

Overview of the French Revolution

DAVID ANDRESS

The identity of France in the eighteenth century, as a kingdom held together by the character of its monarchy, hinged on a narrative of kingship constructed in the previous century. Louis XIV, completing the work of his father's great cardinal-ministers, made a claim of absolutist power both ideologically coherent and effectively irresistible. Louis XV's reign, almost as lengthy as his great-grandfather's, preserved that heritage intact, and Louis XVI, callow as he was in many ways, was as certain of his own right to untrammelled political initiative as any of his ancestors. The great political problem of the eighteenth century was that, after 1715, it was repeatedly made clear that other powerful people in the kingdom had never accepted the absolutist narrative, and alternative stories of the character of France increasingly flourished, with decisive political effect. The roots of revolutionary change were wide and deep, and ran to the heart of the "Old Regime" itself.

The fragility of what Louis XIV had built at Versailles was shown almost immediately after his death, when the Regent duc d'Orléans and the judges of France's highest court, the *Parlement* of Paris, did a deal to overturn the old king's will, giving Orléans more power. The judges in return got back the power, which Louis XIV had stripped from them, to "remonstrate" against royal edicts before registering them in their statute-books. By confining remonstrance to a gesture after registration, the old king had nullified its ability to hinder the royal will, but now, and right down to the Revolution, the *parlementaires* in Paris and a dozen other regional centers would be able to haggle over the implications of any royal act. For these judges, the claims of absolutism were simply a giant mistake, a misunderstanding of the reality of an unshakeable ancient constitution, to which any new piece of legislation or taxation must conform, and of which they were the unimpeachable guardians. The demonstrable fact that different provinces operated by entirely different codes of law, and that historically grounded inconsistency

was the general rule of internal administration, gave their position additional weight.¹

Around this basic clash, the whole course of eighteenth-century French public policy played out. Imperial ambitions, religious persecutions, and the swelling tide of publication and discussion that subsequently became “the Enlightenment” all found their place on this battlefield, where ultimately all the forces of Old-Regime society and culture came close to annihilating each other. The context for all this internal conflict was the reality of dynastic and imperial war that dominated the middle decades of the new century.

France was the most populous state of western Europe, and under Louis XIV had become a military juggernaut, repeatedly expanding its boundaries, and fighting a widespread alliance of other powers to a stalemate in the final years of his reign, albeit at a ruinous fiscal and human cost the king did not choose to see. Although the Regency and the ministries of Louis XV’s early adulthood kept France out of major conflicts, and thus stabilized the finances, there was ultimately little hesitation in rejoining the round of European dynastic struggles when potential advantage presented itself. The War of the Polish Succession in the early 1730s thus brought France effective control of the Duchy of Lorraine, but the War of the Austrian Succession that dominated the 1740s saw no such clear-cut gains, as unsuccessful campaigns spread from central Europe to the furthest extent of European settlement in North America, and from the Caribbean to India. France dramatically changed sides in the politics of Europe in 1756, a “Diplomatic Revolution” that aligned it, traumatically for some, with the ancestral Austrian foe. The Seven Years’ War that began at that point was, in global terms, a continuation of conflict with the British Empire which had never entirely ceased in the intervening years, and which had ramped up significantly since 1754.²

Renewed war ended in 1763 with the near-miraculous survival of Frederick the Great’s Prussia, and hence the catastrophic failure of the “Diplomatic Revolution” on the Continent, made far worse for France by a virtual clean sweep of British victories in North America and India. Although France held onto the economic powerhouse of its Caribbean slave colonies, it had to surrender an empire that had stretched, nominally at least, the length of the Mississippi Valley and across the Great Lakes into Quebec, and which

¹ Colin Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XIV to Napoleon* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), Chapters 1 and 2.

² Miranda Spieler, “France and the Atlantic World,” in Peter McPhee, ed., *A Companion to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 57–72.

on the other side of the world had offered the prospect of military and economic dominance of southern India. This geopolitical disaster – and the enormous cost of it in temporary taxation and borrowing – was the foundational crisis of the long slide to revolutionary collapse.

For the following seven years, the aging Louis XV and his ministers struggled to get the *parlementaires* to accept changes in governmental practice that would facilitate paying down the crown's debts and securing longer-term stability in taxation. Both sides dredged up again and again their core positions, royal power assuming that, eventually, the threat of temporary exile would cow the judges as it had before, but the judges finding growing confidence through public support and a new articulation of the idea that the rights they defended were those of "the nation." In March 1766, facing growing *parlementaire* pretensions to be a national network, rather than separate instruments of his will, the king confronted them physically, using a speech to the Paris *parlement* given in his presence to deliver a "scourging" that resounded in public opinion at home and abroad:

It is as if they forgot that my courts derive their existence and their authority from me alone, and that the discharge of that authority, which they exercise in my name only, always remains with me and can never be employed against me. Independent and undivided legislative power belongs to me alone . . . Public order in its entirety emanates from me, and the rights and interests of the nation, for which some dare to create a separate body from the monarch, are necessarily united with my rights and interests and rest only in my hands.³

Yet such thundering had little effect. The king, working through his minister Maupeou, eventually at the end of 1770 did what absolutist doctrine said he had always had the power to do, and demanded obedience; when in early 1771 it was not forthcoming, recalcitrant judges were arrested, and the *parlements* replaced with more compliant institutions.

Reaction to the "Maupeou coup" demonstrated the wider cultural shifts that had been taking place through the middle years of the century. Although the king and his ministers held firm to their decisions, they did so through a howling storm of public outrage.⁴ None of this yet had any institutional traction to touch them directly, but it illuminated the extent to which

³ Text: <https://revolution.chnm.org/d/236>, see also Mike Rapport, *Rebel Cities: Paris, London and New York in the Age of Revolution* (London: Little, Brown, 2017), Chapter 3.

⁴ Durand Echeverria, *The Maupeou Revolution: A Study in the History of Libertarianism; France, 1770–1774* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

“enlightened” culture had become far more than just genteel discussion about abstract philosophy. The French never spoke of “the Enlightenment,” a later coinage from German, using rather the metaphor of “lights,” *lumières*, to describe both individual and collective new wisdom and its spread. Similarly, the famous *salons* in which the social and intellectual elites met to chew over the affairs of the day and the novelties of culture were unknown by that term until the end of the century. The circles of sociability that the word later described were nonetheless real, although the most serious-minded of the female hostesses (and their male guests) were in a decided minority amidst a wider throng of wealthy people with time to talk.⁵

The value of salon culture in promoting, sponsoring, and patronizing a wave of rationalizing and reformist ideas should not be underestimated, but the tensions and contradictions of its context were also significant. Darlings of the salons like Denis Diderot continued to risk arrest if they actually published some of their more daring ideas, and kept many of their challenging texts in circulation only in manuscript among friends, or entirely secret until after their deaths. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, like Diderot plucked from social obscurity by the salon-going elite for his talents, gave vent in print to misogynistic declamations against the very same kinds of “unnatural” female social and intellectual engagement practiced by many of his greatest fans. This helped to produce an increasingly hostile cultural backlash against female scholarship, notably from nonelite men who, in an era of rising prosperity for the middling classes, formed their own single-sex cultural associations rejecting the “rule” of hostesses.⁶

Misogyny also reigned in a wider world of print. The official realm of approved, censored publication lived in constant battle with two different, but connected, illicit realms. In one, significant publishing enterprises based outside the borders of France, often in Protestant jurisdictions unconcerned with assisting in papist censorship, bypassed official controls by smuggling texts to networks of otherwise-licit booksellers. Much of their trade was relatively innocuous, but from the middle of the eighteenth century it also included a stream of materials that blended the sexually explicit (and often

⁵ Antoine Lilti, *The World of the Salons: Sociability and Worldliness in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁶ Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), Chapters 3 and 6; Haydn T. Mason, *The Darnton Debate: Books and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998).

sexually abusive) with the socially and intellectually critical. The fact of a well-established market for such materials helped sustain the second, more flagrantly illegal, publishing realm. Marginalized aspiring writers in the capital were easy prey for networks of illicit printers and pamphleteers, who readily turned society gossip and political disputes into the raw materials of defamatory printed matter – quite often working at the behest of parties to such disputes. Libel was an arms-race with no concept of mutually assured destruction.⁷

Just such obscene charges swirled around all the principals of the “Maupeou coup,” and while prudence restrained direct attacks on the monarch until his death in 1774, thereafter there were few limits to the descriptions of depravity his court was charged with. With supreme irony, such corrosive condemnations circulated at the same moment that Louis XVI, a young man with clear sympathies for reform and for the voice of “public opinion,” was being urged in the name of *lumières* and the nation both to radically open up the mechanisms of government and to restore the *parlements* and their historic rights. With further brutal irony, complying with the public wish for the latter helped to assure that his genuine effort to promote widespread structural reform through his minister Turgot was brought to a chaotic collapse within two years of his accession.⁸

Overcoming obscene gossip about the inadequacies of his own sexuality and the profligacy of his queen’s favors, Louis XVI made himself popular by openly embracing the cause of American independence in renewed war from 1778 – and more popular still by largely deferring the cost into the future through new loans. French elite enthusiasm to reverse the battlefield verdict of 1763 was matched by their infatuation with the republican virtues of the rebellious colonists. Those who inhabited the pinnacle of a grossly unjust hierarchical society gave as little thought to the meaningful implications of this for their own lives as they had for decades to the destabilizing potential of other enlightened enthusiasms.⁹

As very expensive victory over Britain in 1783 failed to translate into major territorial gains, or significant economic advantage, other burdens from the

⁷ Simon Burrows, *A King’s Ransom: The Life of Charles Théveneau de Morande, Blackmailer, Scandalmonger, and Master-Spy* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010); Simon Burrows, *The French Book Trade in Enlightenment Europe II: Enlightenment Bestsellers* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

⁸ John Hardman, *The Life of Louis XVI* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁹ Dena Goodman and Thomas E. Kaiser, eds., *Marie Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen* (London: Routledge, 2003); Sarah Maza, “The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution,” in McPhee, *Companion to the French Revolution*, 42–56.

past began to press urgently on the French body politic. The monarchy was still, as it had been doing since the days of Henri IV, generating income by selling public offices to the wealthy as private property that conveyed privileged legal and fiscal status – up to and including personal and heritable nobility. The wider social desirability of privilege and status was reflected in a lively market for seigneurial rights – paper claims of lordship that brought real entitlements to payments and services from peasant communities, and helped purchasers up the ladder toward “living nobly.” The increasing value (and cost) of these as a capitalist investment was racking up tensions in the countryside, as lords and their agents sought to maximize revenues, and peasants used royal courts to challenge abusive impositions. In these ways and others, revenues of the swelling economy that might have alleviated the state’s difficulties were locked away behind barriers of privilege. Meanwhile the farming out of indirect taxation, on easily identifiable goods and activities, produced endemic low-level conflict between the mass of the population and the paramilitary agents of the tax-farmers, empowered to go where they liked in pursuit of revenue.¹⁰

It is in the intractable existence of such collisions that the political and cultural history of the coming of revolution meets its social history. While many administrators and intellectuals had bemoaned a falling population across the century, it had in fact been rising, by perhaps as much as a third since Louis XIV’s day. Soaring global trade, centered on a near-explosive growth in slave-grown produce, had swollen the port cities, while villages across many regions counteracted growing pressure on land by diversifying into cottage industry. The French economy had been growing more complex, more “modern,” and as a consequence more fragile, as rising numbers of people depended on increasingly elaborate networks of production, trade, and movement to survive.¹¹

Economic fragility struck hard in the second half of the 1780s. The costs of war were still unrelieved, and the new United States failed to offer the massive trading boost its ally had expected. Misplaced optimism in government led to a trade treaty with Britain in 1786 that opened French markets to

¹⁰ William Doyle, *Venality: The Sale of Offices in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996)

¹¹ Lauren R. Clay, “The Bourgeoisie, Capitalism and the Origins of the French Revolution,” in David Andress, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 21–39; Jean-Pierre Jessenne, “The Social and Economic Crisis in France at the End of the *Ancien Régime*,” in McPhee, *Companion to the French Revolution*, 24–41.

competition at prices its manufacturers could not match, spreading unemployment in many proto-industrial districts. Harvests in these years grew erratic, and by 1788 catastrophic. If large numbers of those who prospered from trade – directly, or indirectly as men of the law – still sent their new wealth to find safe haven in rural land and seigneurial rights, wider patterns of change were shifting to expose the jarring contradictions of such conduct.

Louis XVI's postwar finance minister Calonne, pursuing a twin-track policy of boosting confidence with grandiose spending plans and haggling once again with the *parlements* for a reformed tax settlement, succeeded by 1786 only in reaching the realization that full-blown structural reform was needed to see off real state bankruptcy. Launching into increasingly desperate efforts to avoid that outcome demonstrated perhaps the most ironic influence of the Enlightenment on the coming Revolution. It was the growing conviction amongst scholars and publicists that acts of state bankruptcy – a common phenomenon in early-modern monarchies – represented an intolerably despotic approach to governance, that colored the combined determination of almost all parties that such an event was out of the question.¹²

To avoid bankruptcy required reform, but in 1787 Calonne's efforts to persuade a handpicked national Assembly of Notables of that simple conclusion foundered disastrously. The Notables, for myriad personal and sectional reasons, rejected every aspect of Calonne's diagnosis. His own confidence-boosting spending plans were held against him, and made to look criminally irresponsible, and were perhaps even the short-term cause of a crisis he was exploiting to promote the same old changes that had been rejected in the 1760s and 1770s. Calonne fell from office, replaced by Brienne, a former vigorous opponent of the reforms – which did not help his own subsequent efforts to propel them forward. Out of the Notables' meetings, and continuing into further wrangling with the *parlements*, an antidespotic alliance was forged between conservative elites and the "enlightened" reading public, increasingly convinced that the protection of France's historic constitution and the furtherance of a more inclusive "national" political settlement went hand-in-hand.¹³

¹² Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹³ Vivian R. Gruder, *The Notables and the Nation: The Political Schooling of the French, 1787–1788* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

The marker of this unspoken alliance was the claim – supposedly first articulated by the marquis de Lafayette, patriot-hero of the American War – that a “truly national representation” was needed, and this meant the revival of the historical Estates-General, a consultative body of medieval origin that had not met since 1614. Through further months of chaotic confrontation, including an abortive attempt in May 1788 to abolish the *parlements* outright (met with popular protest and a collapse in state credit), the need for the Estates-General became a truism in the public mind. Brienne fell from office in late August, to be replaced with Jacques Necker, regarded as a popular hero, and a financial wizard, for steering the finances during the American War. His administration now placed all its hopes in an Estates-General meeting the following year, which abruptly brought into focus the question of what that actually meant.¹⁴

In September 1788 the antidespotic alliance shattered irreparably. The Paris *parlement* declared that the Estates-General should, self-evidently, meet as it had last done – in “the forms of 1614” – and thus as three separate (and separately voting) chambers for the three historic Estates: Catholic clergy in the First, fully authenticated nobles in the Second, and everyone else, 98 percent or more of the population, in the Third. What would soon be denounced as the “privileged orders” would thus be able to outvote the Third by two to one. The huge majority of the reading, thinking public outside the clergy and nobility were forced to confront in the coming months the fact that most of those inside those two groups really did insist on remaining elevated above them, in the new, more consultative monarchy they had seemed to be forging together.

Aided by the (possibly strategic) relaxation of censorship on publication about the Estates-General’s composition, a flood of pamphlets denounced the privileged orders toward the end of 1788. The minority amongst the privileged who stood out for thorough-going reform, some of whom grouped in Paris in the soon-notorious “Society of Thirty,” became as vociferous as any. Amongst them was the clergyman Emmanuel Sieyès, who in January 1789 published the 200-page “pamphlet” *What Is the Third Estate?*, lambasting the privileged as little more than a tumor on the body-politic. A whole new chapter of public division and antagonism was opened up, as the country prepared for the practicalities of an unprecedented national election.

¹⁴ Annie Jourdan, “Tumultuous Contexts and Radical Ideas (1783–89): The ‘Pre-Revolution’ in a Transnational Perspective,” in Andress, *Oxford Handbook*, 92–108.

Deputies for the Estates-General were chosen in a process that reached down to every town neighborhood, guild association, and village community. Householders, largely but not exclusively male, gathered in early 1789 both to delegate some of their number upwards to the final 300 district-court constituencies that chose deputies and to write down their communal grievances. These *cahiers de doléances*, the time-honored textual basis of the gathering, reflected the notion of kingship as a judge and righter of wrongs. What they produced in 1789 was the spectacle of a country set on articulating the injustice of practically every element of its public life.¹⁵

Many urban documents, and notably those compiled and condensed for final transmission to the Estates-General, proposed a reordering of state administration and politics on representative grounds far beyond anything imagined in official reforms. Many even amongst the nobility and clergy agreed that fiscal privileges, at least, should be removed for the public good. From the towns and villages, on top of sometimes-blistering attacks on the injustices of royal taxation, came variously respectful, pleading, bitter, angry, and occasionally desperate statements about the iniquity of seigneurial rights and the abuses of the church tithe. Elite contemporaries, unable to gain an overview of the vast amounts of complaint recorded, found the widespread unrest that broke out in the spring of 1789 almost inexplicable, but historians' investigations have shown that the entire country was primed to throw off the yoke of multiple abuses that, once voiced, had become intolerable.¹⁶

Thus, from the bottom up, revolution came to France. At Versailles, a fundamentally divided body of men gathered for the Estates-General. Noble representation was dominated by the "old" nobility for whom their status in itself was an indelible component of their identity, clearly threatened by Third-Estate pretensions. Before and after the opening of the Estates-General in early May, reports of rural unrest, the repossession of crops delivered up as seigneurial dues and clerical tithes, and the outright pillage of other stocks flowed around the nation. After that opening, left to organize themselves by Necker and the king, the Estates deputies could not even agree whether to constitute themselves as one body, or three. Fears of some decisive coup against the national movement were everywhere.

¹⁵ Pierre-Yves Beaurepaire, "The View from Below: The 1789 *cahiers de doléances*," in Andress, *Oxford Handbook*, 149–63.

¹⁶ Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

In June, with prices of basic foodstuffs rising to dangerous levels, widely believed to be provoked by an aristocratic “famine plot” to subjugate a hungry nation, the political landscape shifted. The Third Estate deputies and their noble and clerical sympathizers dubbed themselves, on Sieyès’ suggestion, the National Assembly, and days later, in an atmosphere of panic fear at the prospect of dissolution, swore to give France a new constitution. Belated royal efforts to seek reforms that now seemed pitiful half-measures fell flat, and by the start of July, voices in the royal family that had been calling for a hard line since late 1788 rose again. Louis XVI, still essentially well-meaning but vulnerable to claims that his prerogatives were under attack, heeded his brothers and other relatives who demanded tough action. Growing numbers of troops were summoned to encircle the capital, and on 11 July Necker was dismissed in the first phase of a planned slow strangulation of the National Assembly. Amidst nationwide turmoil, with almost no hesitation, Paris rose up, shattering these plans. The king’s own brother, Artois, fled into exile, as did the leader of the “Ministry of the Hundred Hours” that had briefly replaced Necker. Louis was forced to capitulate to an Assembly that, only hours before, had feared its own destruction.¹⁷

Principles and Politics

The revolution of 1789 was born under the sign of deadly treason, and would never shake off the mark of its origin. It was widely and inaccurately asserted that the Bastille’s governor, de Launey, butchered and decapitated by a crowd on 14 July, deserved his fate because he had opened the gates to the crowd and then opened fire on them. The city’s royally appointed mayor, de Flesselles, perished similarly, having supposedly tried to palm off a crowd demanding weapons with some empty chests. The blundering coup attempt of early July cemented the perceived reality of the otherwise mythical “famine plot,” which led directly to the brutal lynching of two senior officials, Foulon and Berthier, at the hands of Parisian crowds a week after the Bastille fell.

Narratives of betrayal rapidly spread beyond the Parisian streets. Almost simultaneously with these lynchings, the first edition of the *French Patriot* newspaper carried a scaremongering tale of citizens blown sky-high by a

¹⁷ Robert H. Blackman, *1789: The French Revolution Begins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).



Map 1.1 A map of France in 1789.

treacherous seigneur. Across swathes of the countryside, the prospect of inevitable aristocratic revenge in the rumored form of harvest-burning brigand bands produced a “Great Fear” of community mobilization. News of these deeply disturbing, though ultimately short-lived, movements reached Versailles in waves, prompting further alarm in the National Assembly that simultaneous disturbances must have been coordinated by their enemies. Out of this complex stew of fear at betrayal and loss of control

emerged the idea of regaining the initiative by a renunciation of the privileges that so many *cahiers* had denounced. Propelled by a radical minority, the bulk of the Assembly joined on the “Night of 4 August” in an event they would identify as the “abolition of feudalism,” which they persuaded themselves was ecstatic.¹⁸

In its first months of power, the Assembly staked out positions that would determine much of what followed. Although the late-August Declaration of the Rights of Man seemed to address individuals, much of it was in fact devoted to folding such people into a highly centralized and unitary vision of a sovereign nation. The revolutionaries empowered future legislators – and implicitly themselves – with many of the attributes of an absolutist sovereign, while at the same time awkwardly squeezing their actual monarch (who still believed himself absolute) into a limited chief-executive role. They made a commitment to giving localities, down to the individual village, responsible elected leaders, but in practice expected only obedience from them. There was no question of “intermediary bodies” outside the capital, any more than there was of a revising chamber or other privileged check on the “general will” that, according to the Declaration, produced laws.¹⁹

Reconciling such principles with the realities of politics proved persistently impossible. The renewed activism of popular crowds that resulted in the transfer of the royal family to Paris in the “October Days” ratcheted up tension with the crown. It also fueled “moderate” suspicions that radicalism was itself a plot by the king’s cousin Orléans to seize the throne. The high-handed appropriation of Church assets the following month furthered the logic of the end of privilege, while offering a route out of the state’s fiscal crisis. However, it marked the start of a slippery slope toward a choice between submission and rebellion for all who did not agree that secular authorities could demand obedience from the Church hierarchy. In the following years the Assembly moved to double down on its individualist logic by banning anything that resembled a trade union, while also insisting that the end of “feudalism” still meant that peasants had to hand over their onerous dues to the wealthy owners of seigneurial rights, or buy them out for the absurd sum of twenty years’ payments. The suppression of violent

¹⁸ Michael P. Fitzsimmons, *The Night the Old Regime Ended: August 4, 1789, and the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Barry M. Shapiro, *Traumatic Politics: The Deputies and the King in the Early French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

protest against doctrinaire efforts to “liberalize” the markets for basic food-grains, which recurred annually, and sometimes spread into wider denunciations of economic disruption, showed yet another dimension of the revolutionary elite’s detachment from genuinely popular concerns.²⁰

While such policies were pushed through, often with little or no substantive debate, the revolutionary political class continued to understand itself as under siege. Those plotters who had fled abroad in July 1789 had been joined thereafter by a steady trickle of new *émigrés*, a cohort of “counterrevolution” both vocal and visible, and generally assumed, with some good reason, to be intertwined with internal networks of similarly intransigent opposition, dedicated to the destruction of the Revolution. The aristocratic counter-revolution – signified not least by the positions of a good quarter of the National Assembly’s members, some of whom fought duels against leading patriots – provided the context for understanding all revolutionary politics as crisis. In that crisis, the “good citizens” were perpetually pitted against not just the overt counterrevolution, but also the abiding fear that any discord strengthened the risk of collapse – and the second-order fear that such discord was stoked precisely to achieve that end.²¹

As something akin to a political spectrum developed over the Revolution’s first years, differences were defined less by positive policy positions than by views over who was a genuine patriotic leader and who a dangerous agitator. Ultracentrist *monarchiens* had been pushed out of politics by attacks from both sides by the end of 1789. Royalist publications heaped scorn on the whole project of revolution. Partisans of strong authority rallied around the Marquis de Lafayette, an unimpeachable patriot, but also, at the head of the Parisian National Guard, a sworn foe of radical agitation. *Fayettistes* saw such agitation as the work of despicable “factious” and “seditious” people, and a front for the supposed continuing ambitions of the duc d’Orléans to seize the throne. The swirling contentious landscape of the new uncensored revolutionary press was made more turbulent by the fact that these and other factions did subsidize publications (much as they had before 1789), in which

²⁰ Barry M. Shapiro, *Revolutionary Justice in Paris, 1789–1790* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Noelle Plack, “Challenges in the Countryside, 1790–92,” in Andress, *Oxford Handbook*, 346–61.

²¹ Kirsty Carpenter, “Emigration in Politics and Imagination,” in Andress, *Oxford Handbook*, 330–45; Timothy 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).

their infighting and constant reinterpretation of minor incidents fueled a paranoia that other authors – Jean-Paul Marat for example – needed no financial incentive to share. The other side of the charge of sedition was the radical belief that – again, with little reference to specific policy choices – those leading the Assembly and the politics of the capital were navigating toward a compromise with counterrevolution that would usher in repression and resubjugation.²²

The printed dimension of politics pullulated – several hundred mostly short-lived titles, of every political shade, fought for Parisian (and hence national) market share in 1789–1791 – and the politics of personal correspondence and verbal exchange was little less fervid. Deputies within the Assembly had wasted little time in marking out sharp divisions amongst themselves, which were thereafter constantly reinforced by their own exchanges with constituents, and from the end of 1789 by the foundation of what became the Jacobin Club. Its name, which initially merely gestured toward the previous tenants of a monastic building, became the label for a whole ideology of radical patriotic partisanship. At the same time, it was constantly asserted as part of that ideology that Jacobins were merely the “good citizens” on whom the Revolution depended. The Paris club, initially reserved for Assembly deputies, but soon attracting other activist members, and a regular public audience, spawned first dozens and by 1791 several hundred provincial imitators. Revolutionary political engagement became a form of sociability, although most clubs followed the Rousseauist line of excluding formal female participation. Within Paris, some more radical Jacobins took the lead in forming a club with lower subscriptions, the Cordeliers, which itself in early 1791 spawned a clutch of explicitly “popular” societies, all loudly, though somewhat formlessly, radical in outlook.²³

The ideological possibilities of Jacobin participation may have contributed to the decline of large-scale electoral participation. As the numbers of clubs steadily rose, so the percentage of “active citizens” taking part in repeated rounds of time-consuming voting for wave after wave of newly created offices drifted downwards. The two processes would ironically coincide to

²² David Andress, *Massacre at the Champ de Mars: Popular Dissent and Political Culture in the French Revolution* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2000).

²³ Charles Walton, “Clubs, Parties, Factions,” in Andress, *Oxford Handbook*, 362–81; Isser Woloch, “A Revolution in Political Culture,” in McPhee, *Companion to the French Revolution*, 437–53.

leave only the committed activist minority engaged with public office, while both Jacobin ideology and the rules of elections (no declared candidates, the ability to nominate any individual with your vote) insisted that those involved were merely patriots seeking the best outcome for the nation. Within this politics of nonpolitics, the corollary was that opposing the patriotic line was not dissent, but treason. Deputies had implicitly endorsed this when they transformed the old crime of *lèse-majesté* into the new one of *lèse-nation*, and eagerly debated how it was to be punished.²⁴

The difficulty was that revolutionary politics in practice continued to create divisions where ideology preached there should be only unity. In its takeover of financial responsibility for the Catholic Church, the National Assembly's majority took the view that it was entitled thereafter to remodel ecclesiastical institutions for greater efficiency. This had been done successfully in other enlightened states, but not by rulers perceived, as the Revolution was, as the enemy of sanctified institutions. From the closing down of "surplus" convents in early 1790, what were supposed to be administrative measures generated ideological resistance. The intrusion of sectarian fears about Protestant influence brought real violence to southern cities in the following months. Revolutionary doubling-down, inserting the clergy into effectively secular structures of electoral control in June 1790, was met with increasingly disruptive resistance. The attempt to set a hard limit, demanding in January 1791 a loyalty-oath from all beneficed clergy, produced only mass refusal by half of all priests, and violent protest across the nation. "Fanaticism" became a charge to add to "aristocracy" and "counter-revolution" to explain all opposition, and to justify harsh measures to eliminate it.²⁵

The immediate repercussions of the clerical oath had barely died away before the whole Revolution was thrown into doubt by the king's attempted escape on the night of 20 June 1791. While the royal couple swiftly discovered that France outside Paris did not nurture the feelings for them they had fondly believed, the leadership of the National Assembly was forced to confront the monarch's clearly expressed unwillingness to be a constitutional figurehead. They did so by smothering the evidence of his dissent, proclaiming that he had been kidnapped by the aristocratic counterrevolution, and

²⁴ Charles Walton, *Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁵ Edward J. Woell, "The Origins and Outcomes of Religious Schism. 1790–99," in McPhee, *Companion to the French Revolution*, 145–60.

desperately conducting a secret negotiation with the recaptured royal couple to preserve the appearance of agreement.

The Paris Jacobins split over the public consequences of this strategy, with the more centrist wing (including most of the deputy-members) joining Fayetteists in a new “Feuillant” club (like the Jacobins, named for its monastic home), while radicals regrouped in the aftermath of an explosive public clash in Paris. Crowds gathered on 17 July on the Champ de Mars to petition for a referendum on Louis’ constitutional fate were attacked by National Guard militia under martial-law provisions, and in the belief that radical protesters were being egged on by counterrevolutionary *provocateurs*. The Constitution of 1791 was thus finally enacted in the aftermath of fatal conflict between self-defined patriots, and under the shadow of proscriptions (albeit ones lifted immediately by general amnesty). Radicals had been given decisive proof, to their own minds, that their moderate opponents were in league with the counterrevolution. That the king perjured himself as he accepted his new role (and later wept at his fate in doing so), was only one of the challenges France faced.²⁶

The progression of French revolutionary history from the founding of its new constitution, through war, Republic, and Terror to the post-Thermidorian aftermath of corruption and division, is often seen as the central story of the decade. In essence, however, much of it amounted to the playing-out with variations of the political attitudes and approaches already clearly evident by 1791, in situations of greater peril and with consequently more heightened effects, both rhetorical and real. Little new entered the political equation, even if events now proceeded with more memorably colorful language, and the ramping up of violence by orders of magnitude.

The dread of the counterrevolution was the lever by which a grouping of radical Jacobins in the new Legislative Assembly, associated with the journalist and activist Jacques-Pierre Brissot, and thus inevitably labeled “Brissotins,” seized the political agenda. Proposing measures which provoked the king into using his veto barely two months into the new system, thereafter the Brissotins advocated with increasing force and intransigence for a war to remove the *émigré* threat from France’s eastern frontiers. With internal politics deadlocked, a lunge to war started to appeal across almost the whole political spectrum. Brissotin radicals saw it as a chance for uncomplicated

²⁶ Munro Price, *The Road from Versailles: Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, and the Fall of the French Monarchy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002).

patriotic triumph; Feuillants and Fayetteists, still entrenched in government, as a route to restore social discipline against radical hotheads; the royal family, incomprehensibly, as a route to restored absolute power through defeat and destruction of the whole Revolution.²⁷

Only a small minority of radicals, Maximilien Robespierre among them, opposed war, and they did so precisely because they saw it as a plot to lure an unprepared nation into destruction – yet another in the long line of treasons since the commandant of the Bastille had supposedly opened the fortress gates, only to open fire on the patriots with cannon. When Brissotin allies entered government, taking up ministerial posts explicitly quarantined from the national representatives as potentially corrupting in nature, they gave sustenance to well-established tropes of revolutionary paranoia. When war against Austria came in April 1792, bringing early defeats, the terror of real betrayal, and by the summer the addition of Prussia as a further potent foe, the constitutional structure shattered.

Lafayette tried to launch a military coup against Jacobinism in June, but was allowed to return to his army command unhindered. The Assembly seized executive authority from the king in early July, yet hesitated over any move to formal deposition. *Émigrés* threatened devastation to Paris if the king was touched. Radicals, convinced that the isolated and helpless monarch was somehow actively directing French defeat, used control of Parisian local government to launch their own coup on 10 August. A new radical-patriotic identity as *sans-culottes* – an invented label of highly contentious significance – was cemented in blood, as hundreds were killed in a pointless clash with the royal Swiss Guards, after the king had already surrendered himself to the Assembly.²⁸

The following year was dominated – through the declaration of a republic, the trial and execution of the king, the widening of the war to every frontier and colony, and the desperate steps to create structures able to fight that war – by the unremitting fratricidal hatred between the original “Brissotins” and their sympathizers on one side, soon relabeled “Girondins,” and the alliance of Parisian *sans-culottes* and other more radical “Montagnard” politicians on the other. This played out both within the National Convention elected in September 1792 to constitute a new republican order and across

²⁷ Leigh Ann Whaley, *Radicals: Politics and Republicanism in the French Revolution* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000).

²⁸ David Andress, “Politics and Insurrection: The *Sans-culottes*, the ‘Popular Movement’ and the People of Paris,” in Andress, *Oxford Handbook*, 401–17.

the wider field of politics. A remarkable facet of the Revolution's history is how antagonists on both sides repeatedly leveled charges of the most treasonous conduct against their opponents, then managed to press on with parliamentary business for weeks or months until the next explosion was reached. Girondins inherited the Feuillant mantle of pragmatic politicians who saw their more radical opponents as deranged and ignorant at best, and prospective looters of a collapsed polity at worst. *Sans-culottes* stood where the Brissotins once had, and condemned those close to power as selfish profiteers who slid at every moment closer to open counterrevolution. Parliamentary and press argument raged over which factions were "true" or "false" friends of the people, while the *sans-culottes* short-circuited the question by declaring quite simply that they were the people, and that the National Guard putsch which finally expelled the Girondin leadership from the Convention in early June 1793 was the people's will.²⁹

Revolutionary leaderships preached the imperative of national unity – and increasing national mobilization – while fomenting divisions that increasingly became immediately murderous. Conscription decreed to fight the expanded war had set the spark to a tinder of religious and cultural alienation in the west, producing an overtly counterrevolutionary peasant army in the Vendée that amateurish National Guard forces struggled to contain. As this weakness helped drive local massacres and panicky division at the center, so the antagonisms there spread back out, with Paris-backed radical factions in Lyon, Marseille, and elsewhere condemned by locals as ignorant disorganizers and shameless looters. Explosive revolt in such major cities fed back into the purging demands of the *sans-culottes*, and ensured that, when Girondin leaders fled the capital, a ready-made civil war erupted around them.

This was the context for the consolidation of what is conventionally called "the Terror." An escalation of ruthless measures of national emergency, to contain revolt while building an unprecedented million-man army to fight the external war, it produced an equally unprecedented vision of a nation rebuilt from the bottom up by patriotic energies. Later partisans could find within it ammunition to denounce radical republicanism as a satanic project of indiscriminate slaughter, or to laud it as a new vision of justice, clawed free at dreadful cost from reactionary foes. It was also a process in which, driven by the same paranoid fears and demands for unconditional unity that

²⁹ Marisa Linton, "Friends, Enemies and the Role of the Individual," in McPhee, *Companion to the French Revolution*, 263–77; Paul R. Hanson, "From Faction to Revolt," in Andress, *Oxford Handbook*, 436–52.

had been in place since 1789, the leadership of the Republic steadily cut deeper and deeper into its own collective body, obsessively seeking to grub out the imaginary counterrevolutionary roots of all dissent and misconduct. Emblematic of this is the process whereby, as military victories seemed to bring no relief from the purgative demands of Robespierre and those around him, hardened survivors of previous political battles turned in fear of their own lives on him as a scapegoat for the whole process, and defamed him as an aspiring counterrevolutionary monarch.³⁰

In some accounts, particularly those within the twentieth-century Marxist tradition, the fall of Robespierre and his closest allies in the so-called “Thermidorian Reaction” of July 1794 marked the effective end of the French Revolution, because a regime that was not moving forward on a path of greater social radicalization could not be “revolutionary” any more. There are many reasons for thinking such an easy division untenable. Thermidor itself was an event largely organized by those who had been active collaborators in the “Terrorist” project. While politics over the following year swung emphatically toward a relaxation that liberated very many “suspects” from the propertied classes, others detained for their dangerously ultraradical sympathies also benefited. The Thermidorians certainly were callously doctrinaire in their removal of price controls at the end of 1794, exacerbating what would almost certainly have been a famine winter anyway, but the operation of those controls had been so riddled with corruption and malfeasance that crowds had cursed them as they jeered Robespierre to the guillotine. The politics of 1795 and after did brutally scapegoat an entire class of more plebeian local activists as “terrorists,” but the politics of early 1794 had already closed down the institutions of the *sans-culottes*’ movement as dangerously disruptive. Parisian crowds in the spring of 1795 did invade the legislature demanding “Bread and the Constitution of 1793,” but the architects of the Terror had refused to implement that totemically “democratic” document, proclaiming the people untrustworthy until their Jacobin masters had won the war for them.³¹

The wider truth that emerged from politics in the later 1790s was that the nature of the conflicts in the first half of the decade had shattered the persistent assumption of those years that a widely based body of “good

³⁰ Dan Edelstein, “What Was the Terror?,” in Andress, *Oxford Handbook*, 453–70; Marisa Linton, “Terror and Politics,” in Andress, *Oxford Handbook*, 471–86.

³¹ Laura Mason, “Thermidor and the Myth of Rupture,” in Andress, *Oxford Handbook*, 521–37.

citizens” could rally to an effective form of government. When the National Convention finalized its second constitution in late summer 1795, it compromised the liberal balance of powers the document embodied by insisting that two-thirds of the new national representatives should be existing Convention members. Imposing this settlement provoked a “royalist” rising from conservative Parisian neighborhoods, duly suppressed with military force, and marked the “Directorial” regime from its start as alienated from the electoral legitimacy that revolutionaries since 1789 had declared essential – even if they had often honored such a claim only in the breach.

Victims and Survivors

The French Revolution was an extraordinary outburst of cultural innovation and political liberation. From the streets of Paris to the most remote villages, the events of 1789 stirred the sense that individuals could be, and were, free, in a quite new way. Reckless expressions of this sentiment from too far down the social ladder still tended to get squashed quite effectively by the local partisans of good order and decency, while even prosperous peasant property-owners had to embark on several years of resistant struggle before their feudal burdens were actually erased in 1793. But the general sentiment that people – men and women, and occasionally even children – could speak up and speak out was an undamnable river that flowed on even through those moments, like the spring and summer of 1794, when such behavior carried a significant risk of arrest, or worse. One of the most remarkable things about the records of police spies who lurked in Parisian crowds during the Terror is the volume and variety of things they found to report. Between the wooden expressions of loyalty and the paranoia of subversion, there still emerges time and again the echo of a people uncowed, critical, often alarmed but always engaged.³²

Although the printed expression of political disagreement was steadily ground down between 1792 and 1794, and remained a site of sharp and frequently censorious contestation under the Directory, the wider landscape of publication flourished more continuously. The world of unregulated pamphleteering became so extensive as to be a labyrinth for unwary

³² Jill Maciak Walshaw, *A Show of Hands for the Republic: Opinion, Information, and Repression in Eighteenth-Century Rural France* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2014).

researchers, in which it is possible to find almost any view expressed. Every crank in France had the freedom to express themselves at length if they could pay a printer, and almost all of them, it seems, could. But beyond this, new freedoms produced more noteworthy consequences. It became, for example, far more likely that female authors would receive publication than under the Old Regime. The Revolution's atmosphere of radical change also stimulated stylistic and substantive innovations in literature, from protofeminist accounts of activism to proto-science-fictional speculations on automata, including one which invoked the name "Frankenstein" from an older German text, three decades before Mary Shelley.³³

The French revolutionary stage, with allowances for periodic excesses of censorship, came alive in bold new ways as playwrights, actors and audiences wrestled to make new uses of the potential of drama to enlighten and stimulate society. As millions lived through years of trouble, thousands, at least, invested their time, effort and imagination in the idea that there might be new ways of making sense of new times. Nor should it be forgotten that real personal freedom took leaps forward in other ways. Divorce, from 1792, became a route to escape from unhappy or abusive marriages taken by thousands, the majority women, until snatched away a decade later. More generally, the Revolution transformed the legal basis of the family from one of dominance and subordination to a meeting of (near-)equals, even if some provisions around illegitimacy seemed to shield men from responsibilities older morals had insisted upon.³⁴

In wider terms, revolutionary freedom often formed an unpalatable stew. Revoking all forms of feudal rights and subordination turned out to create knotty legal problems, as old-regime custom had inserted almost-nominal reference to such relationships in routine leases, loan agreements, and even bills of sale. Liberating private property often entangled it in years of unforeseen disputation. In parallel vein, the beliefs revolutionaries shared around the *assignat* paper currency, not least that its perceived value (or lack thereof) was a matter of political rather than economic confidence, led them into policy choices that created both

³³ Carla Hesse, *The Other Enlightenment: How French Women Became Modern* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Julia V. Douthwaite, *The Frankenstein of 1790 and Other Lost Chapters from Revolutionary France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

³⁴ Susan Maslan, *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy, and the French Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Susanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

misery for the common people and exploitative opportunities for augmenting the estates of the wealthy.³⁵

In all the realms of policy that touched on real poverty, intensifying doctrinaire hostility to the religious personnel who tended the sick, crippled, or orphaned, or distributed charity to the old or the dispossessed, burned down structures of relief with little more than periodic expressions of good intentions offered as replacement. Similarly, bold plans for general schemes of education, again displacing the clerical role, were cheered to the rafters, but went unfunded and undelivered. With endemic unrelieved poverty came beggary, despair, and the fear and reality of banditry – sometimes aligned with continuing ideological battles, sometimes mere murderous rampage.³⁶

Directorial politics, in its own way, was a project of making sense of the new reality. In practical terms this would ultimately mean pragmatic decisions to reintroduce things like excise taxes that had been execrated in 1789 – and indeed to embark on a partial state bankruptcy, the very thing whose shadow had sparked the revolutionary process. In political terms the Directory reeked of hypocrisy. From the two-thirds decree onwards, the conduct of public life conspicuously failed to match up to the promise of the constitution. The animosities of previous years drove voters across the nation toward the formation of “Jacobin” and “Royalist” groupings – far too diverse to be called parties, but both antagonistic to the control of the self-selected political survivors in Paris (as well as, of course, to each other). Once regular annual elections were initiated in 1797, the government showed its determination to remain in control by blatantly refusing to seat dozens or hundreds of elected figures in the national legislature, and purging local results to secure compliant administrators. But before simply condemning this, the political and social reality of many areas of France needs to be acknowledged.³⁷

France in the later 1790s was a society of victims and survivors. Hundreds of thousands had good reason to feel they had been unjustly persecuted under the Terror by people who still lived among them – and tens of thousands denounced as “terrorists” since 1794 were also learning what such persecution felt like, and who to blame for it. The discourse of ideological conflict and suffering was also a language with many self-centered uses.

³⁵ Rafe Blaufarb, *The Great Demarcation: The French Revolution and the Invention of Modern Property* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Rebecca L. Spang, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

³⁶ Alan Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

³⁷ Howard G. Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

Survivorhood could also mean having tacked with the prevailing political winds, and remaining ruthlessly determined to hold onto power in one's particular village, town, or locality. It could equally mean continuing to prosecute vendettas that went back to individual and familial grievances long predating 1789, and in which revolutionary politics might be little more than a stage-setting for grimly small-scale epics of revenge. Directorial political manipulation worked against these trends as much as it cynically safeguarded the power of the elite.³⁸

Understanding the final years of the revolutionary decade is a delicate balance between confronting the self-interested and exclusionary nature of Directorial politics and questioning whether any alternatives, given the ingrained strife of previous years, could have been better. Directorial policy initiatives did much to reconstruct an educational and scientific landscape that had been relentlessly pummeled by revolutionary hostility to the former privileged corporations of old-regime intellectual life, and latterly to any suggestion that there might be merit in anything other than a chaotic individualist free-for-all in the marketplace of ideas (an attitude which, carried over into the realms of production, had resulted in a catastrophic slump in the quality of French goods in the middle years of the decade). To justify reforming an intellectual elite in the new Institut national, Directorial thinkers increasingly articulated what they saw as a positively elitist understanding of cultural and scientific endeavor. Yes, the argument went, the people in general formed a republican citizenry, but they were not all sufficiently advanced along the road of understanding, and it was vital that those who were should be supported by the state to continue their own development freely, while the remainder were gently but firmly led toward a *future* capacity for political engagement.³⁹

Such guidance went hand-in-hand with the wider elaboration of what has been called a “security state,” where an increasingly militarized approach to suppressing the worst excesses of criminal disorder was accepted by local stakeholders as a satisfactory substitute for their own democratic autonomy. These trends found a sharp echo in the decision to project France's newly asserted status as the “Great Nation” into the conquest of Egypt under

³⁸ Ronen Steinberg, *The Afterlives of the Terror: Facing the Legacies of Mass Violence in Postrevolutionary France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); D. M. G. Sutherland, *Murder in Aubagne: Lynching, Law, and Justice during the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

³⁹ Jean-Luc Chappey, “The New Elites: Questions about Political, Social and Cultural Reconstruction after the Terror,” in Andress, *Oxford Handbook*, 556–72.

General Bonaparte. Strategically justified as a stepping-stone to attacking British India, and revenge for the global defeat of 1763, the expedition birthed its own Institut d’Egypte, with dozens of French scholars devoted to reclaiming through scientific expertise the knowledge of Egyptian antiquity buried under centuries of Muslim “ignorance.” This line was maintained through Bonaparte’s subsequent atrocity-stained campaigning in the Holy Land, and the eventual defeat and evacuation of the French presence. Ironic testament to its potency lay in the forlorn grouping of republican sympathizers, natives of various corners of the Ottoman domains, who left with the French, hoping for support to extend republican principles across the Levant.⁴⁰

A further ironic impact of Directorial politics was felt on the other side of the world, where a complex stew of colonial revolt and multipolar war had steadily thickened ever since white settlers and planters had rejected the racially egalitarian implications of 1789. Metropolitan fears of the loss of an economic powerhouse had encouraged a pandering approach to white alarm, but had not been able to stop different groups of whites escalating political violence, especially in Saint-Domingue, attacking the nonwhite free population, and creating the conditions for massive slave rebellion in August 1791. Radicalizing politics on the ground and in Paris had eventually led to first a local and then a general declaration of the end of slavery (by February 1794), but its global effects were patchy (Indian Ocean colonies simply refused to implement it) and confused in the Caribbean by a multipolar conflict between slave rebels, “official” French forces, local whites, and British and Spanish armies. Nonetheless, the later 1790s (until the discreditable Napoleonic restoration of slavery) were the only period in which official French policy was to support unqualified freedom for people of all races. Evidence suggests that, in at least some of the scattered military and insurgent campaigns across the Lesser Antilles, a vision of a free multiethnic republic was what some people were indeed fighting for.⁴¹

Events in the later 1790s in the Levant and the Caribbean testify to the remarkable power of the idealistic narratives generated by the French Revolution. They are not the only such narratives, of course: counterrevolutionary belief in the wickedness of proceedings has also left a clear legacy,

⁴⁰ Ian Coller, “The Revolutionary Mediterranean,” in McPhee, *Companion to the French Revolution*, 419–34.

⁴¹ Paul Friedland, “Every Island Is Not Haiti: The French Revolution in the Windward Islands,” in David A. Bell and Yair Mintzker, eds., *Rethinking the Age of Revolutions: France and the Birth of the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 41–79.

while suppression of antirepublican revolt in the Vendée in 1793–1794 produced a potent legend of Catholic martyrdom, more recently escalated to forceful, if highly contestable, claims about genocide. There are views and analyses of the 1790s available to suit any political position one might care to imagine. Like many of the great “events” of history, much of what we understand about the French Revolution is the outcome of a persistent duel between the hunt for new evidence and the human desire for myth-making, and is unlikely to ever be anything else.⁴²

⁴² Pascal Dupuy, “The Revolution in History, Commemoration, and Memory,” in McPhee, *Companion to the French Revolution*, 486–501.