to explain it as a necessary storm yielded by “the horrible situation of the society, incredible misery ... and injustices, [and] absence of rights for individuals ...” (Ritter 342-343). And although he deemed it too extreme to be durable, he conceded that both “*Virtue* and *Terror* [were] the order of the day (Hegel 470). The violence depicted in *La Marseillaise* is part of France’s heritage and contributed to modern values: it was necessary to lead to happier circumstances, to more liberty. For “The History of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom” (Hegel 33). This supports the argument that changing the lyrics of the hymn would mean denying History. Martial contributions to peaceful democracy should then be a cause for pride not shame.

Indeed, the national anthem efficiently serves as a catalyst of national pride and patriotism, to be differentiated from racism. As a proof, it is Jessye Norman, the notorious American Black opera vocalist, who was chosen to sing *La Marseillaise* in 1989, during one of the most poignant moments of the celebrations of the bicentenary anniversary of the Revolution, draped in a dress representing the French flag and designed by none other than Azzedine Alaïa, a

native of Tunisia! Besides, it is well known that the melody of *La Marseillaise* was used beyond the French borders: in Latin America during wars of independence (late 18th–early 19th centuries), in Russia during the 1917 Revolution, and in Beijing during the 1989 demonstrations, to name only these (Toulat 91)! Countless non-French freedom fighters used it to support their fight against their own tyrants. Rather than self-identifying as “enemies,” because not French, they perceived the message of liberty carried by the anthem, that by being united oppressed masses can overrule even well-established autocrats, the actual enemies the song denounces.

Last but not least, the French are fond of their national anthem. A 2005 scientific survey, using a representative national sample of 1002 people, suggested that 72% of French feel attached to their anthem (CSA Opinion–Institutionnel). Statistics showing support of a majority are definitely an indicator of social acceptance. *La Marseillaise* was only one among many revolutionary songs circulated in the late 18th century. But none other achieved and maintained the widespread popularity that *La Marseillaise* did (McKinley 5). This intransience clearly demonstrates the special place that this song has had in the heart of French citizens, how much they integrated it as part of their identity. Despite its old age, it seems like its “Spirit is immortal, with it there is no past, no future, but an essential now” (Hegel 96). Thus, this hymn is not only a unifying symbol but also a symbol of national cultural stability and continuity, in a rapidly changing world, in an era where globalization tends to swallow national uniqueness.

Still, one might object that acceptance is not acceptability, that what is acceptable for a war song may not be acceptable for a national anthem, and that the fact that a war song might have been acceptable as a national anthem two centuries ago does not make it acceptable today.

La Marseillaise in the 21st century

Following its splendid debuts in 1792, *La Marseillaise* saw its official status degraded by successive political leaders who deemed it too subversive for their ruling style. It was replaced or forbidden outright during Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte's reign (1799-1814), the *Restauration* of royalist regimes (1814-1848), the Second Republic (1848-1852), and Napoleon III's Second Empire (1852-1870). However, the song remained popular among the masses throughout the 19th century, and was finally re-instituted as the national anthem after the establishment of the Third Republic, in 1870. *La Marseillaise* has been enshrined in the French Constitution as a national symbol since 1948, following another period of proscription while France was occupied by Nazi Germany. At the turn of the third millennium, teaching the anthem and its history in elementary schools became mandatory (Article 26 of Bill 2005-380, 23 April 2005).

As stressed above, one of the conservatists' arguments is that *La Marseillaise* remains a highly appreciated song among French citizens. But, while widespread appreciation may be necessary to determine morality, it is not a sufficient condition therefor. Indeed, people may love things that cause harm to themselves or to others. Moreover, appreciation may be irrational, as people may love things that they do not quite understand. And love of a potentially dangerous object without adequate understanding thereof may perpetuate harm...

Law, ethics and moral confusion

Even though it was demonstrated above that adversaries were not strictly defined based on their citizenship in *La Marseillaise*, saying that anyone has an *impure* blood suggests that she or he is morally inferior or is altogether unworthy of moral consideration. This denial of natural dignity opens the door to all and any kinds of wrongdoings made acceptable by that justified irrelevance of moral consideration. Racism has historically been intellectualized by such logic

and, as noted earlier, racism is morally wrong. As a democracy, France disapproves of racism, hence its antidiscrimination laws. Regrettably, although deontology (rules) can promote desirable behaviors and consequentialist considerations (sanctions) can deter undesirable ones, passing laws rarely solves everything. Indeed, behaviors may be motivated by other factors, including hedonic ones, as suggested in the introduction (Stokes 47).

According to Martha Nussbaum, national anthems teach patriotism, “a strong emotion taking the nation as its object,” “a form of love.” About *La Marseillaise*, she said that this love message for the nation is conveyed by the expressions “Children of Fatherland” and “cherished liberty” (Nussbaum). The love of French for their anthem may then be a social convention resulting from a constructivist process (Graham 11). Contrary to David Hume’s assertions, morality is not about feelings: just because a majority *is* emotionally attached to the anthem does not imply that the anthem *ought* to be deemed ethical. Still, there is some coherence between having a majority of citizens claiming support for *La Marseillaise* (matter of fact), that song being backed up by national laws (moral statement), and related liabilities (ethical prescription).

Yet, there seems to be some incoherence between legal obligations. On the one hand, the national anthem is legally protected and prescribed for civic education. Outrage to the hymn can cost €7,500 and 6 months in prison (Article 113 of Bill 2003-239 for homeland security; Article 433-5-1 of the Penal Code, 18 March 2003). But on the other hand, an array of French laws condemn discourses motivated by, suggesting or calling for violence based on xenophobic discrimination. Penalties may go from a €1,500 fine for non-public calls to discriminatory hatred or violence (Article R.625-7 of Penal Code) to a €45,000 fine and 1 year in prison for public calls to racial discrimination, hatred or violence (Article 24 of Bill of 29 July 1881), and up to a

€100,000 fine and 7 years in prison for terrorist acts or public praise thereof (Article 5 of Bill 2014-1353).

The lyrics of *La Marseillaise* are undeniably violent and bluntly express a denigration of and antipathy towards foreigners. So, singing them in public should be deemed unlawful, hence unethical from a deontological perspective. If law-makers, reputed for their rationality and entrusted with the management of justice, can actively produce conflicts of duties by making discrimination both *prima facie* right and wrong, it is not surprising that the general population may have divergent perceptions of the national anthem's lyrics.

Furthermore, the recent nature of these laws, as contrasted with the old age of the song, suggests that historic events can influence legislative processes. In fact, Bill 2003-239 was passed just a few months after *La Marseillaise* was loudly booed during the opening ceremony of a friendly soccer game opposing France to Algeria (Paris, 6 October 2001). Projectiles were thrown towards the officials in attendance, hitting two ministers and a security officer. Later on, dozens of spectators invaded the soccer field, causing a riot. This incident yielded loads of comments in the press and in the political arena, and some interpreted that expression of disrespect toward a national symbol as related to a feeling of social exclusion of supporters from cultural minority groups (Dupuis, Mandonnet et Dekeirel). This is a plausible explanation. However, national anthems other than *La Marseillaise* have been booed during soccer games, so this behavior might be more about attacking what these hymns represent (e.g. the government) than about reacting to discriminatory lyrics. In any case, that new law did not prevent similar incidents from occurring with the French anthem (Le Monde.fr).

Notwithstanding, regulatory action still seems to come as a natural solution to outrages to *La Marseillaise*. Some decision-makers believe that regulations can reinforce respect of national

symbols and strengthen civism. Such a discussion occurred again recently right after the lethal attack that targeted cartoonists from *Charlie Hebdo* magazine (Paris, 7 January 2015) who had published representations of Prophet Muhammad over the years, an act judged blasphemous by the killers (Soyez). A scientific survey conducted shortly after the tragedy suggested that a majority of French remained supportive of the national anthem, with 68% of respondents favorable to having *La Marseillaise* sung regularly in schools (Ifop, on behalf of Valeurs Actuelles). But other elected officials as well as simple citizens rose to the occasion to publicly renew the plea for a revision of the lyrics of the anthem (Bayou) (Grammont) (Lombardo).

Such acts of violence, temporally linked to public debates about *La Marseillaise* echo certain of Nussbaum's reflections. She wrote that patriotic love may have a dark side, as it defines "good" nationals (*we*) in opposition to "outsiders and subversives" (*they*). Deborah Bradley concurred by stating that the line can be blurry "between solidarity, nationalism, and fascistic [i.e. racist] forms of community within the potentially significant musical moments" (Bradley). Although that last statement pertained to the United States of America's anthem (*The Star Spangled Banner*), it is applicable to *La Marseillaise* as well.

Interestingly, in the examples above, associating contemporary social violence and *La Marseillaise*, brutality doers did not explicitly say that their actions had anything to do with the anthem's lyrics. Yet, some observers could see a potential link, a possible causal relationship whereby violent lyrics might trigger violent behaviors. This would be hard to prove *beyond all reasonable doubt*, as per the legal expression. Yet, if a song has the potential of causing harm because of its lyrics, it is unethical from a consequentialist perspective.

Perceived racism

Let us pause here for a short thought experiment. First, let us picture an angel-faced child serenely singing “To arms, citizens!” in front of a crowd of diverse cultural heritage. Second, let us mentally relive the opening of an international soccer game, with French players solemnly facing the opposing team, while frenzied supporters shout at the top of their voice “Let an impure blood...Water our furrows!” Third, let us consider the French President welcoming a foreign political leader with a choir chanting “What! Some foreign cohorts Would make the law in our homes!” before reaffirming peaceful and solidary bonds.

Considering the situations above, let us now ponder on the lyrics of *La Marseillaise*, as 21st century people, ignorant of the history-informed ethics review exposed above. In that state of mind, how would we feel as a non-French in the audience listening to these words and contrasting them with the innocence of the child chanting them? How would we feel as the second-generation immigrant selected in the national soccer team, expected to honor the anthem, or as a member or a supporter of the foreign team come for a friendly game? How would we feel as the foreign official obliged to respect the French protocol and to stand still while the anthem’s lyrics fill the air? And how would we position ourselves in the “us versus them” dichotomy implied in the song? Would we feel empowered to self-classify or would we feel as if this was not even up to us? And how would we feel as a singer? Would we think about how our words might be taken? It is, at best, a feeling of awkwardness that would transpire rather than a message on “*liberté, égalité, fraternité.*” The three stories above are not fiction, and illustrate the discomfort the French anthem can generate.

Ms. Séverine Dupelloux was 10 years-old when she gave an *a cappella* interpretation of *La Marseillaise*, during the opening ceremony of the 1992 Winter Olympic Games held in Albertville, France. An article from *The New York Times* reported that “the contrast between the

innocence of her unaccompanied voice and the ferocity of the words—subtitled for the benefit of foreign television viewers—seemed too much.” (Riding). The reaction of shock that ensued gave some momentum to Toulat’s concomitant campaign for a revision of the anthem’s lyrics.

Soccer being arguably the most popular sport in France, *Les Bleus*, the national team’s players, are under close public scrutiny, including regarding their behavior towards *La Marseillaise*, which is played in high level competitions. Players, particularly those in attacking (!) positions, regularly come under the fire of conservatives if caught on camera with their lips tight while the music is playing. Yet, some players have chosen not to sing it. Karim Benzema, recently reacting to such criticism, cited famous predecessors, including legendary Zinedine Zidane and Michel Platini who, like him, firmly refused to sing the hymn (Schiavi).

In 2009, Germany accepted, for the first time, the invitation of France to participate in the commemorative ceremonies for World War I armistice, in Paris. Nicolas Sarkozy (French President, 2007-2012) and Angela Merkel (German Chancellor since 2005) found themselves at the *Arc de Triomphe* monument—which bears François Rude’s sculpture representing the *Departure of the volunteers of 1792*—. Both *La Marseillaise* and the *Deutschlandlied* (German national anthem) were played by the French Military Choir. Valéry Giscard-d’Estaing (French President, 1974-1981), commenting that scene, said that the lyrics of *La Marseillaise* were “ridiculous” (L’Express), likely referring to its belligerent tone and the fact that France and Germany had been traditional military rivals for centuries. Thus, Sarkozy and Merkel were surrounded with obsolete symbols contrasting with the cordial rapport being celebrated.

Since the 18th century, France has significantly changed. Political transitions, colonial expansion, decolonization, mass migrations, novel international agreements, and globalization have deeply transformed the demographics and cultural dynamics in that country. The population

now comprises citizens and residents from diverse genealogies and customs, including people from current and former colonies, from traditionally rival nations, or with dissenting views on the French heritage. In spite of all the positive aspects of these changes, cultural tensions and clashes do occur in contemporary France (Huntington), which can easily yield divergent interpretations of the exact same objet by fellow residents using different cultural lenses.

In public discourses, “culture,” despite its very broad definition, is often used in place of “race,” making race a cause or the cause of some cultural clashes. As many classification systems, human race has never had a reasonably objective definition: designed and used by scientific “experts,” it has been disputed by many other ... “experts.” When the term is used (out of habit, for practical purposes or for lack of a better word), it is always politically tainted because of the countless discriminatory attitudes and behaviors justified on the basis of some race hierarchy, throughout history (e.g. restriction of civil rights, socioeconomic exclusion, criminal profiling, slavery, genocides). Nowadays, most leaders of the world acknowledge historical racial discrimination as being wrong and use institutional mechanisms to identify, condemn and punish offenders. This demonstrates historical moral progress but also reminds us that racism is still a reality that can negatively affect societies and requires constant vigilance.

In effect, “discourses of race, ethnicity, nationalism ... wield subtle influence on an individual’s self-understanding,” that is, on an individual’s *self-identity* (Bradley). Thus, one may infer that public discourses on such issues can generate emotions that will influence one’s perception of self. In turn, one’s self-perception influences the construction of one’s reality, which will influence one’s attitude and behaviors. In the era of political correctness, it should be expected and understandable that contentious lyrics such as those in *La Marseillaise* might be deemed offensive by members of cultural minorities or by foreigners. This may be particularly

true in specific situations such as those in the thought experiment above. This might also have played a role in public order disturbances cited earlier, for which legal action was considered, in times where France is experiencing persisting social tensions involving cultural minorities.

There is clearly much subjectivity in this, as well as a complex mix of psychological, social, political and cultural factors. But the idea that the national anthem might promote racism is terribly disturbing, given the cultural diversity of modern France and the possibility that it may generate psychological, social or even physical harm. A painful but unavoidably crucial question needs to be posed: is *La Marseillaise* really a racist anthem?

Beyond perceptions ... realities

In light of my history-informed philosophical assessment, I will affirm that the French national anthem was not motivated by, suggesting or calling for racism, upon its creation. To begin with, the original title translates as *War song of the Army of the Rhine dedicated to Marshal Luckner*. Rouget de Lisle named it as a tribute to the top military who was in command where and when he wrote it. Nikolaus, Count of Luckner (1722-1794) happened to be German though then serving on the French side, and supportive of the revolutionist government despite being a noble. His allegiance owed him to be granted the rank of Marshal of France in 1791. These marks of respect show that he was esteemed as a valuable officer in that critical time, not despised as a foreigner – even though he had fought against France previously in his career –.

It is true though that “conjured kings” (stanza II, line 2), “foreign cohorts” (stanza III, line 1) and “mercenary phalanxes” (stanza III, line 3) clearly refer to non-French combatants and political rulers. But the antipathy they inspired was essentially due to their affiliation with Marquis de Bouillé (stanza V, line 6), a French anti-revolutionary noble involved in Louis XVI’s

attempted escape. Moreover, the lyrics suggest family ties between just and unjust combatants. Speaking of Bouillé's accomplices, Rouget de Lisle wrote that they ripped apart "their mother's breast" (stanza V, line 8), hinting that what the just combatants were defending (Fatherland, Liberty...) happened to be the foe's mother. He also described the tyrants' plans as "parricidal," further implying that conflicting parties had a common relative, at least figuratively.

Though in a twisted way, this suggestion of kinship uniting opposed factions would speak to the *fraternity* evoked in the motto of France. In any case, it further attests that the sociopolitical situation was complex in 1792 France: there were tensions within the country between royalists and revolutionists, but also acts of intimidation from foreigners who viewed the Revolution as a terrorist threat that needed to be destroyed. Thus, not only were there enemies both inside and outside, but these enemies were both French and non-French!

Yet, Rouget de Lisle portrayed the unjust side in most disdainful terms: "horde of slaves," "mercenaries," "merciless tigers," "traitors," "conjured kings," bloodthirsty and vile despots, "tyrants," "perfidious," "the opprobrium of all parties ...". The most appalling lines until this day are arguably "Let an impure blood...Water our furrows!" For better or for worse, they happen to make up the musical climax of the song. They are repeated as part of the chorus, in the rare situations where the full song is presented, or stand out as the final words when the short version of the anthem is sung. So, whose blood is impure? And what makes it impure?

Progressives will affirm that the "impure blood" is that of foreign foes, in support of their argument that the anthem is racist (i.e. unethical). In the anthem's moral defence, conservatives will rather interpret "impure blood" as that of just soldiers, assimilating anthem's lines 6-7 of stanza VI to Augusta Holmès's dramatic representation of ancient Gauls (ancestors of the

French), in her symphony *Lutèce*: “The blood of heroes rejuvenates ... fertilizes devastated fields.” (Pasler), showing their willingness to sacrifice, for the sake of liberty.

As a matter of fact, in her review of Jesse Goldhammer’s *Headless Republic Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought*, Ptacek relates this discussion to the sacred notion of sacrifice, picked up by the revolutionists from ancient Rome and Christian traditions, and which “formed the basis of subsequent theoretical debate in France about the role of sacrifice in political foundation.” Her understanding was that, in that context, the qualifier *impure* could have either a symbolic or a facetious connotation (or even both), suggesting that it could be attributed to the just side or to the unjust side (Ptacek)!

As Wayne Booth put it, “[n]o critic of [war] rhetoric can escape bias” (Booth). I am not aware of recorded comments from Rouget de Lisle himself about this particular passage, so we might never know what he meant or if he meant anything at all by “impure blood.” Maybe he just threw in this contentious phrase as a crowd pleaser... Maybe he was just trying to balance the syllables counts and match his rhymes. Maybe, in the excitement of the moment and under the pressure to deliver *the* song, he did not take time to think about possibly conflicting interpretations. After all, he reportedly spent only a night on writing the lyrics, while possibly inebriated subsequent to the Mayor’s party...

To conclude on this controversial but important sub-debate, a key message in *La Marseillaise* is that the enemy to be fought, in late 18th century France, was anyone standing against the freedom of the people (stanza VI, lines 3 & 7), in or out of the country, French or not. Now, 21st century France is a democracy, fostering freedom of the people and abiding with principles and values of human rights, an ethical framework in accordance with that key message. Notwithstanding, to modern ears, the expression “impure blood” is unequivocally

demeaning, whether it refers to valiant freedom fighters or to vile despots, whether symbolic or facetious. Furthermore, in human rights ethics, all humans are equal by *virtue* and offensive language is unacceptable. So, whatever the popular or contextual meaning of “impure blood” was in 1792, this expression is ethically indefensible nowadays.

Human rights principles are in line with the wishes expressed in the closing verses of *La Marseillaise*: a hope for peaceful times, which will make the militaristic lyrics of the hymn irrelevant. Why then do French continue singing them, despite a long-lasting democratic peace?

Verstand-less emotions

Over the years, numerous organized groups have aimed to educate and/or engage the French public in the debate on the ethics of their national anthem. Some can easily be identified on the Internet (blogs, petitions, social network pages and/or comprehensive websites), although not all keep their online material up-to-date. It is hard to determine what proportion of the French population progressists and conservatists actually represent or mobilize. Indeed, with laws protecting freedom of speech and with the popularization of digital tools facilitating it, dissident voices can easily disseminate messages to wide audiences. Although there are some statistics relevant to this question, their interpretability is limited by data collection methods.

As an illustration, the 2005 survey cited above found that 72% of French feel that it is important to know the lyrics of *La Marseillaise*. Yet, only 16% of respondents declared knowing the lyrics “very well” (CSA Opinion–Institutionnel). This suggests a poor knowledge level in the general population. Besides, this estimate is likely inflated, since it is based on subjective answers to an imprecisely formulated question, national identity being a highly sensitive question –hence susceptible to social desirability bias–. Moreover, quantitative analyses cannot say much about people’s knowledge and attitudes. But such questions are delicate, and people

might be reluctant to share deeper thoughts: only 25 of the 60 (42%) personalities approached by Toulat agreed to participate in the open-ended question survey reported in his 1992 book.

Some qualitative investigations, though informal, suggest that French citizens, from primary school children to Members of the Parliament, do not know well the lyrics of *La Marseillaise*, particularly beyond the first stanza and the chorus (<http://paroles.marseillaise.over-blog.fr>), which are typically the only parts played in public events. Marine le Pen, the leader of the *Front National* (the predominant far-right party in France), is a virulent critique of any public figure failing to show active support of the anthem (Le Monde; AFP), and a short version of the anthem is routinely sung during meetings of her party. Nonetheless, she had to admit that she is not familiar with the lyrics of all the stanzas (Hamard).

Despite the apparent limited knowledge of the content of the song, 60% of surveyed people asserted that *La Marseillaise* is still relevant today (CSA Opinion–Institutionnel), in the 21st century. This may seem like a decently high level of support for conservatives. But, assuming that all respondents who said that they know the lyrics very well (16%) are among the 60% who deem it relevant nowadays, this brings the figure down to 9.6% of supporters who possibly know what they are talking about! Moreover, only 41% of French citizens find the lyrics of *La Marseillaise* violent (CSA Opinion–Institutionnel), despite its graphically militaristic lines. That level of ignorance and the denial thereof are quite baffling!

This being said, French citizens can hardly hold their raw feelings about their anthem: less than 5% of surveyed people, in each the 2005 CSA study and two similar IFOP studies (2009, 2015), opted not to answer either question pertaining to *La Marseillaise*. The emotion this song generates cannot be overstated. Michel Platini is the current head of the Union of European Football Associations and was mentioned above as a classic example of a professional sportsman

openly refusing to sing the national anthem for ethical reasons. Yet, his autobiography published in 1987 mentions that he did “happen to whisper it” before a game against Bulgaria, in 1977: “the emotion was so strong,” he confessed (Rouyer et Guimier)!

Furthermore, among the 25 personalities who shared their thoughts about *La Marseillaise* with Toulat, several disclosed internal moral conflicts, including Jacques Chaban-Delmas (Prime Minister 1969–1972), Bernard Clavel (writer, Prix Goncourt 1968), Françoise Giroud (journalist, writer, and Minister of Culture 1976–1977), and even Danielle Mitterrand (First Lady, 1981–1995). They acknowledged the wrongness of the violence expressed yet could not refrain from enjoying the hymn, alluding to an irresistible attachment blamed on social constructivism, patriotic love, and difficulties of settling on an acceptable alternative (Toulat 15–28). This challenges Hegel’s assertion whereby “Reason is the Sovereign of the World” (Hegel 22). Emotion has clearly a powerful influence on attitudes towards *La Marseillaise*, powerful enough to overrule reason.

Ethical arguments for progressivism

La Marseillaise is undeniably a beautiful musical piece and has been a source of inspiration for oppressed masses in dire historical circumstances. That song is imprinted in French citizens’ identity and certainly deserves special recognition. However, there are compelling reasons to consider revising its controversial lyrics.

It is true that commendable values and virtues transpire in some phrases of *La Marseillaise*. But other parts of the song contrast somberly by their aggressiveness. It is one thing to mandate the study of the national anthem, but this duplicity clearly causes great confusion in mature adults—if only they pause to think about it—, let alone in growing children. Educators are facing a puzzling conundrum articulated by Toulat in 1992 and still true today:

How to teach fraternity with calls to hatred? How to justify the fight against racism while talking about an impure blood? How to denounce Nazism, which was based precisely on the concept of a pure race? (Toulat 86)

Although the Just War Tradition provides a framework somewhat reconciling that contradiction, it only justifies violence in the context of 1792 France – and possibly other revolutions, though each situation would require a specific assessment –. The aggressive lyrics of *La Marseillaise* do not transpose well into the modern situation of France, a multiethnic society governed by a democratic regime espousing human rights principles, including respect of cultural differences. While it is important to acknowledge History, holding on to anachronistic symbolism and ambiguous rhetoric may hinder a healthy historical progression.

Too many phrases in the lyrics are inappropriate in present circumstances; yet they keep being sung in public, mechanically, with little or no consideration for their harmful potential. There is no need, no moral justification for contemporary French citizens to take arms and make some “impure blood” flow, at the time of “Europe and Peace” (Broché). There have been more than enough trauma and sorrow caused by xenophobic violence using a similar vocabulary to educate us on the danger of condoning such expressions. Extermination of Jews and Roma by Nazis in Europe, persecution and killings of ethnical minorities in Pol Pot’s Cambodia, tribe-based civil conflicts in several African countries, cultural and physical genocide of First Nations in the Americas are only a few of many documented examples in recent history.

This is not to say that 18th century symbols lost all their value, it is rather that 21st century French can hardly relate to some of them, especially in civilian circumstances. In one of his many statements justifying his attitude towards *La Marseillaise*, Platini said: “it’s a war hymn that has nothing to do with the game, the joy of soccer. The eleven facing us on the field were

not going to cut our sons' and wives' throats, they just wanted to get the ball from us.”

(Eurosport) Revising the lyrics of *La Marseillaise* would not mean denying History, quite the contrary: it would mean embracing It in Its evolution, evolving as per the Spirit of the song.

Yes, *La Marseillaise* is, by design and by nature, a war song. The use of a belligerent oratory was appropriate at the time it was created because the sociopolitical context called for and agreed with it. The song rightly served its primary purpose, that of mobilizing a threatened nation around ideals of a revolution deemed just. In the military sphere, *La Marseillaise* remains a great song that could serve as a model of abnegation for soldiers. Regrettably, even there, misinterpretations can be destructive. After Jewish pop singer Serge Gainsbourg (1928–1991) launched his reggae version of the anthem in 1979, his concert in Strasbourg was cancelled following acts of intimidation by angry military who considered this remake as an outrage to the hymn (Simmons 89–90). In 1987, Habib Grimzi was thrown through the window of a train in motion by three legionnaires in training simply because he was Arabic; their attorney reportedly cited lines from *La Marseillaise* in their defence (Toulat 89).

Thus, the French national anthem, by its violent content, can contribute to violent attitudes, discourses and behaviors, outside of a war context. The use of such nationalist rhetoric is at best problematic, given that history has caused changes in the perceived identity of us and them and in the interpretation of conflicts opposing these two sides. Unfortunately, interpretation may be induced by a diversity of political agendas, which further complicates the picture. For instance, far-right parties are fundamentally conservatives in the debates over *La Marseillaise* and they supported a law banning Islamic headscarves (Bill 2004-228 on ostensible religious symbol in public schools, 15 March 2004); yet Muslim girls and women demonstrating against

that ban sang the anthem to proclaim their French citizenship that, they felt, was being questioned because of their cultural and racial identity (Keaton).

Even more concerning, little is known about conditions in which lyrical violence will translate into harm and to what degree. Such events may seem rare and their risk insignificant but when sociopolitical circumstances are sufficiently tensed, what seems like nothing could trigger explosive violence. France was mentioned multiple times in Huntington's seminal paper on the clash of civilizations, and is still struggling with complex sociocultural challenges. Confusing discourses alluding to sensitive classifications of the human kind, even if wrapped in an anthem, can threaten peace through unfortunate interpretations. The narrative conveyed in *La Marseillaise* is incredibly complex to grasp for whom lacks a thorough background in history, yet it very easy to fit to contemporary crises by political agents who do not mind taking advantage of factual unawareness and manipulate public opinion.

Studies suggest that indeed, most people love the hymn despite a limited familiarity with the lyrics. But ignorance in this case is not excusable and is not an excuse for the harm that might result from the unwise use of offensive lyrics. “[I]t is not healthy not to think what you say, or to say what you don't think: it is the opposite of education” (Toulat 88). *La Marseillaise* lends itself to dangerous misperceptions, and misperceptions of that kind may lead to conflicts (Frowe 134–136). But sadly, only the minority who understands the moral justification for the anthem's violent lyrics can appreciate the futility of its transposition to contemporary circumstances.

An important query might give this debate a more positive direction, focusing on the present for a better future rather than lingering in the past. It was formulated in the process of a reflection on the (in)acceptability of the older version of the German national anthem, *Deutschland über alles* (“Germany above all else”), after World War II:

Should our reconstruction of the eighteenth-century intent of the authors be the standard or should we reinterpret the language in the spirit of our present day context?

(Myers Feinstein).

Synthesis

Michelet, cited in Tiersot, made that superb comment about *La Marseillaise*:

[Rouget de Lisle] found what no-one else ever conceived: a song perfectly adequate for the thought of the moment, summarizing, with absolute accuracy, – and with such intensity! – the national sentiment, the état d'âme of a great people at the most solemn, the most terrible, the most heroic, the most decisive time of its history. (47)

That time of history required a war song and Rouget de Lisle served it well! He met and exceeded his goal of crystallizing the Spirit of the Revolution. His masterpiece gained a life of its own, motivating combatants for a just war, inspiring civilians in supporting the cause, and unifying a nation, by providing a means for hope and empowerment, all that in the portable, user-friendly and endlessly reusable format of a song!

In 1792, the lyrics reflected a palpable reality: violence was required in response to an imminent threat. Even then, all violence was not justified. For instance, the regime of Terror (1793–1794) applied martial laws, claiming good revolutionary intentions. But these sent thousands of citizens under the blade of the infamous *guillotine* based on mere suspicions of treason (Belloc 137). Mayor de Dietrich and Marshal Luckner so died, and Rouget de Lisle himself came close to having the same fate (Guédé 243)! This shows how easily violence used for a just cause can be diverted from its original purpose, and the end of the anthem wisely advises that violence should not be used beyond strict necessity.

Although intense emotions from that time remain attached to the French national identity, essential facts were not retained as durably in collective memory, even among influential decision makers. In today's France, few people would be able to articulate a meaningful history-informed moral justification for the violence of *La Marseillaise*'s lyrics. Singing them is a tradition: people feel rather than they understand the anthem, they learn to be moved by it, as part of their social development (Lomax). Most people interpret the lyrics based on socially constructed emotions. Consequently, opinions on the hymn are bound to be irrational and generate extreme positions; this explains why debates about it can be so sensitive and polarized.

Surely, fundamental republican values are expressed in *La Marseillaise*: unity, self-determination, courage, etc. However, recurrent questioning on the (im)morality, (dis)respect and (mis)use regarding the anthem's lyrics points to a public ethical quandary. From a virtue perspective, the long list of demeaning terms designating the enemy is offensive and simply unacceptable in the human rights ethics framework. From a deontological perspective, the legal protection of the anthem despite its problematic lyrics is in direct conflict with laws condemning violence and discrimination. From a utilitarian perspective, exposure to and use of these polysemous lyrics can contribute to psychological, social or physical harm, despite the hedonic satisfaction the song yields. These issues feed public moral tensions and must be addressed.

Democracy will be better served through the advocacy of non-contradictory public discourses, and republican values will be better taught using unambiguous symbols. The French government and citizens will be collectively responsible whenever harm occurs that might have been caused by the anthem's lyrics. As per Glenn Gray's principle: "The greater the possibility of free action in the communal sphere, the greater the degree of guilt for evil deeds done in the name of everyone." (Walzer 298). Although resistance to change is understandable, change

might be necessary for the greater good, following the utilitarian Greater Happiness Principle. Since the lyrics of *La Marseillaise* are potentially harmful, the idea of changing them cannot be dismissed outright. Those French citizens who proposed such a revision have likely already experienced some guilt despite being told that the hymn is sacred and untouchable.

In fact, revising a national anthem is not unheard of. While this might follow major changes in political regime (Central Intelligence Agency), it can be done for ethical reasons. It was the case in 1860 for Belgium's *Brabançonne*, deemed unnecessarily militaristic only thirty years after being written (Toulat 94). For Austria and Germany, revisions occurred after World War II during which the lyrics got irreversibly tainted by the Nazis' interpretation: they fitted them to a nationalist ideology that justified systematic discrimination in the most odious ways. That trauma maximized pain and minimized pleasure procured by the anthem in the people's collective utilitarian balance, making revisions acceptable if not unavoidable.

Thus, there are historical examples of horrendous harm done based on biased interpretations of anthems' lyrics, which suggests that violence might be prevented if French nationals act upon their anthem-related ethical challenges. In doing so, they might want to consider a reflection from the debate that Americans have been having on the violence of their own national song:

Singing more peaceful and inclusive songs can be a counterpoint to unreflective, uncritical, passionate, unrestrained, and extreme nationalism, and allow us to think about what we ought to do as a nation and what our role in the world should be. (Jorgensen)

Some consider *La Marseillaise* like the most famous anthem, worldwide. While the non-French appreciate its stirring tune, they are usually shocked when they come to learn the lyrics (Toulat 91–92), so dissimilar to the image they have of France as a key human rights

campaigner! A collective reflection is needed in France about the ethics of the national anthem. This is an incredibly sensitive issue, but wisely designed actions could appease passions and allow for reasonable decisions about the status and use of this song in today's society.

Rules and regulations appear insufficient, if not inadequate, in solving ethical issues posed by *La Marseillaise*, so other approaches need to be explored. Because many French are so fervently attached to this hymn, a previously proposed strategy for a revision – a national lyrics competition potentially leading to a referendum (Toulat 154–155) – likely remains untimely and impractical. Democratic agreement on desirable criteria for new lyrics and for mandating a selection committee would be a challenge on its own; it might trigger defensiveness and exacerbate polarization. Political leaders will refrain from making any significant move unless they can secure sufficient support from the population. This would require a stable shift of extreme conservatives towards the neutral position, which is improbable in a foreseeable future.

But disclaimers could be a good “soft” start: USA authorities do just that on a webpage presenting an old recording of *La Marseillaise* (Library of Congress). Instrumental versions, already used occasionally, could become the norm, as they may suffice to satisfy patriotism. Formal qualitative studies (e.g. surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews) could be conducted to better assess the population's sentiment on French values, on the anthem, and on a possible revision thereof. Psychosocial experiments could be designed to measure effects of exposure to *La Marseillaise* on attitudes, emotional state and behaviors, accounting for potential factors such as age, sex, education, degree of knowledge of and exposure to the lyrics, political affinity, military versus civilian status, and ethno-cultural heritage. Methodic monitoring of the frequency and circumstances of racist acts involving the national anthems and other national symbols would also be informative. By including assessments of the perpetrators' motivations, it could

eventually identify signals objective enough to indicate a sociopolitical problem and demonstrate the need for a revision.

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Appendix: Lyrics of La Marseillaise (French & English)

<u>STANZA</u>	<u>LINE</u>	<u>PAROLES</u>	<u>LYRICS</u>
I	1	Allons! Enfants de la Patrie!	Onward! Children of the Fatherland!
	2	Le jour de gloire est arrivé!	The day of glory has arrived!
	3	Contre nous de la tyrannie,	Against us of tyranny,
	4	L'étendard sanglant est levé! (Bis)	The bloody banner is raised! (x2)
	5	Entendez-vous dans les campagnes	Do you hear in the countryside
	6	Mugir ces féroces soldats?	Bellow those ferocious soldiers?
	7	Ils viennent jusque dans vos bras	They're coming right into your arms
	8	Égorger vos fils, vos compagnes	To slit throats of your sons, your women
CHORUS	1	Aux armes, citoyens!	To arms, citizens!
	2	Formez vos bataillons!	Form your battalions!
	3	Marchons, marchons!	Let's march, let's march!
	4	Qu'un sang impur...	Let an impure blood ...
	5	Abreuve nos sillons!	Water our furrows!
II	1	Que veut cette horde d'esclaves,	What does want this horde of slaves,
	2	De traîtres, de rois conjurés?	Of traitors, of conjured kings?
	3	Pour qui ces ignobles entraves,	For whom these ignoble hindrances,
	4	Ces fers dès longtemps préparés? (Bis)	These irons prepared long ago? (x2)
	5	Français! Pour nous, ah! Quel outrage!	French folk! For us, ah! What an outrage!
	6	Quels transports il doit exciter;	What passion it must arouse;
	7	C'est nous qu'on ose méditer	It is us whom one dares plan
	8	De rendre à l'antique esclavage!	To return to the ancient slavery!
III	1	Quoi! Des cohortes étrangères	What! Some foreign cohorts
	2	Feraient la loi dans nos foyers!	Would make the law in our homes!
	3	Quoi! Des phalanges mercenaires	What! Some mercenary phalanxes
	4	Terrasseraient nos fiers guerriers! (Bis)	Would strike down our proud warriors! (x2)
	5	Dieu! Nos mains seraient enchaînées!	God! Our hands would be in chains!
	6	Nos fronts sous le joug se ploieraient!	Our fronts under the yoke would yield!
	7	De vils despotes deviendraient	Some vile despots would become
	8	Les maîtres de nos destinées!	The masters of our destinies!
IV	1	Tremblez, tyrans et vous, perfides,	Tremble, tyrants and you perfidious,
	2	L'opprobre de tous les partis!	The opprobrium of all parties!
	3	Tremblez! Vos projets parricides	Tremble! Your parricidal projects
	4	Vont enfin recevoir leur prix. (Bis)	Will at last receive their reward. (x2)
	5	Tout est soldat pour vous combattre.	All is a soldier to combat you.
	6	S'ils tombent, nos jeunes héros,	If they fall, our young heroes,
	7	La terre en produira de nouveaux	The earth will produce new ones
	8	Contre vous tout prêt à se battre.	Against you fast ready to fight.

<u>STANZA</u>	<u>LINE</u>	<u>PAROLES</u>	<u>LYRICS</u>
V	1	Français, en guerriers magnanimes	French folk, as magnanimous warriors
	2	Portons ou retenons nos coups!	Let's strike or hold back our blows!
	3	Épargnons ces tristes victimes,	Let us spare those sorry victims,
	4	A regret, s'armant contre nous! (Bis)	With regret, arming against us! (x2)
	5	Mais ce despote sanguinaire!	But this bloodthirsty despot!
	6	Mais ces complices de Bouillé!	But these accomplices of Bouillé!
	7	Tous ces tigres qui, sans pitié,	All these tigers who, mercilessly,
	8	Déchirent le sein de leur mère!	Tear apart their mother's breast!
VI	1	Amour sacré de la Patrie	Sacred love of the Fatherland
	2	Conduis, soutiens nos bras vengeurs!	Lead, support our avenging hands!
	3	Liberté! Liberté chérie,	Liberty! Cherished Liberty,
	4	Combats avec tes défenseurs! (Bis)	Fight along with thy defenders! (x2)
	5	Sous nos drapeaux que la Victoire	Under our flags may Victory
	6	Accoure à tes mâles accents!	Hurry to your manly accents!
	7	Que tes ennemis expirants	May your expiring enemies
	8	Voient ton triomphe et notre gloire!	See your triumph and our glory!
VII	1	Nous entrerons dans la carrière,	We shall enter the career,
	2	Quand nos aînés n'y seront plus;	When our elders are no longer there;
	3	Nous y trouverons leur poussière	We shall there find their dust
	4	Et la trace de leurs vertus. (Bis)	And the trace of their virtues. (x2)
	5	Bien moins jaloux de leur survivre	Much less envious to survive them
	6	Que de partager leur cercueil	Than to share their coffin
	7	Nous aurons le sublime orgueil	We shall have the sublime pride
	8	De les venger ou de les suivre.	Of avenging them or following them.
	9	Enfants, que l'Honneur, la Patrie	Children, let Honour, Fatherland
	10	Fassent l'objet de tous nos vœux!	Be the object of all our wishes!
	11	Ayons toujours l'âme nourrie	Let us always have our souls nourished
	12	Des feux qu'ils inspirent tous deux. (Bis)	With the fires that they both inspire. (x2)
	13	Soyons unis! Tout est possible;	Let's be united! All's possible;
	14	Nos vils ennemis tomberont,	Our vile enemies will fall,
	15	Alors les Français cesseront	Then the French folk will cease
	16	De chanter ce refrain terrible:	To sing this terrible refrain: