Experience has recently reemerged as an important analytical category for historians of the Old Regime and the French Revolution. Reacting against the perceived excesses of discourse analysis, which made political language independent of any social determinants, certain post-revisionists are now seeking to contextualize political language by relating it to the experience of those who use it. Political agency, in these analyses, is understood to be the effect of particular formative experiences. This article suggests that the search for an experiential antidote to discourse is misconceived because it perpetuates an untenable dichotomy between thought and reality. Access to the phenomenon of historical agency should be pursued not through experience or discourse but through the category of consciousness, since the make-up of the subject’s consciousness determines how he/she engages the world and decides to attempt changing it. After a brief discussion of an important study that exemplifies both the allure and the functionality of the notion of experience, Timothy Tackett’s *Becoming a Revolutionary*, the article focuses on the evolving political consciousness of a man who became a revolutionary agitator in 1789, J.-M.-A. Servan. Analysis of his writings between 1769 and 1789 shows that the way in which his perspective was constructed, rather than the lessons of experience per se, determined the shape of his revolutionary intentions in 1789.

All historians wrestle with the difficulties of analyzing human agency, but the interpretation of agency poses special problems to historians of revolutions. Revolutions, by their very nature, stand for decisive change. They fire the passions. They harness the loyalty and optimism of millions of people. They inspire great sacrifices and elicit enormous creative energy. They represent the pursuit of a better world. Any historian who seeks to explain revolutionary events must inevitably confront the conditions of their possibility. Why do participants in revolutions opt for dramatic change? What explains the timing of revolutionary events? How do living conditions that previously seemed tolerable, and problems that once seemed manageable, come to be perceived as insupportable? How do ideas and projects articulated within prevailing frameworks of thought harden into a revolutionary program?

1. I wish to express my gratitude to my friends and colleagues Lloyd Kramer, Michael Kwass, and Donald Reid, all of whom read the penultimate draft of this article on extremely short notice and provided invaluable reactions and criticisms. Special thanks go to Timothy Tackett, who graciously took time away from his own research in Paris to respond positively to an article he ostensibly had every reason to dislike. Through his interaction with this piece, he provided a model of collegial and constructive intellectual exchange that would surprise no one acquainted with his reputation in the field.
In recent years, many historians of the French Revolution have sought answers to these questions in the bedrock of experience. Reacting against both traditional social explanations, which showed motivations springing from seemingly objective class positions, and the revisionists’ political/linguistic explanations, which often deduced agency from the logics internal to discourses, historians of pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary France have begun to emphasize the decisive influence of concrete experiences in the lives of individuals and groups. This new work is based on the commonsense assumption that sensitive and thorough empirical analysis of the lived experiences of the past will enable historians of political action to navigate between the equally unappealing alternatives of old-fashioned social determinism, on the one hand, and newfangled linguistic determinism, on the other hand.2

Contemplating the prospect of a post-revisionist history of eighteenth-century France, Vivian Gruder called in 1997 for a new political history “closely calibrated to the unfolding of events, the impact of concrete experience,” a form of analysis more sensitive to the ways in which “concepts present in discursive language . . . summed up and crystallized multiple prior experiences.” Gruder described a movement already underway, for as Jack Censer observed in a recent review article, many historians of the Revolution are now attempting to leaven their analyses of “linguistic constructions” with an interest in “social conditions,” “lived experience,” and the weighing of “real life opportunities.”3 The examples are numerous. William H. Sewell’s analysis of the Abbé Sieyès’s What is the Third Estate? seeks to capture the text as both discursive artifact and as “action in a social world”; Paul Hanson’s work on monarchist political clubs seeks to show that real events and actions—“political experience, that is”—shaped the discourse of both Revolutionaries and counter-Revolutionaries; David Andress’s analysis of the Champs de Mars massacre concentrates on the political elite’s misunderstanding of popular dissent and its failure to develop a vocabulary that captured and responded to the unrest of 1791.4

Despite its renewed appeal to historians of eighteenth-century France, however, the concept of experience has been subjected to a critical scrutiny that seems

---


only to intensify with the passing of years. In the field of labor history, for example, E. P. Thompson’s notion of “working-class experience,” which he saw as the crucible of workers’ consciousness, spawned a complex and still smoldering debate about the implicit dividing line separating experience from consciousness in cultural histories of the working class. Historians of gender and sexuality have similarly called into question the correlation between identity and the personal experiences typically assumed to have produced it. Joan Scott, in a much-cited article, trenchantly observed that since individual subjects never occupy a neutral position free of ideological constraints and relations of power, the meaning of the experiences they construe and process is always dependent on the perspectives, or subject positions, that they occupy. Meanwhile, post-structuralists and students of narrative have drawn attention to the retrospective construction of experience, and the inclination of both individuals and groups to read their pasts as coherent stories built around meaningful, life-altering events.

This article responds not only to History and Theory’s timely call for essays examining the issue of agency in historical analysis, but also to currents of discussion now swirling about my own field of Old Regime and Revolutionary France. Like other dix-huitièmistes, including many who celebrate the recent


7. Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” Critical Inquiry 17 (1991), 773-797. See also Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Feminists Theorize the Political, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992). Although I am sympathetic, and obviously indebted, to Scott’s elegant and persuasive argument, in “The Evidence of Experience,” against the foundationalism implicit in the analysis of experience, her own emphasis on the constitutive power of discourse leaves little space for the exercise of individual agency. The present article builds on and supplements Scott’s argument in its attempt to conceptualize the space between discourse and experience, the space where individuals weigh options and make moral choices.

“revival of the social,” I yearn for a new mode of analysis that can account both for the powerful influence of linguistic structures and for the drama of personal decision-making and sheer historical contingency. But unlike the historians who eagerly seek an antidote to the perceived excesses of postmodernism, I remain deeply skeptical of the analysis of experience, which, thanks in part to the recent groundswell of interest in solidly “social” phenomena, is now emerging as one of the primary alternatives to discourse analysis in eighteenth-century studies. My doubts about the concept of experience derive in part from the same concerns that historians of labor, gender, and narrative have already articulated, but I am especially mistrustful of the tendency to invoke experience as an explanation for purposeful political action, including revolution. I argue in this article that in order to understand how subjective perceptions of the world get transformed into political agency, historians need to resist the lure of the category of experience and adopt a new approach to the study of human consciousness, an approach designed to penetrate structures of belief. Greater appreciation for the ways in which worlds are both sustained and remade through beliefs will ultimately yield more satisfying explanations of how and why people act politically, and why they sometimes even come together to make a revolution.


10. The search for new alternatives to discourse analysis has also involved many historians and social scientists sympathetic to at least some aspects of postmodernism, including some who are fully aware of the analytical deficiencies of the category of experience. Virtually all of the new alternatives they have articulated, however, ultimately oppose language/culture to something ostensibly more real, thus creating new interpretive dilemmas. See, for example, Gareth Stedman Jones’s incisive critique of Roger Chartier’s categories of “representation” and “practice,” in “The Determinist Fix: Some Obstacles to the Further Development of the Linguistic Approach to History in the 1990s,” History Workshop Journal 42 (1996), 19-35, esp. 26-27. Stedman Jones developed further this line of criticism in his review of Les Formes de l’expérience: une autre histoire sociale, ed. Bernard Lepetit (Paris: A. Michel, 1995). See Stedman Jones, “Une autre histoire sociale?,” Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales 53 (1998), 383-392. Richard Biernacki’s attempt to distinguish between “signs” and “practice” raises problems similar to those criticized by Stedman Jones. See Biernacki, “Language and the Shift from Signs to Practices in Cultural History,” History and Theory 39 (2000), 289-310, and the critical commentary by Chris Lorenz in the same volume, “Some Afterthoughts on Culture and Explanation in Historical Inquiry,” History and Theory 39 (2000), 348-363, esp. 359. The danger in trying to find new ways to bridge the supposed gap between lived “reality” and its interpretation or representation is that the effort inevitably perpetuates unhelpful polarities that divert attention from the central problem of consciousness. Kathleen Canning, for example, tries to get at the culturally conditioned agency of working-class women by focusing on the body, “in both its discursive and experiential dimensions” (Canning, “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience,” Signs 19 [1994], 368-404, esp. 386). William H. Sewell, Jr. has suggested that analysis of social change must incorporate both “semiotic explanation” and “mechanical explanation” that supposes the operation of non-semiotic logics (“demographic, technological, coercive, institutional, and the like”); see Sewell, “Language and Practice in Cultural History: Backing Away from the Edge of the Cliff,” French Historical Studies 21 (1998), 241-254, esp. 252. Gabrielle Spiegel has similarly called for greater attention to the “social logic of the text,” as distinct from its semiotic logic (“History, Historicism, and the Social Logic of the Text in the Middle Ages,” Speculum 65 [1990], 59-86). These newer and subtler oppositions between basic realities and imaginative constructions, for all their ingenuity, still manage to cut short the analysis of consciousness and the process of interpretation. In each of these formulations, the historian is spared the trouble of penetrating the labyrinth of the mind because the production of consciousness is traced back to phenomena that supposedly possess self-evident causative implications.
To clarify what is at stake in historians’ use of experience as an analytical category, the article begins with a necessarily detailed discussion of Timothy Tackett’s approach to the concept in his influential book, *Becoming a Revolutionary*.11 Because of the force and clarity of the argument he pursues, Tackett’s analysis of the developing conflicts between deputies to the National Assembly in 1789–1790 can be used to exemplify the experiential turn that marks much recent work on the eighteenth century. After identifying the problems inherent in this new orientation toward experience, the article offers an alternative approach to the study of political consciousness, an interpretation derived from a close reading of the words, and mind, of a single participant in the revolutionary drama, the lawyer Joseph-Michel-Antoine Servan (1737–1807).

I. EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF IDEAS: 
THE EXAMPLE OF *BECOMING A REVOLUTIONARY*

The ensuing discussion requires a preliminary disclaimer. Although I focus on what I consider to be an imperfection of *Becoming a Revolutionary*, my purpose is not to challenge the book’s status as a landmark work. *Becoming a Revolutionary* stands as a monument to careful research, and it performed the overdue task of putting people—rather than ideas, discourses, and cultures—back at the center of French Revolutionary studies. More specifically, Tackett’s book provided a powerful empirical challenge to the common claim that nobles and wealthy members of the third estate formed a large and homogeneous elite on the eve of the Revolution. He demonstrated, through analysis of incomes and careers, and through the barbed comments of the deputies themselves, that differences in material conditions and cultural perspective separated the great majority of noble representatives from the great majority of those representing the third estate. At the same time, he showed that the social animosities dividing the third estate from the privileged orders were laced with uncertainty and ambiguity. For both of these reasons—his helpful reassessment of the pre-Revolutionary milieu the deputies inhabited, and his emphasis on the unpredictability of the Revolutionary moment—Tackett’s evidence has added fuel to the many post-revisionist arguments being developed by others in the field, including my own.12 *Becoming a Revolutionary* has been unanimously praised by reviewers, it received a prestigious prize from the AHA, and it unquestionably deserves its wide acclaim.13


One aspect of the book that requires close critical attention, however, is its treatment of the relationship between consciousness and agency. In his introduction Tackett announced his frustration with the stale debate over whether the Revolution had had “social” or “political” origins. The time had come, he declared, to leave aside burdensome historiographical agendas and “to focus . . . on the Revolutionary experience of the specific individuals who took part in and embodied [the] Revolution. How did men and women become Revolutionaries?” Tackett explained that, because the book focused on the rapidly changing mentality of the hundreds of deputies who reported to Versailles in May, 1789, only to find themselves remaking the nation a few weeks later, his was essentially a study in collective psychology.

It follows, insofar as possible, the transformation of the deputies’ values and mode of thinking. . . . In so doing, however, it makes the assumption that culture is ‘produced’ not only through intellectual experience, but through social and political experience as well, and that it is impossible to understand how individuals ‘read’ their world without a full delineation of the contours of their lives.

In other words, Tackett aimed to provide a balanced and measured account of the actual revolutionary experience, an account that would show why the revolutionaries behaved as they did in the heat of the initial battles of the Revolution.

To many specialists, the tone of Tackett’s prose, and his evidently reasonable objectives, came as a welcome change. In contrast to much of the work of the 1980s and early 1990s, which focused on semiotic systems, ideological constructions, and the many dimensions of representation, Tackett’s analysis seemed to rest on straightforward evidence and refreshing common sense. The initial positive impression is continually reinforced by the author’s becoming intellectual modesty and the painstaking research that undergirds his account. The attentive reader soon detects, however, that even Tackett’s empirically grounded argument is rooted in a set of theoretical suppositions. By probing those suppositions, especially as revealed in Tackett’s analysis of the developing animosity between noble and common deputies in the spring and summer of 1789, I hope to demonstrate that his method of connecting experience to action actually obscures the fundamental cognitive processes that lie behind political choice.

The basis for Tackett’s working assumptions about the nature of political process can be found in his repudiation of discourse analysis and the fully developed revisionism of the 1980s. In opposition to the now familiar argument, advanced by François Furet and others, that the reign of Terror developed logically and ineluctably out of the Rousseauian rhetoric of the general will, Tackett maintained that the course of Revolutionary events, and the mentality that made those events possible, grew out of political contingencies specific to the time. Surveying the attitudes and early writings of the third-estate deputies who would later embrace Revolutionary ideals, Tackett observed that although “virtually all were familiar with some elements of the Enlightenment, . . . little evidence can

15. Ibid., 13.
be found before the Revolution of an oppositional ideology or ‘discourse’”; by
and large they were practical men who read law, history, and science, and had no
inclination toward “abstract philosophy.”16 On the eve of the Revolution their
political culture “was shaped less by books and essays than by their concrete
political and social experience under the Old Regime.”17 They went on to make
their ideological choices in light of “specific political contingencies and social
interactions within the Assembly and between the Assembly and the population
as a whole.”18 But how did these various “concrete” and “contingent” phenom-
ena actually affect the thinking of the deputies? Tackett addresses that question
by outlining a two-stage process of coming-to-consciousness, a process that
looks plausible only if one accepts the proposition that experience happens out-
side the mind and carries inherently recognizable meanings.

Tackett understandably sees the Revolution as a transformative event, a rad-
ical break with what came before, but because of the analytical tradition against
which he is reacting—what Gruder has called “the argument of discourse”—he
is anxious to establish that the events of the Revolution were not inscribed with-
in the political debates of the Old Regime.19 Few of the future members of the
Constituent Assembly, he writes, “had anticipated the transformations that were
about to take place” when they convened at Versailles in May, 1789. “For the
great majority, it was only after May 5, in the extraordinarily creative process of
the Assembly itself, that a ‘Revolution of the Mind’ came about.”20 This argu-
ment comes perilously close to tautology—the revolutionaries are made revolu-
tionary by the revolution that they themselves are making—but Tackett narrow-
ly avoids the tautological trap by evoking two different kinds of experience, one
corresponding to what might be called social formation, the other to immediate
sensory perception.21 The key to the process of causation in Tackett’s analysis
lies in the convergence of these two forms of experience, which become mutual-
ly reinforcing and thus culturally productive.

As one would expect, the formative aspects of experience occupy Tackett’s
attention in the chapters devoted to pre-Revolutionary France. Judging from a
whole range of objective measures, the social backgrounds of the deputies rep-
resenting the third estate differed markedly from the social background of the
privileged orders, and especially that of the nobility. Tackett begins the book by
filling out the social profiles of the noble and commoner deputies—incomes,
careers, dowries, educational levels, status, institutional affiliations—and he goes

16. Ibid., 14.
17. Ibid., 305.
18. Ibid., 76.
21. Tackett’s bifurcated treatment of experience is strikingly similar to Wilhem Dilthey’s analyti-
cal distinction between Erlebnis (which can be translated roughly as “immediate sensory experience”) and Erfahrung (“knowledge gained from lived experience”), though Tackett makes no allusion to
Dilthey. For discussion of Dilthey’s categories see Pickering, History, Experience, 94–124; Martin Jay,
“Experience without a Subject: Walter Benjamin and the Novel,” New Formations: A Journal of
on to assert that the respective social worlds established by those objective parameters instilled in the deputies distinctive values and habits of thought. After assessing the backgrounds of the noble deputies, for example, Tackett places emphasis on their nearly universal attachment to the military.

Even if a minority of deputies had revolted against military values, the critical formative years spent in the armed forces, from the mid-teens to the early twenties, invariably had an impact. Training in swordplay and horsemanship, in military discipline, in the ideals of honor, hierarchical command, and devotion to the king, all left a stamp that would clearly distinguish the corps of the Second Estate from their colleagues in the Commons. It was an influence that would strongly affect many members of the Nobility in their fundamental assumptions about the nature of society and social relationships—despite the common veneer of eighteenth-century urban culture which touched both Nobles and Commoners.22

Tackett sees proof of this instinctive attachment to the values instilled by experience in the political positions later articulated by noble deputies, which reflected, he says, their “underlying political culture and the military-aristocratic ethos which informed that culture.”23

The deputies of the third estate looked less socially homogeneous than the representatives of the nobility, but Tackett argues that they, too, had come from a distinctive milieu that shaped their thinking in subtle ways. More than half came from the legal profession, and at least two-thirds “had probably received training in the law.”24 Most were respectable property owners, and “a substantial and influential segment of the deputies had acquired practice in collective politics at the town, provincial, and even national levels.”25 For the most part these were deliberate, practical, responsible men whose writings “alluded more frequently to history and the classics, than to reason and the general will or to Rousseau and Voltaire.” In fact, they later evinced little interest in the various strands of Enlightenment discourse, which seemed irrelevant to the “concrete problems facing them in the Assembly.”26 At the outset of the Revolution, the deputies of the third estate were conciliatory and conservative-minded reformers, not angry firebrands.

Tackett suggests, however, that in some respects the experience of living under the Old Regime had prepared the deputies of the third estate, at some vaguely subconscious level, to pursue radical social transformation when the opportunity arose. Because they possessed a less exalted status than most members of the nobility in the pre-Revolutionary social hierarchy, and because their wealth, though often considerable, placed them well below the level of material splendor enjoyed by great aristocrats, Tackett infers that their lives involved “a potential for frustration and tension.” Ambitious in their careers, and often desirous of possessing noble status for themselves or their progeny, many future deputies con-
fron the established nobility. Tackett assumes that awareness of these differences must have fostered discontent. "For some individual deputies [their] ambiguous social standing had undoubtedly engendered a sense of humiliation and anger that remained close to the surface." 27 A "deep-seated" anti-aristocratic bitterness, "engendered by the social and legal system in which they lived," would affect the political posture of representatives of the third estate in ways that most of them did not anticipate. Feelings of jealousy, injustice, and bitterness were "present in the hearts" of many deputies of the third estate when they convened at Versailles in May, 1789, and this bitterness "was to be a central element . . . in the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness within that Estate at the beginning of June 1789." 28 Although Tackett finds little evidence of revolutionary consciousness preceding the Revolution, a revolutionary consciousness sprang readily from the frustrated minds of the third estate once political confrontation provided the necessary provocation.

The experiences associated with their respective social formations had imparted to the deputies of the second and third estates certain underlying attitudes—a commitment to honor and status for the nobles, largely unarticulated resentment for the commoners. But in Tackett's narrative, these attitudes hardened into uncompromising political agendas only after the deputies endured another kind of experience in the spring and summer of 1789, namely, the protracted debate over voting procedures in the assembly. Since the last weeks of 1788, liberals from all the orders had been arguing for a symbolic merger of the three estates, common deliberations in the assembly, and voting by head rather than by order. All of these key procedural issues had been left unresolved by the king, and many deputies had hoped to reach a workable compromise at the opening sessions of the Estates-General.

Tackett emphasizes that the deputies of the third estate, despite their high hopes, found themselves confronting a "culture of intransigence" on the part of the nobility. 29 "Provincial and Parisian, titled and untitled, robe and sword, young and old, the great majority of all Nobles were aggressively hostile to the liberals [of the Second Estate] and the position they represented." 30 The political choices of the noble deputies, Tackett writes, "were determined less by inter-estate rivalries than by the ideological positions and cultural values shared by a great many nobles at all levels in society." 31 The majority remained "deeply convinced of their innate superiority." They were "strongly penetrated with a military, even feudal sense of honor and duty." One even finds them referring "to models of noble courage and chivalry from the past," and using a "chivalric vocabulary of defending one's honor and proving one's loyalty to the king." 32 Offended by the

27. Ibid., 46.
28. Ibid., 109-110.
29. Ibid., 132.
30. Ibid., 134.
31. Ibid., 133.
32. Ibid., 136-137.
constitutional claims of the third estate, and rallied by conservative spokesmen such as D’Antraigues and Cazalès, the great majority of the deputies of the Second Estate stubbornly defended the prerogatives of their order and rejected what they regarded as unconstitutional procedural innovations.

The deputies of the third estate, according to Tackett, felt frustration and outrage in the face of the nobles’ inflexibility. For some, the nobility’s unexpected obstinacy led to a “wrenching experience, entailing an agonizing re-evaluation of a value system to which they had long acquiesced.” For others, noble stubbornness “aroused long-held sentiments of animosity and resentment, feelings which most had labored to suppress in the name of unity, in the pious hope that they might now be regarded as equals.” Tackett contends that the deputies’ frustrated hopes released “a deep-seated revulsion for the years of condescension and scorn” and produced an “all-consuming passion” to win recognition of the third estate’s rights. In the first weeks of June, following a month of fruitless negotiations carried out by committees of the three orders, the third estate moved rapidly to constitute itself as the nation’s true representative assembly. By the morning of June 17, the deputies of the third estate had voted overwhelmingly to adopt the name “National Assembly” and to assume sovereign powers once reserved for the king. For Tackett, these first two and a half weeks in June represent a “dramatic transformation” in thinking, a revolutionary moment “born of a complex convergence of factors, some long developing and rooted in the social and cultural structures of the Old Regime and their consequent effects on noble-commoner relations, some related to the contingent lack of leadership and to the deputies’ immediate experience in the Estates-General and the actions and reactions of Third Estate and Nobility” in the weeks after the opening session of May 5. The converging lessons of experience ultimately produced an awareness of irreconcilable differences and set the third estate on an unanticipated revolutionary course.

For Tackett, then, the Revolution, and the antagonisms that set it in motion, should be seen not as a discursive event, but as an event born of experience—both the long-term “social” experience of status, wealth, and career that had shaped the lives of the deputies, and the immediate “political” experience of confrontation in 1789. For the nobles, their time in the schools and camps of the military had left a “stamp,” made an “impact,” exercised an “influence” that, Tackett believes, established for them a kind of default ideology, a latent counter-revolutionary consciousness, that the political claims of the third estate in 1788–1789 inevitably activated. At the same time, the third estate’s posture toward the noble deputies in late May and early June reflected not so much “an intellectual position” but “an instinctive and visceral antipathy” brought to the surface by the deliberative process itself, which served to “crystallize and intensify social antagonisms, making many deputies far more self-conscious of those antagonisms than ever before.”

33. Ibid., 144.
34. Ibid., 145, 147-148.
35. Ibid., 308.
third estate was a direct expression of immediate experience, a consciousness reinforced by half-suppressed memories of earlier antipathies.

Historians of eighteenth-century France now agree that the phenomena Tackett seeks to capture through his focus on experience, such as vocational training, material comfort, status anxieties, and the give and take of political debate, deserve more attention than they received in revisionist analysis after the 1970s. Unfortunately, though, Tackett’s commitment to experience as a discrete analytical category—a category comprising “concrete” matter that stands apart from discourses, ideologies, and ideas—drives him inevitably toward a dubious definition of consciousness. For Tackett, the function of consciousness is to record, and eventually to distill, the meanings of experience. While merely recording experience—that is, when the mind is assimilating more or less unreflectively the external realities that shape it—consciousness is partly suppressed and manifests itself primarily in culture. When actually distilling experience—that is, when the mind finally engages and pronounces the meanings derived from those external realities—consciousness rises to the surface and leads to action.

Tackett certainly acknowledges the role of ideas in the development of a revolutionary consciousness, especially after the deputies passed the point of no return in June 1789. But by emphasizing the decisiveness of the experience of political conflict, he necessarily overlooks the intricate interior process by which the deputies worked through their ideas and values, thus enabling them to assimilate the events of 1789, as well as earlier developments, to an evolving but coherent picture of the world. As Michael Oakeshott shrewdly observed, in his classic work on experience and perception, experiences, whether they take the shape of encounters, events, developments, or routines, do not present themselves to the apprehending mind in splendid isolation, announcing their own significance and performing the work of the deciphering eye. Experiences acquire their meaning, and register their existence, only through their incorporation within a larger world of related meanings, a world whose tenuous coherence and unity depends on the active thinking of the interpreting agent. When people sort through the individual strands of word, deed, and encounter that constitute the fabric of their lives, they confront these phenomena not as “concrete” materials that render judgment unnecessary, but as half-formed impressions that emerge over the conceptual horizon, dim silhouettes that achieve their definition only through the process of filtering and ordering that necessarily characterizes all thought. The key to uncovering the connection between consciousness and agency lies not in the analysis of experience per se, but in the processes of inter-

36. Tackett’s second chapter provides a survey of the various intellectual influences that had helped to shape the deputies’ attitudes at the outset of the Revolution. But he suggests that the very “complexity and ambiguity of their outlook” prevented them from being disposed in any particular direction before the Revolution began. Only after the events of spring and summer 1789, he observes, did references to the philosophes begin to appear in the writings of the deputies (63-64).

37. Michael Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes [1933] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966). “Judgment and experience are inseparable; wherever there is judgment there is inference, and immediacy has given place to mediation. And the claim of sensation to be, on account of its immediacy, a form of experience exclusive of thought, must be said to have failed” (17).
pretation that inevitably intersect the phenomena one regards as the subject’s experience.38 To go where the action is, and to find the motors that drive historical change, the historian needs to dissect the interpretive dispositions that determine how people engage, process, and learn from all that occurs in their lives.

The analytical instinct to derive thought from forces external to the subject, such as discourse or experience, succeeds only in masking the creativity and moral determination that characterize the active human consciousness. Tackett, for example, assumes that because the deputies had apparently not undergone a previous “Revolution of the Mind” that could be attributed to a particular ideology, “discourse” is ruled out as an explanation for their actions, leaving “social and political experience” as the likeliest source for the third estate’s impatience in 1789. But this either-or choice, which focuses one’s attention outside the mind of the subject, is misconceived. Interpretive dispositions are composed not of discourses, but of constellations of beliefs, ideas, and values that are often fragmented, disconnected, composite, and even contradictory. Unlike discourses, which are defined by their structural unity and which take shape only when an outside observer abstracts them from the processes of cognition and communication and reifies them for analytical purposes, interpretive dispositions are as untidy and unfixed as any human interaction, despite the structures that frame them. They are inherently dynamic and susceptible to change because they reflect the multiple convictions and commitments on which the subject bases his/her sense of self, as well as the disparate beliefs and assumptions that inform those commitments. People exercise agency during every “event” or “experience,” including the fleeting and the random as well as the dramatic and the enduring, because their interpretive dispositions shift to meet every contingency. They refine their inclinations as their beliefs interact with the divergent and unsettling potentialities of their world, creating a desire for moral coherence and the search for a new center of gravity in the layers of their consciousness. This inescapably cognitive process reflects neither the instrumental use of putative “discourses” nor the “instinctive and visceral” reactions to supposedly unmediated experiences, but the subject’s creative and ongoing reformulation of values and priorities.

The revolutionary arguments of 1789 reflected not a sudden political awakening but the final, and momentous, rearrangement of conceptual resources long familiar to both the deputies to the Estates-General and their constituents. Tackett

38. Cf. Stanley Fish’s useful concept of “interpretive communities,” as developed in Is There a Text in this Class? (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980). Fish’s critics are right that he goes too far in declaring that texts do not exist “prior to interpretation.” Fish’s interpreting subject possesses a conceptual grid so coherent and self-replicating that it resists all challenges to its organizational principles, and therefore has no real need for contact with a world outside itself. But the more limited claim that emerges out of Fish’s discussion, namely, that interpretive assumptions are always inescapable, both for groups and for the individuals who comprise them, seems incontrovertible. For critical discussion of Fish’s concept of interpretive communities, see Gerald Graff, “Interpretation on Tlön: A Response to Stanley Fish,” New Literary History 17 (1985), 109-117, followed by a reply from Fish, “Resistance and Independence: A Reply to Gerald Graff,” 119-127. See also Robert Scholes, Textual Power (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).
represents the attitudes of the deputies on the eve of the Revolution as a product of the Old Regime’s “social and legal system,” a natural outgrowth of the “social and cultural structures” of the age. For Tackett, the common deputies’ angry response to the nobility’s defense of its prerogatives was a sign of their resentment against the “condescension and scorn” that had characterized their relations with the Second Estate for many years. But can the “system” or “structure” of the Old Regime really be credited with bestowing on future deputies of the third estate the “pious hope” that they would soon be regarded as the equals of the nobility? How so? Systems and structures, no matter how hierarchical, are never inherently unfair, and experience of them therefore cannot simply be expected to produce resentment and indignation. What requires close attention is the process that, in some minds, had rendered objectionable the claims associated with the existing social system. What had prepared the third estate, or at least some of its representatives, to construe the nobles’ assertions of their social superiority as “condescension and scorn?” How, within the context of the traditional social order, did spokesmen for the third estate ever come to believe that they were entitled to equality? If many members of the third estate had harbored feelings of “frustration,” “humiliation,” and “animosity” toward the nobility for years, why had they not condemned the inequities of the system in greater numbers and with greater frequency before 1789? How can their lingering respect for the institution of nobility, which Tackett rightly emphasizes, be reconciled with their impassioned denunciations of the society of orders in 1789 and after?

To answer all of these questions adequately, one would need to rewrite the history of pre-Revolutionary political consciousness in France—an objective far beyond the scope of a journal article. In the pages that remain, however, I want at least to begin the task of scrutinizing the long-term thought processes that enabled the future revolutionaries to envision peaceful and multilateral political reform, on the one hand, and to capture and articulate reasons for powerful resentments, on the other hand. Especially pertinent to the dramatic confrontations of the early Revolution are the diverse opinions concerning hierarchy, status, and the social order articulated between roughly 1750 and 1789. These opinions, expressed by many members of both the second and third estates, and written for various purposes, make clear the contestation that surrounded the idea of nobility in the years leading up to the Revolution. The variety of the views expressed, ranging from reactionary assertions of noble power to bold affirma-

39. To support his account, Tackett cites many instances of bitterness and resentment on the part of the deputies. The deputy Jean-Gabriel Gallot, for example, adopted an exceptionally strident tone. In a letter to his wife, he wrote of the noble deputies, “After their abominable behavior, this noble scum, with all their coats of arms, deserves to be humiliated” (109). The Lyon deputy Jean-André Périsse Du Luc reported confronting one of his fellow freemasons, a noble of conservative political persuasion, with the declaration that “hereditary nobility was a political monstrosity” (110).

tions of the equality of all citizens, make it difficult to believe that the future deputies to the Estates-General could have entered the period of pre-Revolutionary turmoil utterly unaware of the potential for intransigence on the part of their political opponents. Yet the open-endedness, the conceptual fluidity, and the multivalency of the proposals communicated in the pre-Revolutionary decades also suggest that the key issue that separated the deputies of the second and third estates—the nature of the difference between noble and non-noble status—remained far from settled in most minds down to the early stages of the constitutional crisis of 1788–1789. The events of 1789 were implicit in the political consciousness of the Old Regime, but it was only the accelerated reevaluation of priorities, and the refinement of varying structures of belief, that made the conflicts of that year finally unavoidable.

II. BALANCING IDEAS AND ENGAGING THE WORLD: 
THE EVOLVING MIND OF J.-M.-A. SERVAN

The writings of Joseph-Michel-Antoine Servan provide an ideal point of entry into the evolving political consciousness of the pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary years. On the one hand, his own political trajectory in 1788–1789 seems to exemplify the process charted by Tackett. A champion of the constitutional claims of the third estate, Servan initially sought common ground with the nobility before becoming embittered in December 1788. Angered by what he clearly perceived as noble arrogance, he wrote a series of pamphlets fiercely critical of the Second Estate in 1789, and he fully supported the revolutionary initiatives in June of that year. In other words, the path Servan followed in “becoming” a revolutionary seems to have paralleled that described by Tackett in his analysis of the deputies to the Estates-General. But on the other hand, the evidence illuminating Servan’s life and mind in the years before 1788 makes it difficult to attribute his radicalization either to the experience of his own social station under the Old Regime or to the experience of political debate in 1788–1789. Although Servan clearly identified with the third estate, both as an author and as a political figure, he actually came from a Dauphinois family of minor but securely established nobility. As a respected magistrate in the parlement of Grenoble, he

41. For an example of Servan’s moderation before late 1788, see Petit colloque élémentaire entre Mr. A et Mr. B. Sur les abus, le droit, la raison, les Etats-Généraux, les parlements & tout ce qui s’ensuit. Par un vieux jurisconsulte allobroge (n. p., 1788). The interlocutors of the pamphlet appeal to the conscience of both the First and Second Estates and remain hopeful that the privileged orders will see that the common interest demands an end to fiscal abuses.

42. Servan’s father, the owner of a modest seigneurie, sent his two sons into the customary noble professions of the law and the military. Despite being placed in the conventional career paths of the socially ascendant, both Servan and his younger brother, Joseph Servan de Gerbey, actually acquired their reputations by the pen, calling for the enlightened reform of their own respective institutions and for the overall regeneration of French society. Both became enthusiastic supporters of the Revolution; Servan de Gerbey would go on to serve as Minister of War in 1792. For background, see Biographie universelle ancienne et moderne, ed. Joseph-François Michaud, 45 vols. (Paris: A. T. Desplaces, 1854–1865), 39: 139-142; Dictionnaire historique de la révolution française, ed. Albert Soboul (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1989), 981; Dictionnaire Napoléon, ed. Jean Tulard, 2 vols.,
would have endured very little condescension or scorn in his pre-Revolutionary professional life. Moreover, analysis of his intellectual evolution in the decades prior to the Revolution shows that neither the ideas nor the passions to which he gave voice in 1789 derived suddenly from the heat of unexpected conflicts. The political positions he articulated in the early stages of the Revolution, though clearly more radical than anything he had produced before, grew naturally out of the complex of ideas that had filled his mind and exercised his attention for years. He had earlier refrained from pushing the most anti-aristocratic implications of his moral assumptions because those assumptions had been convoluted and at least partially conflicting. His decision to press for full political equality in 1789 reflected the subordination of some of his beliefs, the reformulation of others, and the envisioning of a new social world whose coherence demanded civic equality.

To make sense of Servan’s choices in 1789, one needs to understand his immersion in the moral debates and conceptual experimentation that characterized the entire second half of the eighteenth century. Like many writers of the 1760s and 1770s, Servan sought a general moral reform of French society, and this desire inspired on his part sustained contemplation of the proper characteristics of the citizen. Alarmed by the egoism, lassitude, and luxury he saw around him, Servan tried to inspire patriotic feeling in the French by encouraging the cultivation of private virtue. “Private life is a continual lesson in public life,” he wrote in his *Discours sur les moeurs* (*Discourse on Morals*) of 1769. Striking a distinctly Rousseauian chord, Servan asserted that the citizen who developed sound personal habits inevitably would find that “his own heart is his legislator.” Servan hoped to use the medium of print, and the “contagion of the imagination,” to impress upon all well-intentioned men (the “honnêtes gens”) the need for moral self-discipline and civic spirit. He assumed that the revival of moral rigor and French patriotism in a corrupt eighteenth century required, above all, stellar examples of rectitude and selflessness that readers and citizens at large could learn from and emulate.

Also like many of his contemporaries, Servan expressed great admiration for the exploits of patriots from ancient Greece and Rome. If one could only travel through time to visit the households of Aristides and Cato, true “sanctuar[ies] of morals,” one could “contemplate these great and virtuous men” and cultivate “the immortal desire of imitating them.” But Servan preferred to search for

---


44. *Ibid.* The audience of “honnêtes gens” is identified on p. 2; the “contagion of the imagination” appears on p. 109.


good examples closer to home, on the principle that familiar examples command greater attention. In spite of Montesquieu’s assertion, widely repeated in the decades that followed publication of the *Spirit of the Laws* (1748), that honor and virtue represented distinct moral principles appropriate to different political systems, Servan’s admiration for ancient political virtue directed his attention especially toward the honor-bound French nobility of the later Middle Ages. “In our history, if I were to choose the most glorious age for our morals . . . I would select . . . the time from Charles the Wise [Charles V] to the brave Francis I. Those were the glory days of our valorous nobility, the days of that praiseworthy and brilliant chivalry, where an abundance of virtues overshadowed our faults.” Nobles then possessed a “singular mélange” of characteristics that lent their behavior “a certain indefinable noble and virtuous quality that calls out for admiration.” It was no coincidence, according to Servan, that the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries had given birth to revered national heroes. “We then saw the Montmorency, the Chastillon, the Dunois, the La Trémoille, the Bayard, the Brissac, the Soubise; names cherished forever, true ancestors of the nation.” Their inculcation of a code of honor that took precedence over all external laws or commands was especially commendable. Noble behavior, in that still uncultivated age, could not be regulated “except by honor.” “The French genius,” Servan intoned, “was in its virility; those were times of proud and generous sentiments.” “The French spirit speaks to us through our great men,” he concluded, and the spirit they represented should be studied and imitated by all.

Servan certainly did not see himself as an apologist or spokesman for the nobility. In fact, the contemporary nobility never appears in his text, neither as a distinct target within his expected reading audience nor as a subject of critical commentary. He addressed his moral prescriptions to all “honnêtes gens,” and he even went to the trouble of constructing allegorically an image of “political man” that amalgamated the professions of commerce, the law, and the military. Servan admired the qualities represented by the nobility in its days of glory because he believed that those qualities expressed a “French genius,” a “French spirit” that could serve as the basis for a general patriotic renewal. By emulating nobles who had once “cared only for honor,” all citizens of the nation—or at least, all literate and politically engaged citizens of the nation—could reconnect to an authentically French and virtuous past, and thereby overcome the moral depredations of modern culture. In effect, Servan’s invocation of the nation’s noble “ancestors” projected a future nobility without nobles, a spiritual nobility comprising all right-minded citizens who performed their civic and private duties zealously and consistently. With respect and admiration, he appropriated a nearly forgotten “French” tradition of aristocratic honor and turned it to national and moral purposes that seemed to transcend boundaries of class.

47. Ibid., 34, 37.
48. Ibid., 37-38.
49. Ibid., 83.
50. Ibid., 59-60. For further discussion of Servan’s rhetoric, see my “Recovering Tocqueville’s Social Interpretation,” forthcoming.
The implicit contrast, in Servan’s thinking, between the spiritual nobility acquired through civic virtues and the legal nobility acquired by birth or titles emerges more clearly in a text written roughly a decade after the *Discourse on Morals*. In the later text, a *Discours sur le progrés des connoissances humaines* (*Discourse on the Progress of Human Knowledge*) presented to the Academy of Lyon in 1781, Servan continued to emphasize the need to form virtuous and patriotic citizens. His discussion of what he called “the apprenticeship of the Citizen” differed in subtle ways, however, from the arguments advanced in the *Discourse on Morals*. Good examples and conscious emulation of those examples still stood out as indispensable ingredients of the moral education of the citizen, but Servan also drew attention to the mechanisms of recognition and recompense that are necessary to sustain the citizen’s emulation over time. “In a state,” he wrote, “the art of making men is also that of offering merit its just rewards.” But “what have we done in France? We have sought to purchase with gold what we should have rewarded with a glance of recognition; [consequently,] the state has exhausted its treasury, and qualities of heart are debased.”

Servan applauded the king’s decision to commission public statues of some of France’s greatest men—he specifically identified the noble writers and jurists Fénelon, l’Hôpital, d’Aguesseau, and Montesquieu—because the building of public monuments revived a highly effective Roman practice. The ancients had shown that “a great character, after observing a [hero on a] pedestal, can no longer remain bound to the earth; he must raise himself to that higher level, or die trying.” Servan feared, however, that the king’s efforts would not bear fruit unless the government developed a more general strategy for rewarding patriotic emulation.

Within the context of this broad discussion of patriotism, selflessness, and the proper means of rewarding them, Servan eventually broached the related subjects of law and nobility. “Oh, if only all respectable men (‘gens de bien’) could rely on a body of laws that provide recompense for virtue! But where are these laws?” Servan noted the other common subdivisions of jurisprudence, such as martial law, canon law, and criminal law, and he expressed exasperation at the absence of what he termed “remunerative law.”

Imagine! One has to create a name for the most noble subject of human legislation! We have neither the word nor the thing. All across Europe we have signs and colors that prove that a man was born into the Nobility; we have others that prove that he served in the army; we have others that prove nothing at all. But by what signs, what marks, do we recognize the enlightened zeal of the ecclesiastic, the vigilance and integrity of the magistrate, the heroic valor of the soldier, the good faith of the merchant, the industry of the artisan, the talent of the artist?

The legal marks of nobility—parchments, titles, epaulettes—were always clear and, moreover, frequently meaningless. Other “gens de bien,” however, fell

---

52. Servan, *Discours sur le progrés*, 111.
53. Ibid., 109.
into a vast and undifferentiated crowd, where “all merit is obscured, happy merely to escape persecution, happier still to avoid extinction.” Yet in spite of the flaws in the current system, Servan reported that he could “hear the human heart cry out from all directions: Look at me, and I will do well; praise me, and I will do better.” Servan argued that the king, if he wished to command “citizens” rather than mere “subjects,” must manage carefully the signs of public esteem so that genuine merit and civic virtues would receive the encouragement and recognition they needed. By dispensing official honors widely, conspicuously, and fairly, the king would inspire in his subjects a “delirious enthusiasm” and help to provide “public instruction” in the virtues of citizenship. That last point deserved emphasis, because “good public education” was “the only plank left amid the universal shipwreck of morals” confronting French society.

The *Discours* of 1781 can be seen as an elaboration of ideas first expressed in the *Discours* of 1769. The ultimate objective of both texts is to reform both individual morals and the broader political culture of the eighteenth century. Servan hoped to replace luxury and egoism with civic spirit and virtue, and to that end, he used both of his texts to highlight appropriate objects of emulation for the conscientious citizen—ancient patriots, statues of great men, and the heroic and honorable nobility of earlier centuries. In both of his discourses, moreover, Servan looked past the standard categories of profession or estate to address all right-minded citizens, the “honnêtes gens” in 1769, the neglected “gens de bien” in 1781. In short, the purposes and general characteristics of the moral reform that Servan craved changed not at all between 1769 and 1781; the two discourses differed only in the techniques of reform that they recommended. In 1769, Servan had encouraged self-examination and patriotic introspection. By 1781, he had become persuaded that the “contagion of the imagination” on which he had earlier based his hopes also needed structural reinforcement. Individual good will and initiative remained important, but the monarchy’s methods of recognizing excellence had to change to accommodate the broad imperative of forming virtuous and patriotic citizens. Whereas the *Discourse on Morals* worked from the ground up by urging readers to strive for a nobility of virtue in their own lives, the *Discourse on the Progress of Human Knowledge* worked from the other direction and urged the crown to acknowledge formally the demonstrated spiritual nobility of the patriot.

Given his penchant for inclusive rhetoric, and his own apparent ability to craft a kind of hybrid moral identity, how should Servan’s contributions to the debates of 1789 be understood? Although he had previously shown no overt hostility
toward the Second Estate, his writings of the “pre-Revolution” established an unmistakable and uncharacteristic rhetorical opposition between the nobility and commoners. In one piece he identified himself, with mock humility, and a certain disingenuousness, as a “mere bourgeois.” Another essay bore the title “commentary of a commoner.” Several pamphlets decried the “dangerous aristocracy” of the high nobility and magistracy. In a pamphlet that addressed the political interests of the third estate, he expressed disdain for “those who dare to scorn you.” Servan’s steady stream of anti-aristocratic rhetoric in 1789 no doubt helps to explain why he was chosen by two different electoral districts of Dauphiné to represent the third estate of his province at the coming Estates-General, an honor he politely declined. What explains the change in tone? Were Servan’s fighting words produced by the shock of political conflict? His pamphlets certainly commented on and responded to dramatic events, such as the declarations of the second Assembly of Notables, and the Parlement of Paris’s announcement of its support for the Notables’ conservative constitutional arguments. If one focused strictly on the apparent political dynamics of the year 1789, one could well interpret Servan’s heated rhetoric as reflecting a change of consciousness brought about by stunning events and unanticipated experiences.

But just as Servan’s critique of French laws in 1781 had reflected his specific and personal preoccupation with the challenge of cultivating citizenship in an age of corruption, so his interventions in the constitutional debates of 1789 reflected the fermentation and evolution of his own thoughts on the political and social order. Some of the vocabulary employed in his arguments may have been provided by the immediate issues that framed the conflict—“aristocracy” and “commoners,” “despotism” and “abuses”—but the perspective communicated in Servan’s pamphlets was perfectly consistent with, and had obviously grown from, attitudes he had expressed consciously in earlier years. To be sure, tension had been evident in those earlier reflections. He had praised the “nobility” while also stressing the universal category of the “citizen;” he admired aristocratic honor at the same time that he urged the recovery of virtue and “antique morals;” he acknowledged the legitimacy of traditional honorific marks even as he recommended the creation of new distinguishing marks to reward the merits of all subjects. Servan had been able to balance these distinct and potentially conflicting ideas because of his faith in the common moral ground that linked the traditions of the nobility to the aspirations of all right-thinking subjects of the third

59. See Glose et Remarques, 9: Commentaire roturier, 12.
60. Avis salutaire au Tiers Etat. Sur ce qu’il fut, ce qu’il est, & ce qu’il peut être (n. p., 1789), 27.
61. Michaud, Biographie universelle, 39:140. Servan penned a total of seventeen pamphlets in 1788–1789, all of them sympathetic to the claims of the Third Estate. The pamphlets are distinguished from one another mainly by their level of vitriol.
62. See, for example, both Commentaire roturier and Glose et Remarques.
63. On his admiration for “antique morals,” see Discours sur le progrès, 125.
estate. From the transcendent ideals of patriotism, he evidently hoped, there would ultimately spring a new kind of universal nobility, one rooted in the virtues of citizenship and differentiated internally only by the honorific emblems of patriotic zeal.

In the fall of 1788, the Second Estate’s gradual articulation of a more exclusive and traditional definition of nobility, one that preserved the corps’s legal as well as its symbolic superiority within the French social order, contradicted Servan’s evolving conception of the proper composition of a patriotic community. Consequently, Servan felt impelled to iron out the apparently irreconcilable commitments in his developing conceptual scheme. Recognizing the limits of the nobility’s fraternal embrace of its patriotic brethren, Servan reprised and elaborated one of the subordinate themes of his earlier work; he now foregrounded the negative moral consequences that arose from the existence of a nobility whose institution rested on mere legal formula.

The decrees of the Parlement and the Assembly of Notables, as well as the recent agitation in provinces such as Brittany and Languedoc, had shown that, although “nobles are common, nobility is quite rare.” The position of the majority of the nobility since the parliamentary decree of September 25, 1788—that the Estates General must convene in accordance with the “ancient forms” that gave preeminence to the privileged orders—invited Servan’s return to the important subject of French and aristocratic history. His remarks sounded echoes from his earlier writings. “If the great lords of the clergy, of the sword, and of the robe cling obstinately to their demand for an Estates-General according to the ancient forms, the Third Estate, for its part, may very well demand Bishops, Magistrates, and Gentilshommes consistent with ancient forms. From the nobility, they will expect men such as Duguesclin, Dunois, and Bayard; from the Parlements, they will expect Cuquières, d’Orgemont, Lavaquerie, l’Hôpital . . . all of whom,” he noted sarcastically, “observed ancient forms.” Servan’s rehearsal of this roster of French heroes betrayed his recent mental effort to reconcile the principles of honor and virtue and to recuperate for modern uses past examples of noble patriotism. Believing that he had found submerged in France’s noble history the foundations of a unifying and universal civic ethos, he inevitably regarded the Second Estate’s own appeal to tradition as a narrow, faulty, and selfish reading of the nation’s past. He expressed surprise that the nobility would opt for an interpretation of political history that violated its own interests, properly understood, in addition to those of the nation at large. If one looked beyond the ancient forms that governed past meetings of the Estates and observed the “ancient and eternal forms of integrity, public virtue, and social justice,” the nobility would happily find itself liberated from the domination of wicked ministers, and the people would find itself enjoying “the sacred rights of man and of the citizen.”

---

64. Servan, Commentaire roturier, 38.
65. Ibid., 32-33.
As Servan articulated his new political stance, his mind continued to pivot around the concept of the “citizen.” The existence of the “citizen,” whose moral formation had occupied Servan’s attention for decades, now served as the underlying premise for his critique of noble privilege and exclusivism. Countering the nobility’s arguments for retaining and even strengthening the society of orders, Servan declared that it is “only the Order of the Citizen that forms the state and sustains it.”66 Commoners had only to become conscious of their moral worth and of the rights to which their moral worth entitled them. In the past, he noted, “certain disdainful people, wearing swords, told you that you were not men, and you believed it; they claimed that they were more than men, and you believed it.”

People of the third estate had been taught to regard themselves as “serfs . . . villagers, peasants, laborers, bourgeois, or, as the men of quality like to say, the lower sort. Citizens we [were] not.” The time had arrived to recognize that “you are citizens, gentlemen of the third estate, in spite of yourselves, in spite of the men of quality, and in spite of Jean-Jacques, who saw citizens only in Plato’s Republic, or in his own [republic of Geneva.]”67 At the collective level at least, the “apprenticeship of the citizen” had evidently come to an end, and members of the third estate stood ready to assume the patriotic roles that the nation assigned them.

Subtly inverting the argument of the Discourse on Morals, which had suggested that the path to virtuous citizenship lay in the emulation of the historical nobility, Servan now asserted that noble status necessarily rested on the anterior virtues of the citizen. When confronted with the arrogant claims of the nobility, he advised his readers among the third estate, “do not hesitate to ask the nobility if [noble status] can have any legitimate origin other than the civil virtues; ask next what privileges derive from the civil virtues, and if one of these privileges consists of the right to harm the state.” The nobles now needed to hear common citizens utter that “sweet and powerful word, equality, the cry of reason and justice. . . . [Tell them] that without equality, all morality is a chimera, and justice is nothing but an insoluble problem.”68 The equality that had implicitly united all “honnêtes gens” in the Discourse on Morals, an equality that had placed honor and moral excellence theoretically within the reach of all, had now to become a formal feature of French political culture. Servan hastened to add, however, that the third estate should specify the nature of the equality it claimed. “Point out that you are asking not for an equality of conditions, wealth, power, or honors that would be incompatible with monarchy. . . . Note that the equality you claim is only an equality of rights.”69 Here Servan surprisingly combined a Rousseauian recognition of natural rights with a Montesquieuian respect for monarchical forms, a gesture that could easily be construed as a tactical maneuver designed to placate sympathetic readers within the Second Estate.

66. Ibid., 34-35.
68. Ibid., 29-30.
69. Ibid., 29.
But more than mere political strategy, Servan’s qualification of the third estate’s claims to equality seemed to express nervous second thoughts about the radical course that he and others were now proposing. To justify “becoming revolutionary,” the deputies and voters of the third estate would need simultaneously to show a capacity to “become” citizens, and Servan was unable to expel from his mind nagging doubts about the quality and effectiveness of the preliminary “apprenticeship of the citizen” that his fellow patriots had served. His exhortation to the third estate to claim its rights as equal citizens came laced with apprehensions about its moral preparedness. The occasionally shrill rhetoric that he directed against the nobility seems to have been intended less to relieve pent-up hatreds than to arouse the third estate to self-consciousness (“Awaken from your thousand-year lethargy . . .”), and to inspire the passion and moral determination required of the properly patriotic citizen.70 Still persuaded by his own earlier argument that the citizen’s moral disposition mattered more than the specific laws that governed the polity, Servan concluded his Avis salutaire au Tiers Etat (Salutary Advice for the Third Estate) with warnings about the stiff moral challenges confronting his readers. “In most governments, men can be neither entirely free nor entirely enslaved; when [men] evince sufficient courage to fight their servitude, they still lack the virtues necessary for liberty. The reform of morals must always precede, or at least accompany, the reform of laws. To provide a liberating constitution to a corrupted people is like lowering anchor far from shore and into a bottomless sea.”71 Servan’s trepidation concerning the sudden establishment of civic equality, and his willingness to envision some version of an inequality of “conditions,” undoubtedly reflected his lingering affinity for the concept of a spiritual nobility, one that could express and exemplify patriotic virtues, establish a widely advantageous object of emulation, and enjoy deserved marks of public recognition.

This assumption about the justice and utility of the concept of nobility, which even included an abiding respect for the chivalric traditions of aristocratic families, helps to explain why Servan himself had probably long harbored the “pious hope” that the second and third estates might eventually reach a patriotic compromise regarding the foundations of the social and political order. Servan would have been well aware that, ever since the 1750s, a great many noble writers and reformers had defined themselves as patriots, identified with the virtues of citizenship, and sought new ways to reconcile the traditions of the French monarchy with ancient civic models and a more inclusive national spirit.72 Servan, and

70. Ibid., 27. Referring to the feudal past, Servan reminded his common readers that “you were bound and gagged by men who styled themselves great barons, [men] who violated your daughters, caressed your wives, emptied your stores of wine, and pillaged your harvest, after first trampling your fields with their packs of hounds” (11).

71. Servan, Avis Salutaire, 32.

72. For examples of the creative thinking of nobles of the sword, see Victor de Riquetti, marquis de Mirabeau, L’Ami des Hommes; ou, Traité de la population (Avignon: n. p., 1756); Charles-Gaspard Toustain de Richebourg, Précis historique, moral et politique sur la noblesse française (Amsterdam: Chez Marc-Michel Rey, 1777); Guillaume Barthez de Marmorières, Nouveaux essais sur la noblesse (Neuchâtel: Société Typographique, 1781); Louis Gabriel du Buit-Nançay, Eléments de la politique,
many others like him, must have assumed that the articulation of a shared definition of patriotism in 1788–1789 would eventually produce a more fluid, more edifying, and more mutually acceptable social order reflecting the values and aspirations of all conscientious nobles and commoners.

But the fermentation of patriotic thinking in the decades before the Revolution had simultaneously opened several new vistas to the self-styled patriots of the reforming Old Regime. Some of those vistas had reserved an important role for a reinvigorated corporate nobility, one that would draw purposefully from its distinctive traditions to institute the ultimate model of moral excellence and to encourage all royal subjects to perform the duties specific to their proper spheres. Taking as their prime targets the destabilizing effects of luxury, the reflexive pursuit of profit, and the decline of French self-discipline, these patriotic visionaries shared much in common with advocates of more expansive reforms, including Servan. But despite the existence of this common ground, the decision of the Second Estate (or at least its leading spokesmen) to espouse a conservative and limiting version of patriotism, one that constructed a far narrower bridge linking chivalric honor to modern virtue, prompted Servan to conclude that “without equality, all morality is a chimera.” Interpreting the nobles’ apparent retrenchment as a disappointing subversion of a unifying patriotic program, he exercised his agency in 1789 by giving priority to the objective of equal opportunity, and by partially suppressing, at least temporarily, his conceptually troubling commitment to the existence of a moral nobility. Servan had come to realize, through a dialectical realignment of his beliefs concerning justice and community, that formal recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of the “citizen” stood as the sine qua non of meaningful political reform.

III. IDEAS AND THE EXERCISE OF AGENCY: LESSONS FROM THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

What does the case of J.-M.-A. Servan reveal about the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness in 1789? And why is his story instructive for those seek-
ing new approaches to the study of human agency? For specialists of the French Revolution and for historians in general, Servan’s personal journey through the world of eighteenth-century political thought highlights the explanatory inadequacies of two frayed arrows in the historian’s quiver, the terms experience and discourse. Servan’s anger toward the institution of the nobility, an institution to which he after all technically belonged, cannot be ascribed to his having suffered through the fractious social relations between estates under the Old Regime. And analysis of the perceptions and convictions that Servan brought with him to the crisis of the “pre-Revolution” proves that the components of his egalitarian political arguments had taken shape in his mind well before 1788–1789 and the conflicts over voting procedures in the Estates-General. The decisive factor in Servan’s own revolutionary itinerary was not the nature of his “social and political experience,” but the various ideas with which he assigned meaning to the experiences he assimilated to his picture of the world.

In assessing the words and deeds of Servan, one finds that discourse works no better than experience as an explanatory device. Within the voluminous writings of Servan, one sees traces of many alleged discourses, including those of classical republicanism, aristocratic constitutionalism, anti-commercial moralism, enlightened despotism, Voltairean rationalism and tolerance, and the Rousseauian general will. But none of these putative discourses exercised hegemonic control over Servan’s thinking, and the logic of his political outlook depended on his own ordering of priorities rather than on premises supplied by already existing discursive structures. Arguments by Rousseau, Voltaire, Montesquieu, Mably, Beccaria, Mirabeau père, and many others certainly influenced Servan’s thinking, but the range of his reflections was not limited to the number of discrete discourses available on the eighteenth century’s intellectual menu. He combined, dismantled, expanded, and modified the ideas of the philosophes for reasons specific to his own moral conscience and evolving sensibilities. The concept of discourse is insufficiently agile to shed light on the inner operations of Servan’s mind, and it fails to capture the moral determination that inspired his work both as a thinker and as a political agent.

Servan’s path to a revolutionary consciousness is best understood in light of the diverse, multi-faceted, and not always fully formed ideas that he brought to bear in his interactions with the events that crowded his conscience and his world. Like most people in most phases of their lives, Servan had simultaneous commitments to many ideas, including some that could prove to be incompatible within certain kinds of contexts. Moved by a perception of moral decline and national malaise—a perception that had undoubtedly been produced by an earlier chain of ideas and moral decision-making beyond the purview of this article—for decades before the Revolution, Servan had promoted a culture of citizenship, envisioned a system that granted equal access to honor, and contemplated the redefinition of nobility. His developing political philosophy contained a tradition-tinged image of moral hierarchy, which he understood to be both useful and necessary to any healthy political culture, and a longing for a fraternal form of
civic equality, which he considered prerequisite to the patriotic renewal that France desperately needed. Servan had little trouble holding some semblance of these distinct ideas in harmonious balance until the shifting context of political argument challenged him to refine and reiterate his beliefs.

When in 1788 the nobility claimed the right to retain at least some of its formal privileges in the social and political order, Servan reprocessed his working assumptions. Thanks to his own prior reflections, and to the wide-ranging public discussions in which he had previously been engaged, he was prepared to assimilate the nobility’s claims to a network of ideas that made clear the implications of aristocratic particularism for the prospects of moral reform in France. Those aristocratic claims, though they were articulated around many of the same points of reference cherished by non-noble reformers, failed to correspond with some of the expectations that Servan had integrated into his semi-coherent moral vision. Now sensing counter-productive potential in some of the ideas to which he had long been attached, Servan exercised agency by deciding what mattered most to him and by therefore acting on the world with a newly clarified sense of moral purpose. Working through the familiar category of the citizen, and drawing on resources already present in his mind, he expanded and promoted the egalitarian implications of his patriotic desires, while downplaying, and even vehemently reversing, the implicit aristocratic sympathies also integral to his earlier political vision. Having filtered the confrontation of estates through the complex of ideas that he had used to make sense of the existing social and political order, Servan outgrew one interpretive disposition and salvaged from its remains the resources appropriate to another. According to the terms of this new disposition, claims to legal distinctiveness were necessarily rejected as a selfish and unpatriotic affront to the inherent dignity of all French citizens.

Because of his intellectual sophistication, his impressive literary output, and his enjoyment of a kind of “dual citizenship” straddling the Second and Third Estates, Servan can hardly be taken as a representative figure of the Revolutionary generation. But his atypical status does not mean that the trajectory of his changing consciousness lacks general significance for the history of eighteenth-century France. Because they were dialectically engaged with the kinds of shared categories that structure life in any community, Servan’s reflections were necessarily intersubjective as well as subjective. In fact one may reasonably conclude that, for both Servan and for the readers who absorbed and responded to his writings, his ideas could be construed as having moral import precisely because of their bearing on the nature of social relations in France. Much evidence suggests that the kinds of social, moral, and political concerns that occupied Servan from the 1760s to the 1780s—the role of the nobility, the meaning of citizenship, the relationship between honor and virtue, the relative merits of ancient and modern political cultures, the characteristics of a specifically French patriotism—attracted the attention of countless writers and readers in the years preceding the French Revolution.75 The general process by which Servan negotiated the passage from

75. I hope to communicate some of the intensity of these concerns in a forthcoming book on conceptions of patriotism in eighteenth-century France.
pre-Revolutionary to Revolutionary modes of thought must have been replicated in the minds of hundreds or thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of French subjects who innocently yearned for a more just and equitable world. Needless to say, the kinds of conceptual compromises made by other individuals in other milieus may have differed significantly from those of Servan. But the rich and complex case of this exceptionally thoughtful Dauphinois lawyer helps to delineate the cognitive space out of which incipient Revolutionaries collectively derived their political agency. To explain the shape of the Revolution created by the contingencies of 1788–1789—to understand, for example, why representatives of the Third Estate moved from expressions of admiration and awe for the nobility toward impassioned denunciation of all the Second Estate’s pretensions—one must examine the intricate relationships and multiple dynamics inherent in the complex of ideas embraced by the deputies at the outset of the Revolution. As the individual case of Servan demonstrates, their agency consisted in the resolution of the conflicting moral priorities that mediated between their ideas and their world.

A brief word should be said about one of the conceivable objections to the approach advocated in this article—namely, that it limits historical analysis to the study of intellectuals. An approach emphasizing processes of moral reasoning and the play of ideas will inevitably direct historical attention toward intellectuals and other elites who leave behind a reservoir of written evidence providing clues to the operation of their minds. But this path of least resistance is not the only path open to those who would investigate the sources of historical agency. As numerous social and cultural historians have shown over the past generation, the resourceful historian has the capacity to discern beliefs, ideas, and values in evidence that does not take immediate written form—for example, in rituals, gestures, songs, customs, acts of resistance, court testimony, police investigations, and associational life. Through judicious use of inference and induction, one can profile the likely principles and operating assumptions of both collective entities and relatively inarticulate individuals. By using a wide array of clues once-removed from the subject, and by avoiding the reifying temptation built into the labels “mentalities” and “world views,” the historian can infer the existence of supple structures of belief, attempt to trace their evolution over time, and make reasonable assertions regarding the connections between belief, thought, and action. In any case, the difficulties of ascertaining the thinking or motivations of subjects who leave behind little written evidence, though frustrating and disappointing, does not justify the historian’s resorting to the anonymous and mysterious force of “experience” to account for agency or social change. It is far better to admit honestly the limits of historical knowledge than to ask readers to accept on faith the mental impact supposedly exerted by forces outside the self. Attention should be focused not on experience, but on the composition, and decomposition, of the interpretive dispositions that inevitably frame historical agency.

The historian should conceive of an interpretive disposition as a set of disparate beliefs and assumptions whose cumulative effect produces a general
moral sense and a particular view of the world. But because one’s moral sense is never fixed, monolithic, or immune to transformation from within, one’s understanding of justice can be tested when interlocutors with whom one shares certain premises and organizing concepts make divergent or seemingly incongruous moral assertions—as seems to have happened in 1788, when the Second Estate defended the justice of its privileges within an atmosphere of patriotic fraternity. On such occasions, the will to reestablish coherence leads to the refinement of meanings and the rearrangement of priorities. The very act of sorting out and explaining a sense of justice whose moral force has not previously been fully evident, either to the speaker or to the community, gives expression to a new hierarchy of beliefs and a new interpretive disposition. If that disposition is sufficiently consonant, in most of its particulars, with the belief systems of others in the community, it may compel the adherence of other minds and give shape to a political project. In 1789, the new filtering capacity of the concept of the citizen—its sudden ability to stand for several salient commitments—signaled the emergence of a revolutionary program. From the perspective of many advocates of the Third Estate, the word “citizen” expressed revolutionary intent in a way that seemed consistent with aspirations and values contemplated much earlier by many common subjects of the crown. For J.-M.-A. Servan, the focus on the rights of the citizen, in the charged political battles of 1789, merely continued the conceptual agency he had been exercising for years, during the slow revolution of his mind.

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

76. Cf. Stedman Jones’s argument linking linguistic disputation to notions of “right” in “The Determinist Fix,” 31. Although he is right to stress that political disagreements rest on conflicting perceptions of the right and the just, his explanation of the emergence of conflicting claims is tied to the operations of discourse itself—either the inherent instability of its meanings or its vulnerability to displacement by other discourses. To avoid reifying discourse, I prefer to see notions of right as giving rise to the linguistic patterns that express them.