The French Revolution and Empire

The Quest for a Civic Order

D. M. G. Sutherland

Blackwell Publishing

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For Holly and the infs

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5018, USA
108 Cowley Road, Oxford OX4 1JF, UK
550 Swanston Street, Carlton South, Melbourne, Victoria 3053, Australia
Kurfürstendamm 57, 10707 Berlin, Germany

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Map 1 France: Departments of 1790

'The mire of debauchery infects public morals. Dissolution passes from the court into society: luxury and licentiousness pass from bishops and high benefactors down to the Levites. In a word, corruption overflows from the ranks that surround the throne to the nearest neighbour, from the capital to the entire empire. The people are little by little possessed by languor; they have become the slave of the government, of the privileged, as well as of their own pleasures and great sufferings.'

Elysée Loustallot, 'Notice. Revolutions de Paris,'
12 July 1789

'Incomparable year! You have seen the end of a government of frightening memory, a government that was so closely bound to the Bastille, its first favourite and the most gross and monstrous female anyone has ever seen, dead of a sudden and violent attack. It is by that we saw the same day my brave and happy compatriots save the National Assembly... break the chains of slavery and terrify the blade of despotism.... Grand year! You will be the year that regenerates, you will always carry that name.'

Louis-Sébastien Mercier, 'Adieux,' *Annales patriotiques*,
31 December 1789

'Frenchmen, rise up! Let the anger of the nation burst and return to dust the handful of intriguers who desolate us with the force we let them have.... People, be of good cheer! The saviours, the avengers of the world are coming! Oh! With what transports of delirium are they welcomed. I see this stream grow from a holy source, form a torrent which drags along its course the tyrants, the slaves, the priests, the nobles, the hypocrites and all the trash, which for centuries, have soiled and poisoned the sojourn of man [on earth].'

Jacques-Antoine Dulaure, *Thermomètre du jour*, 26 June 1792

'... a nation must show itself great, strong, invincible and terrible; it is then, that instructed by the experience of her misfortune, by seventeen centuries of oppression, slavery and cruelty, she must launch the thunderbolt of her anger against the monsters who fertilize the soil with blood in order to resuscitate privileges [that] are odious to nature [and] injurious to religion....

There can be no hesitation between death and the destruction of tyrants: we have to devour the Prussian who advances, and fall like a

torrent on the traitors and the conspirators. Our pikes must do justice to the counterrevolutionaries of the interior and our cannon annihilate the crusade of the conspiring despots. . . .'

Jacques Roux, *Sur les moyens de sauver la France et la Liberté. Prononcé dans l'église Métropolitaine de Paris, dans celles de St.-Eustache, de Ste.-Marguerite, de Saint-Antoine, et de Saint-Nicolas-des- Champs*, *membre de la Société des Droits de l'Homme et du Citoyen* (1793)

'Such is the nature of human affairs that great benefits are always mixed with great misfortune. What then ought to be the principles of truly patriotic legislators? It is to pardon the great wrongs, the appendage of the great benefits which operate for the regeneration and enfranchisement of the human race. And certainly, if this principle is not admitted, no Revolution would ever be possible, never would an enslaved people rise to liberty; for an abuse, which is inseparable from any Revolution, would stop its progress and prevent its effects.'

Jean-Bon-Saint-André, regicide, Protestant pastor, future member of the Committee of Public Safety, speaking in favour of a motion to quash all proceedings against those arrested for murder during the September Massacres, 8 February 1793, *Archives parlementaires*, lvii, pp. 377–8

'The Terror of '93 was not a necessary consequence of the Revolution, it was an unfortunate deviation. It was more fatal than useful to the formation of the Republic because it went beyond all the limits, because it was atrocious, because it immolated both friends and enemies . . . and because it led to a nasty reaction not only against the terrorists but also against liberty and her defenders.'

Antoine-Claire Thibaudeau, regicide, *Mémoires sur la Convention, et le Directoire* (1824), p. 57

'Our hopes have been deceived: the Revolution was scarcely only a change of name for things and [a change] of fortune for individuals.'

Henri-François Grégoire, regicide, constitutional bishop of the Loir-et-Cher, *Mémoires*, (1814), i, p. 457

Introduction: The Problem and the Thesis

There are three questions worth asking about the French Revolution. What caused the Revolution? What caused the Terror? Why did it end in the dictatorship of Bonaparte?

Of course, there is an endless number of other questions that can be asked after these, but they are all subsumed under these three. The reader of this, or any other history of the period, can tell what question the author is addressing simply by paying attention to the time-line. If the subject under discussion is the Old Regime and 1789, for example, the author is trying to answer the first question. And so on.

Unfortunately, the answers to the questions are not at all as simple as the questions themselves. The debates over the answers can be traced back to contemporaries who often provided vital clues about how they understood the event itself. The early historians of the Revolution, the historians of the 1820s and 1830s in France, often posed the questions that historians still debate. Indeed, a case could be made that there was a real French Revolution, one that actually happened, and the French Revolution of these early writers. They did not falsify the record, far from it, but they were concerned to write a history that would contribute to the realization of what they thought were the ideals of the Revolution. Theirs was always a noble version of the Revolution, a Revolution that sought to find in the events of 1789 and after, a legitimation of a humane, compassionate, egalitarian liberal society or even a democracy. We frequently, and perhaps unavoidably, see the real Revolution through the filter that they provided.

Writing a history of the Revolution is a political act. In the nineteenth century, being an active politician and an historian of the Revolution was frequently a seamless activity. The day of the scholar-statesmen has probably passed forever, but the political preferences of

most historians of the Revolution since the founding of the chair of the French Revolution in 1884 have been well known. None has tried to hide their preferences under a veil of an elusive objectivity. Writing the history of the French Revolution and Empire therefore is to join an enterprise that itself has a long and honourable history, and one whose practitioners in France are public figures.

One example of how contemporaries cued subsequent historians to the kind of history that could be written was what is called 'the thesis of circumstances', a term we will be discussing often. This means the revolutionaries did what they did because outside forces forced them to institute extraordinary and violent solutions to the problems that faced them, namely foreign war and domestic counterrevolution. That is, the Terror was a provocation external to the Revolution itself. This was the language of the revolutionaries themselves when they instituted the Terror, that what they did was an indisputable act of self defence. This is fair enough, but there is so much more that could be said about the concept and how it was used, or rejected, at the time.

François Furet reversed this claim about the thesis of circumstance. He and those whom he inspired flipped the thesis of circumstances upside down. The claim was that far from being external to the Revolution, the internal needs of revolutionary ideology generated the violence of the Revolution. A lot of what follows in this book is a discussion of this flip. This assertion is not at all wrong – it does, however, force a serious re-thinking of the subject.

When Al Bertrand of Blackwell asked me to write a second edition of *France, 1789–1815: Revolution and Counterrevolution*, we both assumed the process would be short. Since the publication of that book, I had thought I had kept up fairly well with the publications in the field. This turns out to have been far too optimistic. As I began to delve into the production since the publication of the first book, and especially as I tried to master the enormous production since the Bicentennial of the Revolution of 1989, I realized how much I had missed. Not only that, I realized as my reading went on how much the field had taken another qualitative leap forward in terms of analytical capacity. A great deal of this production has been published in a newly refurbished *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, a journal that improves with almost every issue, and with the publications of Michel Vovelle and his students. Another invaluable source has been the publication of the hundreds of papers of conferences about the Revolution. And unlike most conference proceedings, these are often of high quality. This has been one of the major venues of valuable work in the last decade.

Still another source has been the Library of Congress. The collection blossomed. Not only has the LC been able to acquire the unspeakably

expensive French Revolution Research Collection, the European librarians, especially Carol Armbruster, have scarcely missed a book. She also is a quiet resource for this book.

Steven Kaplan pointed this out some time ago. The Bicentennial was a major intellectual event. For those of us who jet-setted around the planet, it was enough to bask in the unusual attention that the media conferred upon us all. But Professor Kaplan saw very early that beneath the glitter, some major changes were occurring in the conceptualization and the expression of the French Revolution. Some of these changes are reflected in this book.

It tries to incorporate as much as anyone can the renewal of the field since 1989. These changes have been so great that they have forced a major re-writing and thus a new title. Almost all of the chapters down to the Directory have been completely re-written. Those that follow have changed less, because the field itself has changed less. But there is a major re-writing of the relation between the Revolution and the economy that reflects some of my own research since 1989.

This book does retain the major thesis of the earlier one, namely that the Revolution has to be understood as a struggle between revolution and counterrevolution. I think a lot of this argument has now been absorbed into general writing of the subject. It is no longer possible, as it was at the conference at Rennes in 1985, for someone to deny that an authentic and popular counterrevolution existed, to deny that 'the people' could possibly be counterrevolutionary.

But from that base, I hope that this version is richer and more complex than the earlier version.

At the same time, I have tried to make the book more accessible to students coming at the field for the first time. I have done this by trying to simplify the prose and by introducing the editorial comments that pop up in the text from time to time. These diminish, indeed disappear, because as time goes on in this period, the amount of serious controversy also declines. Alas, there is nothing I can do about reducing the geographical challenge this book poses. Trying to expand the standard narrative to the provinces requires a geographical familiarity that few Anglo-Saxons coming at the subject for the first time have. The map should help. There are also several geographical sites that are discussed: Paris and the Midi in the largest sense. The third geographical entity is the west, but contrary to what some good friends have alleged, this is not a book about the French Revolution viewed from the west. The argument then and now is that the opposition to the Revolution was real, serious, authentic, legitimate in its own way, and popular. It was not marginal, not confined to the west alone. Indeed, the anti-revolution and the counterrevolution were in their way *the* popular movements of the period.

There are many people I would like to thank for offering comments, criticisms and suggestions. First among them has to be Timothy Tackett, who let me see an early version of his wonderful study of Louis XVI and the Flight to Varennes. He did it knowing that I am his most severe critic and I hope, his greatest admirer. Then, *my* most severe and best critic, Tim Le Goff, followed by Jack Censer, David Bell, Howard Brown, Philip Hoffman, Colin Lucas, Patrice Gueniffey, Françoise Brunel, Gerard Béaur, the Baltimore–Washington Old Regime Group, and many others, in no particular order. And, it goes without saying, Michel Vovelle from whose books and articles I have learned so much. Within my own department, I cannot express how much I have learned over the years from Madeline Zilfi and Brigitte Bedos-Rézak, both of whom work on a history totally remote from the Revolution, but both of whom have taught me more than I can express about religion, politics, society, and how women fit in. Or, as they would now correct me, having just read the last sentence, how I still have to think more about this subject.

College Park
February 2002

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The Origins of the Revolution in France

The Classic Theory of the Bourgeois Revolution

There was a time when historians were confident in describing the origins of the French Revolution. The operative concept was 'aristocratic reaction'. It meant several things at once. Politically, it referred to the undermining of the absolutism of Louis XIV. The Sun King was thought to have subverted the independence and privileges of the aristocracy. But after his death in 1715, the *parlements*, the regional sovereign and appeal courts of which that of Paris was by far the most important, undertook an offensive, a reaction, on behalf of the entire nobility. They were able to transform their right of registering laws and edicts into a veto on progressive royal legislation. The Crown was consequently much weaker.

This had implications in the social sphere as well. In the course of the eighteenth century, the aristocracy ended up monopolizing the highest offices in government, the military, the Church and the judiciary. This in turn affected the bourgeoisie. No longer able to advance to the top of the predominant social and political institutions of the day, the bourgeoisie became increasingly alienated from the state and from respectable society. Frustrated in achieving its highest ambitions, its loyalties painfully strained, ever open to imaginative criticisms of the system, it was well placed to take advantage of the political crisis of 1788–9 to overthrow the old order altogether. One of the many crises of the Old Regime was a crisis of social mobility.

The argument was irresistibly attractive, partly because of its internal elegance and partly because it explained so much. It made sense of the reign of Louis XIV, the eighteenth century and the Revolution too. The struggle between revolution and counterrevolution could be reduced to two actors, the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, who had first come to

blows in the closing years of the reign of Louis XIV. The aristocracy lost, of course, and specialists of the nineteenth century could move on to the next round, the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the working class.

This argument is also utterly untenable. In the first place, it assumes rather than demonstrates the aristocracy's progressive monopoly of high posts. It assumes, too, that the society of the seventeenth century was more open than its successor but relies on incomplete evidence and a limited range of contemporary complaints. The duc de Saint Simon's famous observation that Louis XIV raised up the 'vile bourgeoisie' turns out to be untrue in the case of the episcopate, partially true but grossly misleading in that of the ministry and unknown in the case of the officer corps of the army. More refined methodologies have turned up some odd anomalies. All the intendants (the immensely powerful representatives of the king in the provinces) of Louis XV and Louis XVI were nobles, but the trend in appointments, such as it was, was increasingly to prefer nobles of more recent creation. Closer examination of some of the major signs of noble exclusivism shows that restrictions were often aimed at excluding the rich parvenu nobles, not a rising bourgeoisie. The famous Ségur ordinance of 1781, for instance, limited the recruitment of army officers to men with four quarterings of nobility, that is, four ascendant blood relatives had to have been noble. Oddly enough, the intention was to help professionalize the army by excluding nobles who had recently amassed a fortune in commerce or finance. These types were thought to value cupidity and self-interest, not the genuinely military values of self-sacrifice and discipline that were supposed to be the preserve of staid, landed families. Even the few *parlements* which took similar four quarterings decrees had much the same object in mind. The Parlement of Rennes, for instance, most of whose magistrates could trace their noble lineages back two centuries, adopted a four quarterings decree in 1732 and managed to maintain its caste-like character against all comers, noble and roturier, until the very end. The Parlement of Paris, whose jurisdiction covered one third of the country, never bothered to restrict its entry and remained conspicuously open to the rich men of banking, high finance and government service, most of whom were nobles already. To be sure, exclusivist tendencies were worrying to many bourgeois, even though they were not affected directly, because they feared an even greater tightening in the future.

It was always possible for many to acquire noble status. The Crown did grant nobility directly, and after 1760 or so broadened the basis of selection significantly. The annual number of direct grants more than tripled to nearly a dozen per year and, while outstanding service in the military and judiciary continued to be rewarded as before, so now also were contributions in government service, commerce, industry, culture

and science. The Old Regime monarchy, in fact, rewarded a broader range of talents than did Napoleon.

By far the most important device for creating new nobles was venal office. There were roughly 70,000 offices in the royal bureaucracy and outside it that could be bought, sold and inherited just like any other piece of property. These included most offices in the judiciary, all army officers, financial services, many municipal posts and even humble occupations like market-porter and barber-wigmaker. Office was attractive because it guaranteed exemptions from some taxes or provided a monopoly of a certain service. Restricting entry thus sustained the owner's income. The more expensive the office, the more exemptions and privileges. And they were getting more expensive. From the closing years of the reign of Louis XV to the Revolution, the value of offices doubled and even trebled, a far greater increase than rents on farms and domaines. Right up to the end, they remained a safe and lucrative investment.

Roughly 3750 venal offices in the civil, criminal and financial courts and some municipalities conferred hereditary nobility on the owner or his family, mostly after one or two generations. The very expensive office of *secrétaire du roi* brought heredtary nobility after twenty years' service. There were 800 of these and their owners did nothing more onerous than seal legal documents. No one is certain how many families were ennobled by the process of venal office during the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI, but one estimate suggests 10,000. By 1789, most noble families were descended not from the military nobility, but from office-holders. The Old Regime aristocracy was thus comparatively young and was in a constant process of renewal.

The doors of the Second Estate were always ready to swing open to men of talent, but above all to men of money. Society was therefore capable of absorbing the most thrusting, entrepreneurial and ambitious men of the plutocracy.

An ennobling office was far from cheap. In 1791, they were commonly priced well above 50,000 *livres*, enough to support two hundred families of rural weavers for a year. The owner of an ennobling office was therefore a very wealthy man indeed. The classic origin of these nobles is usually thought to have been an aspiring merchant family that gradually withdrew from trade over a generation or two, and bought land, offices and a title instead. Such families were certainly very numerous and the temptation to follow this route may well have increased for many merchant families along the Atlantic coast because the successes of British privateering made investment in overseas trade much more risky. But this was not the only pattern. Many other families rose to the top through tax-farming or the fiscal system generally. Another route was to make a fortune in the sugar islands of the Caribbean and begin the

ascent that way. The most famous example was the writer Chateaubriand's father who returned to France enormously rich, 'reclaimed' his status as a Breton noble and settled into a brooding life at his newly acquired château at Combourg. The fast route could lead to some dizzying ascents with rises from the artisanate or even the peasantry in one or two generations. Still other families had been primarily landowners and rentiers for some time, content to build up the family's status monotonously through the patient acquisition of ever more prestigious offices until it slid almost imperceptibly into the Second Estate.

There were few qualitative economic differences between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. Approximately 80 per cent of the private wealth of the country was in land, urban real estate, bonds and so on, and both groups invested heavily in them. Although the proportions varied greatly from place to place, the nobility and the bourgeoisie together were everywhere important landowners. In some of the rich agricultural areas of the country, like maritime Flanders, around Versailles, parts of Burgundy, the river valleys of Provence and so on, they owned land out of all proportion to their numbers. Nobles were also heavily involved in industrial activities closely related to land and its resources like forest products, mining and metallurgy, not to mention the marketing of grain and wine. Although there remained a strong prejudice against direct participation in trade, nobles were major investors in colonial trading companies, land-clearing and speculation companies, and in banking, industrial and tax-collection enterprises of all sorts. The prominent contributions of nobles to capitalist ventures and the strong presence of bourgeois on the land show that from the point of view of economic function, the two groups were a single class. At the very least, the bourgeois–noble split of 1789 did not have economic origins.

The effect of the revisionist critique of the classical interpretation has been to reassert the importance of the cultural and political origins of the Revolution. If the nobility had always been a dominant class, if whatever trends there were towards exclusivism are problematic to interpret, if opportunities for advancement were far greater than has ever been suspected, and if nobles and bourgeois shared similar economic functions and interests, then the notion that the Revolution originated in a struggle between two distinct classes has to be abandoned. Politics and culture remain. Both groups could agree to unite to overthrow absolutism in favour of a liberal constitution but, according to which revisionist historian one follows, they fell out either over means, or because of a failure of political leadership or the form the political crisis took, or even over something as amorphous as 'style'.

Some of the cultural interpretations are, to be sure, a stretch. Explanations based upon psychology are always hard to prove. The claim that the decline in the role of fathers in eighteenth century novels was related to the decline in the myth of kings as fathers of their peoples and therefore is related to the execution of Louis XVI is hardly convincing. Similarly, claims that the politicization of pornography in the Old Regime had a bearing on the origins of the Revolution can also be carried too far. After all, randy nuns, lascivious prelates and debauched lords are very old stock characters in European literature. No one thinks of dirty books as coded manifestos of the future or imagines how they could be linked to the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

Other investigations of the cultural dimension of the Revolution illustrate that a small part of the literate class was increasingly critical of the status quo. Lawyers' briefs, for example, were not censored and could be printed in large numbers. Advocates who borrowed from tropes in popular theatre cast heros and enemies in stark contrast, and were able to portray prominent cases in terms of dastardly aristocrats cheating their roturier partners, taking advantage of their connections to exploit ordinary people, and otherwise failing to live up to even their code of honour. But this mode of pleading was fairly rare even among jurists in Paris. It was even more rare among barristers and other legal professionals who would be elected to the Estates-General. Other writings broke new ground. Some of these were histories of France in which the monarchy's role in the national history was marginalized or even delegitimized.

The century also witnessed an unprecedented explosion of print literature, in the form of national and provincial newspapers, pamphlets, books, and so on. Academies and reading societies along with salons and masonic lodges were established in most of the large provincial centres. Thus was created what the German Marxist Habermas called 'the bourgeois public sphere', a nexus in the realm outside the control of government where men and women aroused by the passions and fads of the day, could debate and discuss. There was, of course, nothing bourgeois about these institutions, nor were they somehow outside normal society, nor were they harbingers of Revolution. Most of the academies were dominated by aristocrats and, in the cities that had parlements, by the leading magistrates. Many devoted themselves to public policy and intellectual questions and so downplayed status distinctions among their members. The significance of this social mixing can be exaggerated. In 1789 at the early meetings of the Estates-General, noble deputies spoke of the bourgeois deputies as if they had never seen a barrister close up in their lives. And the astonishment was mutual.

Moreover, a great deal of print culture was completely apolitical. Printers in the provinces, for example, contracted only for government announcements, posters and almanacs. The *Affiches de Rennes*, a weekly in one of the most politically robust provinces in the country, was an utterly tedious compendium of real estate ads and grain prices. The admirers of the work of Augustin Cochin on the literary societies of Brittany, thought to be among the most important institutions for spreading the radical Enlightenment, stifle the genuine quirkiness in Cochin's work. He was convinced that the literary societies were front organizations of an ultra-secret 'Machine', and the very absence of a shred of evidence of the Machine's existence was proof of how successful a conspiracy it really was. Cochin's own evidence shows that the crisis of 1788–9 politicized the literary societies; they did not politicize the crisis, so much as respond to it.

But if there was no straight line between Old Regime cultural institutions and beliefs on the one hand, and the Revolution on the other, some cultural phenomena certainly did contribute to a profound disaffection for the status quo. One of these was Jansenism. This was a doctrine of salvation and the means of grace that several popes condemned, most notably in 1713 in the bull *Unigenitus*. After decades of persecution from ecclesiastical and royal authority, Jansenism became a movement hostile to bishops, to papal sovereignty and to the wrongful exercise of royal authority. It found a home in a small but energetic faction among the Parisian *parlementaires* and to an extent in the streets of the capital. The Parlement took up the cause of the liberties of the French or Gallican Church against the Crown and the papacy, and in the 1750s, it defended Jansenist clerics against attempts to deny them extreme unction on their deathbeds.

Jansenism, therefore, popularized the idea of obedience to legal rather than arbitrary authority. Jansenist factions also claimed the *parlements* somehow were the guardians of the kingdom's fundamental laws and that the magistrates represented the Nation and spoke for it. In other words, France had a Constitution that kings were bound to respect. Many *parlementaires* and attorneys of the Paris bar were convinced they had a special role in evaluating the extent to which royal activities intruded upon ancient rights and privileges. While many of these men were sympathetic to Jansenist ideas, they were also upholding a centuries old tradition of French public law they had learned at university or studied in their legal textbooks. Moreover, in defending these concepts, they were also defending their interests as a corporation. Unlike the *philosophes*, for instance, they were largely indifferent to reform of the criminal law and they were more or less loyal to the Parlement of Paris in its battles with the Crown.

After they engineered the dissolution of their archenemies, the Jesuits, in 1763, the Jansenist movement scattered in different directions, denouncing the Enlightenment as impious, but advocating religious toleration for Protestants and Jews, and endorsing anti-slavery. These ideas had a great future but in the immediate term, individual Jansenists got more directly involved in politics. One of the most interesting examples was the journalist and publicist Pidansat de Mairobert. In the 1760s he had been deeply involved in a Jansenist salon hosted by Mme Doublet, and later made his living collecting and publishing news, scuttlebutt, rumours and gossip. The Maupeou coup of 1770–1 (see below) crushed his spirit, however, and in 1779, he slit his wrists, overwhelmed with debt and with despair for his country. He was convinced that the absence of any real resistance to the coup not only proved the monarchy to have been a despotism but that the French themselves had been too corrupted with centuries of oppression to regenerate themselves. His moralizing, his manecheeism, and his emphasis on a regenerative, morally based politics was an eerie foreshadowing of a major revolutionary discourse on how to effect regeneration after centuries of corruption of the human personality. Mairobert was a pessimistic Robespierre.

Mairobert was also a venomous critic of the court and he was tossed into the Bastille for writing a scurrilous biography of Madame du Barry, Louis XV's mistress, that highlighted her base origins as a cook and onetime prostitute. Indeed criticism of the court and its nefarious role in setting public policy grew throughout the century. From army officers in dusty provincial garrisons complaining about the conferring of the best commissions on well connected courtiers, to the intense humiliations at court of provincial squires like the comte d'Antraigues who consequently loathed Marie-Antoinette greatly, and who became one of the best publicists for Rousseau, the court loomed over polite society. It was resented almost everywhere.

One of those resentments was how much the court cost. No matter that most of its expenditures were entirely routine: meagre sums conferred on widows of military officers and on the relatives of other modest former state servants. No matter that the court budget was so small relative to overall expenditures: no one knew this at the time. There were too many spectacular examples of the Crown underwriting the debts of favourites; too many examples of far too much extravagant spending for the acquisition or construction of new châteaux, like St Cloud and the Bagatelle for the public to forgive the lush expenditures. After all, the Parlement of Paris itself told the public, in documents that could not be censored, that the source of public debt was extravagant government spending.

The unpopularity of the court related directly to the unpopularity of the King's mistresses, or in the case of Louis XVI, of his wife. Mme de Pompadour, the stunningly beautiful and charming mistress of Louis XV, eventually came to be loathed both by courtiers and by pamphleteers because of her sexual power. Commentators and gossips interpreted her improvized plays before the King at Versailles as humiliations of various courtiers. From the beginning, she had been described as 'the whore'. As time went on, she seemed to have an unnatural power over the King; indeed to have taken such advantage of him as to emasculate him. Her low birth only made the scandal worse, and the Jesuits at court were quite beside themselves when she acted in her own plays before the queen and uttered taunting lines. Her successor, Mme du Barry was seen as so grasping and so domineering that she was blamed for a grain shortage in Paris in 1770, a shortage that was allegedly designed to allow Louis XV to rake in mega profits to buy her fantastic jewellery and magnificent coaches.

But the most hated consort was Marie-Antoinette. Louis XVI was not respected. Courtiers commented on his awkwardness, his lumping gait, his absence of majesty, his irresolution, his lack of self confidence, even his impotence until that was fixed. But most of that mean spiritedness was kept within bounds. Not so with Marie-Antoinette. Rhetorical devices of sexual excess and irresistible seduction that had been applied to Mme de Pompadour were next applied to her. As a Hapsburg princess, she was a victim of the unpopularity of the alliance of 1756 with Austria but her gaucherie and her spite exacerbated her disastrous reputation. From the moment she stepped onto French soil until the day of her execution, many suspected her loyalties were anti-French, and that she was a Hapsburg spy in the highest quarters. Rumours about her libidinous sex life began early: she had had lesbian affairs with courtiers, it was said; she committed incest with her brother-in-law, the comte d'Artois who taught her new positions, it was said; she was 'soiled with crime and debauchery', said another pamphlet. The police commissioner of Paris actually bribed some people to cheer her when she visited but to little avail. Passers-by correctly suspected police involvement.

The Diamond Necklace Affair of 1785 gave such rumours an enormous fillip. This was a confidence scheme in which a gang of tricksters persuaded the ageing Cardinal de Rohan to purchase a hugely expensive diamond necklace as a gift for Marie-Antoinette to gain her favour. The thieves stole both the necklace and the money and made off to London. When the scam was discovered, Louis XVI concluded that Rohan could not possibly have been so stupid and that he must have been an accomplice. The King invested a great deal of energy into getting Rohan convicted but when the Paris *parlement* narrowly exonerated him, it

showed that few feared Louis's wrath. Worst of all, anonymous pamphlets assaulted the Queen, accusing her of catching venereal disease from the Cardinal and spreading it to the court. Needless to say, courtiers outside her charmed circle with the Polignac family often funded these attacks.

The consequence of these attacks on mistresses and queens was not to discredit the idea of monarchy as an institution, far from it. In both the case of Louis XV and Louis XVI, the discourse represented the king as a passive victim of sexually powerful, not to say, domineering women. One solution was to reduce the malign role of the court, to reduce its political influence over public affairs to nothing and to choke off its finances. For some others, the prominence of corrupt women in politics and the fame of certain salons that were dominated by celebrated women, showed the utter impurity of public life. Thus another avenue opened up that led to the same conclusion Mairobert had reached: France itself had been debauched. An entire generation grew up dreaming of doing great things. Some school boys at Louis-le-Grand in Paris that several future revolutionaries attended (Robespierre, Desmoulins, Fréron) smuggled books about Roman heroism to their beds to read them under the covers. This led others to dream of restoring a masculine identity, to revive a male altruistic virtue. Art historians have argued convincingly that David's *The Oath of the Horatii*, first exhibited at the salon of 1785, exemplifies this. The sons take the oath from their father to sacrifice themselves for their country while the women sit limp off in a corner.

Where Are We Now in the Argument?

The great historian of the Revolution in the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville, said that the Revolution was made in men's minds before it became a reality. As with anything Tocqueville said, the statement forces us to think, but it is certainly wrong. Those who embrace the interpretation of the Revolution based upon language and culture believe Tocqueville, though. Indeed, the late François Furet went even further than Tocqueville and asserted that the utopian language of the Enlightenment dominated the scene once the Old Regime collapsed and that since it was impossible to decree virtue, the Terror, the obsession to compel people to be good, was a logical and inevitable result. Furet also insisted on the importance of the influence of a particular reading of Rousseau, that his thought set up the conceptual framework of Jacobinism. This erected popular sovereignty into an absolute so that there was no limit on public power. If after a long and sincere debate, Rousseau says, someone persists in resisting the General Will, that is, they resist an unambiguous moral

truth, they can be killed. Thus there is but a short step, or perhaps no step at all, to the conformity of sentiments in the Terror.

Others have asserted that certain discourses of the Old Regime, particularly those that emphasized a political theory in which the ideal polity was based upon justice, as opposed to liberty or the rule of law, 'opened the way for the Terror'. Still others have argued for a decline in the respect kingship evoked, or even that the monarchy was desacralized. Thus when the pathetic law clerk/servant Damiens plunged a pocketknife into Louis XV's fur coat in January 1756, the would-be assassin set off a chain of events, so it is said, that led to the de-legitimization of the monarchy.

If only things had been so simple. Police reports at the time certainly showed the public understood the hypocrisy of maintaining Louis XV's public image as the *Bien aimé* (the 'well beloved') and his scandalous private life, as well as his persecution of those much admired spiritual Olympians, the Jansenists. But the most some hotheads could imagine was a replacement of the Bourbons with another dynasty. Indeed, few revolutionaries at the beginning could imagine France without monarchy. Even after Louis XVI's many betrayals once the Revolution began, even after the overthrow of the monarchy in August 1792, most Jacobin clubs assumed monarchy in one form or another would continue. Monarchy as an institution in people's minds could be eradicated only after the immense provocations that occurred after 1789, not before.

The importance of the linguistic–cultural interpretation is that it is an outgrowth of the anti-Marxist critique of the origins of the Revolution. Their adepts assume that since the class struggle interpretation is untenable, a social interpretation in any form is untenable too. The defining event of the period thus becomes the assault on the monarchy. The research agenda in turn becomes a search for anti-monarchial statements in the Old Regime. But the dislike of individual kings, or the utterly disgusting attacks on their reputations, ought not to be confounded with hostility to the institution of kingship. Unfortunately for those who believe in the desacralization of the monarchy thesis, the French Revolution occurred under Louis XVI, not under the reign of his grandfather.

Perhaps it is time to revisit the social context in which the Old Regime collapsed. But before doing so, we need to realize that even on the eve of the Revolution, the Revolution had not yet occurred in people's minds. The political experience of the thinking classes before 1789 was that the monarchy was too despotic, and that the court was quite beyond redemption. The solution was more liberty, a liberty that was quite compatible with monarchy, but almost until the eve of the final crisis in 1788, no one, literally no one, imagined that aristocratic, clerical, and other privileges would have to disappear too. In other words, a great deal of

what made the Revolution revolutionary did not occur until circumstances compelled the revolutionaries to do what they did.

Circumstances mattered largely because the good will of moderate leaders of both sides was not able to overcome fundamental differences over the nature of the liberal constitution to be imposed on the monarchy. This in turn arose because of critical differences in the social position of the two groups, that is over the related questions of wealth and privilege. Nobles were the wealthiest single group and were among the most privileged. Although many nobles were willing to surrender all or most of their privileges and maintain their leading social position simply through their massive ownership of property, the majority of the elected representatives of the Second Estate was not. Pure selfishness apart, they retained an older view that privilege was a useful defence against unbridled absolutism. All that was needed was a constitution to supplement these privileges. In the event, many bourgeois agreed on the necessity to reinforce privilege. It was the role of the liberal leadership, both noble and bourgeois, to convince their constituencies that group privileges were no longer adequate. They failed, and since privilege was removed by violence and chicanery in August 1789, they created one of the strands of the counterrevolution.

Aristocrats and Bourgeois

It is hard to imagine how wealthy the eighteenth-century aristocracy was. Of course, there were many poor nobles. To cite only one example, Sublieutenant Bonaparte earned only 1000 *livres* per year in the artillery, which was less, far less, than the court aristocrats, the La Tremoilles, spent on their boxes at the *Comédie Française* and the *Théâtre Italien*, let alone the 44,000 *livres* a year they spent on dinner parties. Other court families like the Orléans, with their revenues of two million a year, or the Contis with their 3.7 million, were among the wealthiest people in the country. There were similarly breathtaking bourgeois fortunes. The Luynes family, merchants at Nantes, had a fortune of over four million *livres* in 1788. On the whole, however, the nobility's fortunes were greater than those of most others. Even in Lyon, the largest industrial city in the country, the average noble fortune, much of it in the hands of office-holders, was three times that of the silk wholesalers, the wealthiest single group in the bourgeoisie. In Troyes, another manufacturing city, noble fortunes were more than double those of the wholesale merchants. Of the sixteen wealthiest people in the little port of Vannes, twelve were nobles. Of the marriage contracts signed at the administrative centre of Dijon in 1748, all those of the nobility but not one of those of the

bourgeoisie were worth more than 50,000 *livres*. Finally, in the administrative centre of Toulouse, nobles held over 60 per cent of the private wealth in the city and two thirds of that noble wealth belonged to the magistrates in the *parlement*. Despite the overlappings these figures reveal, the overwhelming tendency was for the aristocracy to be wealthier than anyone else.

Wealth, status and professional ties also made nobles a fairly closed group. Although much work remains to be done on the question of marriage alliances, what evidence there is suggests a high degree of endogamy. Among the magistrates of the Parlement of Provence, 90 per cent of the marriages were with other nobles, mostly other robe families, but there was a significant set of alliances with sword, or military, nobles too. A little over one in ten marriages was with non-noble families but alliances with the merchant and wholesaling bourgeoisie were very rare despite the proximity of Aix-en-Provence and Marseille and despite the fabulous fortunes of the Marseille shipping clans. Elsewhere, eight out of ten marriages of the magistrates of the Parlement of Brittany took place within the circle of fully-fledged aristocrats. Marriages with merchants and financiers were very rare for the magistrates of the Parlement of Paris, who had close family relationships among themselves and with some of the most illustrious names at court. Among the nobles of the Paris region in general, there was almost no intermarriage with the Third Estate, indeed almost no marriage across the various sub-classes of noble. Among courtier families, the intermarriage among cousins in the same family was increasing because they were increasingly concerned to keep the blood lines pure. It also helps explain why opinion considered courtiers almost a race apart – they almost were.

The revolutionaries defined nobles with some justification as a wealthy group. They also claimed they were excessively privileged. Although this allegation is harder to assess, there was considerable truth to it. One of the difficulties is that there were few privileges common to the aristocracy throughout the realm and many varied in their impact. Their honorific rights defined in heraldic and sumptuary legislation marked them out without harming anyone else materially. Others could have real but intangible consequences: exemption from the jurisdiction of the bankruptcy courts, exemption from hanging or flogging except in cases unworthy of their station like treason or perjury, the privilege of *committimus* by which some nobles (and some clerics, among others) could demand a trial in civil cases before a higher jurisdiction, and so on. Still others could have a direct material benefit for individuals or their families. Nobles alone could own seigneuries or fiefs outright. Roturier owners had to pay a tax known as *franc-fief*. In regions of customary law, nobles enjoyed a different testamentary code that could permit primo-

geniture, thus preserving their estates from the disintegration that threatened those of roturiers every generation.

Above all nobles benefited from tax exemptions. Contrary to a common belief, nobles did pay taxes in the Old Regime. In 1695, Louis XIV subjected them to the *capitation*, a tax on overall revenues, and in 1749 his successor imposed the *vingtième*, a 5 per cent tax on net landed revenues. But nobles were exempt from compulsory billeting, militia service, the *corvée* or compulsory roadwork, and the *gabelle*, or salt tax. They were exempt too from the *taille personnelle* which covered three quarters of the country. In practice, this meant they could cultivate a home farm directly and pay no tax. Turgot, who as finance minister and a former intendant was in a position to know, estimated that this exemption was worth up to 2000 *livres*, and the reduced taxes on the farms of tenants allowed the noble landlords to demand higher rents.

They also paid less than they ought to have done on the taxes they owed. The richest noble families around Toulouse paid an average rate of less than 15 per cent while a typical peasant family paid considerably more. The princes of the blood ought to have paid 2.4 million *livres* in *vingtième* but actually paid only 188,000 *livres*, while one of them, the duc d'Orléans, bragged that he paid whatever he pleased. In Brittany the noble-dominated provincial estates collected taxes on behalf of the Crown on separate rolls for the nobility. They assessed themselves at half the per capita *capitation* of roturiers. The result was that the Marquis de Piré who had a gross fortune of 2.5 million *livres* paid only 27 *livres* in taxes, less than a prosperous baker paid. Privilege then was worth having. So too was ennobling office despite the low formal return on investment.

Many non-nobles thought privilege was worth having too. In fact, the most privileged corporation in the kingdom was the Church, which paid no taxes at all and instead negotiated a *don gratuit* or 'free gift' with the Crown every five years. In return, it received a monopoly of public worship, education and public charity. Many *roturiers* were privileged as well. No Bretons paid the *taille* or *gabelle* with the result that their tax load was less than one fifth that of their counterparts in the Ile-de-France. Indeed, as Necker, the Director-General of Finances, revealed in 1781, the regional disparities in the incidence of taxation were immense. Within the provinces too, various towns had bought or acquired exemption from the *taille*, as had various individuals, office-holders and occupations. Given the primitive fiscal machinery of the time, it is likely too that towns in general paid less than the countryside, although the system tried to compensate for this by elaborate indirect taxes on articles of consumption such as alcohol, soap, legal documents and playing cards.

In other words, nobles and bourgeois may have been functionally a class of property holders but there were still significant differences among them. Nobles were richer, and relatively more privileged. These differences affected the politics of the two groups in 1789.

The Crisis of the Old Regime

Aside from obvious self-interest, one of the reasons Frenchmen of whatever rank clung to privilege so much was that it protected them from a fiscal system that was both a mystery and accountable to no one. Indeed, the government itself had no idea what its resources or expenditures were. Although there were substantial efforts to adopt a more responsible system of internal accounting under the reign of Louis XVI, the Old Regime monarchy never thought of opening the books to outside scrutiny, or even to a centralized internal audit, let alone of justifying its fiscal policies to the public. Yet the monarchy did expect its subjects to pay and its officials were flabbergasted when other bodies questioned them.

The first great crisis of this sort occurred in the wake of the Seven Years War (1756–63). To raise money for this disastrous war, the government doubled the *vingtième* in 1756, and tripled it in 1760. Some exemptions from the *taille* were suspended, those remaining exempt had their *capitation* doubled, indirect taxes were raised and surtaxes were created. No one questioned that everyone had to make sacrifices in wartime but these measures were so drastic that they raised the question of the government's right to tax as it saw fit. Since the government proposed to continue these measures into the peace for reasons that were clear to no one, the question quickly arose of the limits of the monarchy's fiscal powers and of the proper relation between the Crown and its subjects.

The men best placed to pose these questions were the magistrates in the *parlements*, not only because the fiscal expedients of the war directly affected their pocket books but because venality of office offered them a measure of protection against reprisals. But they also spoke for everyone else who was affected, privileged or not, or for all those haunted by the nightmare of unchecked fiscality devouring the wealth of the nation.

Although the *parlements* lost in the struggle against the monarchy, they did habituate the politically conscious public to the idea that the solution to royal voracity was the rule of law. During the Jansenist crisis, the Parlement of Paris had already claimed to represent the nation. In 1763–4, it applied this principle to taxation. The magistrates argued that the King held his throne and legitimacy from the fundamental laws of the realm, which were immutable. The *parlement* had the right to determine whether ordinary legislation conformed to the principles of the ancient

constitution. In fiscal matters, the magistrates claimed, 'the infraction of the sacred right of verification simultaneously violates the rights of the Nation and the rights of legislation; it follows that the collection of a tax which has not been verified is a crime against the Constitution . . . '. The purpose of government was to maintain the citizens in the enjoyment of rights which the laws assured them, those rights being liberty and honour. Provincial *parlements* went even further with strikes, collective resignations and orders to arrest local governors for enforcing the edicts. The most agonizing and dramatic conflict came with the Parlement of Brittany. This struggle lasted until 1770 with arrests, counter arrests, suspension of the *parlement*, resignations and arrest of magistrates. When the Parlement of Paris refused orders to cease its intervention, the Chancellor Maupeou in effect abolished it in February 1771. Subsequent protests from provincial parlements led to their 're-modelling'.

Yet once the government had its way, the Controller-General, Terray, did nothing to reform the government's finances. Force had shown that the monarchy could push its critics aside and stumble from one expedient to another, as it always had. Thus when Louis XVI, who ascended the throne in 1774, immediately restored the *parlements* in an attempt to win popularity and govern by consensus, men drew a number of conclusions from Maupeou's 'revolution', as it was called at the time. The *parlements* issued a number of declarations that showed they were unrepentant. They strongly protested Turgot's attempt in 1776 to transform the *corvée* into a money tax. In practice, however, the judges showed an extreme reluctance to risk provoking the monarchy again. Other commentators were simply dismayed. The timid Paris bookseller Hardy accused Maupeou of destroying the ancient constitution of the French government but could think of nothing better than to look to the princes of the blood 'on whose protests depends perhaps the salvation of the French and the conservation of the true rights of the nation'. Others were more imaginative. The Maupeou affair confirmed what some had been thinking for a long time: that France had become a despotism, no different from that of the dreaded Turks or any other oriental despotism. French kings no longer ruled according to the laws of God. They had succumbed to their base appetites.

But there were other possible lessons that could be taken from the Maupeou affair. Malesherbes, the magistrate of the *cour des aides* who later defended Louis XVI at his trial, remonstrated on behalf of his colleagues that the courts 'supplemented' the role of Estates in consenting to taxes and, in 1775, demanded the King hear 'the nation assembled . . . . The unanimous wish of the nation is to obtain the Estates-General or at least, provincial estates'.

Some of the provincial *parlements* like Grenoble, Bordeaux and Besançon demanded provincial estates as well, bodies which would give their provinces a bargaining power over taxes and a lever against the intendants such as the Bretons had and which they alone could not provide. In fact, the *parlements* had a strong sense of their own fragility, which was only reinforced by the docility of the Paris *parlement*. It registered a double *vingtième* in 1780, a triple *vingtième* in 1782 and loans of 125 million *livres* in 1784 and 80 million *livres* in 1785, with only perfunctory demands for further economies in the royal household and finances. The long-term effect of Maupeou's revelation of the *parlements*' weakness and their subsequent docility was thus to discredit the *parlements* as a defence against despotism. Rabaut-Saint-Etienne, the Protestant minister and deputy to the Constituent Assembly, wrote that part of the nation regarded the *parlements* as a 'barrier to despotism of which everyone was weary'. The general public may well have thought so, but others explained the absence of heroics from this generation of magistrates as obsequiousness, ambition or corruption. The abbé Morellet, a minor writer, accused the *parlement* of 'letting us be overwhelmed [with taxes] for over a century, [of permitting the government] all its waste and its loans which it knew all about . . .'

Many Frenchmen of the 1780s had concluded that the risks of the monarchy degenerating into a despotism were very real and that the solution was not to reinforce the powers of the *parlements* but to revive the provincial estates or the Estates-General. So far as one can tell, few yet thought about the question of privileges. Indeed, the *parlementaires* who demanded the revival of representative institutions clearly thought of them as augmenting their constitutional powers and consequently protecting their privileges, not supplanting or suppressing them.

The government's freedom of maneuver in this general crisis of confidence in existing institutions was consequently limited. Nor had the two important finance ministers of the period, Necker and Calonne, raised the level of confidence. When a powerful coalition of tax-farmers, resentful courtiers and spiteful ministers pushed him out of office in 1781, Necker claimed in his famous *Comte rendu au roi* that there was a surplus on hand of 10 million *livres*. Whether this was misleading, as his detractors later suggested, is less important than the fact that, as the first public declaration of royal finances, it created a sensation and established Necker's reputation as a miracle worker. The triple *vingtième* and the huge loans after his fall only reinforced this impression. Calonne underlined it by heaping huge pensions on avid courtiers and by authorizing the Crown's acquisition of the lovely châteaux of Saint-Cloud and Rambouillet. By contrast, Necker had tried to impose greater internal accountability, closer surveillance of the tax-farmers and economies on