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'Alençon on 16 September 1772. 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 "tous es 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. "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. But a case study carried out by Jean Marie Goulenot, the scholar who has most fully considered the meaning of the idea of revolution during this period, is at least suggestive in this respect. Goulenot looked carefully at the French translations of a single text—Machiavelli's Discorsi sopra la prima decade 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. 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
REVOLUTION

There was, however, a notable exception to this prevailing usage of the term "revolution," with its connotations of a plurality of relatively autonomous and independent events. The 1727 edition of Furetère's Dictionnaire picked it up when it recorded that "Les Anglais appellent la Révolution, le changement arrêté par l'abolition de Jacques II, et l'establishement de Guillaume III et de ses enfants."

Among French writers, this "grande révolution... qui fait l'énoncément de l'Europe" (Jurieu) unleashed a wave of pamphlets between the Hogarth exiles who praised the actions of William III in accepting the throne vacated by a tyrant, and the defenders of absolutist monarchy who protested the illegal and rebellious depositions of James II. In fact, as Gouletot shows, it was the Hogarth 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 explaining the importance of these events and distinguishing the salutary change they had brought about in English government from the "révolutions" that had gone before. 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 definitive article, offering "une révolution" as one instance among many to be characterized and particularized by an appropriate adjective—"grande," "promette," "subite," "soudaine," "surprise," "marvelleuse," "estonnante" etc., as the Dictionnaire de l'Académie française proposed.

Second, "révolution" was an en post facto category of historical understanding. It was something that had already occurred, usually abruptly and without the conscious choice of human agents. 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" (Furetère, 1690), "changement qui arrive dans les affaires publiques" (Ac. fr. 1718), "en change- ment considerable arrivé dans le gouvernement d'un état" (Enc. 1765). Révolutions occurred; they were not made.

Third, as an en 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 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 étonnés, à la veille d'une si grande révolution qui se préparait" (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.

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II
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 typical 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 this Revolution by deprecating and desinalizing it, reducing it once again to the level of the long series of vicissitudes with which English history seemed so clearly afflicated to 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 completées en 1693. The Jesuit historian adapted to the history of English government the logic of Varillon's Histoire des révolutions en matière de religion, which in turn drew on the evidence 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 alternation pesquee régulière, qui se trouve chez les Anglais, d'un régime heureux fortissant, appauvrissant, et d'un régime calamiteux, troublant, finissant par la catastrophe d'un Roi déposé, mis aux fers, souvent sacrifié à l'ambition d'un usurpateur singulier." 10

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. 11 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 revolutions." D'Orléans himself added to this vogue by publishing an Histoire des révolutions d'Espagne in 1734. But the recognized master of the genre was the Abbé Réne Aubert de Vercor. 12 His Histoire des révolutions de Sardaigne, first published in 1695, was republished 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 paintings before 1789. While some matched Vercor's works in popularity, additional Histoires des révolutions bowled them over 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 (1758-59), Russia (1760), Scotland and Ireland (1761), the Roman Empire (1766, 1783), and Poland (1735, 1773). Indeed, all of European history seemed reducible to an Histoire des révolutions, as in Gabriel de Maissac's Faisez 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 "révolution" tended to lack specificity in this discourse. Yet Goulounet, the only historian to have considered this literature systematically, finds a consistent ideology at its core. At least as 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 "revolutions" portrayed in these histories represent 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. 13 These accounts of the political vicissitudes affecting 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 1760, 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 to the authority of an absolute monarch but to the political virtue of the nation itself to create the instability and vicissitudes constantly threatening human affairs. 14 From this perspective, the Observations sur l'Histoire de France was a story of repeated failure. "Je me propose dans cet ouvrage de faire connaitre les différentes formes du gouvernement auxquelles les Français ont obéi depuis leur établissement dans les Gaules, et de décroître les causes, qui, en empêchant que rien n'eût été stable chez eux, les ont livrés, pendant une longue suite de siècles, à des continuelles révolutions." Mably announced at the outset of this work. 15 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 unprecedented 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 Malby’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 fasse à un simple particulier devoir, 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 suscitaient quelquefois.” This constant recourse to the English Magna Carta, Malby insisted, “a empêché que des révolutions souvent communes se fussent commises,” “preserving their form of government even “au milieu des mouvements communs 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’avait au contraire aucune loi fondamentale consacrée par l’homme et le respect de la nation, qu’elle a été condamnée à ne s’occuper dans chaque conjoncture que des intérêts immédiats, et que ses Français obéissent sans résistance aux événements, les Anglais résistent à leur impulsion: de là, sur les raisons des fêtes d’élève chez les uns une monarchie, et chez les autres un gouvernement libre.”

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 settled national will, Malby 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 politically constituted order, he saw a play of political wills unconstrained by any principle of stability. With the brief exception of Charlesguy’s reign, he argued in concluding his work, the French had never attempted to 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. “De là les efforts toujours impuissants, une politique toujours incertaine, un intérieur constant, un caractère, mille mœurs fixes, de là des révolutions continuelles dont notre histoire pointant, et enfin les peuples pour avoir été habitués à l’action des événements et des passions, nous sommes accoutumés à n’avoir aucun respect pour les lois.”

Behind the constitutional will, there lay the desire for an absolute privilege of monarchical power: “secret de l’Empire,” the monarchical disposition 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? Malby 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 Englishman, Malby essayed a logically identified as a Commonwealthman, Malby 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 liberty.
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 "révolution"—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," Mably's Frenchmen—now won over by the arguments of his English interlocutor—specialties in the conclusion of the work, the form of government would contain defects, irregularities and prejudices inherited from the earlier state of things. But "des que notre nation retrouve du néant, sortit 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 rosiéne. 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 parliamentary 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. 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 desvoirs du citoyen. The revolution that occurred was not his "révolution monétaire" but the very different revolution effected by chancellor Maupertuis the event that rent the constitutional veil of the French monarchy to reveal the despotism that lay behind.

Le traité a été dédié, par la révolution que la magistrature du royaume a épuisée dans ses derniers temps. Le traité de Mably . . . nous a fait voir une grande vérité que tout ordre de citoyens qui souverains le despotisme, dans l'opposition de la grammaire avec le prince, créer un abîme sous ses pieds, et mêler ses voix en un crieur. 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 Maupertuis 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, be insisted, it would have been impossible for Maupertuis 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 disapprove, rather than with vigorous attacks on despotism and demands for the immediate calling of the Estates General.

The Observations sur l'histoire de France thereupon 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

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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 a pas longtemps, une sorte de fermentation dans les esprits sous nos ans qui se retrouvaient, en état d'alourdir de sa plénitude, en regardant les monarques comme un objet plus dangereux que la vie même, et ces esprits, en se réfléchissant comme gouvernements, et en se réfléchissant les uns aux autres, se croient renforcés en valeur et puissance, plus de que nous nous sommes caracrant comme nos gouvernements, et que nous ne pourrions en nous-mêmes nous nommer princes de révolution." The Maupertuis coup—and the manner in which the French accepted it—simply confirmed these fears. A bitter note added to the Observations summed up "humiliances réflexions" to which Mably's investigation of the French past . his experience of the French present had brought him: "Ce que je dis dans corps de mon ouvrage, que nous ne pourrons en nous-mêmes aucun principe révolution, est une vérité dont on ne peut plus douter." Neither the second part of the Observations sur l'histoire de France nor Des 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 1748, just as they were presented with the opportunity to do so by the events of the calling of the Estates General. Its representation of French history as an essentially disordered domain found frequent echo in the prerevolution pamphlets. The second, with its script for the recovery of national sovereignty, was published in 1789, just as that body was meeting. In the event, the political transformation that was accomplished—and the conception of "révolution" it 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 limit challenging the French to prepare for yet another revolution by pressing a progres of political contestation, and readying themselves to seize upon it as an oppor-Revity for the assertion of political will. As Mably saw it, the moment of revol- 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 cost face to resolve act by a nation no less determined than it was enlightened.

Determination—which is to say political will—is here the essential point. Chris republican to the last, the austere author of the Observations sur l'histoire de France was more concerned with discerning any remaining vestiges of polit virtue among a nation undermined by despotism than he was with celebrating progress toward enlightenment. "Qui pourrait prédire le sort qui attend notre nation? Notre siècle se goulfe de ses lumières, la philosophie, dit-on, fait cour jours des progrès considérables, et nous regardons avec étonnement nos pères; mais cette philosophie et ces lumières dont nous sommes si fiers, ne hiérarchies dans nos devoirs d'hommes et de citoyens . . . Les lumières viennent teint, quand les moeurs sont corrompues." But others, less pessimistic, elaborated upon the idea of "révolution" in the spirit of the Enlightenment, dra- upon it to express the dramatic progress of reason in history. The difference between Mably's conception of "révolution" and the conception that sprang is
being in 1789 owed much to the spin the philosophes put on the term as they shifted the semantic register from political 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," he was announcing a very different historiographical program from that of the Histoire des révolutions or the Observations sur l'histoire de France. The displacement of the political from 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 in longer-term social and cultural transformations, at once more profound and more beneficent. "Révolutions" as the disasters 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.

The Essai sur les moeurs is exemplary in this respect. "Moiros principaux but a été de suivre les révolutions de l'esprit humain dans celles des gouvernements..." Voltaire argued in describing l'Abriégi de l'histoire universelle from which the Essai grew. 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 États n'étaient qu'un accessoire à celle des arts et des sciences." Of the sixty-three occurrences of the term "révolution" identified in the Essai sur les moeurs, G. Maillot 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," "vénérable," "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.

Several aspects of this new Enlightenment infusion upon the term "révolution" deserve emphasis. First, it suggested a cultural transformation, a revolution in the human mind. Second, it linked 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 definition 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 avion qui a changé de place dans l'immensité des choses, et dans le nombre incomparable 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." D'Alembert adds similar words of world-historical significance for the rebirth of intellect that began with the fall of Constantiniople and the invention of printing: "ainsi naquit-il au genre humain, pour sortir de la barbarie, une de ces révolutions qui font prendre à la terre une face nouvelle." 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 projets, la force, les richesses, la félicité des nations, sont devenues le prix des lumières." 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'esprit humaine," he was echoing a fourth critical feature of the Enlightenment notion of revolution. The philosophers 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, but was itself a momentary expression of unchangingly and that je ne saurais le plaisir d'être témoin," Voltaire wrote to Chavreuil in 1764. "Les Français arrivent tard à tout, mais enfin ils arrivent; la lumières s'est tellement répandue de proche en proche qu'on écartera à la première occasion et alors ce sera un beau tapisage; les jeunes gens sont bien heureux, ils verront de belles choses." 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 princesse Galais in 1767. "La lumière se communique de ces côtés... Il s'est fait depuis environ quinze ans une révolution dans les esprits qui sera une grande époque. Les crises des peuples annoncent ce grand changement comme le croisement des corbeaux annoncent le bœuf..." Frédéric the Great was no less pragmatic in anticipating the fruits of enlightenment in a letter to the philosophe the same year: "Quelle révolution! A quoi ne doit pas s'attarder le siècle qui suivra le nôtre? La cogitation est mise à la racine de l'âge (i.e. l'âge moderne)... Cet édifice sapé par les fondements va s'écrouler, et les nations transiteront dans leurs annales que Voltaire fut le primateur de cette révolution qui se fit au disque-lent siècle dans l'esprit humain." And twenty years later, Grimm's Correspondance litééraire could still celebrate the paraisstat's triumphal return to Paris in the same mood, rejoicing in "l'heureuse révolution qu'il a su étre 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 ... .134

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 cent ans seulement, il 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 éteignant le progrès des lumières et du changement qu’elles doivent enfanta, il est permis d’espérer qu’elles apporneront au monde le plus grand bien, et que les tyrans de toute espèce finiront devant ce ci universel qui retentit et se prolonge pour remplir et envahir l’Europe." Per 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."135 In this new culture of intellectual expectation, the rebirth 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 terre. C’est une catastrophe de cette République naissante que sont déposées les vrais tyrans qui enrichissent le monde," declared 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?"136 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 Europe—the order of relative importance suggested by Condorcet in his own response to Raynal’s question, De l’influence de la révolution d’Amérique 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."137

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, benéficiant "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 municipalité declared that "la bonne temps est une chimère et le mot de ralliement de l’ignorance et de l’imbecilité,"138 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."139 But none seemed to offer more than the provincial assemblies eventually introduced by Bétienne in 1787. Bétienne’s reforms were greeted by many who heralded "cette révolution "Révolution".

cénonnante [qui] va s’opérer, non par la force des armes, la contrainte et la violenc mais par la conviction générale, sur le vou au même de tous les Ordres de l’État" this "Révolution la plus complète, et ... la plus heureuse."140 Peuchet, however, was particularly revealing in this respect. The preliminary discourse he wrote for his section of the Encyclopédie méthodique cast its entire history of the progress of civilization as a prelude to the introduction of the new assemblies. In a euphoric view, "la révolution qu’elles doivent opérer et qu’elles ont déjà commis,"141 was the latest in a long series of beneficent revolutions in the evolution modern civil society. Fruit of enlightenment, it sprang from that "révolution opérée dans la crise, aux dix-septième et dix-huitième siècle," which above had brought Europe to its "état présent de polérisme et de lumières."142 And prepared by enlightened writers—"car c’est des écrits publics, des livres pl ou moins dogmatiques, que les plus importantes révolutions se sont faites,"143 principles had been generalized and strengthened by public discussion, that exercising the power of opinion from which "il est évident de nouvelles lumières, de nouveaux moyens qui bâtitent la révolution."144 Peuchet epitomized the belief in human progress as a succession of beneficent revolutions in the human mind, culminating in that universal transformation of civil society that was the Enlightenment.

But there were other voices. Elsewhere, as Darline Levy has so strikingly put it, "a journalist rushing to the scene of an apocolypse was reporting on the shape a future on the other side of doom."145 Linguist’s Annales politiques—perhaps the most compelling journal of the prerevolutionary period—offered Europe (and particularly France) a warming of an approaching revolution somewhat different from the peaceful transformation promised by the philosophes and administrateurs reformers. And with that warming, it offered a conception of revolution as crisis as the decisive turning point at which a society, like a sick patient, will live or die. It offered a conception of revolution as the ultimate moment of truth for the sociopolitical.

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 the happiest and most peaceful in the annals of European civilization, Lingue saw more destructive forces at work. On the one hand, he argued, "les viles recouverts de toutes parts des embellissements qu’une éducation sournoise promet encore de multiplier. Les communications sont faciles et sûres ... Les campagnes sont peuplées de châteaux, où le luxe réunit aux recherches de l’art tout ce qui lé décadent de la nature peut produire ... jamais les joissances n’ont été plus 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 subsidence totale, d’autant plus terrible que le désespoir total en sera la cause, une désolation d’autant plus effrayante que nous n’aurois pas pour la repaire les ressources qu’ont eus nos ancêtres dans des cas à peu-près pareils."146 While others were celebrating the emergence of modern commercial society from the collapse ...
feudalism, Linguec 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 États finira de sang, et poeta le carnage avec l’incendie aux portes de la Maîtrise du Monde.” 49 Between the dispersion of an increasingly immiserated populace and the luxury of the propertyless few, there stood only the bayonets and the gibbets that, in containing popular unrest, extinguished “la rage journalièrement renouvelée qui bouillonne au fond de leur coeur, ni le démesure qui n’en modère les transports qu’en créant la force qui les rendroit redoutables.” 50 In such a situation, Linguec saw only two possibilities. Either the oppressed, constrained by military force, would expire in silent misery, leaving European prosperity to extinction. Or they would throw up “quelques Spartacées nouvelles, enhardi par le dépeçage, écarté par la nécessité, appelant les camarades de son indignation à la véritable liberté, brisant les loix meurtrières et trompeuses qui la font mener.” 51

One of the other of these calamities was inevitable, Linguec 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 rapporceront.” 52 The actual content of his predictions was perhaps less important than the tone of urgency with which he endorsed them. This message 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 recent and distinctive features of Linguec’s journalism. 53 Herodote’s 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 endeared every issue he touched with apocalyptic urgency. Not least of that of the Bastille, which became in his writings the condensed image of all the evils of the Old Regime . . . 54

VI

“C’est une révolte.” 55 “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 movement toward revolution.” 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.” 56 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 irreversible, 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 already unexpectedly happened. Liancourt was perhaps telling Louis XIV that the old French government had been transformed before his very eyes. But in this 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 convenv usage was indeed transformed—not by an abrupt shift from one mean another, but by a complex process of reordering and recombining existing things. The process can be seen nowhere more clearly than in the pages of which become the most widely-read revolutionary journal in Paris and throughout France, the Révolutions de Paris. Recently the subject of a fascinating study by Pierre Batz, the evolution of this journal in the course of 1789 shows the disintegration of the French Revolution upon itself—and with it the new understanding concept of “révolution”—at the very moment of its creation. 57 It is important, to begin with, to note the use of the plural in the title of this journal. Why Révolutions de Paris, not Révolution de Paris? As Batz clearly shows, this was not originally intended to be a periodical publication: the first published in 1789 that subsequently became No. 1 of the new journal not bear a number in its early editions. It simply offered a compilation of day-by-day accounts—the earliest actually first published on a daily basis—momentous events that occurred in Paris during the week surrounding the fall 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, à exact de ce qui s’est passé dans la capitale, et particulièrement de la prise de la Bastille, depuis le 11 juillet jusqu’au 25 de même mois—kept its title for conventional sense of “révolutions” as sudden occurrences and dramatic—bringing unanticipated changes in affairs of a state.

However, as Batz shows, the enormous success of this account of a “révolution” 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. 1, contained, for the first time, the promise that “I’ll lend my dons des détails exacts de ce qui s’est passé d’une semaine à l’autre” Speculating that the extraordinary events in French political life would one Prudhomme and his associates undertook to extend their account of “les révolutions de la capitale” indefinitely. After a few issues, these accounts of daily events were supplemented—and after the October days they were replaced with new rubrics intended not simply to chronicle a succession of events define more clearly their structure and meaning. Similarly, the journal as a whole was given a chronological organization articulating the new rhythm of revel new time and celebrating the rupture with the old order of things accomplish this, the “première année de la liberté française.” 58

As the journal itself took form, so did the conception of revolution to us was dedicated. In the process, a succession of “révolutions” became first revolution” and then “l’économat de révolution qui vient de s’opérer'; “ces révolutions” became “cette révolution à jamais inoubliable dans les fastes de l’histoire.” This “révolution française” was not to be simply an abrupt and
The conceptual order of this new domain was clearly mapped out in a long essay, "L'introduction à la Révolution," which appeared in the journal de la Révolution de 1789. 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 de 1789." Most probably written by Élie de la Motte, the former avocat turned journalist who produced most of the copy for the Révolutions de Paris until his death in September 1790, 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 for its public meanings that lay at the heart of the French Revolution—reconfigured, reconceived and redeployed elements of the political discourse of the Old Regime in a new political language.

What was the key to this "Revolution 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, the Revolution of Paris, "ou est éveillé de voir sebrailler la France défie de ce qu'elle est, combien le Français libre diffère déjà du Français esclave, sucre que ne ressort plus de consultation 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 régnait-elle cet âge de fain, pendant lequel le peuple gémissant et misérable, opprimé et bon, adorait son roi, lors même qu'en son nom lui arrivait sa substance nourricière?" The Revolution was therefore a world-historical event, a phenomenon of universal significance. The French were carrying out a universal historical mission: "Faire la révolution de manière éclairante est un acte de sérénité qu'elle [la Révolution] se doit et à elle-même et à toutes les nations qui n'ont pas encore brisé les chaînes de despotsisme." To comprehend the meaning of these acts required more than knowledge of the particular instances of despotsism that had precipitated them. The event had to be placed within a global narrative: "Le despotsisme règne sur tous les peuples avant d'atterrir 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 qu'en a été, en temps et en cause, l'univers comme de son tyran."

As eternal as the universe, and as old as human history, to which it gave its metaphysical significance, the story of despotsism 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 despotsisme pesait sur l'univers. L'histoire des revolutions humaines est la répétition des usurpations du pouvoir, des révolutions de la raison et des représailles de la force. C'est l'histoire du despotsisme. Il est où avec l'homme qui a été despote aussi-à-tant qu'il a eu empire à exercer." This history was cost, moreover, in Enlightenment tomes, in the tomes of Voltaire's "Estaquet l'Éclairé" amplified by the Holbachian rhetoric. It was structured by the metaphysical opposition between reason and superstition. "C'est parce qu'on a fait descendre du ciel le despotsisme, et qu'on lui a donné une sanctité divine, qu'il est si puissante et stable. Il y a longtemps que les droits de l'homme aient réhabilités, sans l'épée tiède dont les prêtres de tous les Dieux ont veillé la raison, ou le fauteur dont ils ont frappé..." Priests everywhere had been more or less odious, more or less despotic. But Europe had finally learned that it was not impolicy to condemn "le despotsisme sacré"; that if immorality and miscreatin too far, "un peur de taire nous est peut-être permis pour l'antique auteur de nos maux." This resentment guarantees the continuance of the revolution.

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 accounts of the genesis of the revolution offered by the Révolutions de Paris. But the emphasis constantly shifts between them. If Louchet argues at one point that "il est donc incomptabilisable que cet excès de nos maux qui nous a donné le courage d'apparier rentrée. Les lumières de la raison en ont hâlé le moment; elles n'ont pas tout fait. Des peuples ont recouvré leurs droits avant le régime de la philosophie..." he insists at another that the nation, tired of its tyrants, did not know its rights until "la révolution de la philosophie s'est éveillé." Then "il mal est trop grand pour que nous tardions à en trouver les effets." If he claims that "il ne faudra jamais plus que leser la patience des opprimés," he insists that "l'injustice assure la révolution présente," it is only to express the hope that in this revolution "ne que l'excès et une sentence, souvent, ou la pacification de la philosophie" the latter is "l'excès des dévots," c'est qu'elle est la révolution des anges et des esprits, et que cette caution n'a été celle d'aucune autre révolution." The only thing that seems entirely clear is that suffering and enlightenment together made the revolution: "l'extraordinaire et le progrès des lumières souvent seuls opérer une révolution chez un peuple qui a vécu dans l'ignorance et la servitude..."

Note the formula: "l'excès de maux et le progrès des lumières." Its interest lies less in the ideologicalism 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. Louchet offered an account of French history that was Mably rendered in the language of Louis XVI. "L'Empire français n'ayant jamais eu de constitution... depuis l'origine de la monarchie, nous avons alternativement glissé sous le despotsisme fédérale et sous le despotsisme ministériel." Unnatural though it was, feudal despotsism was preferable to ministerial despotsism, which was "entièrement odieux": at least, the seigneurs, unlike the predatory minister, fed their peasants like domestic animals. But Richelieu had destroyed seigneurial despotsim
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 councillors, clergy, parlements, intendances, and corporate bodies "jusqu‘aux sociétés littéraires" had "fractionné le despotisme." The moment marked by the ancient idée had finally come: "Patience multum ventum quoque sequens patet. C'est l'époque où nous nous trouvons." 189

The French Revolution was therefore a crisis, a moment of life or death in the social body. "Tous les remèdes étant utiles, il fallait une crise, et dans ces crises violentes, les forces constitutionnelles seules réussissent." 190 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 effroyable et terrible, elle signalait la vengeance du peuple contre ses oppresseurs." 191 Démonstrons nos regards de ces actes (Poitiers qui nous ont aliagés. Espérons que nous sommes désormais (the phrase is revealing in its contradiction) aucun homme n‘aura encore ce qu‘il doit à des hommes. 192 As Bétaz points out, the prevailing image is one of storm and tempest. "L‘orage des révolutions vient à grimper dans un état, 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 dérouillent dans un instant."

Moreover, "dans une révolution chaque jour a ses orages et ses dangers"; "chacune journée est marquée par différents traits qui ne peuvent être les derniers de cette révolution à jamais mémorables dans les fastes de notre histoire, et par les motifs qui l‘ont fait naître, et par les sornes terribles qui ont effrayé les ennemis de la nation." 193 Toutefois l‘expérience est acquis de moments de morts, un moment de vie, et le moment de la 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."

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 "mythique present" in which eternity and contingency meet. 194

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 philosophers.

"Révolution" as progress was experienced with all the urgency and trawl of Liaugue’s terrifying "révolution" as indelible 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. Théodore Crousaz, ed., Victor de Corse’s Correspondance, 107 vols. (Geneva, 1953-65) [hereafter cited as letters in the Corse-
    pondance de Voltaire], volume 2 (1968), 89.

    Reinhart Kreeb in Geschichte der französischen Revolution: Historische Landes- und politische-politische
    (Nuremberg, 1772-1780), 5-723 (hereafter cited as "Révolution")."

3. It is interesting to remark that a search of the French language database on the project for American
    and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language (ALPEN) 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 112 occurrences of "révolution" in a seventeenth-century corpus of
    18,265,235 words (a frequency of .00093%) and a total of 3142 occurrences in an eighteen-
    century corpus of 37,499,880 (a frequency of .00030%). Broken down further by period, the
    eighteenth-century occurrences are as follows:

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>1750-1769</td>
<td>25,49,803</td>
<td>.00037</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1740-1759</td>
<td>10,795,991</td>
<td>.00036</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

4. Jean Marie Gouzeau, "L‘empire du "révolution" dans les thèmes francophones du XVIe siècle


It is interesting to remark that a search of the French language database on the project for American

7. Ibid., 2, 2 (1777), 2156. This definition was repeated unchanged in the editions of 1740 and

8. encyclopédie, in Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une société de gens
    de lettres. — 17 vols. (Paris, 1751-1762). 14-87. In addition, the dictionary was published under the
    title of Dictionnaire encyclopédique (1764). 3, s. l. (hereafter cited as "Dictionnaire").

9. Dictionnaire universel des arts et métiers (1747), 3, s. l. (hereafter cited as "Dictionnaire").

10. Richer, Dictionnaire, 2 vols. (1738), 2, 2316. The example taken from the Mémoires de la
    Académie des sciences and is translated into contemporary language (as follows):

11. The following discussion draws on Gouzeau, la "l‘empire du "révolution" dans les thèmes

12. In addition to the dictionaries previously cited, see Fons Hugonnet, Dictionnaire des
richesse de la langue française, et de mélodrame qu’il s’y est introduit : contenant les mœurs nouveaux et rares (Paris, 1770), Jean-François, French, Dictionnaire critique (Marseille, 1787-88).


17. The French Revolution made its start in its brief essay on the political meaning of the term "Révolution," s.l. in Le siècle de la politique, et changements considérables, éloge de la nouvelle manière des choses (Paris, 1789), 12 s.v. It is the translation of the English edition of the same work (1789), pp. 124-225. For a similar use of words, with the same sort of terms, see Dictionnaire de Trilingue, vol. 1 (1771), 8-56.

18. Goulet, Dictionnaire, pp. 539-41.


22. Ibid., 1:225-37.

23. Ibid., 2:249.

24. Ibid., 2:250.

25. Ibid., 3:311.


29. Ibid., 1:225-37.

30. Ibid., 2:249.

31. Ibid., 2:250.

32. Ibid., 3:311.

33. Ibid., 3:311.


35. Ibid., 1:225-37.

36. Ibid., 2:249.

37. Ibid., 2:250.

38. Ibid., 3:311.

39. Ibid., 3:311.

40. Ibid., 1:220.

41. Ibid., 1:220.

42. Ibid., 1:220.

43. Ibid., 1:220.

44. Ibid., 1:220.

45. Ibid., 1:220.

46. Ibid., 1:220.

47. Ibid., 1:220.

48. Ibid., 1:220.

49. Ibid., 1:220.

50. Ibid., 1:220.

51. Ibid., 1:220.

52. Ibid., 1:220.

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57. Ibid., 1:220.

58. Ibid., 1:220.

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106. Ibid., 1:220.

107. Ibid., 1:220.

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111. Ibid., 1:220.

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121. Ibid., 1:220.

122. Ibid., 1:220.

123. Ibid., 1:220.

124. Ibid., 1:220.

125. Ibid., 1:220.

126. Ibid., 1:220.