THE FRENCH REVOLUTION
AND THE CREATION
OF MODERN POLITICAL CULTURE

**Volume 2**

# *The Political Culture of the French Revolution*

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CHAPTER 2

# *"Revolution"*

KEITH MICHAEL BAKER

"MON cher philosophe, ce siècle ne vous paraît-il pas celui des révolutions . . . ?" Voltaire wrote to d'Alembert on 16 September 1772.[1] The sentiment is scarcely surprising, for the eighteenth century was indeed full of "révolutions"—at least semantically. Everywhere one looks, one finds the term invoked, generously and indiscriminately, to cover an ever broader variety of changes—remembered or anticipated, feared or hoped for—in human life and social existence. If "tout est révolution dans ce monde," as eighteenth-century writers liked to proclaim, this was at least in part the result of the popularity of a term that now came more readily from the lips and flowed more easily from the pen.[2] "Révolution" was far from being an unfamiliar term in 1789. But it was among the first to be reshaped by the linguistic and conceptual transformations that gave meaning to the events of that year.

## I

It is hardly possible to offer a precise demonstration of the growth in the popularity of the term "révolution" throughout the entire eighteenth century.[3] But a case study carried out by Jean Marie Goulemot, the scholar who has most fully considered the meaning of the idea of revolution during this period, is at least suggestive in this respect. Goulemot looked carefully at the French translations of a single text—Machiavelli's *Discorsi sopra la prima decada de Tito Livio*—from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. Eliminating mere repetitions of earlier translations, he identified four basic versions, first published in 1571, 1664, 1691 and 1782 respectively. The sixteenth-century translation did not use the term "révolution" at all, while the seventeenth-century versions used it only once (in 1664) or twice (in 1691). The 1782 translation, on the other hand, used the term no less than twenty-five times. Since Machiavelli's text remained stable, it is clear that the eighteenth-century translator found, in the constant text of the *Discorsi,* opportunities to use the term "révolution" that had simply not existed for his predecessors.[4] The phrases in Machiavelli's text for which the eighteenth-century translator substituted the term "révolution"—or, more frequently, "révolutions"—do not usually refer to the old idea of a cycle in human affairs which

brings things back to their point of departure (in an analogy with the astronomical meaning of the term). Instead, they refer largely to changes in fortune, to accidental mutations in human affairs, to innovations and disorders erupting within the flow of human time. They refer, in short, to all the vicissitudes and instabilities of human existence that Machiavelli saw arising from the operation of human passions—and which he held it to be the function of political order to contain and stabilize.

This, indeed, is the figurative meaning of the term appearing alongside the astronomically related ones in the French dictionaries of the end of the seventeenth century, and it is the meaning that remained the basic one in relation to political matters throughout the eighteenth. In 1690, Furetière, having given the astronomical meaning of the term, added "REVOLUTION, se dit aussi des changements extraordinaires qui arrivent dans le monde," filling out this definition with such examples as "Il n'y a point d'Estats qui n'ayent été sujets à de grandes *revolutions,* à des decadences. Les plus grands Princes ont eu des *revolutions* en leur fortune. La mort d'Alexandre causa une grande *revolution* dans ses Estats."[5] According to the *Dictionnaire* of the Académie française in 1694, this usage of the term signified "Vicissitude, grand changement dans la fortune, dans les choses du monde," and it offered *"Grande, prompte, subite, soudaine, estrange, merveilleuse, estonnante révolution"* among its illustrations.[6] Some twenty years later, in 1717, the Académie gave this definition a more explicitly political dimension by offering "changement qui arrive dans les affairs publiques, dans les choses du monde,"[7] a specification carried further by the *Encyclopédie*: "REVOLUTION . . . signifie *en terme de politique,* un changement considérable arrivé dans le gouvernement d'un état."[8] The *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* emphasized the negative connotations of the term in recording that it "se dit aussi des changemens extraordinaires qui arrivent dans le monde: des disgraces, des malheurs, des décadences" and offering the Latin equivalents *"Publicae rei commutatio, conversio, calamitas, infortunium, imperi occasus."* In the same mood of disquietude, it supplemented examples taken from Furetière with "Tous les esprits étoient inquiets, à la veille d'une si grande *révolution* qui se préparoit."[9] Richelet was more succinct in identifying the threatening connotations of this usage in an age that valued stability as the highest worldly good. From 1680 on, he gave: Revolution. Trouble, desordre & changement."[10]

Thus "revolution" was associated with change and disorder, frequently but by no means exclusively in the political order of states—in other words, with disruptions in the stability which all early modern governments aimed to impose on human affairs. As a result, the term had several characteristics in eighteenth-century usage which are worth underlining at this point.[11] First, its underlying meaning was in the plural, for if order was thought of as unitary, change and disorder—of which the term was the essential expression—were understood as having an infinity of different manifestations. Hence the tendency of the dictionaries to lapse into examples in the plural: "Il n'y a point d'Estats qui n'ayent été sujets à de grandes *revolutions"* (Furetière 1690), "Le temps fait d'estranges révolutions dans les affaires" (Ac. fr. 1694), "Les révolutions continuelles de notre esprit" (Furetière, 1727), "Révolutions dans les Etats (préparer des grandes)" (Alletz, 1770), "C'est ici un siècle de *révolutions*" (Féraud, 1787-88).[12] Similarly, when the term was used in the singular, the dictionaries preferred the indefinite to the definite article, offering "une révolution" as one instance among many to be characterized and particularized by an appropriate adjective—"grande," "prompte," "subite," "soudaine," "estrange," "merveilleuse," "estonnante" etc., as the *Dictionnaire* of the Académie française proposed.



Second, "révolution" was an *ex post facto* category of historical understanding. It was something that had already occurred, usually abruptly and without the conscious choice of human actors. It was an outcome of events rather than a project of human action, a phenomenon recognized for what it was only after it had happened. Hence the operative verb in the dictionary definitions is "arriver": "des changements extraordinaires qui *arrivent* dans le monde" (Furetière, 1690), "changement qui *arrive* dans les affaires publiques" (Ac. fr. 1718), "un changement considérable *arrivé* dans le gouvernement d'un état" (*Enc.* 1765). Revolutions occurred; they were not made.

Third, as an *ex post facto* category, an outcome of events rather than a logic of human action, revolution had no internal chronology or dynamic of its own. A revolution existed in time, but time did not exist within a revolution.

Finally, it follows from what has already been said that revolution was experienced as a fact rather than lived as an act. If it derived from human actions, it did so accidentally, as an outcome rather than as a project. Even when it was anticipated rather than observed as an already accomplished fact, "révolution" tended to be apprehended passively rather than lived actively: "Tous les esprits étoient inquiets, à la veille d'une si grande *révolution* qui se préparoit" (*Dict. de Trévoux*). Hence the absence in the dictionaries of such active forms of the term as "révolutionnaire" and "révolutionner," which simply did not exist before 1789.

## II

There was, however, a notable exception to this prevailing usage of the term "révolution," with its connotations of a plurality of relatively unparticularized events. The 1727 edition of Furetière's *Dictionnaire* picked it up when it recorded that "Les Anglais appellent *la Révolution,* le changement arrivé par l'abdication de Jacques II, et l'etablissement de Guillaume III et ils en font une Epoque."[13] Among French writers, this "grande révolution . . . qui fait l'étonnement de l'Europe" (Jurieu) unleashed a war of pamphlets between the Huguenot exiles who praised the actions of William III in accepting the throne vacated by a tyrant, and the defenders of absolute monarchy who protested the illegal and rebellious deposition of James II. In fact, as Goulemot shows, it was the Huguenot exiles who gave currency in French to the singular, capitalized form of "révolution" to describe the events of 1688 as *"la Révolution d'Angleterre."* And they clearly did so as a means of exalting the importance of these events and distinguishing the salutary change they had brought about in English government from the "révolutions" that had gone before.[14] In their view, the Glorious Revolution was not merely another outcome—even a happy one—in the vicissitudes of political affairs. On the contrary, and more fundamentally, this "Révolution" was a true return—a "revolution" in the astronomical sense—to the fundamental laws of an earlier form of government that had been subverted by a succession of "révolutions" in the course of earlier reigns. It was, simultaneously, the dawn of a new era heralding

the recovery of liberty elsewhere in Europe. From this perspective, the equation of "revolution" with "return' or "restoration" in the case of the English Revolution—which has often been seen as exemplifying the prevailing political sense of the term during this period—seems to be atypical of eighteenth-century usage. It was a way of setting the events of 1688 apart from the threatening disorder and change represented by other "revolutions."

In fact, absolutist writers were willing at times to single out "La Révolution d'Angleterre" in recognition of the enormity of the rebellion that had subverted the legitimate form of monarchical government in England. But they also found it useful to counter the Huguenot effort to privilege that Revolution by decapitalizing and desingularizing it, reducing it once again to the level of the long series of vicissitudes with which English history seemed so clearly afflicted in absolutist eyes. This, in effect, was the strategy adopted by père Joseph d'Orléans in his *Histoire des révolutions d'Angleterre depuis le commencement de la monarchie jusqu'à présent* completed in 1693. The Jesuit historian adapted to the history of English government the logic of Varillas's *Histoire des révolutions en matière de religion,* which in turn drew on the equation of Protestantism with instability that found its classic expression in Bossuet's *Histoire des variations des églises protestantes*. Transformed in the light of recent events, his history of England—initially undertaken before 1688—was now recast as an account of "cette alternative presque réglée, qui se trouve chez les Anglais, d'un régne heureux florissant, applaudi, et d'un règne malheureux, troublé, finissant par la catastrophe d'un Roi déposé, mis aux fers, souvent sacrifié à l'ambition d'un Usurpateur sanguinaire."[15]

D'Orléans' work, republished many times in the course of the following century, found constant echo in the representations of English history as an unstable succession of disorders and revolutions that became a commonplace of eighteenth-century French political discussion.[16] It found echo, too, in a genre of French historiography published and republished throughout the century, a genre in which the histories of a growing list of countries and governments were presented in terms of their "révolutions." D'Orléans himself added to the vogue by publishing an *Histoire des révolutions d'Espagne* in 1734. But the recognized master of the genre was the abbé René Aubert de Vertot.[17] His *Histoire des révolutions de Suède,* first published in 1695, was reprinted at least twenty times before the French Revolution; and his *Histoire des révolutions arrivées dans le gouvernement de la république romaine,* first published in 1719, no less than a dozen. So successful was the formula of his titles that his *Histoire de la conjuration de Portugal,* first published in 1689, was retitled *Histoire des révolutions de Portugal* in 1711 and enjoyed another dozen or so printings before 1789. While none matched Vertot's works in popularity, additional *Histoires des revolutions* flowed from other pens. By 1789, works bearing this title had been devoted to Spain (1724), the Low Countries (1727), Corsica (1738), Hungary (1739), Persia (1742), Constantinople (1749), Genoa (1750), the Moslem Empire (1750-52), Russia (1760), Scotland and Ireland (1761), the Roman Empire (1766, 1783), and Poland (1735, 1775). Indeed, all of European history seemed reducible to an *histoire des révolutions,* as in Gabriel de Massiac's *Faits mémorables des guerres et révolutions de l'Europe* (1721).

What, if anything, did these works share beyond their titles? What did the flood



of revolutions they mapped out have in common? Certainly, the genre came to be stretched thinner and thinner as use of such titles became increasingly banal in the course of the eighteenth century. Certainly, too, the content of the term "révolutions" tended to lack specificity in this discourse. Yet Goulemot, the only historian to have considered this literature systematically, finds a consistent ideology at its core. At least at its inception, he argues, the ideal of political stability, and the judgment that absolute monarchy alone could achieve such stability, underlies this genre; the fear of disorder arising from political and religious change haunts it. Taken together, the "révolutions" portrayed in these histories represented the perennial threat of disorder in human affairs: a threat by which absolute monarchy was constantly haunted, and which it functioned to contain. Considered individually, they were judged according to whether they moved governments toward or away from that ideal, and only effective, form of government.[18] These accounts of the political vicissitudes afflicting so many states and nations found their implicit point of reference in the political continuity and order to which French absolutism aspired.

## III

As a genre, then, the *Histoires des révolutions* took on their meaning only in comparison with the stability and order of absolute monarchy in France. From this perspective, it is striking—and entirely appropriate—that this historiography, which found revolutions in the history of so many parts of the world, produced no *Histoire des révolutions de France.* Yet there is, in effect, an *Histoire des révolutions de France,* though it goes by another name and it belongs to an entirely different tradition of historical writing. It was published in two parts, in 1765 and 1788, under the title *Observations sur l'histoire de France,* and its author was, of course, none other than the abbé Mably. Not only is this much neglected work the most profound and influential of Mably's political writings, but it is one of the great eighteenth-century histories. And its concept of revolution is most revealing.

Mably wrote as a classical republican, which is to say that he looked not to the authority of an absolute monarch but to the political virtue of the nation itself to contain the instability and vicissitudes constantly threatening human affairs.[19] From this perspective, the *Observations sur l'histoire de France* was a story of repeated failure. "Je me propose dans cet ouvrage de faire connoitre les différentes formes du gouvernement auxquelles les Français ont obéi depuis leur établissement dans les Gaules; et de découvrir les causes, qui, en empêchant que rien n'ait été stable chez eux, les ont livrées, pendant une longue suite de siècles, à de continuelles révolutions," Mably announced at the outset of this work.[20] His researches into French history revealed none of the continuity and stability others saw achieved through the benevolent authority of an absolute monarch; on the contrary, they disclosed a succession of revolutions and disorders, usurpations and conflicts, a domain of passions and contingency uncontained by any principle of political virtue. Reversing the perspective of absolutist historiography, Mably saw English history as the achievement of a sustained political order through the constant assertion of national political will, French history as a collapse into disorder and discontinuity.

In Mably's eyes nothing illustrated this difference between French and English history better than the responses of the two nations to the tyranny of King John. For while the French limited their opposition to the tyrant to demanding the suppression of particular abuses, "n'ayant pris aucune mesure pour que l'injustice faite à un simple particulier devînt, comme en Angleterre, l'affaire de la nation entière," the English seized the opportunity to establish a general order enshrined in Magna Carta, which became "une boussole qui servit à diriger le corps entier de la nation, dans les troubles que l'intérêt particulier et les factions suscitèrent quelquefois."[21] This constant recourse of the English to Magna Carta, Mably insisted, "a empêché que des révolutions souvent commencées ne fussent consommées," preserving their form of government even "au milieu des mouvemens convulsifs dont elle a été agitée." The French, on the other hand, were unable to establish any such fundamental law as the basis for a settled constitutional order. "C'est parce que la France n'avoit au contraire aucune loi fondamentale consacrée par l'estime et le respect de la nation, qu'elle a été condamnée à ne consulter dans chaque conjuncture que des intérêts momentanées; les Français obéissoient sans résistance aux événemens, les Anglais résistoient à leur impulsion: de-là, sur les ruines des fiefs s'élève chez les uns une monarchie, et chez les autres un gouvernement libre."[22]

This was a profoundly subversive claim. In equating the growth of monarchy in France with failure to achieve an established political order on the basis of a sustained national will, Mably was also denying the vision of the French monarchy as a settled constitutional order in which royal power was limited by fundamental laws. Where others saw the continuity of a judicially constituted order, he saw a play of political wills uncontained by any principle of stability. With the brief exception of Charlemagne's reign, he argued in concluding his work, the French had never attempted to discover and establish the true basis for political society. On the contrary, each order of citizens had sought to oppress the others; none had established a firm basis for the general welfare. "Delà les efforts toujours impuissans, une politique toujours incertaine, nul intérêt constant, nul caractère, nulles moeurs fixes; de là des révolutions continuelles dont notre histoire cependant ne parle jamais: et toujours gouvernés au hasard par les événemens et les passions, nous nous sommes accoutumés à n'avoir aucun respect pour les lois."[23] Behind the constitutional veil, there lay the true "secret de l'Empire"[24]—the monarchical despotism to which the French were succumbing through their inability to assert a sustained political will.

Could the French now seize control of their history, recover their national unity, and reverse the succession of revolutions that had brought them to the threshold of political annihilation? Mably certainly seems to have thought so in the 1750s, for his *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen*, apparently written in 1758, offered nothing less than a script for such an endeavor. In that work, which took the form of a dialogue between a Frenchman and an English milord easily identified as a Commonwealthman, Mably was chiefly concerned to overcome the profound French fear of political conflict—the fear upon which absolute monarchy depended for its legitimacy. The dialogue begins as his Frenchman elevates that fear into a philosophical defense of political lethargy:



> Tandis que vous [Anglais] vous tourmentez pour conservez votre liberté, n'y a-t-il pas une sorte de sagesse à s'étourdir sur sa situation, quand on ne peut pas la changer? Nous autres François, nous avons été libres comme vous l'êtes aujourd'huy en Angleterre . . ., nos pères ont vendu, donné ou laissé detruire leur liberté; à force de la regretter, nous ne la rappellerions pas. Le monde se conduit par des révolutions continuelles; nous sommes parvenus au point d'obéissance où vous parviendrez à votre tour. Nous nous laissons aller tout bonnement à la fatalité qui gouverne les choses humaines. Que nous serviroit de murmurer et de regimber contre le joug? Nous en sentirons davantage le poids; en effarouchant notre maître, nous rendrions son gouvernement plus dur.[25]

To the Commonwealthman, native of a land seen by the French as constantly thrown into disorder by its love of liberty, this defense of political quiescence is far from convincing. In his view, contestation is at the heart of healthy political life. Nor is civil war the greatest evil that could afflict a state. On the contrary, this latter is to be found in countries so long submissive to the arbitrary will of a despot that "il n'arrive et ne peut arriver aucune révolution": where minds are so dulled by ignorance, discontent is so stifled by fear, energy so sapped by the annihilation of civic status, that even the most dramatic events produce no change in the political order. But wherever this extreme point has yet to be reached, wherever sovereign power is still "exposée à recevoir des secousses, fruit des passions du citoyen, des magistrats ou du monarque, et des mesures plus ou moins efficaces que le gouvernement a prises pour perpetuer et affermir son autorité," liberty can still be recovered. If sovereign power can still extend its grasp, it can also meet with new obstacles; its growth can be hindered; it can be shaken and replaced. "Je crois alors les révolutions encore possibles; un bon citoyen doit donc esperer, et il est obligé, suivant son état, son pouvoir et ses talens, de travailler à rendre ces révolutions utiles à sa patrie."[26]

Mably's Commonwealthman therefore offered the French a dramatic alternative: "Choisissez entre une révolution et l'esclavage, il n'y a point de milieu."[27] But what did Mably mean by "révolution" in this context? In *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen*, as elsewhere, he uses the term to describe the disorders and discontinuities, the agitations and shocks, that are the work of the passions in political life. But he also makes clear that these moments of disruption can be turned to various ends. If the nation is enlightened and determined to assert its political will—conscious, in other words, of its inalienable right to "interpréter son contrat, ou plutôt ses dons, d'en modifier les clauses, de les annuller, et d'établir un nouvel ordre des choses"[28]—it will seize the opportunity to advance the cause of liberty. If it is not, "le despotisme profitera toujours des révolutions pour appesantir son joug sur des sots et des ignorans."[29] From this perspective, then, a revolution is not merely—or not necessarily—the expression of passion, disorder, and contingency in human affairs. An enlightened and determined nation will not merely—or not necessarily—experience it as a fact. Instead, it will seek to transform it into an act.

The Commonwealthman sketched a dramatic scenario for the accomplishment of such a "révolution ménagée," to be prepared by a pattern of political contestation of the kind he saw already occurring in France in the 1750s, and to be accomplished at the point at which the monarch would be forced by sustained opposition to convoke the Estates General. This convocation once achieved—and the nation educated in its political rights in the process—the Estates General would insist upon a regular system of national representation before proceeding to a

series of reforms that would eliminate abuses, curtail the royal prerogative, and institutionalize the rights of the nation. The resulting revolution, it need hardly be said, would not merely be "*a* revolution"—one of the many to which an impotent people had been subjected in the past. Like the English Revolution, it would be distinguished as "*the* revolution"—the moment at which the French recovered their government by an act of national will. "Pendant plusieurs années après *la révolution*" (my emphasis), Mably's Frenchman—now won over by the arguments of his English interlocutor—speculates in the conclusion of the work, the form of government would contain defects, irregularities and prejudices inherited from the earlier state of things. But "dès que notre nation retirée du néant, auroit repris le droit de s'assembler," commissions could be created to perfect the work of liberty, strengthen the political character of the nation, and prevent it from slipping back imperceptibly into its earlier *vomissement*.[30] The recovery of French political will would be complete.

It is possible that *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen* was initially written with an audience of parlementary magistrates in mind, for it was on their sustained resistance to monarchical authority—and on their willingness to press this resistance in the service of the political interests of the nation as a whole—that the accomplishment of his script for a French Revolution critically depended.[31] Whether or not this was the case, the outcome of the constitutional contestations of the 1750s and 1760s was very different from the scenario he had imagined in *Des droits et devoirs du citoyen*. The revolution that occurred was not his "révolution ménagée" but the very different revolution effected by chancellor Maupeou:[32] the event that rent the constitutional veil of the French monarchy to reveal the despotism that lay behind.

> Le voile a été déchiré, par la révolution que la magistrature du royaume a éprouvée dans ces derniers temps. Le chancelier de Maupeou . . . nous a fait sentir une grande vérité; que tout ordre de citoyens qui favorise le despotisme, dans l'espérance de le partager avec le prince, creuse un abyme sous ses pas, et assemble un orage sur sa tête.[33]

Thus it was in a mood of bitter disenchantment occasioned by the events of 1771 that Mably added the concluding remarks to his *Observations sur l'histoire de France*. The second part of that work, largely completed before the Maupeou revolution, had already turned into a sustained indictment of the historical record of the parlements in seeking to establish their own pre-eminence at the expense of the Estates General. Mably now added a bitter attack on the refusal of the parlement of Paris to subordinate institutional self-interest to the common good by consistently supporting the doctrine of the "union des classes." If the parlements had effectively sustained that principle of political unity, he insisted, it would have been impossible for Maupeou to destroy them. They were suppressed not as a threat to arbitrary power, but as a personal annoyance to powerful ministers. And their suppression was greeted with half-hearted protest and general discouragement, rather than with vigorous attacks on despotism and demands for the immediate calling of the Estates General.[34]

The *Observations sur l'histoire de France* therefore concluded in despairing tones. Suspecting that the political virtue of the French had been eroded to such a point that "ayant encore assez de raison pour craindre le despotisme, ils n'ont



assez de courage pour aimer la liberté," Mably had already come to fear bef 1771 that the moment for revolution in France had passed.

> Nous avons vu, il n'y en a pas long-temps, une sorte de fermentation dans les esprits; nous avon qu'en se plaignant, on étoit alarmé de ses plaintes; on regardoit les murmures comme un déso plus dangereux que le mal qui les occasionnoit, et on craignoit qu'ils n'indisposassent cont gouvernement et n'en dérangeassent les ressorts. Plus cette crainte est vaine et puérile, plus il est que nous avons un caractère conforme à notre gouvernement, et que nous ne portons en nous-mê aucun principe de révolution.[35]

The Maupeou coup—and the manner in which the French accepted it—sim confirmed these fears. A bitter note added to the *Observations* summed up "humiliantes réflexions" to which Mably's investigation of the French past a his experience of the French present had brought him: "Ce que je dis dans corps de mon ouvrage, que nous ne portons en nous-mêmes aucun principe révolution, est une vérité dont on ne peut plus douter."[36]

Neither the second part of the *Observations sur l'histoire de France* nor *I droits et des devoirs du citoyen* were published in Mably's lifetime. The first, w its challenge to the French to lay hold of their history, was published in the fall 1788, just as they were presented with the opportunity to do so by the announ ment of the calling of the Estates General. Its representation of French history an essentially disordered domain found frequent echo in the prerevolution pamphlets. The second, with its script for the recovery of national sovereign was published in 1789, just as that body was meeting. In the event, the politi transformation that was accomplished—and the conception of "révolution" t gave it meaning—went far beyond Mably's conception of what was possible desirable. Yet if he never entirely broke out of the old meaning of "révolution" the recurring expression of contingency and disorder, instability and change human affairs, he stretched this traditional meaning to its conceptual limits challenging the French to prepare for yet another revolution by pressing a progr of political contestation, and readying themselves to seize upon it as an opp tunity for the assertion of political will. As Mably saw it, the moment of revoluti when it occurred, could be opened up from within, and extended into a dom of political choice and historical possibility. It could be transformed from cont gent fact to resolute act by a nation no less determined than it was enlightene

Determination—which is to say political will—is here the essential point. Clas cal republican to the last, the austere author of the *Observations sur l'histoire France* was more concerned with discerning any remaining vestiges of politi virtue among a nation undermined by despotism than he was with celebrating progress toward enlightenment. "Qui pourroit prédire le sort qui attend no nation? Notre siècle se glorifie de ses lumières; la philosophie, dit-on, fait tous jours des progrès considérables, et nous regardons avec dédain l'ignorance nos pères; mais cette philosophie et ces lumières dont nous sommes si fiers, nc éclairent-elles sur nos devoirs d'hommes et de citoyens? . . . Les lumières vienn trop tard, quand les moeurs sont corrompus."[37] But others, less pessimistic, h elaborated upon the idea of "révolution" in the spirit of the Enlightenment, dra ing upon it to express the dramatic progress of reason in history. The differe between Mably's conception of "révolution" and the conception that sprang i

being in 1789 owed much to the spin the philosophes put on the term as they shifted the semantic register from political will to social reason.

## IV

When Voltaire declared in the *Essai sur les moeurs* that "Je considère donc ici en général le sort des hommes plutôt que les révolutions du trône,"[38] he was announcing a very different historiographical program from that of the *Histoires des révolutions* or the *Observations sur l'histoire de France*. The displacement from the political to the social, from the vicissitudes of thrones and governments to the progress of civil society, lay at the heart of Enlightenment thinking. It also implied a shift in the connotations of the term "révolution." Alongside—or rather beneath—the traditional succession of "révolutions" introducing abrupt changes or political disruptions, usually negative in their effects, Enlightenment philosophy discerned other "révolutions" taking form as longer-term social and cultural transformations, at once more profound and more beneficent. "Révolutions" as the disorder of events in the flow of human time, expression of the instability of all things human, began to give way to "révolution" as dynamic transformational process, expression of the historical rhythm of the progress of the human mind.[39]

The *Essai sur les moeurs* is exemplary in this respect. "Mon principal but a été de suivre les révolutions de l'esprit humain dans celles des gouvernements. . . .," Voltaire argued in describing the *Abrégé de l'Histoire universelle* from which the *Essai* grew.[40] In his view, the most precious part of that sketch was devoted to the growth of science from the discovery of algebra by the Arabs to the "derniers miracles de nos jours," a history in which "les *révolutions* des Etats n'étaient qu'un accessoire à *celle* des arts et des sciences."[41] Of the sixty-three occurrences of the term "révolution" identified in the *Essai sur les moeurs*, G. Mailhos found it used forty-one times in a fairly traditional sense to designate revolutions as disruptive events—frequently qualified in such negative terms as "horribles," "bouleversantes," "sanguinaires," "sanglantes," "atroces." In twelve instances, however, it was used to designate a revolution understood as a more profound process of transformation, an advance of the human mind frequently qualified in such positive terms as "juste," "sérieuse," "grande." And in ten instances, it was used in a way that linked these two conceptions by identifying a revolution as event with a revolution as underlying transformational process.[42]

Several aspects of this new Enlightenment inflection upon the term "révolution" deserve emphasis. First, it suggested a cultural transformation, a revolution in the human mind. Second, it linked that cultural transformation to a profound and irreversible change in civil society, a transformation prodigious in its scope and positive in its effects. Third, to the extent that Enlightenment historiography took as its object world history—the history of human civilization as a whole—the revolutions it identified as dynamic processes of transformation had universal implications: they were not merely local events but phenomena of world-historical significance. They were fundamental to the mechanism of human progress. Thus, for Voltaire, the revolution that was the rise of Islam was "le plus grand changement que l'opinion ait produit sur notre globe . . ."; and the enormity of its implications was even enough to counterbalance the characteristic Voltairean deflation



of human claims to significance in the face of an infinite universe. "Cette révolution, si grande pour nous, n'est, à la vérité, que comme un atome qui a changé de place dans l'immensité des choses, et dans le nombre innombrable des mondes qui remplissent l'espace; mais c'est au moins un événement qu'on doit regarder comme une des roues de la machine de l'univers."[43]

D'Alembert made similar claims of world-historical significance for the rebirth of intellect that began with the fall of Constantinople and the invention of printing: "ainsi fallut-il au genre humain, pour sortir de la barbarie, une de ces révolutions qui font prendre à la terre une face nouvelle."[44] And Condorcet, in turn, saw this same growth of enlightenment not only as universal but as irreversible in its transformation of the fate of nations: "par une révolution dont l'origine remonte à l'invention de l'imprimerie, et dont rien ne peut plus arrêter les progrès, la force, les richesses, la félicité des nations, sont devenues le prix des lumières."[45] His *Esquisse d'un tableau historique de l'esprit humain* was later to give canonical expression to this conception of human history as a succession of transformations in the human spirit.

Moreover, when Condorcet declared in the introduction to that work that "tout nous dit que nous touchons à l'époque d'une des grandes révolutions de l'espèce humaine,"[46] he was echoing a fourth critical feature of the Enlightenment notion of revolution. The philosophes not only expanded the concept of revolution to universal significance, but began to shift the chronological inflection of the term. The revolution that was the Enlightenment was no longer simply an *ex post facto* category applied to the outcome of past events, nor was it merely a momentary expression of contingency in the flow of historical time. Extended chronologically as process, it constituted a domain of lived experience and offered a new horizon of expectation. "Tout ce que je vois jette les semences d'une révolution qui arrivera immanquablement et dont je n'aurai pas le plaisir d'être témoin," Voltaire wrote to Chauvelin in 1764. "Les Français arrivent tard à tout, mais enfin ils arrivent; la lumière s'est tellement répandue de proche en proche qu'on éclatera à la première occasion et alors ce sera un beau tapage; les jeunes gens sont bien heureux, ils verront de belles choses."[47] In this sense, the Enlightenment itself was a profound revolution already underway: lived as a process of cultural transformation, it was already separating past from present and reorienting expectations toward the future. "Je vois avec plaisir qu'il se forme dans l'Europe une république immense d'esprits cultivés," Voltaire wrote to prince Golitsyn in 1767. "La lumière se communique de tous les côtés . . . Il s'est fait depuis environ quinze ans une révolution dans les esprits qui sera une grande époque. Les cris des pédants annoncent ce grand changement comme le croassements des corbeaux annoncent le bon temps . . ."[48] Frederick the Great was no less rhapsodic in anticipating the fruits of enlightenment in a letter to the philosophe the same year: "Quelle révolution! A quoi ne doit pas s'attendre le siècle qui suivra le nôtre! La cognée est mise à la racine de l'arbre [i.e. *l'infâme*] . . . Cet édifice sapé par les fondements va s'écrouler, et les nations transcriront dans leurs annales que Voltaire fut le promoteur de cette révolution qui se fit au dix-huitième siècle dans l'esprit humain."[49] And twenty years later, Grimm's *Correspondance littéraire* could still celebrate the patriarch's triumphal return to Paris in the same mood, rejoicing in "l'heureuse révolution qu'il a su faire et dans les moeurs et dans l'esprit de son siècle, en

combattant les préjugés . . ., en donnant aux lettres plus de considération et plus de dignité, à l'opinion même un empire plus libre et plus indépendant . . ."[50]

Thus it was a fundamental claim of the Enlightenment that it represented a process of universal transformation, a world-historical revolution in human affairs. "Depuis trente ans seulement, il s'est fait une grande et importante révolution dans nos idées," Mercier declared in 1782. "L'opinion publique a aujourd'hui en Europe une force prépondérante, à laquelle on ne résiste pas: ainsi, en éstimant le progrès des lumières et le changement qu'elles doivent enfanter, il est permis d'espérer qu'elles apporteront au monde le plus grand bien, et que les tyrans de toute espèce frémiront devant ce cri universel qui retentit et se prolonge pour remplir et éveiller l'Europe." For Mercier, this transformation was above all the result of the courage of enlightened writers in laying claim to their "legitimate authority" to plead the interests of nations and the cause of humanity. "Il est à présumer que cette tendance générale produira une révolution heureuse."[51] In this new culture of intellectual expectation, as Mercier's remarks suggest, political events themselves began to take on new meaning. No longer simply the work of historical contingency, the mere play of the passions in human affairs, "révolutions" could give expression to the logic of that "révolution" that was the profound and irreversible transformation of society by enlightenment. From this perspective, no mutation in the course of human affairs, no dramatic transformation in a nation's government, seemed more profound and universal in its implications than the American assertion of independence. "L'indépendance des Anglo-Américains est l'événement le plus propre à accélérer la révolution qui doit ramener le bonheur sur la terre. C'est au sein de cette République naissante que sont déposés les vrais trésors qui enrichiront le monde" proclaimed the abbé Genty in response to the celebrated prize-essay question proposed by the abbé Raynal in 1783 on the subject: "la découverte de l'Amérique a-t-elle été utile ou nuisible au genre humain?"[52] As the War of Independence was transformed into the "Révolution de l'Amérique," there were quickened expectations of its effects on humanity, on Europe, and on France—the order of relative importance suggested by Condorcet in his own response to Raynal's question, *De l'influence de la révolution d'Amerique en Europe*. It was Raynal himself, one of the great European publicists of the events in America, who perhaps best expressed these apocalyptic sentiments. "Un jour a fait naître une révolution," he said of the outbreak of hostilities in America. "Un jour nous a transportés dans un siècle nouveau."[53]

In the 1770s and early 1780s, events in France still fell short of the drama unfolding in America. But the Old Regime did not lack its own "révolutions" in the service of human progress. In the years before 1789, beneficent "révolutions" seemed to flow from every enlightened pen. When in 1789 Peuchet, the editor of the section of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* devoted to *Police et municipalités* declared that "*Le bon vieux temps* est une chimère et le mot de ralliement de l'ignorance et de l'imbécilité,"[54] he summed up a mood increasingly pervasive in the last years of an enlightened, reforming monarchy. To those in such a mood, each of the cascade of legal, fiscal, and constitutional reforms initiated during these years promised yet another "heureuse révolution."[55] But none seemed to offer more than the provincial assemblies eventually introduced by Brienne in 1787. Brienne's reforms were greeted by many who heralded "cette révolution



étonnante [qui] va s'opérer, non par la force des armes, la contrainte et la violenc mais par la conviction générale, sur le voeu unanime de tous les Ordres de l'Etat this "Révolution la plus complette, et . . . la plus heureuse."[56] Peuchet, howeve was particularly revealing in this respect. The preliminary discourse he wrote f his section of the *Encyclopédie méthodique* cast its entire history of the progre of civilization as a prolegomenon to the introduction of the new assemblies. In h euphoric view, "la révolution qu'elles doivent opérer et qu'elles ont déjà comme cée,"[57] was the latest in a long series of beneficent revolutions in the evolution modern civil society. Fruit of enlightenment, it sprang from that "révolutic opérée dans les esprits, aux dix-septième et dix-huitième siècle," which above a had brought Europe to its "état présent de politesse et de lumières."[58] And pr pared by enlightened writers—"car c'est par des écrits publics, des livres pl ou moins dogmatiques, que les plus importantes révolutions se sont faites"—i principles had been generalized and strengthened by public discussion, that exe cise of public opinion from which "il en résulta de nouvelles lumières, de nouveau moyens qui hâtèrent la révolution."[59] Peuchet epitomized the belief in huma progress as a succession of beneficent revolutions in the human mind, culminatir in that universal transformation of civil society that was the Enlightenment.

## V

But there were other voices. Elsewhere, as Darline Levy has so strikingly put i "a journalist rushing to the scene of an apocalypse was reporting on the shape a future on the other side of doom."[60] Linguet's *Annales politiques*—perhaps th most compelling journal of the prerevolutionary period—offered Europe (an particularly France) a warning of an approaching revolution radically differe from the peaceful transformation promised by the philosophes and administrati reformers. And with that warning, it offered a conception of revolution as crisi as the decisive turning point at which a society, like a sick patient, will live or di It offered a conception of revolution as the ultimate moment of truth for the boc politic.

The opening issues of the *Annales politiques*, which began to appear in 177 presented a diagnosis of the "révolution singulière dont l'Europe est menacée that turned the Enlightenment theory of the progress of civil society on its head. Beneath the appearances of cultural and social progress that seemed to make th age the happiest and most peaceful in the annals of European civilization, Lingu saw more destructive forces at work. On the one hand, he argued, "les vill reçoivent de toutes parts des embellissemens qu'une émulation soutenue prom encore de multiplier. Les communications sont faciles et sûres . . . Les campagn sont peuplées de châteaux, où le luxe réunit aux recherches de l'art tout ce que fécondité de la nature peut produire . . .; jamais les jouissances n'ont été pl générales, plus faciles et plus communes." But on the other, "jamais peut-être, a milieu de sa prospérité apparente, l'*Europe* n'a été plus près d'une subversio totale, d'autant plus terrible que le désespoir totale en sera la cause, ou une dépop lation d'autant plus effrayante que nous n'aurons pas pour la réparer les ressourc qu'ont eues nos ancêtres dans des cas à-peu-près pareils."[62] While others we celebrating the emergence of modern commercial society from the collapse

feudalism, Linguet lamented the abolition of serfdom as a poisoned liberty freeing the masses only for the exploitation upon which European prosperity now depended. Europe had reached, by another route, the point at which Italy had found itself "quand la guerre des *Esclaves* l'inonda de sang, et porta le carnage avec l'incendie aux portes de la Maîtresse du Monde."[63] Between the desperation of an increasingly immiserated populace and the luxury of the propertied few, there stood only the bayonets and the gibbets that, in containing popular unrest, extinguished "ni la rage journellement renouvellée qui bouillonne au fond de leur coeur, ni le dénuement qui n'en modère les transports qu'en énervant la force qui les rendroit redoutables."[64] In such a situation, Linguet saw only two possibilities. Either the oppressed, contained by military force, would expire in silent misery, leaving European prosperity to extinction. Or they would throw up "quelque *Spartacus* nouveau, enhardi par le désépoir, éclairé par la nécessité, appelant les camarades de son infortune à la véritable *liberté,* brisant les loix meutrières et trompeuses qui la font méconnoître."[65]

One of the other of these two calamities was inevitable, Linguet insisted in closing this introduction to his journal, "et je ne manquerai pas, dans ce Journal, de faire observer les circonstances qui de jour en jour nous en rapprochent."[66] The actual content of his predictions was perhaps less important than the tone of urgency with which he endowed them. This menace of revolution as an impending crisis in which social life would hang in the balance between extinction and recovery—this sense that time itself was quickening as society lurched toward the moment of apocalypse—was one of the most recurrent and distinctive features of Linguet's journalism.[67] Horrendous alternative to the enlightened conception of "révolution" as advancing the steady march of human progress, it was the accelerating pulse that gave his writing much of its power. And it endowed every issue he touched with apocalyptic urgency. Not least that of the Bastille, which became in his writings the condensed image of all the evils of the Old Regime . . . [68]

## VI

"C'est une révolte." "Non, Sire, c'est une révolution." This famous (and perhaps apocryphal) exchange between Louis XVI and the duc de la Rochefoucauld, following the fall of the Bastille, has often been cited in discussions of the history of the meaning of the term "revolution." Hannah Arendt, in her well-known book, *On Revolution,* sees it as exactly dating "when the word 'revolution' was used for the first time with an exclusive emphasis on irresistibility and without any connotation of a backward revolving movement." Indeed, she adds, "so important does this emphasis appear to our own understanding of revolutions that it has become common practice to date the new political significance of the old astronomic term from the moment of this new usage."[69] In the light of the previous discussion, however, this interpretation of what Liancourt might have said seems unlikely. We have seen that there are many earlier examples of the use of the term "révolution" to describe sudden changes in the political order of a state, without any connotation of a return to an earlier point; if these changes were understood as irresistible, this was only to the extent that "révolution" was essentially an *ex post facto* category describing a change that had already occurred, an already



accomplished fact, something that could not be resisted because it had alreac
unexpectedly happened. Liancourt was perhaps telling Louis XIV that the
of French government had been transformed before his very eyes. But in thi
he was drawing on the conventional usage of the term "révolution" to do

Yet in the days and weeks following the fall of the Bastille, this conven
usage was indeed transformed—not by an abrupt shift from one mean
another, but by a complex process of reordering and recombining existing
ings. The process can be seen nowhere more clearly than in the pages of wh
to become the most widely-read revolutionary journal in Paris and throu
France, the *Révolutions de Paris.* Recently the subject of a fascinating stu
Pierre Rétat, the evolution of this journal in the course of 1789 shows the dis
of the French Revolution upon itself—and with it the new understanding
concept of "revolution"—at the very moment of its creation.[70]

It is important, to begin with, to note the use of the plural in the title
journal. Why *Révolutions de Paris,* not *Révolution de Paris*? As Rétat
clear, this was not originally intended to be a periodical publication: the bro
published on 18 July 1789 that subsequently became No. I of the new journ
not bear a number in its early editions. It simply offered a compilation o
by-day accounts—the earliest actually first published on a daily basis—
momentous events that had occurred in Paris during the week surrounding t
of the Bastille. Thus the *Révolutions de Paris* was originally conceived
account of a day's, then several days', then a week's remarkable events in
without any thought of extended periodical publication. And like other
cations inspired by the same idea—for example, the *Révolutions de Paris, o*
*exact de ce qui s'est passé dans la capitale, et particulièrement de la prise*
*Bastille, depuis le 11 juillet jusqu'au 23 du même mois*[71]—it took its title fro
conventional sense of "révolutions" as sudden occurrences and dramatic
bringing unanticipated changes in the affairs of a state.

However, as Rétat shows, the enormous success of this account of a w
"révolutions" in the capital, indicated by the demand for more editions,
prompted the idea of transforming a single publication into a periodical or
fifth edition of No. I contained, for the first time, the promise that "To
lundis on donnera des détails exacts de ce qui sera arrivé d'une semaine à l'a
Speculating that the extraordinary events in French political life would con
Prudhomme and his associates undertook to extend their account of "les r
tions de la capitale" indefinitely. After a few issues, these accounts of event
daily basis were supplemented—and after the October Days they were repla
with new rubrics intended not simply to chronicle a succession of events
define more clearly their structure and meaning. Similarly, the journal as a
was given a chronological organization articulating the new rhythm of revol
ary time and celebrating the rupture with the old order of things accomplis
this, the "première année de la liberté française."[72]

As the journal itself took form, so did the conception of revolution to wl
was dedicated. In the process, a succession of "révolutions" became first
révolution" and then "l'étonnante révolution qui vient de s'opérer"; "ces r
tions" became "cette révolution à jamais mémorable dans les fastes de
histoire." This "Révolution française" was not to be simply an abrupt and

pected change, recognized and understood as such only *ex post facto*. The revolutionary moment was opened up and extended from within to become a domain of lived experience with its own dynamic and its own chronology.

The conceptual order of this new domain was clearly mapped out in a long editorial essay, an "Introduction à la Révolution, servant de préliminaire aux Révolutions de Paris" published in January 1790 with the subtitle, "clef de la Révolution de 1789."[73] This account of the significance of the events occurring in France had been promised since September, when the journal had undertaken to respond to readers' demands for an "introduction aux Révolutions [i.e., the journal] qui contient un tableau historique et politique de tout ce qui s'est passé en France depuis la première assemblée des notables, et qui démontre les causes politiques de l'étonnante révolution qui vient de s'opérer." Most probably written by Elysée Loustalot, the former *avocat* turned journalist who produced most of the copy for the *Révolutions de Paris* until his death in September 1790,[74] it offers a fascinating illustration of the power of the new revolutionary press to frame public understanding of events, as of the process by which journalists—like others engaged in the competition to fix public meanings that lay at the heart of the French Revolution—recombined, reconstituted and redeployed elements of the political discourse of the Old Regime in a new political language.

What was the key to this "Révolution de 1789"? How were the French to understand the historical, metaphysical and existential meaning of the events through which they were now living? Clearly these events were to be seen as more than a momentary disruption in the flow of time. To the contrary, the French Revolution was an unprecedented event offering a new spectacle in the world. It was a radical rupture with the past, the work of a people overthrowing in an instant the chains they had borne for centuries. In thinking back to the period of the calling of the Estates General, argued the *Révolutions de Paris*, "on est étonné de voir combien la France diffère de ce qu'elle étoit, combien le Français libre diffère déjà du Français esclave, auquel il ne restoit plus de consolation que dans sa frivolité." Those who claimed that the French were already regretting the old order of things were answered with a passionate denunciation of the evils of an entirely different age in human history. "L'humanité regretteroit-elle cet âge de fer, pendant lequel le peuple gémissant et misérable, opprimé et bon, adoroit son roi, lors même qu'en son nom on lui arrachoit sa substance nourricière?"[75]

The Revolution was therefore a world-historical event, a phenomenon of universal significance. The French were carrying out a universal historical mission: "Punir les coupables d'une manière effrayante est un acte de sévérite qu'elle [la Révolution] se doit et à elle-même et à toutes les nations qui n'ont pas encore brisé les chaines de despotisme."[76] To comprehend the meaning of these acts required more than knowledge of the particular instances of despotism that had precipitated them. The event had to be placed within a global narrative: "Le despotisme a régné sur tous les peuples avant de s'attacher à cet empire. Ce monstre, aussi ancien que le monde, a toujours été le cruel ennemi du peuple; nous avons voulu apprendre à la classe qui en a été si long-temps victime, l'histoire complète de son tyran."[77] As eternal as the universe, and as old as human history, to which it gave its metaphysical significance, the story of despotism was a conflict universally inscribed within human nature itself, a conflict therefore to be resolved only by the complete



transformation of humanity. "Depuis l'origine des sociétés le despotisme pèse sur l'univers. L'histoire des révolutions humaines est la récit des usurpations du pouvoir, des réclamations de la raison et des vengeances de la force. C'est l'histoire du despotisme. Il est né avec l'homme qui a été despote aussi-tôt qu'il a eu empire à exercer."[78]

This history was cast, moreover, in Enlightenment tones, in the tones of Voltaire's "écrasez l'infâme" amplified by the Holbachian chorus. It was structured by the metaphysical opposition between reason and superstition. 'C'est parce qu'on a fait descendre du ciel le despotisme, et qu'on lui a donné une sanction divine, qu'il s'est si puissament établi. Il y a longtemps que les droits de l'homme seroient réhabilités, sans l'épais tissue dont les prêtres de tous les Dieux ont voilé la raison, ou la stupeur dont ils l'ont frappée . . ."[79] Priests everywhere had been more or less odious, more or less despotic. But Europe had finally learned that it was not impiety to condemn "le despotisme sacré"; that if immorality and unreason go too far, "un peu de haine nous est peut-être permis pour l'antique auteur de nos maux. Ce ressentiment garantit la conquête de la raison."[80]

Thus the revolution of Enlightenment was being achieved by a bitter and oppressed people. Philosophy was being realized through the sheer force of misery. This juxtaposition of misery and enlightenment is a constant feature of the account of the genesis of the revolution offered by the *Révolutions de Paris*. But the emphasis constantly shifts between them. If Loustalot argues at one point that "il est donc incontestable que c'est l'excès de nos maux qui nous a donné le courage d'apporter remède. Les lumières de la raison en ont hâté le moment; elles n'ont pas tout fait. Des peuples ont recouvré leurs droits avant le règne de la philosophie . . .,"[81] he insists at another that the nation, tired of its tyrants, did not know its rights until "la révolution de la philosophie s'achevoit." Then "le mal étoit trop grand pour que nous tardassions à en éprouver les effets."[82] If he claims that "il ne faudra jamais que lasser la patience des opprimées," and that "le long supplice de l'injustice assuroit la révolution présente," it is only to express the hope that in this revolution "qui ne pouvoit-être qu'une sevère vengeance, ou la pacifique opération de la philosophie" the latter will henceforth prevail. "Ce qui doit rassurer, c'est qu'elle est la révolution des ames et des esprits, et que cette caution n'a été celle d'aucune autre révolution."[83] The only thing that seems entirely clear is that suffering and enlightenment together made the revolution: "L'excès de maux et le progrès des lumières peuvent seuls opérer une révolution chez un peuple qui a vieilli dans l'avilissement et la servitude . . ."[84]

Note the formula: "l'excès de maux et le progrès des lumières." Its interest lies less in the indeterminacy of the relationship between its elements than in the fact that it allowed for the combination of two quite antithetical themes: "révolution" as the progress of enlightenment, and "révolution" as a crisis of life and death in the social body. Loustalot offered an account of French history that was Mably rendered in the language of Linguet. "L'Empire français n'ayant jamais eu de constitution . . ., depuis l'origine de la monarchie, nous avons alternativement gémi sous le despotisme féodale et sous le despotisme ministériel."[85] Unnatural though it was, feudal despotism was preferable to ministerial despotism, which was "entirely odious": at least, the seigneur, unlike the predatory minister, fed his peasants like domestic animals. But Richelieu had destroyed seigneurial despotism

to establish ministerial despotism. Arbitrariness had increased ad infinitum; usurpation and despotism had become principles of authority invading the entire social system as kings and courtiers, clergy, parlements, intendants, and corporate bodies "jusqu'aux sociétés littéraires" had "fractionné le despotisme." The moment marked by the ancient adage had finally come: "*Patiendo multa veniunt quae nequeas pati.* C'est l'époque où nous nous trouvons."[86]

The French Revolution was therefore a crisis, a moment of life or death in the social body. "Tous les remèdes étant usés, il falloit une crise, et dans ces crises violentes, les fortes constitutions seules resistent."[87] And as a crisis, it was naturally to be experienced as a terrifying moment of violence and danger, a period of agitation and anguish. Throughout the early issues of the *Révolutions de Paris*, there is an emphasis on the horror of the events, necessary though they are in the eternal scheme of things. "Cette journée fut effrayante et terrible, elle signala la vengeance du peuple contre ses oppresseurs"; "Détournons nos regards de ces scènes d'horreurs qui nous ont affligés. Espérons que sans doute désormais [the phrase is revealing in its contradiction] aucun homme n'oubliera ce qu'il doit à des hommes."[88] As Rétat points out, the prevailing image is one of storm and tempest: "L'orage des révolutions vient-il à gronder dans un Etat, alors le caractère national disparaît et le peuple le plus aimable et le plus doux n'est bientôt que le plus féroce et le plus barbare . . ." The Revolution is one of "ces orages terribles qui détruisent dans un instant."[89]

Moreover, "dans une révolution *chaque jour* a ses orages et ses dangers"; "*chaque journée* est marquée par différents traits qui ne peuvent être les derniers de cette révolution à jamais mémorable dans les fastes de notre histoire, et par les motifs qui l'ont fait naître, et par les scènes terribles qui ont effrayé les ennemis de la nation."[90] Time itself is experienced as a succession of moments in which life and death hang in the balance. Each day offers a new combat between the Revolution and its enemies. Each day offers the possibility of "un choix fortement prononcé entre la mort et la liberté." Each day decides whether France will be "esclave ou libre," whether it will be "le plus heureux des peuples" or "le plus malheureux."[91] Each day, in short, is the turning point that decides the fate of France and of humanity. Projected indefinitely into the future, Revolution ceases to be a moment of crisis and becomes an extended present at once immediate and universal, a "mythic present" in which eternity and contingency meet.[92]

## VI

The act of giving meaning to the events of 1789 by defining them as "La Révolution française"—so clearly occurring before our eyes in the pages of the *Révolutions de Paris*—was not carried out de novo. Nor did it occur solely in the pages of the Prudhomme's journal. Yet the example of that journal suggests that the new conception of revolution involved a transforming synthesis of many themes associated with prerevolutionary uses of the term. In the process, "révolution" as historical fact was irrevocably translated (as Mably had hoped) into "révolution" as political act, the will of a nation reclaiming its history. "Révolution" as sudden disruption in the political order of a state was endowed with the universal significance of the world-historical transformation anticipated by the philosophes.



"Révolution" as progress was experienced with all the urgency and travail of Linguet's terrifying "révolution" as ineluctable crisis, moment of life or death for a people brought to the depths of misery. From this conceptual synthesis, the Revolution emerged as a transcendental present in which eternity and contingency were conjoined, as an absolute value to be realized by immediate historical action, as a dynamic conflict between good and evil projected indefinitely into the future. But in imagining revolution as at once conscious act and universal process, the revolutionaries—for only now could this term come into existence—could no longer effectively think of it as historical outcome. They had created the insuperable problem of bringing the Revolution to a close.

## Notes

1. Theodore Besterman, ed., *Voltaire's Correspondence*, 107 vols. (Geneva, 1953–65) [henceforth, Best.], 16851; cited in G. Mailhos, "Le mot 'révolution' dans l'Essai sur les moeurs et la Correspondance de Voltaire," *Cahiers de Lexicologie* 13 (1968): 89.
2. D'Argenson, *Considérations sur le gouvernement ancien et présent de la France* (1757), p. 14; Louis Sébastien Mercier, *L'an 2440*, ed. R. Trousson (Bordeaux, 1971), p. 330. Mercier is cited by Reinhart Koselleck in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, 5 vols. to date (Stuttgart, 1972–), 5:720 (s.v. "Revolution"), which offers the best discussion of the history of the term to date.
3. It is interesting to remark that a search of the French language data base at the project for American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language (ARTFL) at the University of Chicago (a joint project with the Institut National de la Langue Française, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique) yields a total of 152 occurrences of "révolution(s)" in a seventeenth-century corpus of 18,269,513 words (a frequency of .00083%) and a total of 2526 occurrences in an eighteenth-century corpus of 37,499,880 (a frequency of .00673%). Broken down further by period, the eighteenth-century occurrences are as follows:

| | occurrences of "révolution(s)" | no. of words in corpus | frequency |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1600–1699 | 152 | 18,269,513 | .00083% |
| 1700–1799 | 2526 | 37,499,880 | .00673 |
| 1700–1750 | 392 | 12,805,037 | .00306 |
| 1751–1770 | 782 | 10,879,911 | .00718 |
| 1771–1789 | 504 | 10,651,996 | .00473 |
| 1789–1799 | 848 | 3,162,936 | .02681 |

It must be emphasized, however, that the ARTFL database is not, in any strict statistical sense, a representative sample of French works published during the period.

4. Jean Marie Goulemot, "Emploi du mot 'révolution' dans les traductions françaises du XVIIIe siècle des Discours de Nicolas Machiavelli," *Cahiers de lexicologie* 13 (1968): 75–83.
5. Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel*, 3 vols. (1690), 3 (s.v. "Revolution").
6. *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, dedié au Roy*, 2 vols. (1694), 2:406.
7. Ibid., 2 vols. (1717), 2:512. This definition was repeated unchanged in the editions of 1740 and 1762.
8. *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens de lettres . . .*, 17 vols. (Paris, 1751–65), 14:337.
9. *Dictionnaire universel françois et latin* (1704), 3 (s.v. "Révolution"). The definition and examples were repeated in the 1721, 1732 and 1752 editions.
10. Richelet, *Dictionnaire françois*, 2 vols. (1680), 2:316. The example taken from the *Mémoires* of La Rochefoucauld underlined the sense of menace: "Ils s'assurent contre tout ce qui pouvoit arriver dans une *révolution* comme celle qui les menaçoit."
11. The following discussion draws on Goulemot, "Le mot *révolution* et la formation du concept de révolution politique (fin XVII siècle)," *Annales historiques de la révolution française* 39 (1967): 417–44.
12. In addition to the dictionaries previously cited, see Pons Augustin Alletz, *Dictionnaire des*

*richesses de la langue françoise, et du néologisme qui s'y est introduit: contenant les termes nouveaux et reçus* (Paris, 1770); Jean-François Féraud, *Dictionnaire critique* (Marseille, 1787–88).

13. Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel* . . ., 4 vols. (1727), 4 (s.v. "Révolution"); cited in Goulemot, "Le mot *révolution*," pp. 430.
14. Goulemot, "Le mot *révolution*," pp. 428–9. See also Goulemot, *Discours, révolutions et histoire. Représentations de l'histoire et discours sur les révolutions de l'Age Classique aux Lumières* (Paris, 1975), pp. 81–122.
15. Père Joseph d'Orleans, *Histoire des révolutions d'Angleterre depuis le commencement de la monarchie jusqu'à présent*, 3 vols. (Amsterdam, 1714) 2:*avertissement*; cited in Goulemot, *Discours*, p. 186.
16. I have touched on this theme in a recent article, "Politics and Public Opinion under the Old Regime: Some Reflections," in Jack Censer and Jeremy Popkin, eds., *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 205–246.
17. The *Encyclopédie* made this clear in its brief entry on the political meaning of the term: "RÉVOLUTION, s.f. signifie *en terme de politique*, un changement considérable arrivé dans le gouvernement d'un état . . . L'abbé de Vertot nous a donné deux ou trois histoires excellentes des *révolutions de différens pays* . . ." (14:237). For a similar statement, with credit also given to père d'Orléans, see *Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, 8 vols. (1771), 8:366.
18. Goulemot, *Discours*, pp. 175–221.
19. The following paragraphs draw on my earlier articles, "A Script for a French Revolution: The Political Consciousness of the abbé Mably," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 14 (1980–81), 235–263; "Memory and Practice: Politics and the Representation of the Past in Eighteenth-Century France," *Representations 11* (1985), 134–164. On Mably's conception of revolution, see also Lutz Lehmann, *Mably und Rousseau: Eine studie über die Grenzen der Emanzipation im Ancien Régime* (Bern, 1975), pp. 111–115.
20. Mably, *Observations sur l'histoire de France*, in *Collection complète des oeuvres de l'abbé Mably*, 15 vols. (Paris, an III), 1:120.
21. *Ibid.*, 2:255–57.
22. *Ibid.*, 2:283.
23. *Ibid.*, 3:300.
24. *Ibid.*, 3:131.
25. Mably, *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen*, ed. Jean-Louis Lecercle (Paris, 1972), pp. 6–7.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
31. Throughout the dialogue, the Frenchman expresses distrust of the magistrates' motives, while the Englishman maintains that "malgré tout ce qu'on peut leur reprocher," they "composent la classe la plus estimable de votre nation" (167). As the dialogue proceeds, the Commonwealthman demonstrates that the parlementary magistrates will eventually be obliged to demand the calling of the Estates General, in self-defence if not for love of the public good. "Ah! Monsieur," his French interlocutor exclaims in concluding his reports of these conversations, "que Milord ne connoît il les magistrats de nos parlements! que ne peut il leur présenter les veritez importantes qu'il m'a apprises!" (223).
32. Maupeou's action against the parlements was widely denounced as a "révolution." See, for example, [Pidansat de Mairobert,] *Journal historique de la Révolution opérée dans la Constitution de la Monarchie Française, par M. Maupeou, Chancelier de France* . . ., 7 vols. (London[Amsterdam], 1774–1776).
33. Mably, *Observations sur l'histoire de France*, 3:425.
34. *Ibid.*, 3:542–55.
35. *Ibid.*, 3:305–6.
36. *Ibid.*, 3:542.
37. *Ibid.*, 3:301.
38. Voltaire, *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations*, ed. René Pomeau, 2 vols. (Paris, 1963), 1:781.
39. See Goulemot, *Discours*, pp. 415–78; Mailhos, "le mot 'révolution'"; Rolf Reichardt, *Reform und Revolution bei Condorcet. Ein Beitrag zur späten Aufklärung in Frankreich* (Bonn, 1973), pp. 312–346.
40. *Ibid.*, 2:865.
41. *Ibid.*, 2:865. My emphasis.
42. Mailhos, "Le mot 'révolution'," pp. 86–88. Mailhos discovered a similar distinction between



revolutions as events and revolutions as process in Voltaire's correspondence, where t substantially more references to the latter than to the former.

43. *Supplément à l'Essai sur les moeurs*, in *Essai*, 2:915.
44. D'Alembert, "Discours préliminaire," *Encyclopédie*, 1:20.
45. *Oeuvres de Condorcet*, ed. F. Arago and A. Condorcet-O'Connor, 12 vols. (Paris, 1847
46. *Ibid.*, 6:23.
47. Best. 10968 (2 April 1764).
48. *Ibid.*, Best. 13464 (11 April).
49. Best, 13266 (5 May 1767).
50. Grimm, et al., *Correspondance littéraire*, ed. M. Tourneux, 16 vols. (Paris, 1877–8 (March 1778).
51. Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris. Nouvelle édition* . . ., 12 vols [Amsterdam, 1 4:289–91 (1782).
52. *Influence de la découverte de l'Amérique sur le bonheur du genre humain* (Paris, 1787 Bernard Faÿ, *L'Esprit révolutionnaire en France et aux Etats-Unis à la fin du XVIIIe siè* 1925), p. 133.
53. Raynal, *Révolution de l'Amérique* (London, 1781), p. 85. It is interesting that Raynal h to be paraphrasing Paine's *Common Sense*. He presumably has in mind the following "By referring the matter from argument to arms, a new era for politics is struck, a nev of thinking hath arisen. All plans, proposals, &c. prior to the nineteenth of April, i commencement of hostilities, are like the almanacks of the last year, which, though prc are superseded and useless now . . ."; "We have it in our power to begin the world over The birth-day of a new world is at hand . . ." See *The Political and Miscellaneous* *Thomas Paine*, 2 vols. (London, 1819), 1:19–20, 49.
54. Jacques Peuchet, "Discours préliminaire," in *Encyclopédie méthodique: Jurisprudenc Police et municipalités*, p. liv.
55. On this theme, see especially Reichardt, *Reform und Revolution*, pp. 335–343.
56. Quotations from Legrand de Boislandry, *Vues impartiales sur l'établissement des asseml vinciales* . . ., and the comte de Virieu, *Dialogue sur l'établissement et la forma assemblées* . . ., in Reichardt, *Reform und Revolution*, pp. 341–2.
57. Peuchet, "Discours préliminaire", p. lvi.
58. *Ibid.*, p. lxvi.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. l–li, lxii.
60. Darline Gay Levy, *The Ideas and Careers of Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet. A Study in Eig Century French Politics* (Urbana, 1980), p. 185.
61. *Annales politiques, civiles, et littéraires du dix-huitiéme siècle*, Slatkine reprint (Genev 1:83–103.
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
65. *Ibid.* On Linguet's particular notion of what that liberty would involve—property for som ity for others—see Levy, *Linguet*, passim.
66. *Ibid.*
67. On Linguet's language of time, see Levy, *Linguet*, passim; and Jeremy Popkin, "The olutionary Origins of Political Journalism," in K. M. Baker, ed., *The French Revolution Creation of Modern Political Culture, vol. I. The Political Culture of the Old Regime* 1987), pp. 203–223.
68. See H.-J. Lüsebrink and R. Reichardt, "La 'Bastille' dans l'imaginaire social de la Franc du XVIIIe siècle (1774–1799), *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 30 (1983): 1
69. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London, 1963), p. 40.
70. Pierre Rétat, "Forme et discours d'un journal révolutionnaire: Les *Révolutions de Paris* e in Claude Labrosse, Pierre Rétat, Henri Duranton, *L'Instrument périodique. La foncti presse au XVIIIe siècle* (Lyon, 1986), pp. 139–178. The following discussion owes much t excellent analysis. On the *Révolutions de Paris*, see also Jack R. Censer, *Prelude to Po Parisian Radical Press, 1789–1791* (Baltimore, 1976), passim.
71. Cited in Rétat, "Forme et discours," p. 141.
72. *Ibid.*, pp. 143–145.
73. *Ibid.*, p. 144.
74. On Loustalot, see Marcellin Pellet, *Elysée Loustalot et les Révolutions de Paris (juille septembre 1790)* (Paris, 1872). I am grateful to Dr. Hugh Gough for bringing my attentio importance of Loustalot's role in the writing of the *Révolutions de Paris*.
75. "Introduction," pp. 70, 13.

*Révolutions de Paris*, 4:3.
"Introduction," p. iii.
*Ibid.*, p. 1.
*Ibid.*, p. 3.
*Ibid.*, p. 4.
*Ibid.*, p. 17.
*Ibid.*, pp. 35–36.
*Ibid.*, p. 17.
*Révolutions de Paris*, 16:2.
"Introduction," pp. 5–6.
*Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.
*Ibid.*, p. 64.
*Révolutions de Paris*, 2:23, 31.
*Ibid.*, 2:13, 31. Rétat, "Forme et discours," p. 160.
*Révolutions de Paris*, 6:28; 3:15.
Rétat, "Forme et discours," p. 161.
On the Revolution as a "mythic present," see Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984). See also Reinhart Koselleck, "Historical Criteria of the Modern Concept of Revolution," in *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), pp. 39–54.