Introduction

The history of the Revolution of France is a collection of prophecies.

—Rabaut Saint-Etienne, 1792

Two years before the French Revolution began, the Protestant pastor Jean-Paul Rabaut Saint-Etienne published a scholarly tome entitled *Lettres sur l'histoire primitive de la Grèce*. The purpose of this late Enlightenment text was primarily antiquarian: to uncover an ancient form of picture writing and use it to reveal an archaic mental world. But embedded in this study was also a theory of historical causation and change, a hypothesis that critical breakthroughs in the realm of communication inevitably produce corresponding "revolution[s] of the mind."[1] And this idea led Rabaut, like many eighteenth-century chroniclers of the vicissitudes of *l'esprit humain*, to tie his history of the distant past to that of the present and future. In a lengthy aside in his historical *Lettres*, Rabaut insisted that it was now only a matter of time before the form of modern languages, and, therefore, thinking were transformed again. What Rabaut prophesied in 1787, based on current advances in science and metaphysics, was nothing less than the emergence of a thoroughly philosophical system of notation "in which the signs, being themselves definitions, will produce exact and complete meanings . . . [and] he who says *sign* will say *truth*."[2]

Rabaut Saint-Etienne ceased studying and writing about antiquity once the Revolution of 1789 was underway. Much like Jean-Sylvain Bailly, the celebrated historian of ancient astronomy to whom Rabaut dedicated his musings on the primitive history of Greece, the scholarly pastor plunged instead into the present-day concerns of national politics. Rabaut found his calling as an important revolutionary polemicist and a deputy to the National Assembly and then Convention. Yet Rabaut never abandoned either his theory of historical change, with its characteristic semiotic determinism, or his utopian vision of a coming moment in which truth would be known with certainty and error would be a thing of the past. Rather, as the *Précis de l'histoire de la Révolution française* that he wrote in late 1791 makes clear, Rabaut simply assimi-

lated his earlier ideas about a future semiotic and epistemological transformation into the story of the Revolution that was unfolding all around him. In the same manner as a whole generation of Enlightenment-inspired revolutionary intellectuals, Rabaut imagined a rationalized, democratized, and distinctly revolutionary sign system as a fundamental instrument—as well as goal—of political change and moral regeneration.

But the Revolution of 1789 was not to turn out, either politically or intellectually, in the way that Rabaut Saint-Etienne had hoped. Indeed, already in his *Précis* of contemporary events, Rabaut could point to certain ominous developments that seemed to be causing the revolutionary trajectory to veer off its expected course. Borrowing again from sensationalist histories of the human mind, he explained many of these deviations and missteps in a way that was rapidly gaining appeal in the early 1790s. He attributed the errors of the Revolution to the inadequacies of the current language of politics, an idiom whose meanings and uses were increasingly exceeding the control of enlightened revolutionaries like himself. While the French people had initially rallied together around "two words, *equality* and *liberty*," these same abstract terms now appeared, much to Rabaut's dismay, to be turning into sources of misunderstanding and, consequently, disagreement, factionalism, and even violent confrontation.[3] Writing about the French colony of Saint-Domingue, for example, Rabaut reported that "the word *liberty*, so little known in those climates, introduced there confusion and dissension."[4] Similarly, he claimed that the terms of the civic oath required of the clergy beginning in 1791 had created "one of those great quarrels that are termed a *schism* and in which men separate from each other and then fight for the sake of abstractions that they do not understand."[5] It seemed to Rabaut that the current means for representing and conveying complex political concepts could, in other words, be held responsible for many of the evident disappointments and failures of the Revolution.

Our exemplary revolutionary historian, Rabaut Saint-Etienne, did not live to see which of his predictions—that of a triumphal philosophic idiom creating a world of perfect understanding or that of a flawed and equivocal political language undermining the promise of the revolutionary order—was to prove correct. The Girondin sympathizer faced the guillotine in December 1793. But after the conclusion of the Terror in the summer of 1794, many discussions of both the immediate past and the near future continued to revolve around questions of language and, especially, signs. From Rabaut's fellow republican Conventionnel Michel-Edme Petit, who tried to explain the causes of the Terror with only several months hindsight, to the learned and increasingly royalist journalist Charles de Lacretelle, who took it upon himself in the late 1790s to extend the scope of Rabaut's *Précis* up to the present, commen-

tators on recent history repeatedly looked to the nature, form, and effects of contemporary language practices to understand what had just transpired. Collectively, the Thermidorean intellectual elite insisted that the dictatorship of Robespierre had succeeded in good measure not simply because the Montagnards had spoken an exaggerated idiom that was (in Lacretelle's terms) "empty of sense." The Jacobin leadership had also, by "making orators into sovereigns," given this novel language an extraordinary power over "the property, liberty, [and] life of so many millions of men."[6] Or, as Petit concluded in front of the National Convention in September 1794 before laying out a new language-planning strategy of his own, the Jacobins had effectively "seduced" the public with words.[7]

In certain ways, this late eighteenth-century fixation on the role of language and signs within the dynamic of the French Revolution now seems odd and even rather alien, especially since it was frequently coupled with a vision of semiotic transformation as a solution to social and political ills. During the nineteenth century, such explanations for the Revolution's successes and failures were largely rendered obsolete by arguments stressing class conflict, political machinations, ideological warfare, and other factors that pepper the writings of historians from Michelet to Marx. Yet in other ways, the comments of Petit and Lacretelle, like those of Rabaut before them, can also strike the modern reader as surprisingly contemporary in nature. One hundred and eighty-four years and many thousands of histories of the Revolution later than Michel-Edme Petit's attempt at exegesis, the French historian François Furet's very similar claim about the failures of Jacobin language to reflect a clear material reality became one of the cornerstones of a new reading of the Revolution's course. In a highly influential book entitled *Interpreting the French Revolution*, Furet credited competition among political discourses, rather than social conflict, with creating the conditions of the Terror. The peculiarity of the Revolution, he stated succinctly, owed to the fact that, in the hands of the Jacobins, "language was substituted for power."[8]

Furet's conception of the French Revolution as primarily a linguistic event—a revolution in and by the signs of power—has, by now, had a profound impact on several decades of historiography on both sides of the Atlantic. In part, this has been a result of the confluence of this model with a more general (and largely separate) intellectual trend commonly referred to as the "linguistic turn." Over the last quarter-century, along with the demise of many of the traditional explanatory models of social history, historians in all fields have become increasingly willing to view language as a force that helps to shape and to constitute meaning or experience rather than simply to reflect it. And in the

case of the historiography of the French Revolution, such efforts to consider language as a historical dynamic in its own right have led both to an explosion of interest in the study of revolutionary modes of expression and to a spate of influential books on the ways in which particular terms, images, and symbols—from the word *révolution* to a real severed head on a pike—were deployed within late eighteenth-century political culture.[9]

Despite all this attention to discourse, surprisingly little energy has, however, ever been devoted to historicizing this semiotic approach to revolutionary culture. What remains little appreciated today is not simply that Furet's remarks on the linguistic dimension of the revolutionary struggle themselves constituted a deliberate intervention in the political debates of his own moment (in this case, Paris in the 1970s).[10] It is also that the precedent for this kind of commentary was established by men like Petit and Rabaut in the Paris of the 1790s. When eighteenth-century participants and observers of the Revolution chose to understand and to explain the events of 1789–94 in terms of the profound connections between semiotic change and sociopolitical development, they too did so for explicitly polemical and partisan reasons. In fact, discussions of the uses, power, and consequences of revolutionary language were a constituent element of both the ideology and the practice of revolutionary—and counterrevolutionary—politics from the start.

Perhaps then Furet's interpretive model can be used to open up a different line of historical inquiry. Specifically, Furet's attention to the dramatic effects of language on the revolutionary moment leads one to question why contemporary commentators so frequently understood and reacted to their situation as if it were above all a problem of representation and communication. How did Rabaut Saint-Etienne, Petit, Lacretelle, and so many others come to see themselves as engaged in a high-stakes linguistic power struggle? Why did they frequently respond to political problems with extensive and partisan language-planning strategies, from introducing laws prohibiting obsolete terms to constructing new dictionaries, instruction manuals, and even sign systems? And what did they hope to accomplish by treating the Revolution as a fight for authority over words? The first goal of this book is to describe the sources, development, and eventual decline of this distinctive semiotic conception of and approach to the revolutionary experience. For while we now have many studies of the creation of a revolutionary vocabulary prior to 1789 and the uses made of it after, we still know little about the emergence of revolutionary attitudes toward language or their subsequent fate. This study represents an effort to reconstruct the extended historical process by which language became a major site of political controversy and experimentation, and politics became a key locus

of linguistic controversy and experimentation, from the middle of the eighteenth century to the opening of the nineteenth.

Of course, the late Enlightenment was not the first moment in French history when language and politics became intertwined. As the first chapter will show in greater detail, French national identity had already been tenuously connected to the French language for several centuries (despite the fact that France has always been a multilingual country). The power to determine and to control this language had also long been sought by the absolutist state and contested by various other corporate bodies in France, including the parlements and the Catholic church. Indeed, many historians, beginning with Ferdinand Brunot, the author of a monumental and triumphalist early twentieth-century study of the fortunes of the French language, have placed the revolutionary era into a long-standing history of state concern with linguistic standardization and *dirigisme*.[11]

In this book, however, I argue that during the Enlightenment, a moment of exceptional attention to linguistic questions, there developed an acute and singular sense of the power of language to shape human destiny. In advancing a "natural" explanation for the origin of sign-making or semiosis, the *philosophes* effectively linked intellectual and social progress to linguistic advance; they identified improved communication as one of the keys to the realization of their utopian ambitions and failure in communication as one of the chief sources of society's ills. Moreover, this conception of signs—and the various semiotic experiments that it encouraged in the last decades of the Old Regime—shaped the worldview of educated French people in such a way that they were predisposed to see the revolutionary struggle as fundamentally a problem of language and to respond accordingly: by rendering language both a subject and a tool of their plans. Yet, that said, I do not consider revolutionaries' claims about language politics as evidence that words did, indeed, assume a "unique, magical quality" in the revolutionary period, as Lynn Hunt has notably argued.[12] Nor do I present participants as victims in a war of words that they could neither comprehend nor control. The present work is not, despite its subject, intended to prove a philosophical point about the role that language actually played in the late eighteenth century or any other historical moment. Instead, based on the premise that historians and their subjects must rarely think identically about how language functions and with what effects, this book constitutes an effort to understand the revolutionaries' own conceptions of the linguistic dimension of their own activities. By considering a range of late eighteenth-century Frenchmen's language about language, I trace the advent and development, from the 1740s to the end of the Consulate, of a very particular form of linguistic-political consciousness. This con-

sciousness was rooted in both fear of the effects of faulty communication and faith in semiotic reform as a means to transform perceptions of the world and thus intellectual and social relations within it. What I seek to explain is precisely why many key participants in the revolutionary struggle continually attempted to fashion high Enlightenment epistemological principles into deliberate, partisan, political strategies—while simultaneously denouncing the power of words and the dangers that they represented.

But what becomes evident in telling this story is not simply that late eighteenth-century men and women were unusually attentive to the relationship between language and political power, even in the midst of physical violence. I argue that the leading revolutionaries' particular way of thinking about the nature and functioning of words and other signs—or what we might call the metasemiotic of elite, late eighteenth-century culture—also had an enormous impact on these revolutionaries' efforts to imagine and then to institute a radically new vision of the French nation.[13] From recent scholarship, we know that certain key epistemological problems of the Enlightenment—for example, questions about the ownership of ideas or the nature of representation—became explicit political issues during the 1790s.[14] We are also aware that critical revolutionary actors, such as the Marquis de Condorcet, held specific conceptions of the nature of knowledge and truth that played decisive roles in shaping and determining their political as well as scientific philosophies.[15] And certainly historians of festivals, schools, and other revolutionary educational projects have noted the centrality of aspects of Enlightenment psychological and communicative theory in the formulation of these undertakings.[16] But I am interested in a broader problem: understanding the relationship between the evolution of this metasemiotic and the development during the late eighteenth century of a very distinctive conception of how an ideal polity might be realized. The second, and ultimate, aim of this book is to demonstrate the effects of late Enlightenment epistemology and linguistic theory on the emergence, form, and development of French revolutionary political culture.

This intention remains, despite the so-called linguistic turn, a relatively unusual one, especially in the Anglo-American context. As the political theorist Melvin Richter has pointed out, even those Anglophone scholars of politics most interested in languages and discourse (such as J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner) have generally paid little attention to "philosophical and political controversies in the past about language," leaving such issues to specialists in the history of linguistic thought.[17] Indeed, relying reflexively upon late twentieth-century (and thus potentially anachronistic) conceptions of the uses and function of words, scholars of political theory have rarely thought it worthwhile to

consider the impact of "the history of semantics, that is theories of meaning and signs self-consciously held or contested at the time of inquiry" on contemporaneous political thought.[18]

But in the non-Anglophone study of the French Revolution this situation has been changing since the mid-1980s. As Richter has also noted, German practitioners of the history of concepts, or *Begriffsgeschichte*, have tried in recent years not only to analyze the political discourse of the Revolution but also, to a limited degree, to show how, in the 1790s, "metatheories of language became indispensable to political controversy."[19] Similarly, and more extensively, the French scholar Jacques Guilhaumou, building on the work of the research group at the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Saint-Cloud devoted to political *lexicométric*—the quantitative analysis of political discourse—has also turned his attention to the theory and politics behind revolutionary language. The purpose of his bicentennial book entitled *La Langue politique et la Révolution française* is, Guilhaumou stated, "to demonstrate the decisive impact of reflection on political language on the revolutionary process" as a whole.[20] However, Guilhaumou sees this "revolutionary process" as coterminous with the creation, through Jacobin intermediaries, of a concrete, rational, and popular political discourse that ultimately gave the French people the chance to become sovereign citizens. In the end, the authors of the *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich, 1680–1820*, as well as the members of the Saint-Cloud group, have shown interest in the language politics of the Revolution primarily as it affected the formation and nature of political language(s), which are taken to be the Revolution's chief achievement.

I believe, however, that we can actually see the impact of late eighteenth-century linguistic speculation and experimentation in a broader realm: the socio-political imaginary or culture of the revolutionaries. The complex assumptions about signs held by certain significant revolutionary participants impacted not only the languages that they developed but also, I argue, the very ideals that they set out to realize and the way that they thought about their purpose and goals in this struggle. More specifically, I propose that understanding these values as they manifested themselves in both key texts and deliberate actions or events helps to elucidate the distinctive fixation in late eighteenth-century France on the achievement of ideological, moral, and social consensus within the context of popular sovereignty. In this regard, the present book may be said to engage not only with the body of historical writing stemming from the work of Furet but also with an argument most closely associated in recent years with the writing of the historian Keith Michael Baker.

In an important collection of essays entitled *Inventing the French*

Revolution (1990), Baker argued that revolutionary political culture was created out of the multiple political languages of the Old Regime, even as the revolutionaries proclaimed its end. More precisely, Baker proposed that the antiliberal tendencies in revolutionary thought—including the revolutionary notion that a single, sovereign nation, despite being made up of multiple citizens, must speak with a single authoritative voice—expressed the legacy of France's foremost political tradition, royal absolutism, transformed into an oppositional "discourse of will" in the middle years of the eighteenth century.[21] This argument remains extremely persuasive. Yet it also seems clear (as Baker himself has noted in other of his works) that the rhetoric of politics always stems from a wider variety of sources and is supported by a wider set of beliefs than simply the political theories or political languages of the past. In the present study, I explore the ways in which a central tenet of Enlightenment epistemology—specifically, the idea of language as both the prime source of factional conflict and the key to any potential solution—found expression in prerevolutionary social and cultural practices, as well as philosophical treatises. And I propose that this particular conception of language profoundly shaped and limited the very possibilities available to revolutionary participants as they tried to construct an effective and just means of governing a heterogeneous society profoundly divided along both ideological and economic lines.

On the one hand, the persistence of the Enlightenment assumption that disputes generally stem from faulty communication helps account for revolutionary intellectuals' general refusal to accept the idea that a healthy political system could be built on debate and contestation. On the other hand, an Enlightenment conviction about the restorative effects of a perfect language, crystal clear and impervious to misuse, encouraged many of the leaders of the French Revolution to believe that deliberate language-planning efforts, in keeping with the principles of "nature," would eventually make possible the creation of a thoroughly consensual and harmonious revolutionary state. It is the chief contention of this book that late Old Regime linguistic theory, as formulated by the *philosophes* and modified by practical reformers, contained the seeds of both revolutionary intolerance for pluralism of opinion and revolutionary faith that competition of interests was something that could be overcome, even in a republic. Finally, I argue that it was only with the rise of challenges to these enlightened sociolinguistic ideals and initiatives resulting from the disappointments of the revolutionary decade that the emergence of a contestatory quasi-democratic political culture became imaginable (in a positive sense) and thus possible in the nineteenth century.

This is, certainly, an inherently problematic argument for a historian

to make. For how can one uncover the history of epistemological assumptions when they are only rarely explicitly articulated as such? And how can their causal relationship to actions, events, or even other ideas be demonstrated? As a solution, this book focuses only partly on debates about political language. It takes as its central subject a very particular intellectual and cultural phenomenon of the second half of the eighteenth century: a widespread fascination with gestures and pantomime as means of communication and expression. On the surface, this may well appear a surprising or even perverse choice for a book that is ultimately centered on language, politics, and collective psychological theory. Yet thinking about gestures has often been a way of thinking about words. Furthermore, interest in gesture has, historically, been strongest at moments and places characterized either by great skepticism about the capacity of vernacular language (as in the fin-de-siècle Vienna of Karl Krauss) or great faith in the potential of an ideal sign system (as in the circles of the Royal Academy in seventeenth-century England).[22] In the case of the revolutionary era, both tendencies were clearly operative. Here we would do well to recall Rabaut Saint-Etienne's vision of an archaic picture writing with which this introduction began. In eighteenth-century France, the idea of a primordial language of visual signs became the basis—first literally, then metaphorically—for a range of projects and semiotic experiments aimed at transcending the problems and limitations associated with vernacular words. And it is in the traces of these iconic and often ideographic languages and the discussion around them that we are best able to find clear evidence of two larger cultural trends. The first is the dissatisfaction that many late eighteenth-century thinkers experienced with conventional, modern means of communication. The second is the utopian hope that these same individuals pinned on language reform as a way of instituting new sorts of intellectual and emotional exchange, sociability, and, ultimately, governance rooted in popular consensus.

Of course, my approach is not intended to reveal the mentality of "average" Frenchmen; the people who figure prominently in this book were, with certain notable exceptions, well educated, well connected, relatively well off, urban, and male. But for these same reasons, they were well situated to impose their visions of the society of the future. I start from the assumption that though my subjects' ideas were structured and even constrained by the range of ideas and ways of expressing them available at their moment, they maintained a significant degree of agency in deciding how and when to use these options. And because of their privileged status, including access to the written and often printed word (and in some cases, the backing of the state), their choices substantially impacted the subsequent decisions of others. Indeed, although I

am interested in outlining the shared assumptions and suppositions about language that were common to the revolutionary and even counterrevolutionary *mentalité*, I am also concerned with documenting the various claims and strategies used by different individuals or groups, with different motives, at distinct moments, and in response to changing pressures. In this book I seek, therefore, to tell a dual story: of how a small set of believers in the power of a natural gestural language tried to establish models for a new communicative order, and of how their efforts to impose this vision shaped the political world of late eighteenth-century France. In conclusion, I take up the question of whether this distinctive vision left any lasting mark. For in the end, this book is intended to be a twenty-first century variant on the eighteenth-century's *histoire de l'esprit humain*: a study of the connections between certain early modern epistemological developments and the rise of modern French political culture.

The first chapter, entitled "The Gestural Origins of Society and Semiosis: An Enlightenment Solution, 1745–1760," examines the appeal of the idea of an original *langage d'action*, or universal language of natural, bodily signs, in the context of a broad cultural anxiety about the intellectual and social consequences of the "abuse" of words. This chapter proposes that the notion of a primordial pantomimic idiom not only offered some of the key *philosophes*—Condillac, Diderot, and Rousseau, among others—a way to illustrate the symbiotic development of language, knowledge, and society from their common genesis; it also established an ideal and set of natural guidelines for the construction of a communicative utopia. The next two chapters, "Pantomime as Theater, 1760–1789" and "Pantomime as Pedagogy, 1760–1789," explore two self-contained realms within late absolutist France in which the supposedly primitive language of gesture was recovered and put to new, experimental uses in an effort to transform the way that ideas and sentiments were represented and transmitted in the modern world. The first concerns the *ballet d'action* and the debates occasioned by the revival of a pure pantomimic language on the French stage. The second takes up the new analytical or "methodical" sign language of the deaf as it developed in the classroom and was bolstered by members of various learned *sociétés* eager to use its example for their own purposes.

The fourth and fifth chapters then deal directly with the decade of the Revolution, exploring the impact of these varied ideas and practices on key groups and actors from Rivarol to Robespierre. For in the 1790s these earlier projects became models for a series of prescriptive and partisan language-planning initiatives designed to render politics a science based on self-evident and, hence, consensual truths and to restore social harmony by eliminating the possibility of the *abus des mots*. Chapter

Four, "Revolutionary Regeneration and the Politics of Signs, 1789–1794," looks at the ways in which the sign language paradigm, in particular, was employed in the service of the Revolution and at the consequences thereof. The fifth chapter, "Ending the Logomachy, 1795–1799," focuses on a new set of linguistic inventions—this time ideographic systems of notation, from telegraphs to pasigraphies, modeled on *la langue des signes*—which were encouraged after Thermidor with the hope that they would halt the Revolution and reverse the disastrous course of the Terror. However, as will be made clear by this chapter in conjunction with the concluding one, "The Savage, the Citizen, and the Language of the Law after 1800," by the last years of the 1790s, many French intellectuals were no longer convinced of either the efficacy or the desirability of state-sponsored linguistic remedies for political dissension. The dream of a perfect social scientific language as a political panacea finally came crashing down in ruins as Napoleon rose to power at the century's close. The final objective of this book is to demonstrate the connection, in the first years of the nineteenth century, between the eventual, grudging acceptance of the instability of the abstract linguistic terms that are central to modern conceptions of the state and society, and the emergence of a new, hierarchical political vision in which citizens are valued in direct relation to their ability to use this political idiom without "abuse."