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lated his earlier ideas about a future semic formation into the story of the Revolution: him. In the same manner as a whole generation of inspired revolutionary intellectuals, Rabaut democratized, and distinctly revolutionary instrument—as well as goal—of political c.

But the Revolution of 1789 was not to intellectually, in the way that Rabaut said already in his *Précis* of contemporary events: certain ominous developments that seemed to suggest an alternative trajectory to veer off its expected course. In the rationalist histories of the human mind, like deviations and missteps in a way that was not to be seen until the early 1790s. He attributed the errors of the Revolution to the deficiencies of the current language of politics, and to the uses that were increasingly exceeding the capacities of the French people like himself. While the French people were now around “two words, *equality* and *liberty*” that now appeared, much to Rabaut’s dismay and misunderstanding and, consequently, disapproval, even violent confrontation.³ Writing about the Revolution of Domingue, for example, Rabaut reported that the Revolution had introduced the Revolution to the world known in those climates, introduced the Revolution to the world. Similarly, he claimed that the terms of the Revolution of the clergy beginning in 1791 had created “one of the most serious schisms” that are termed a *schism* and in which men then fight for the sake of abstractions that seemed to Rabaut that the current meaning of the Revolution could, in order to make sense of many of the evident disappointments and

Our exemplary revolutionary historians do not live to see which of his predictions—t

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tators on recent history repeatedly looked for effects of contemporary language practices that transpired. Collectively, the Thermidorians concluded that the dictatorship of Robespierre had succeeded simply because the Montagnards had spoken simply because they were (in Lacretelle's terms) "empty of sense," also, by "making orators into sovereigns," and by exercising extraordinary power over "the property, liberties, and lives of millions of men."⁶ Or, as Petit concluded in his speech in September 1794 before laying out the strategy of his own, the Jacobins had effectively spoken with words.⁷

In certain ways, this late eighteenth-century French language and signs within the dynamic of the Revolution seems odd and even rather alien, especially when viewed through the lens of a semiotic transformation of political life. During the nineteenth century, the Revolution's successes and failures were interpreted through arguments stressing class conflict, political warfare, and other factors that peppered the transition from Michelet to Marx. Yet in other ways, the Revolution's language, like those of Rabaut before them, still reads to the reader as surprisingly contemporary in nature. In the four years and many thousands of historical studies since Michel-Edme Petit's attempt at exegesis, Furet's very similar claim about the failure of the Revolution to reflect a clear material reality became one of the dominant readings of the Revolution's course. In a history of *Interpreting the French Revolution*, Furet's political discourses, rather than social conditions, were the conditions of the Terror. The peculiarity of this reading, distinctly, owed to the fact that, in the har-

case of the historiography of the French Revolution, we consider language as a historical dynamic in light of an explosion of interest in the study of revolution and to a spate of influential books or terms, images, and symbols—from the words of the head on a pike—were deployed within late eighteenth-century culture.⁹

Despite all this attention to discourse, however, little has ever been devoted to historicizing the language of revolutionary culture. What remains little known is simply that Furet's remarks on the linguistic and semiotic struggle themselves constituted a delightful and polemical debates of his own moment (in this sense, also that the precedent for this kind of commentary was set by men like Petit and Rabaut in the Paris of the late eighteenth century participants and observers of the Revolution stand and to explain the events of 1789 in light of the connections between semiotic change and the Revolution; they too did so for explicitly polemical and polemical discussions of the uses, power, and consequences of language were a constituent element of both the Revolution—and counterrevolutionary discourse).

Perhaps then Furet's interpretive model offers a different line of historical inquiry. Specific questions about the dramatic effects of language on the Revolution question why contemporary commentators and observers reacted to their situation as if it were a performance of representation and communication. How did the Revolution, and so many others come to see language as a high-stakes linguistic power struggle? What were the political problems with extensive and diverse strategies, from introducing laws prohib-

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of linguistic controversy and experiment eighteenth century to the opening of the r

Of course, the late Enlightenment was: history when language and politics bec chapter will show in greater detail, French been tenuously connected to the French (despite the fact that France has always The power to determine and to control th sought by the absolutist state and contes bodies in France, including the parlement deed, many historians, beginning with Fei monumental and triumphalist early twer tunes of the French language, have place long-standing history of state concern w and *dirigisme*.¹¹

In this book, however, I argue that dur ment of exceptional attention to linguist an acute and singular sense of the power destiny. In advancing a “natural” expla making or semiosis, the *philosophes* effe social progress to linguistic advance; they nication as one of the keys to the realizat and failure in communication as one of th Moreover, this conception of signs—and ments that it encouraged in the last decad the worldview of educated French people predisposed to see the revolutionary stru lem of language and to respond according a subject and a tool of their plans. Yet, that tionaries’ claims about language politics : deed, assume a “unique, magical quality” Lynn Hunt has notably argued.¹² Nor do I

sciousness was rooted in both fear of the
 tion and faith in semiotic reform as a mea
 the world and thus intellectual and soci
 seek to explain is precisely why many k
 tionary struggle continually attempted to
 epistemological principles into deliberate,
 while simultaneously denouncing the pc
 that they represented.

But what becomes evident in telling th
 eighteenth-century men and women were
 relationship between language and politica
 physical violence. I argue that the leadi
 way of thinking about the nature and fu
 signs—or what we might call the metasec
 century culture—also had an enormous :
 ies' efforts to imagine and then to institut
 French nation.¹³ From recent scholarship,
 temological problems of the Enlightenn
 about the ownership of ideas or the natu
 explicit political issues during the 1790s.¹⁴
 revolutionary actors, such as the Marqu:
 conceptions of the nature of knowledge :
 roles in shaping and determining their po
 losophies.¹⁵ And certainly historians of fes
 lutionary educational projects have noted
 lightenment psychological and commun
 tion of these undertakings.¹⁶ But I am int
 understanding the relationship between
 semiotic and the development during th
 very distinctive conception of how an ide:
 second, and ultimate, aim of this book is
 late Enlightenment epistemology and li

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consider the impact of “the history of meaning and signs self-consciously held in inquiry” on contemporaneous political thought.

But in the non-Anglophone study of this situation has been changing since the mid-1990s. As noted, German practitioners of the history of ideas (*Schicht*), have tried in recent years not only to understand the course of the Revolution but also, to a limited extent, to link the Revolution to the 1790s, “metatheories of language became a major controversy.”¹⁹ Similarly, and more extensively, Jacques Guilhaumou, building on the work of the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Saint-Cloud, has developed a *linguistic*—the quantitative analysis of political thought—his attention to the theory and politics of language. The purpose of his bicentennial book entitled *Révolution française* is, Guilhaumou states, “to assess the impact of reflection on political language as a process” as a whole.²⁰ However, Guilhaumou’s “process” as coterminous with the creation of a concrete, rational, and popular language, of a concrete, rational, and popular language, mately gave the French people the chance to create a new political order. In the end, the authors of the *Handbuch der Geschichte in Frankreich, 1680–1820*, as well as the members of the Saint-Cloud group, have shown interest in the Revolution primarily as it affected the formation of language(s), which are taken to be the Revolution.

I believe, however, that we can actually understand the eighteenth-century linguistic speculation and the Revolution in the realm of the socio-political imaginary or culture. The complex assumptions about signs held by the revolutionary participants impacted not only the course of the Revolution but also, I argue, the very ideals that

Revolution (1990), Baker argued that revolution created out of the multiple political languages as the revolutionaries proclaimed its end. He proposed that the antiliberal tendencies in reimagining the revolutionary notion that a single language made up of multiple citizens, must speak with one voice—expressed the legacy of France’s royal absolutism, transformed into an opportunity in the middle years of the eighteenth century. This rhetoric was extremely persuasive. Yet it also seems clear (as in other of his works) that the rhetoric of revolution drew from a wider variety of sources and is supported not only by, but also against, simply the political theories or political language of the time. In this study, I explore the ways in which a particular epistemology—specifically, the idea of a single language as a source of factional conflict and the key to resolving it—was expressed in prerevolutionary social and philosophical treatises. And I propose that the French Revolution’s language profoundly shaped and limited the possibilities available to revolutionary participants as they tried to find a just means of governing a heterogeneous society along both ideological and economic lines.

On the one hand, the persistence of the idea of a single language that disputes generally stem from faulty conceptions of language. For revolutionary intellectuals’ general rejection of the idea that a healthy political system could be built on a single language. On the other hand, an Enlightenment conviction in the effects of a perfect language, crystal clear and unambiguous, encouraged many of the leaders of the French Revolution to undertake deliberate language-planning efforts, in the belief that a “natural” language would eventually make possible a consensual and harmonious revolution.

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to make. For how can one uncover the assumptions when they are only rarely explicit? how can their causal relationship to action be demonstrated? As a solution, this book is about political language. It takes as its central intellectual and cultural phenomenon of the nineteenth century: a widespread fascination with gesture as means of communication and expression. It will appear a surprising or even perverse choice, especially in a society so emphatically centered on language, politics, and theory. Yet thinking about gestures has often been a part of political theory. Furthermore, interest in gesture has often been a part of political theory at moments and places characterized either by a lack of faith in the capacity of vernacular language (as in the case of the Symbolists or Krauss) or great faith in the potential of gesture (as in the case of the circles of the Royal Academy in seventeenth-century France). Here we would do well to recall Rabaut Saint-Martin's chaotic picture writing with which this introduction begins. In nineteenth-century France, the idea of a primordial language was the basis—first literally, then metaphorically—for a series of semiotic experiments aimed at transcending the limitations associated with vernacular words. These experiments included iconic and often ideographic languages and systems of signs that we are best able to find clear evidence of in the history of language reform. The first is the dissatisfaction that many reformers experienced with conventional, modern language. The second is the utopian hope that these reforms could be a language reform as a way of instituting a new emotional exchange, sociability, and, ultimately, a new popular consensus.

Of course, my approach is not intended

am interested in outlining the shared a about language that were common to the terrevolutionary *mentalité*, I am also con various claims and strategies used by di with different motives, at distinct mome: ing pressures. In this book I seek, therefo small set of believers in the power of a nat establish models for a new communicati forts to impose this vision shaped the pol century France. In conclusion, I take up th tinctive vision left any lasting mark. For it to be a twenty-first century variant on the *de l'esprit humain*: a study of the conn modern epistemological developments a political culture.

The first chapter, entitled "The Ges Semiosis: An Enlightenment Solution, I peel of the idea of an original *langage d'a* natural, bodily signs, in the context of a br intellectual and social consequences of th ter proposes that the notion of a primordi offered some of the key *philosophes*—Cor among others—a way to illustrate the s: guage, knowledge, and society from their lished an ideal and set of natural guidel communicative utopia. The next two cha: 1760–1789" and "Pantomime as Pedago self-contained realms within late absoluti edly primitive language of gesture was i perimental uses in an effort to transform ents were represented and transmitted: concerns the *ballet d'action* and the debat

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Four, "Revolutionary Regeneration and 1794," looks at the ways in which the particular, was employed in the service of the sequences thereof. The fifth chapter, "Et 1799," focuses on a new set of linguistic systems of notation, from telegraph on *la langue des signes*—which were enc the hope that they would halt the Revolutionary course of the Terror. However, as will be conjunction with the concluding one, "The Language of the Law after 1800," by the French intellectuals were no longer convinced of the desirability of state-sponsored linguistic panacea finally came crashing down in ruins at the century's close. The final objective the connection, in the first years of the nineteenth century, grudging acceptance of the institutional terms that are central to modern concepts and the emergence of a new, hierarchical system are valued in direct relation to their function without "abuse."