1

Origins: Inevitable Revolution or Resolvable Crisis?

Could the French Revolution have been avoided? At one level the answer to this question is a simple one: No historical event is inevitable, and certainly no revolution or war need have occurred at precisely the time it did. Our question is a bit more complicated, however, and we might put it in a different way. Could the Bourbon monarchy have survived the crisis that it faced in the 1780s? To be sure, there are monarchists in Paris today who fondly hope for a restoration of the Bourbon throne, but few would consider that hope to be realistic. On the other hand, the other great monarchies of Europe – the Habsburgs, the Hohenzollerns, the Romanovs – survived up until World War I, and the Bourbons returned to the French throne for a brief time after the defeat of Napoleon. So while the collapse of the monarchy in France may have been inevitable, eventually, it need not have happened when it did and as it did. This leaves plenty of room for debate about why the French Revolution occurred, and whether or not it could have been averted in 1789.

One of the striking things about the French Revolution, particularly as compared to other major revolutions in world history, is that it occurred in the most powerful, most prosperous, and most populous nation in Europe at the time. No one in the 1780s would have said that the Bourbon monarchy was on the verge of collapse. So what happened? Understanding the roots of the crisis that confronted the French state in 1789 is a crucial first step toward understanding the nature of the Revolution itself.

The tension between individual liberty and the growth of state power will be a theme running throughout this volume, and it points as well to a distinction we might make in considering the origins of the French Revolution. On the one hand we will find them in the aspirations for greater

freedom and individual rights expressed by educated French people over the course of the eighteenth century, but we will also find causes of revolution in the challenges confronting the French state in the second half of the century, both internal and external, which in the end the monarchy proved unable to master. These two broad themes – the quest for individual freedom, and problems confronting the state – will be explored in this chapter in three sections. The first will discuss the cultural and ideological origins of the French Revolution. For many years the focus here among historians was on the Enlightenment, on the critique of absolute monarchy and the Catholic Church presented by philosophes such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. This was not uncontested territory itself. Some argued that these thinkers were really not so revolutionary in their ideas, while others questioned the extent of their influence in the eighteenth century. More recently, however, scholars have begun to consider an expanding array of cultural developments and institutions, including religious currents (especially Jansenism), popular literature, the world of theatre, an emerging newspaper press, and the growing influence in the final decades of the Old Regime of the ''public sphere'' and public opinion.

The idea of the public sphere points us toward the second section of this chapter, dealing with the social and economic origins of the Revolution. In the Marxist interpretation the focus in this regard was on the rising bourgeoisie and a developing capitalist economy in France. That interpretation, as already noted, has come under serious criticism, and new arguments have been advanced regarding economic change in the eighteenth century and its impact on social categories and political attitudes. An expanding commercial sector was of particular importance, as was the pattern of gradual urbanization. Two major questions will draw our attention in this section: Was the Old Regime economy vibrant and capable of growth, or teetering on the brink of obsolescence? and, Were the elites of the Third Estate virtually indistinguishable from the nobility in their interests and political views, as some have suggested, or were there real tensions and differences between them? In addition, the role of the peasantry as a revolutionary force must be assessed.

The third section of the chapter will focus on structural and institutional origins of the Revolution, some of which are rooted in economic factors. It is clear, for instance, that a financial crisis forced the monarchy to convene the Estates General in 1789. Past scholarship focused largely on the inequality of taxation and an inefficient tax collection system as responsible for this, but very recent work has drawn our attention to the related issue of public debt and the financial institutions of the Old Regime. Some historians have argued that the monarchy made serious efforts to reform judicial and administrative structures in the second half of the

eighteenth century, pointing (on the judicial side) to efforts by Chancellor Maupeou at the end of the reign of Louis XV and (on the administrative side) to reforms introduced by Turgot in the early years of Louis XVI's rule. Loménie de Brienne also attempted reforms on the very eve of the Revolution. All of these efforts failed, however, which has generated debate about the validity of the reforms themselves and the obstacles to their implementation. At the heart of the matter, some would argue, lay the system of privilege upon which the Old Regime monarchy rested.

I would make one final preliminary observation before moving ahead. It is common in the historiography to distinguish between long-term and short-term causes of the Revolution. The inefficiencies of the tax system would be an example of the former, the bad harvests of 1788 and 1789 an example of the latter. I have used the word ''origins'' more often than ''causes'' in these introductory remarks, and in the title to this chapter, quite intentionally. In thinking about the impact of Enlightenment thought, for example, it is difficult to see it as a cause of the Revolution, particularly since so few of the philosophes called for any kind of revolutionary upheaval. But there is no doubt that Enlightenment ideas contributed to the ferment of the 1780s and to the constitutional debates in the Constituent Assembly. Similarly, one would be wary of arguing that an expanding ''public sphere'' and the emergence of public opinion as an acknowledged force in the 1780s *caused* the Revolution, but these changes helped to create a social and cultural context within which political contestation became more possible than it was earlier in the century, and in this sense we must include these elements among the origins of the French Revolution.

Cultural and Ideological Origins

In nearly every textbook on European history or Western civilization a discussion of the Enlightenment precedes the section on the French Revolution, and in that juxtaposition the Enlightenment has come to be seen as a cause of the Revolution. The most celebrated proponent of a direct connection between the two is almost certainly Alexis de Tocqueville, who argued that the abstract ideas of the philosophes, who had no direct experience in government or administration, led to the impractical and ultimately failed experiments of the several revolutionary regimes, from the Constitutional Monarchy through the Jacobin Republic and Directory.[1] In the early twentieth century Daniel Mornet also made a case

1 A. de Tocqueville, *L'Ancien Régime et la révolution* (Paris, Lévy frères, 1856).

for the influence of Enlightenment ideas on revolutionary politics, and monarchist critics of the Revolution have long contended that the Enlightenment was to blame for the fiasco of 1789.[2]

It is easier to make a case for the philosophes as critics of the Old Regime than as advocates of revolution. One sees in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and *The Spirit of the Laws* a critique of royal absolutism, but the latter is more a call for aristocratic restraint on royal power than a call for democratic reform. Many of Voltaire's essays and literary works contained biting criticism of the Catholic Church and religious intolerance, but despite his own deist views he saw religion as essential to the preservation of public morals among the masses. The Revolution would attack both the monarchy and the Church, but not, most historians would agree today, at the call of either Montesquieu or Voltaire.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau went considerably further in his criticism of Old Regime monarchy and society. The *Second Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* argued that the existing social order was the product of an elaborate hoax played upon the weak by the powerful rather than being the fruit of celestial design, and went so far as to suggest that a despotic monarch could be turned out by his subjects. Rousseau carried this argument further in *The Social Contract*, in which he developed his concept of the ''general will,'' asserting that sovereignty resided in the people rather than in the person of the king. In 1791 Louis-Sébastien Mercier published *De J. J. Rousseau considéré comme l'un des premiers auteurs de la Révolution*, clear evidence of the influence he attributed to the philosophe, and it is well-known that Rousseau's writings profoundly shaped the political thinking of Maximilien Robespierre.[3]

That Rousseau's thought was influential *during* the Revolution, however, does not necessarily mean that his writings were a *cause* of the Revolution. Joan McDonald argued, for example, that the *Social Contract* was not widely read before 1789 and that its limited audience was more likely to have included liberal monarchists than future revolutionaries.[4] James Miller took the opposite view in his elegant intellectual biography of

---

2 D. Mornet, *Les Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française* (Paris, A. Colin, 1933); see also Lynn Hunt's entry on the French Revolution in A. Kors, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003), vol. 2, 80–84, for a discussion of monarchist critics, as well as commentary on what some revolutionaries themselves had to say about Enlightenment influence.

3 See, for example, N. Hampson, *The Life and Opinions of Maximilien Robespierre* (London, Duckworth, 1974), and D. P. Jordan, *The Revolutionary Career of Maximilien Robespierre* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1989).

4 J. McDonald, *Rousseau and the French Revolution, 1762–91* (London, Athlone Press, 1965).

Rousseau, pointing out that the key political concepts more fully explicated in the *Social Contract* were also sketched out, in abbreviated form, in his novels *Emile* and *La Nouvelle Héloise*, both of which were enormously popular in the final decades of the Old Regime. Miller credits Rousseau with rehabilitating the idea of democracy, long discredited among European political theorists: "In this respect, the French Revolution has played a major role in determining how we can read Rousseau. The event illuminates the text – for it was the Revolution, after all, which forced the idea of democracy onto the agenda of modern history."[5]

There has been no paucity of scholarly work on Rousseau over the years, but the ascendancy of the Marxist interpretation in the twentieth century and the turn to social history following World War II meant that, for a generation or two, historians of the French Revolution looked away from the Enlightenment toward social and economic causal factors. That trend changed due to the influence of François Furet, who particularly emphasized Rousseauist ideas as responsible not only for the upheaval of 1789 but also for drawing revolutionary politics ineluctably toward the Terror. In this Furet echoed an earlier argument of J. L. Talmon, who saw in Rousseau's philosophy the origins of twentieth-century totalitarianism.[6] Keith Baker has also recently reemphasized Enlightenment thought in exploring the origins of the Revolution, although focusing on lesser-known figures such as Jacob-Nicolas Moreau, Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, and the abbé Gabriel Bonnot Mably, in whose work Baker sees a virtual "script for a French revolution."[7]

The relationship between the Enlightenment and Revolution remains a contested one, however. In response to Furet's argument, Roger Chartier suggested that rather than the Enlightenment having caused the Revolution it was the revolutionaries who self-consciously created the Enlightenment as their intellectual precursor, a dialectical relationship also hinted at by James Miller in the passage quoted above.[8] Darrin McMahon has challenged both Furet and Chartier in *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity*.[9] As the title suggests, McMahon argues on the one hand that the Enlightenment existed as an intellectual force long before the Revolution occurred – its

5 J. Miller, *Rousseau: Dreamer of Democracy* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984), 203.

6 F. Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris, Gallimard, 1978); J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1952).

7 K. M. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), 86–106.

8 R. Chartier, *Les Origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris, Seuil, 1990).

9 D. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001).

enemies were in full voice by mid-century – and on the other that this opposition to Enlightenment ideas continued on into the decade of the 1790s, contrary to Furet's assertion that Jacobin ideology, the heir of Rousseau, created its own mythic enemies as justification for the Terror. This is a debate to which we will return in later chapters.

As we see, then, there have been those who have interpreted the Enlightenment as a cause of the French Revolution in a positive sense, others who viewed its influence more negatively as leading to the political excesses of the Revolution, and still others who have called any causal relationship into question. In recent years, post-modernist thinkers have interpreted the Enlightenment in a more broadly negative light, arguing that in its insistence on empirical truth the Enlightenment privileged European culture and paved the way for colonialism, imperialism, and the subjugation of non-European peoples. Daniel Gordon and others dispute that view in a recent collection of essays, in the conclusion to which Gordon writes that "One way to think about Enlightenment political thought is that it was an effort to bring about a double institutionalization of liberty – to proclaim liberty as a basic human right and to set its limits in practice."[10]

If one sees Enlightenment thought as central to the assertion of human rights, then certainly one must count the Enlightenment among the origins of the French Revolution, given the centrality of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* to the Revolution itself. Many years ago Georges Lefebvre argued that one might read the *Declaration* point by point, despite its claims to universality, as essentially a critique of the failings of the Old Regime.[11] Lynn Hunt has recently contributed two books focusing on the *Declaration of Rights* and the genesis of those rights in the eighteenth century on both sides of the Atlantic.[12] Given the importance of the *Declaration* both as an expression of revolutionary ideals and as a window into the abuses of the Old Regime, we will examine it at some length in Chapter Three.

In another important work, Dale Van Kley explored at length the religious origins of the French Revolution, paying particular attention to the Jansenist controversy within the French Catholic Church. Beginning with the papal bull *Unigenitus* (1713) and culminating with an order of the Archbishop of Paris in the 1750s denying them the sacraments,

10 D. Gordon, *Postmodernism and the Enlightenment: New Perspectives in Eighteenth-Century French Intellectual History* (London, Routledge, 2001), 210.

11 G. Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, trans. R. R. Palmer (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1947). This book, still among the best introductions to the origins of the French Revolution, includes a chapter discussing the *Declaration*.

12 L. Hunt, ed., *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Boston, Bedford Books, 1996); *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, W. W. Norton, 2007).

Jansenists found themselves the targets of concerted royal persecution. The response of the Jansenist minority to that persecution focused criticism not only on the hierarchy of the Catholic Church (by appealing to the conciliar tradition within the church), but also on the sacred character of the monarchy itself. Since many Jansenists were members of the parlement of Paris, they became embroiled in the Maupeou controversy of the 1770s, when Louis XV's chancellor attempted to curtail the authority of the parlements. Maupeou's reforms elicited a wave of critical pamphlets, many of them written by Jansenist *parlementaires*.

Notable among these pamphlets was one published in Bordeaux by Guillaume-Joseph Saige, a young lawyer whose cousin sat on the parlement of Bordeaux. In his pamphlet, *Cathechisme du Citoyen*, Saige combined Jansenist and Rousseauist ideas, arguing, on the one hand, that the conciliarist tradition within the French Catholic Church represented a kind of republicanism, and, on the other, that the many communes of rural France represented ''so many little republics within the great republic of the French nation.'' So incendiary was this pamphlet, with its direct challenge to monarchical despotism and its insistence that sovereignty was embodied not in the king but in the nation, that the parlement of Bordeaux itself ordered it to be burned. Van Kley argues that the Jansenist strain within French Catholicism was not only an essential influence on the Civil Constitution of the Clergy of 1790, but on the genesis of French republicanism: ''religion as mediated by ideology entered into the very texture of revolutionary republicanism, making sense of many of its otherwise paradoxical traits.''[13]

We are more accustomed to thinking of the Catholic Church as a target of revolutionary violence than as a contributor to revolutionary ideas. The church and the monarchy were intimately linked, and the church was among the largest landowners in France. Those lands would be confiscated in 1790 in order to repay the national debt, and by 1794 the church would come under direct attack from radical Jacobins. It seems counterintuitive, then, to think of religious thought among the intellectual origins of the French Revolution, but Van Kley makes a powerful case. Roughly a quarter of the delegates to the Estates General would be drawn from the clergy, of course, so their influence on the debates of the early years is hardly surprising. What is more remarkable, perhaps, is the number of priests, or ex-priests, who are numbered among the radical Jacobins of the Year II.

13 D. Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996), 375. See also K. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, Chapter 6, for a discussion of the Saige pamphlet. The quotation will be found on page 149.

Historians have broadened our understanding of the cultural origins of the French Revolution in a number of other ways as well over the past quarter century. David Bell has examined the emergence of nationalism and the idea of the nation, arguing that a "cult of the nation" emerged in the eighteenth century that, while it came to challenge the centrality of monarchy and the Church in the French polity, also had its roots in French religious thought.[14] Robert Darnton has produced a body of work extending back to the 1970s that has explored the "business" of the Enlightenment – the publishing houses and distribution networks by which clandestine works of all sorts circulated in France – while also stretching our definition of Enlightenment culture to include "Grub Street hacks" and "the forbidden bestsellers" of the final decades of the Old Regime. Some of those "Grub Street" journalists and pamphleteers, including Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Antoine-Joseph Gorsas, went on to become prominent journalists and deputies during the Revolution, and the shopkeepers and working people who stormed the Bastille in 1789 or the Tuileries Palace in 1792 were more likely to have been reading some of the libelous pornography targeting Marie-Antoinette than the plays of Voltaire or the political theory of Rousseau. Did such literature *cause* the French Revolution? Certainly not, but it did contribute to what Darnton calls the "common culture" of late eighteenth-century France that made revolution conceivable in 1789.[15]

The concept of a "common culture" can be seen as related to the idea of the "bourgeois public sphere," first introduced in the 1960s by the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, and to the concept of "public opinion" that historians such as Keith Baker and Mona Ozouf have discussed in some of their writings.[16] Habermas situated the "public sphere" between the state and civil society, arguing that it emerged in the late seventeenth and early

14 D. A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2001).

15 R. Darnton, "The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France," *Past and Present* 51 (May 1971), 81–115; "In Search of the Enlightenment: Recent Attempts to Create a Social history of Ideas," *Journal of Modern History* 43 (1971), 113–32; *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775–1800* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1979); *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1982); *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, Basic Books, 1984); *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, W. W. Norton, 1995). For critiques of Darnton's work, see H. T. Mason, ed., *The Darnton Debate: Books and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, Voltaire Foundation, 1998).

16 J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1992); K. Baker, "Public Opinion as Political Invention," in Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, 167–99;

eighteenth centuries in conjunction with the growth of a new commercial bourgeoisie in Europe. The ''public sphere'' found expression in a number of institutional settings: Masonic lodges, provincial academies, clubs, cafés, salons, and journals. Those who participated in those institutions or fora were generally critical of absolutist monarchy, advocating both increased economic and political liberty and a more open, democratic society. It is ironic that Habermas' ideas have gained currency over the past quarter century, as the revisionist assault on the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution has achieved dominance, given that Habermas' analysis is quite consistent with Marxist philosophy and political theory.

While the concept of the ''public sphere'' is quite abstract and multifaceted, that of ''public opinion'' is more focused and tangible, if still somewhat vaguely defined. It is also a term that one finds in contemporary usage. Louis XVI himself made reference to public opinion early in his reign, and both Jacques Necker and Charles-Alexandre Calonne appealed to public opinion in their debate over their respective management of royal finances in the 1780s. It was not uncommon in the last decades of the Old Regime for members of the parlement of Paris to publish their remonstrances against royal edicts, implicitly appealing to ''public opinion,'' and lawyers quite often published their legal briefs, written in narrative style, to present the cases of their more celebrated clients before the court of ''public opinion.'' Sarah Maza has provocatively analyzed six such *causes célèbres*, including the ''Diamond Necklace Affair'' in which Marie-Antoinette was implicated, and an adultery case pitting Guillaume Kornmann against the playwright Beaumarchais. The *mémoires judiciaires* published by lawyers in these cases were not subject to the same censorship restrictions as other forms of literature, and as such could raise issues related to privilege and the exercise of power that more explicitly political writings could not, except clandestinely. They were enormously popular – hundreds of copies, sometimes thousands, circulated in Paris and throughout the realm. They were important, Maza argues, because they bridged the gap between the philosophical and literary concerns of the Enlightenment and the political concerns of the Revolution, on the one hand, and between the private sphere and the public sphere on the other; they raised questions, in the process, about the relationship between private and public virtue. The reputation of the monarchy was clearly tarnished by the ''Diamond Necklace Affair,'' despite the innocence of the

M. Ozouf, ''Public Spirit,'' in F. Furet and M. Ozouf, eds., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989), 771–80; M. Ozouf, ''L'Opinion publique,'' in K. Baker, ed., *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford, Pergamon, 1987), 419–34; and ''Public Opinion at the End of the Old Regime,'' *Journal of Modern History* 60 (September, 1988), S1–S21.

queen in the scandal, and many of these cases targeted prominent aristocrats. They represent a significant element in the social and cultural ferment that swept across France on the eve of the Revolution.[17]

Politics became public during the Revolution, publicized to an engaged populace through a burgeoning popular press. While there was no free press under the Old Regime, however, a growing body of work has made clear in recent years that the roots of that development lay in the decades before 1789 and that newspapers published along the borders of France circulated widely within the country.[18] They may not have been as bold as their revolutionary heirs, nor did they provide a forum for political debate as newspapers would in the 1790s, but they did educate the reading public regarding a range of national and international affairs, and as such constituted an important part of Habermas' ''public sphere.''[19]

Virtually all of the works discussed in the preceding pages have focused, in one way or another, on the written word: on Enlightenment texts, on religious texts, on lawyers' briefs, on newspapers, journals, and underground literature, on the Declaration of the Rights of Man. That focus begs the question, as Robert Darnton has put it, ''Do Books Cause Revolutions?''[20] How does one make the connection between the written word, or words, of the Old Regime, and the political rhetoric and actions of the Revolution? In this regard, François Furet and Keith Baker have both drawn strong criticism for failing to place the discourse that they analyze in any sort of social context.[21] One historian who has tried to do precisely this in recent years is Arlette Farge, who in a series of books has guided

---

17 S. Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Pre-Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993).

18 J. D. Popkin, *News and Politics in the Age of Revolution: Jean Luzac's ''Gazette de Leyde''* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1989); *Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789–1799* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1990); J. D. Popkin and J. R. Censer, eds., *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987); D. G. Levy, *The Ideas and Careers of Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1980); N. R. Gelbart, *Feminine and Opposition Journalism in Old Regime France: The ''Journal des Dames''* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987); R. Darnton and D. Roche, eds., *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775–1800* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989); C. Bellanger et al., *Histoire Générale de la presse française* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1969).

19 See C. Jones, ''The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution,'' *American Historical Review* 101 (February 1996), 13–40, for a fascinating article making explicit through an analysis of provincial French newspapers the commercial aspect that is central to Habermas' concept of the public sphere.

20 R. Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France*, Section III.

21 See, for example, Marisa Linton, ''The Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution,'' in P. R. Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 139–59.

her readers through the neighborhoods of Paris, describing and analyzing the rumors, plots, minor revolts, acts of violence, public threats, and private quarrels that characterized the daily lives of common people over the course of the eighteenth century. She is interested in both public opinion and the public sphere, though less with the bourgeois and aristocrats who filled the assemblies of the early revolution than with the ordinary folk who would storm the Bastille in 1789.[22]

While Farge has been concerned with the theater of the streets, three other scholars have written works in recent years that focus on the theater itself as a site of political contestation and cultural ferment in the eighteenth century. Jeffrey Ravel takes as his subject those who attended the theater in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, arguing that "the dynamics of the parterre . . . are central to understanding the passage from the world of kings, courtiers, and absolute sovereignty to our current regime of laws, citizens, and inalienable rights, a transition that took place most surprisingly and unsettlingly in eighteenth-century France." Paul Friedland, while pointing out that the audience often mingled with the actors on stage in French theaters until mid-eighteenth century, is concerned more with the actors themselves. He argues that the conceptual understanding of theatrical representation underwent a fundamental shift in the 1750s, and that this paralleled a similar change in the political world, one that made the Estates General of 1789 a much more volatile assemblage of delegates than it had been at its last meeting in 1614. This is a fascinating and provocative argument, more compelling, perhaps, than his final chapters which claim that theater and politics merged during the Revolution. Finally, Susan Maslan examines both theatrical texts and audiences, making a case that revolutionary theater reflected the demand for direct democracy made by the *sans-culottes* of Paris and other large cities. These three works together build a bridge between the question of origins and that of revolutionary politics, one that is seldom crossed by historians, and they also represent some of the more creative work of recent years bringing cultural and social history together.[23]

---

22 A. Farge, *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumor and Politics before the French Revolution*, trans. Claudia Miéville (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1991); *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, trans. Carol Shelton (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993); *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France*, trans. Rosemary Morris (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).
23 J. R. Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture, 1680–1791* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1999), 227, for the quotation above; P. Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2002); S. Maslan, *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy, and the French Revolution* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

Social and Economic Origins

A generation ago, social and economic factors lay at the very heart of historical analysis of the French Revolution and its origins. When Norman Hampson's *A Social History of the French Revolution* appeared in 1963, the review in the *Times Literary Supplement* offered this glowing assessment: "This account is clear and marvellously concise . . . . Likely to hold its own for a long time as the most accurate, most thorough and most measured account of the revolutionary crisis."[24] Indeed, most scholarly work on revolutions around the world at that time, when revolutionary upheaval still seemed more likely than terrorist attacks, focused on social and economic tensions as the major causes of revolution.[25] But within a decade of the appearance of Hampson's book the revisionist critique of the Marxist interpretation would be in full sway, and by the 1980s social interpretations had given way to an emphasis on political and cultural interpretations, which continue to dominate the scholarship on the Revolution today. Our task here, then, is to assess the revisionist critique of the Marxist social analyis, and to examine trends in quite recent scholarship aimed at revitalizing our understanding of the social origins of the French Revolution.

The Marxist interpretation, simply put, argued that a rising bourgeoisie, empowered economically by an emerging capitalist economy, but denied political influence by the landed aristocracy, rose up to challenge both monarchy and aristocracy in 1789, thereby launching a revolution that swept both aside in order to allow the creation of a new, constitutional political regime and a social order that would rest upon talent and merit rather than birth and privilege. The French Revolution, thus, had both social origins and consequences, and marked the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Revisionists challenged this interpretation on a number of scores. Alfred Cobban, as already noted, pointed out that one found very few bourgeois capitalists among the deputies of the Third Estate. George Taylor argued that there were very few signs of capitalist economic development in eighteenth-century France, and that the economy remained very much dominated by traditional agrarian patterns. Following up on this work, Colin Lucas made the case that there was very little

---

24 N. Hampson, *A Social History of the French Revolution* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963). The *TLS* review is quoted on the back cover of the paperback edition, first issued in 1966 and reprinted up into the early 1980s.

25 See, for example, C. Johnson, *Revolutionary Change* (Boston, Little, Brown, 1966) and J. A. Goldstone, ed., *Revolutions: Theoretical, Comparative, and Historical Studies* (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), which offers an overview of scholarship from the previous two decades.

difference, either socially or economically, between the aristocratic and bourgeois elites of the late eighteenth century, and William Doyle challenged the view that there was an "aristocratic reaction" in the 1780s, a last-ditch effort on the part of the old "sword" nobility to defend their traditional position and prerogatives under the Old Regime monarchy.[26] Indeed, Doyle argued, the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie had far more in common than they did to divide them. If there was a "rising bourgeoisie" at century's end, they were rising into the ranks of the aristocracy itself, either through marriage or through the purchase of royal office.

Among the most spirited early responses to revisionist downplaying of the social origins of the Revolution was Colin Jones' article, "Bourgeois Revolution Revivified: 1789 and Social Change," which appears in at least two collections of essays.[27] Jones challenges the revisionist view that the French economy was stagnant in the eighteenth century and that the bourgeoisie was either moribund or composed largely of aspiring aristocrats. He points to a growing body of scholarship showing that, if anything, the French economy was more dynamic in this period than that of Great Britain, often cited as the paradigmatic example of early industrialization.[28] Most economic historians today would agree that France, rather than being backward or retarded in its economic development, pursued a more gradual path to industrial capitalism than Great Britain or, at a later date, Germany and the United States. Over the course of the eighteenth century, however, commercial trade grew quite dramatically, by as much as 400 percent, while manufacturing grew more modestly, by perhaps 75 percent. Cities such as Paris, Lyon, Bordeaux, and Marseille were particularly dynamic, and these would be the centers of revolutionary ferment in 1789. Jones emphasizes this growth in the French commercial economy and the spread of a consumer society, both of which

26 In addition to the works cited in the Introduction (footnotes 8–10), see W. Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980); F. L. Ford, *Robe and Sword: The Regrouping of the French Aristocracy after Louis XIV* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1953), for the classic account of the division of the aristocracy between "robe" and "sword" nobility, and a case for an aristocratic reaction on the eve of the Revolution; and G. Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: From Feudalism to Enlightenment*, trans. William Doyle (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), for a French perspective on the revisionist argument regarding the nobility.

27 C. Jones, "Bourgeois Revolution Revivified: 1789 and Social Change," in C. Lucas, ed., *Rewriting the French Revolution* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991), 69–118; and in G. Kates, ed., *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies* (London, Routledge, 1998), 157–91.

28 F. Crouzet, *Britain Ascendant: Comparative Studies in Franco-British Economic History*, trans. Martin Thom (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990); P. O'Brien and C. Keyder, *Economic Growth in Britain and France, 1780–1914: Two Paths to the Twentieth Century* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1978).

contributed to the emerging ''public sphere'' of which Habermas wrote, although Jones prefers the term ''civic sociability.'' The merchants, shopkeepers, large landowners, professionals, and officeholders, in essence a bourgeoisie, were those who shaped that ''civic sociability.'' Their numbers had grown over the eighteenth century from roughly 700,000 to as many as 2.3 million.[29] And it was this bourgeois elite, Jones argues, that led the Revolution of 1789.

This view is echoed by William Sewell in his book analyzing the Abbé Sieyès' *What Is the Third Estate?*, the most influential and celebrated pamphlet published on the eve of the French Revolution. In Sewell's words, ''Sieyès gained his initial fame by expressing in a novel and brilliantly conceived rhetoric the aspirations and resentments of the French bourgeoisie – the diverse class of well-to-do officials, merchants, lawyers, professionals, rentiers, men of letters, and landowners who made up the politicized segment of the Third Estate.''[30] Sieyès' pamphlet, still read today, at least in part, in most college courses on the French Revolution, appealed to its readers in clearly social terms, conveyed in stirring rhetoric. He posed three questions at the outset: ''What is the third estate? Everything. What has it been heretofore in the political order? Nothing. What does it demand? To become something therein.'' Why, in Sieyès view, was the third estate ''everything''? Because they performed virtually all of the productive and useful functions in society, whereas aristocrats were little better than parasites on the social order. This was a call to revolution, at least to dramatic political change, in social terms. Sewell accepts the critique of Furet and others directed against the classic Marxist argument that an entrepreneurial, capitalist bourgeoisie launched the revolution. He sees the French bourgeoisie in broader terms, as does Colin Jones, but insists that there was a social basis to their resentment that prompted them to rebel against the old political order.

Timothy Tackett has also weighed in on this issue in a recent book examining the deputies elected to the Estates General. To quote Tackett, ''In the face of the 'convergent elites' hypothesis of the revisionists, it will be argued that the principal contending groups within the Estates, the Nobility, and the Third Estate were separated by a considerable gulf, a gulf

29 C. Jones, ''Bourgeois Revolution Revivified,'' 94, and W. Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 231, cite P. Léon's contribution to F. Braudel and E. Labrousse, eds., *Histoire économique et sociale de la France* (Paris, Presses Universitaire de France, 1970), 607, for these figures.

30 W. H. Sewell, *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and ''What Is the Third Estate?''* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1994), 185–86; excerpted passages from the book are reprinted under the title ''A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution'' in G. Kates, ed., *The French Revolution*, 143–91.

created not by class *per se*, but by a combination of wealth, status, and culture.'' The nobility, Tackett argues, were substantially more wealthy than the delegates of the Third Estate, enjoyed marks of social privilege denied to commoners, and were the products of a strikingly different education than delegates of the Third; indeed, they tended to be considerably less well educated than their bourgeois social inferiors. Fully four-fifths of the noble delegates had had military experience, another trait that marked them apart from the delegates of the Third Estate. Tackett concurs as well in regard to the social resentment to which Sewell alluded: ''The majority of the future Third deputies was clearly impatient if not openly hostile toward the nobility.'' ''But to challenge a class explanation of the Revolution,'' Tackett concludes, ''is not to put into question all social explanation – as the revisionists would seem to suggest.''[31]

Many historians, then, continue to see the validity of a social interpretation of the French Revolution, both its origins and its impact, while abandoning the traditional Marxist schema. Not all are in agreement, however. In a recent book that is certain to spark renewed debate, Henry Heller argues that the Marxist view of the French Revolution as the product of an emergent capitalist economy, led by a capitalist bourgeoisie, is still the most compelling interpretation. Indeed, despite the revisionist trend toward cultural and political history, Heller claims that much recent economic and social history has leant new support to the classical Marxist thesis.[32]

Whether one accepts an interpretation of the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution, or not, it is clear that the bourgeoisie did not make the Revolution alone. One thinks first, perhaps, of the taking of the Bastille, of the urban uprisings in Paris and other major cities in the summer of 1789 that prevented the king from ignoring or turning back the more radical demands for change emanating from the Estates General. But roughly 80 percent of French population remained rural at this time, and one must take into account conditions in the countryside in the final decade of the Old Regime in order to understand fully the social origins of the French Revolution. This is not to say that the deputies to the Estates General themselves had that picture in view. As Timothy Tackett has

31 T. Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture, 1789–1790* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996), 14, 107, 306.

32 H. Heller, *The Bourgeois Revolution in France, 1789–1815* (New York, Berghahn Books, 2006). As evidence that French historians have not lost their sense of humor in the midst of what has sometimes been a heated debate, William Doyle begins his H-France review of Heller's book with these words: ''Henry Heller hates me.'' http://h-france.net/vol7reviews/doyle.html.

noted, fully 75 percent of the deputies were urban and had very little sense of the problems or concerns of country people.[33]

Pierre Goubert observed many years ago that ''the quintessence of the ancien régime is confusion.''[34] That is to say, given the many local dialects, the variations in patterns of landholding, the overlapping and competing judicial and administrative jurisdictions, the contrasts between *pays d'état* and *pays d'élection*, the greater or lesser weight of the seigneurial system from one province to another, it is very difficult to generalize about conditions in the French countryside at the end of the Old Regime. It is clear, however, that there was unrest among the peasantry as revealed by patterns of rural protest on the one hand, and by the content of the *cahiers de doléances* on the other.

Debate over the rural origins of the Revolution has generally centered on the so-called ''feudal reaction,'' the claim that in the final decades of the Old Regime seigneurial lords made more onerous the dues and duties that they collected from peasants in order to enhance their incomes in the face of inflationary prices and declining rents. This argument, prominent in the work of Georges Lefebvre and C. E. Labrousse, was challenged both by Alfred Cobban and George Taylor, who asserted quite plainly that there was no evidence in rural *cahiers* of peasant hostility toward seigneurial exactions.[35] We are still not in a position to reach a definitive view in regard to the weight of seigneurial obligations in provincial France, despite the growing number of rural studies that have appeared in recent decades, but the magisterial work of John Markoff and Gilbert Shapiro on the content of the *cahiers* has made clear that the assertions of George Taylor were simply unfounded. Markoff and Shapiro found widespread demands in rural *cahiers* for the abolition of both seigneurial dues and ecclesiastical payments, which the peasants often had trouble distinguishing, whereas, by contrast, peasants commonly called for the reform, rather than the abolition, of royal taxes.[36]

---

33 T. Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 22.

34 P. Goubert, *The Ancien Régime: French Society, 1600–1750* (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1973), 17.

35 G. Lefebvre, *Les Paysans du nord pendant la Révolution française* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1972), and *The Coming of the French Revolution* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1947); C. E. Labrousse, *Esquisse du mouvement des prix et des revenus en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, Librairie Dalloz, 1933), and *La Crise de l'économie française à la fin de l'Ancien Régime et au début de la Révolution* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1944); G. Taylor, ''Revolutionary and Nonrevolutionary Content in the *Cahiers* of 1789: An Interim Report,'' *French Historical Studies* 7 (1972), 479–502.

36 G. Shapiro and J. Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998).

This evidence suggests that the peasantry, by and large, was coming to accept the emergence of the monarchical state while their resentment of the seigneurial system was growing. This was not universally the case, particularly in those areas where seigneurial exactions were light, nor would it be correct to assert that peasants never protested against taxes. Markoff and others emphasize the precariousness of rural life – when times were hard, peasants protested not only against taxes, but against dues and tithes as well, and they particularly resented perceived inequities. Among the most unpopular taxes was the *gabelle*, the salt tax, and resistance to it was greatest along the borders between those provinces that collected the *gabelle*, and those that were exempt from it, such as Brittany. Indeed, some 23,000 people were employed along the borders of Brittany to guard against smuggling.[37]

The most common form of peasant protest under the Old Regime was the food riot, which has long been interpreted as a veiled protest against the emergence of a centralized state.[38] The most serious wave of food riots in the late Old Regime occurred in 1775, the so-called Flour Wars, in which peasants throughout central France rose up to protest Turgot's reforms introducing free trade in grain. The protests forced the repeal of the reforms and the eventual dismissal of Turgot.[39] The incidence of rural unrest remained high over the final two decades of the Old Regime, culminating in the widespread riots and protests of 1788–89, when grain and bread prices reached their highest point of the eighteenth century. While historians following the Tillys have seen these protests as essentially reactionary, a defense of local needs against the encroaching demands of the modern state, Markoff has presented the intriguing argument that one might see in these food riots a kind of political tutelage, a moment of political empowerment that could be seen as leading to the demands for direct democracy that were so common among both the peasantry and the urban *sans-culottes* during the 1790s.[40]

---

37 J. Markoff, ''Peasants and their Grievances,'' in P. R. Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution*, 250.

38 The clearest exposition of this argument has been made by Charles and Louise Tilly. See C. Tilly, ''How Protest Modernized in France,'' in W. O. Aydelotte et al., eds., *Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972), 192–255; L. Tilly, ''The Food Riot as a Form of Political Conflict in France,'' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* II, no. 1 (1971), 23–57.

39 C. Bouton, *The Flour War: Gender, Class and Community in Late Ancien Régime Society* (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993).

40 J. Markoff, ''Peasants and their Grievances,'' 251. See also J. Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996). P. M. Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution*

A spike in rural protest in the 1770s to 1780s, increasing peasant litigiousness over seigneurial obligations at the end of the Old Regime, the demands in rural *cahiers* for the abolition of seigneurial dues – all of this must be seen as evidence of the social origins of the Revolution in the French countryside. This social conflict may not have influenced the political crisis that led to the convocation of the Estates General, but just as one can see the Enlightenment as creating an intellectual context in which revolution might occur, rather than being a direct cause, so we might point to these factors in the countryside as creating a climate that would very definitely shape political developments in the summer of 1789.

There has been less contention among historians about two other social and economic factors that are considered short-term causes of the Revolution. The first is the sequence of two bad harvests in 1788 and 1789 that created grain shortages and drove prices up to their highest point of the century, leading predictably enough to considerable unrest both among peasants and among the working poor of French towns and cities. Thus, at a politically sensitive moment, both crown and delegates to the Estates General at Versailles, meeting for the first time in 175 years, were faced with massive social unrest. This was exacerbated by a second factor, the ill-advised textile treaty signed with Great Britain in 1786, which allowed a flood of cheaper goods into French markets and led to serious unemployment in the French textile industry, dramatically affecting such cities as Lyon, Troyes, and Elbeuf, but also much of the countryside stretching from the northeast west through Normandy, where rural textile production was substantial.

Our focus in these last pages has been principally on the countryside, where the majority of French people lived in the eighteenth century, but as already noted, most of the delegates to the Estates General came from the towns and cities, where the more serious revolutionary upheavals would also occur, especially in Paris. The French population had grown over the eighteenth century, to perhaps 28 million, and by 1789 there were at least thirty towns in France whose population exceeded 20,000 inhabitants, led by Paris with well over 600,000. It was in this urban milieu that the ''public sphere'' took shape, and in which public opinion might assert its greatest influence. A number of works published in recent years shed light on the social tensions engendered by this urban growth, and on the new patterns of sociability that would foster the increasing demands for political change at century's end. Most noteworthy are the books by Daniel Roche and David Garrioch exploring various aspects of

(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially 42–59, is another valuable resource in navigating the historical debates about the rural origins of the Revolution.

Parisian urban life, but one should take note as well of a number of major studies by French scholars devoted to provincial cities.[41]

Structural and Institutional Origins

There is broad consensus that the French monarchy was faced with an institutional crisis at the end of the eighteeenth century. The crown was bankrupt, deeply in debt, shackled by an inequitable and inefficient tax system, and stymied in its efforts at reform by a centuries-old system of privilege that would shortly be swept aside by the French Revolution. Within that broad consensus, however, lie several areas of debate and disagreement: over the severity of the crisis itself, and the monarchy's capacity to respond to it successfully; over where chief responsibility lay for the fact that the fiscal crisis became as grave as it did; over the role of the parlements, in particular the Paris parlement, as the monarchy attempted to address the crisis in the 1780s; and over the role played by royal ministers, and ultimately the Assembly of Notables, in those efforts.

The main cause of the French monarchy's financial difficulties was war. France experienced three periods of war in the mid- to late eighteenth century: the War of Austrian Succession (1740–48), the Seven Years' War (1756–63), and the War of American Independence (1778–83). Just over half of the years in this period were years of war, then, during which time expenditures almost always outstripped normal sources of revenue. Foreign war did provide the monarchy with a justification for raising taxes (indeed, by tradition, it had been nearly impossible to impose new taxes during times of peace since the Middle Ages), but increased taxes were never fully adequate to the task. The gap was made up by borrowing from international banks and *financiers*, some of whom were the same men responsible for collecting the vast array of France's indirect taxes.

41 D. Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the 18th Century* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987), and *France in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1998); D. Garrioch, *Neighborhood and Community in Paris, 1740–1790* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), *The Formation of the Parisian Bourgeoisie, 1690–1830* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1996), and *The Making of Revolutionary Paris* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002); M. Garden, *Lyon et les Lyonnais au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1970); F. G. Pariset, ed., *Bordeaux au XVIIIe siècle* (Bordeaux, Fédération historique du Sud-Ouest, 1968); J. C. Perrot, *Genèse d'une ville moderne: Caen au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, La Haye: Mouton, 1975).

The controller general was the minister responsible for overseeing the royal finances. Between 1777 and 1781 Jacques Necker occupied that post.[42] In 1781 Necker issued a public accounting of the royal treasury, the first time in history that the royal budget had been openly published. While Necker reported royal finances to be in good shape, his report also detailed a number of seemingly frivolous expenses incurred by the court and its retinue, an indiscretion that eventually cost him his job. Two years later Charles-Alexandre Calonne assumed the post of controller general, and almost immediately there began a debate that has raged to the present day. Calonne soon disputed Necker's optimistic accounting of royal finances, laying blame at his feet for the looming fiscal crisis. By 1786, with the short-term loans that Necker had taken out to finance French involvement in the American War about to come due, it was clear that the royal deficit was enormous, well over 100 million *livres* in an annual budget of just under 600 million *livres*. Calonne blamed this on Necker, asserting that the reporting of royal surpluses under his watch had been erroneous, and Necker blamed Calonne, in published pamphlets, for having squandered the robust surplus that he claimed to have left behind. Historians have been trying ever since to establish who was more to blame, without complete success.[43]

There is more to sorting out this mess than assigning blame to either Necker or Calonne, however. They were, after all, essentially just the chief accountants, lacking the power to control royal expenditures, or those ordered by other ministers. Some critics, then and since, pointed at extravagant royal expenditures, or in a slightly different vein, the persistent monarchical quest to achieve grandeur, which would embrace the war costs, as the fundamental cause of the crisis. Others have pointed to the inefficient and inequitable tax system, under which a substantial portion of the revenue ended up in the pockets of the tax collectors rather than in the royal treasury, and which also rested most heavily on the backs of those least able to pay, the peasantry, while sparing the nobility and the wealthy clergy from paying their fair share. No one today would deny that

---

42 Technically Necker was known as director-general of finances, his Protestant faith precluding him from holding the title of *Contrôleur-Général*.

43 F. Crouzet, *La Grande Inflation: la monnaie en France de Louis XVI à Napoléon* (Paris, Fayard, 1993); K. Norberg, "The French Fiscal Crisis of 1788 and the Financial Origins of the Revolution of 1789," in P. T. Hoffman and K. Norberg, eds., *Fiscal Crises, Liberty, and Representative Government, 1450–1789* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994); J. F. Bosher, *French Finances, 1770–1795: From Business to Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970); R. D. Harris, *Necker, Reform Statesman of the Ancien Régime* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1979); J. Félix, "The Financial Origins of the French Revolution," in P. R. Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution*, 35–62.

the tax system was flawed, but recent scholarship claims that, by and large, the French taxpayer paid less onerous taxes than his counterpart in Great Britain.[44] Very recent scholarship, moreover, places more emphasis on the size of the national debt and the cumbersome and costly system of public credit on which the French monarchy customarily relied in order to fund its debt.[45] The crown was also hampered by the fact that, unlike Great Britain, France had no central bank in the eighteenth century.

As the gravity of the fiscal crisis became clear in 1786, additional structural contradictions or tensions impeded the monarchy's efforts to find a resolution. First we might mention the monarch himself. Older descriptions of Louis XVI as intellectually lazy, isolated at Versailles, scarcely engaged with matters of state have given way to more flattering biographies that portray the king as devoted to his subjects, committed to reform, more the victim of circumstance than of his own failings.[46] Whatever his abilities, however, it is clear that Louis XVI was not the "absolute" monarch that Louis XIV had claimed to be when he allegedly uttered the famous line, "L'état c'est moi." It was customary to think of the king as the only "public" person of the realm, the only person who embodied the public interest, as opposed to a populace of "private" individuals whose interests were defined by the traditional system of privilege that prevailed in the corporate society of Old Regime France. In this conception, sovereignty resided in the person of the king, but by the 1780s the king's authority in this regard was contested, and it is clear that the king could not act alone to resolve the crisis confronting the nation.

To register new taxes, or introduce any far-reaching reform, the king required the approval of the Paris parlement, or one of the other dozen provincial parlements, which customarily followed the lead of Paris. The king could impose his will in a special royal session, a *lit de justice*, but to do so in 1786, in the face of parlementary intransigence, would have undermined public confidence in the monarchy and driven up the cost of credit. The Paris parlement refused to authorize new taxes, or additional

---

44 P. Mathias and P. O'Brien, "Taxation in Britain and France, 1715–1810: A Comparison of the Social and Economic Incidence of Taxes Collected for the Central Governments," *Economic History* 5, no. 3 (Winter, 1976), 601–50.

45 This is the conclusion reached by Joel Félix, "The Financial Origins of the French Revolution." See also M. Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2007), whose scope is obviously considerably broader than fiscal policy alone.

46 J. Hardman, *Louis XVI* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993); *Louis XVI: The Silent King* (London, Arnold, 2000); M. Price, *The Road from Versailles: Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, and the Fall of the French Monarchy* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 2003).

loans, and in the face of this opposition Calonne recommended that Louis XVI convene an Assembly of Notables. One hundred forty-four delegates, selected by the king, convened in February 1787 to consider a series of fundamental reforms, drafted by Louis himself in consultation with Calonne. These included the creation of provincial assemblies, liberalization of the grain trade, and the imposition of a new land tax, to be borne equally by all landowners, whether commoner, noble, or clergy. The Notables, aristocrats almost to a man, refused to endorse the proposal, insisting that they lacked the authority, ultimately forcing Louis XVI to call the Estates General.

Historians have long debated the genesis and the implications of this impasse. Calonne's failure to persuade the Assembly of Notables was at least in part due to opposition from Marie-Antoinette and the Polignac clique that surrounded her at Versailles, pointing to the existence of factions at court and the politics of ministerial intrigue.[47] When Calonne stepped aside in April 1787 he was replaced by Etienne-Charles Loménie de Brienne, Archbishop of Toulouse, who had been Calonne's most vocal critic among the Notables. A favorite of the queen, Loménie now adopted a program little different from Calonne's, although with no more success. Some have seen in the Assembly's opposition a principled defense of privilege, both their own and that of the provinces and towns from which they hailed, in the face of monarchical despotism, while others have seen it as an obstinate assertion of vested self-interest.[48]

A key role in all this was played by parlementary judges, a number of whom were delegates to the Assembly of Notables. The Paris parlement, in particular, had opposed the royal will at several pivotal moments in the second half of the eighteenth century – first in the 1750s during the controversy over the denial of sacraments to practicing Jansenists, then in the early 1770s in the face of Chancellor Maupeou's reforms, which would have abolished the parlements, and finally in the 1780s over the issue of new taxes. In those disputes the parlement clearly assumed a political role in addition to its more traditional judicial responsibilities. There has been considerable scholarship on the parlements in recent

---

47 Thomas Kaiser has produced a substantial body of work in recent years tracing the contours of an Austrian faction around the queen at Versailles and establishing the degree to which this fed suspicions of conspiracy. See in particular T. E. Kaiser, ''Who's Afraid of Marie-Antoinette? Diplomacy, Austrophobia, and the Queen,'' *French History* 14 (2000), 241–71; and ''From the Austrian Committee to the Foreign Plot: Marie-Antoinette, Austrophobia, and the Terror,'' *French Historical Studies* 26 (2003), 579–617.

48 See J. Hardman, ''Decision-making,'' in P. R. Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution*, 63–86, who emphasizes the role of factional strife at Versailles in this period.

decades, some of it interpreting the judges, in their judicial opinions and published remonstrances, as advocates of constitutional government, while others view the parlements as defenders of aristocratic privilege. The latter view is supported, in some measure, by the fact that in September 1788 the Paris parlement ruled that the Estates General should convene and deliberate as in 1614, ignoring demands from the Third Estate that their delegation be doubled and that voting be by head rather than order. By this act the parlement alienated the people of Paris, who one year earlier had viewed the judges as champions for opposing the new royal taxes.[49]

To return to the question posed at the outset of this chapter, in the face of these many challenges and problems was the French Revolution inevitable? In his Bicentennial history of the Revolution, *Citizens*, Simon Schama took a very clear position, praising the reforms initiated by Louis XVI and his ministers and arguing that with better luck they might well have succeeded, and that had that occurred France would have been in much better shape at the dawn of the nineteenth century than it was after a decade of revolution.[50] This is not, in my view, a tenable position. Nor is it credible, as François Furet argued, to see the Revolution as the result of a purely political crisis. The economic expansion of the eighteenth century, the growth in population generally and urban population in particular, the emergence of the public sphere, the burgeoning resentment of the seigneurial system among the peasantry – these were all deeply rooted in the social fabric of France, and all must be counted among the origins of the French Revolution. Whether the fiscal crisis of the 1780s was the product of legitimate national policy and commitments, or was rather the product of either royal extravagance or ministerial despotism, by 1786 public opinion viewed it in the latter terms. This, along with the impediment of a system of privilege that was as old as the monarchy itself, made it impossible for the crown to solve its financial

---

49 J. Egret, *Louis XV et l'opposition parlementaire, 1715–1774* (Paris. A. Colin, 1970); D. Echeverria, *The Maupeou Revolution: A Study in the History of Libertarianism, 1770–1774* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1985); W. Doyle, "The Parlements of France and the Breakdown of the Old Regime," *French Historical Studies* 6 (1970), 415–58; D. K. Van Kley, "New Wine in Old Wineskins: Continuity and Rupture in the Pamphlet Debate of the French Prerevolution," *French Historical Studies* 17 (1991), 448–65; B. Stone, *The Parlement of Paris, 1774–1789* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1981); J. Félix, *Les Magistrats du parlement de Paris, 1771–90* (Paris, SEDOPOLS, 1990; P. R. Campbell, "The Paris Parlement in the 1780s," in P. R. Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution*, 87–111.

50 S. Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

crisis without turning to the nation, by convoking the Estates General. That act ushered in a whole new dynamic, to be explored in a separate chapter, but it is significant that the renunciation of privilege would be among the first decisive legislative actions of that body, rechristened by its members the National Assembly.