Introduction

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I. Theses and Themes

That the French Revolution was the immediate result of the insolvency of the Bourbon state at the end of the 1780s is one of the few certainties shared by all historians of this great event. Less clear is why the Old Regime monarchy, which had encountered and surmounted many other fiscal crises by "normal" political means over its long history, not only failed to resolve this one, but also allowed it to escalate into a full-blown revolution by 1789. Was it something in the nature of the fiscal crisis itself that made it so explosive? Or had the Old Regime as a whole changed so radically by this time that it could no longer cope with the kinds of problems it had mastered more or less routinely in the past? Or was it some combination of both?

In lieu of the once dominant socio-economic explanation for the coming of the French Revolution, the various branches of post-Marxist "revisionist" historiography have sought answers in the various political dysfunctions that eventually crippled the Old Regime. Beginning with a concept of the "political" as the self-interested quest for power and position within the Old Regime's institutional apparatus, one such branch has attributed the fiscal crisis largely to the increasing incoherence of the royal decision-making process and the monarchy's loss of control over

Versailles's rival factions.[1] As is appropriate in accounts emphasizing the politics of faction, ideology typically counts for very little, while contingency plays a very large role. A second variant of the "revisionist" political explanation—one best represented by François Furet—follows Alexis de Tocqueville in demonstrating how the absolute monarchy so preempted all traditional political activity generated by the Old Regime's society of orders that it collapsed of its own dead weight.[2] Emphasizing inevitability, and tying, as did Tocqueville, the nature of the new politics closely to ideology, this version postpones the role of political conflict until after revolutionary ideology took form in the vacuum created by the inevitable collapse of the Old Regime. Still other variants of revisionism somehow contrive to combine these theses. In the most authoritative account of the origins of the French Revolution of the past two generations, for example, William Doyle regards the fall of the Old Regime as "inevitable" due to its "internal contradictions." Yet the thesis of structural inevitability coexists uneasily with the contention that until the spring of 1789 the "forces pushing toward the Revolution were almost entirely political"—forces, that is, that would seem to have to do with the contingencies of human agency and volition.[3]

Although similarly prioritizing the political, the thesis implicitly governing the selection of essays in this volume is that the French Revolution had origins other than purely political, including fiscal, economic, and social origins, but that these origins entered into the making of the French Revolution by becoming objects of political conflict within a system the rules of which were rapidly changing. However many or intractable its internal or structural contradictions—and there were certainly very many of them—the Revolution arose from the Old Regime through a process of politicization that mobilized not only the opponents of "absolute," monarchy but would-be defenders as well. That an important part of the conflict involved making pejoratives of adjectives as essential to the Old Regime as "absolute" and "aristocratic" suggests that any satisfactory account of the Revolution's political origins must give due weight to the semantically conditioned goals and purposes of political action. While not reducing the objects of political conflict to the discursive, the "political," as understood in this volume, is sympathetic to Keith Baker's capacious definition as the changing field of meanings within which "individuals

and groups create, maintain, and change their positions within it . . . [by making claims] for themselves and on others."[4]

To be sure, political interests and institutional constraints exerted their own lines of force on the revolutionary crisis. They unquestionably helped to determine, according to their own inner logic, the circumstances confronted by key actors in this drama. Likewise, no one "intended" 1789 as it in fact occurred. At the same time, it seems implausible that the bold, collective decision to abandon the Old Regime and its precedents in the name of national "regeneration"—to embark on a revolutionary project—was dictated by the fiscal crisis and other immediate "circumstances" alone. For two generations prior to 1789, the public had been witness to and had more or less actively participated in a vigorous debate on the Old Regime and its possible alterations. Decoding what players in the Revolution thought they were doing—what meanings they assigned to circumstances and the actions they took when they felt the political ground shifting beneath them—is critical to understanding not only their decisions but also the collective outcome of those decisions, the resulting intersection of political visions and strategies, and the institutional *bricolage* practiced by the revolutionary parties in the wake of the Old Regime's collapse. To invert Marx's famous dictum in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, even if they do not make it as they please, men do make their own history.[5] In short, *both* the institutional "context" of the late Old Regime crisis and the "texts" used to make sense of it need to be kept firmly in view.

What is perhaps most striking about their interaction on this occasion was the unprecedented and rapid way in which the debate on fiscal issues transformed the very procedures traditionally used to resolve them into objects of intense controversy. It was the "absolute" monarchy itself that initiated this process. In light of later, more dramatic developments, it is easy to overlook the boldness of and risks inherent in the crown's decision to submit its far-reaching plan of fiscal reform in February 1787 to an Assembly of Notables, which had not met for almost as long as the Estates-General. That this Assembly not only failed to approve the heart of the plan, but also assaulted the monarchy with allegations of "despotism" while eliciting calls for the convocation of the Estates-General indicates the extent to which the monarchy began to lose the political initiative

almost from the start. When, having failed to bring the *parlements* to heel in November, 1787 notwithstanding the king's effort to register loans in a ceremony called a *lit de justice*, the monarchy boldly dissolved and replaced them in May 1788, the intent may have been to achieve the kind of chastening of challengers that had followed a similar effort during Chancellor René-Nicolas-Augustin de Maupeou's anti-parlementary coup of 1771–74. But far from jerking political contestation back onto the rails of accustomed procedures and rituals, the effect was to unleash a public protest so wide and deep that only a few months later, in the face of imminent bankruptcy, the monarchy bowed to the judgment of the "nation" by taking further desperate measures, the convocation of the long defunct Estates-General in May 1789 and the recall of the popular finance minister, Jacques Necker. By so yielding, the monarchy did win itself some political cover and a temporary respite. Yet it botched its last opportunity to reclaim the initiative by failing to fashion a strategy that could turn its financial and political fortunes around, and from June 1789 forward, it fell further and further behind where public opinion was leading, namely to revolution.[6]

There can be little doubt that, without the fiscal crisis and the bold, if often self-defeating measures taken by the monarchy to solve it, this "derailing" of Old Regime politics would not have occurred in the way and time that it did. But once the crisis deepened and widened, it provided fuel for a new, more activist form of politics "invented" by the monarchy's challengers. To be sure, under the Old Regime the French had hardly been inert bystanders to the deliberations and actions of their supposedly "absolute" government. Even during relatively relaxed periods, they had submitted petitions, initiated lawsuits, humbly remonstrated, and worked the ties of kinship and patronage. In moments of high tension, they had circulated subversive pamphlets, chanted insulting songs, hoisted defamatory placards, and staged destructive riots. Nevertheless, the run-up to 1789 witnessed a kind and degree of politicization the nation had never seen before. As the relatively sedate debates of the Assembly of Notables gave way to the more contentious interactions of the crown with the Parlement of Paris, as the stormy protests of the summer of 1788 gave way to the intense electioneering for the Estates-General of 1789, the French participated in and voted in elections, convened meetings, mounted tribunes, debated legislation, harangued deputies, published newspapers, took up

arms, and staged *journées*. By thus multiplying the venues of political participation, Lynn Hunt has acutely observed, "the Revolution enormously increased the points from which power could be exercised and multiplied the tactics and strategies for wielding that power."[7] In the course of this transformation, the kinds of "claims" made by political actors on one another began to change as well. Once sovereignty was relocated in the nation, older forms of legitimation—appeals to custom and divine right as arbitrated by the king—were superseded by others in which legitimacy derived from the national will articulated by elected deputies in a newly convened National Assembly.

This more or less familiar political narrative—embracing not only the breakdown of the monarchy, but also the transformation of politics before the Revolution itself—clearly lies at the heart of "what happened" to the Old Regime. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any account of the origins of the French Revolution that omits it. But does this political narrative satisfactorily answer the question posed at the outset—namely, why did an apparently traditional fiscal crisis engender the massive transformation of an entire social order? Were "the forces pushing toward Revolution" until the spring of 1789 "almost entirely political" in nature?

Most recently, historians have been inclined not to think so.[8] Missing from the standard narrative are dimensions of the revolutionary crisis—both "origins" in themselves and their concomitant "circumstances"—that may not fall within customary definitions of the "political," but over the course of the crisis came to be politicized, thereby inflecting its "context" and/or its "text."[9] For example, the notion that the French Revolution had important social origins went out of fashion a generation ago with the blistering attack of "revisionist" historians on the Marxist model. But more recent scholarship has persuasively demonstrated that the Second and Third Estates' sharply conflicting social experiences, perceptions, and aspirations underlay the bitter debates over voting procedures at the Estates-General, thereby sinking prospects for a "union of orders" in the face of monarchical "despotism." Economic factors adversely affecting the most populous classes of the nation may not have generated the revolutionary crisis on their own. But surely they came to weigh heavily in the calculations of established authorities once hungry crowds in search of bread began to surge through the capital and

countryside early in 1789, thereby posing increasingly ominous threats to public order. Even economic developments originating in factors exogenous to the fiscal crisis—the unemployment of textile workers caused by France's commercial treaty with England, for example, or the famine resulting from the catastrophic harvest of 1788—bore directly on the fiscal crisis since they cut into the precious flow of tax revenues. Another factor resulting from and bearing on the crisis of the Old Regime that has been rarely or only cursorily mentioned in most "political" narratives was the decline in French security. Lacking the resources to lend effective support to its allies in their hour of need, France stood helplessly by in 1787 as the Netherlands and Turkey faced invasion by their avaricious neighbors, thereby ratcheting up—during a time of acute internal crisis—fears of a "general war" into which an effectively isolated and nearly bankrupt France might be sucked. Intellectual origins also played an essential role in transforming a fiscal crisis into a revolution. Long before the convocation of the Estates-General—indeed, from 1787 onward—the growing crisis provoked reflection about the "constitution" of the realm or "nation" in the form of a flood of pamphlets culminating in the transformation of the Estates-General into a "National Assembly" and that assembly's writing of a declaration of rights and a constitution. And if, finally, religious controversy remained at most a minor motif in the pre-revolutionary crisis, the pamphleteering and constitution writing drew on concepts—the "nation" and its "sovereignty" for starters—that had gained purchase in the course of religious controversies dominating the political stage during the century's beginning and middle decades.

The same holds a fortiori for the less obvious "origins" explored in this volume. The Old Regime's male gendered or patriarchic conception of the family would never have become an issue, and in some sense an origin of the Revolution, had it not become analogically entangled in a mutually reinforcing relation with the notions of the king as a "father" and his subjects as his "children." The Revolution was unable to redefine kingship without eventually redefining the family. And if the Revolution did not exactly originate in the French Caribbean colonies, the affairs of these colonies became an originating factor as well. Not only did the wealth generated by the colonial trade contribute to the unequal expansion of the metropolitan market and rising social antagonisms; in addi-

tion, the slave-owning colonial planters demanded representation in the Estates-General and then the National Assembly, thereby inflecting and complicating the process of distilling a unitary general will from a cacophony of political voices.

The Revolution, therefore, has many origins. But none of these or other origins would have become origins of *the* French Revolution had they not intersected with "the political"—had they not, that is, become central sites of contestation within the new participatory politics, which over time called into question more and more aspects of the Old Regime. "The crisis itself, as a process," Peter Campbell has aptly observed, generated "demands that were new and . . . increasingly incompatible with the continued existence of the Old Regime."[10] It was, in other words, the vital, dialectical interaction between the broadening of a "normal" fiscal crisis and the unprecedented widening of the political process that engendered the transformation of the Old Regime into the French Revolution.

It is this perspective that has guided the organization of essays in this volume. Each author, while focusing on only one "origin" of the French Revolution, provides insight into the entire revolutionary conflagration by tracing the ways in which the particular origin in question added combustible material to it. Although all these origins were on display in the period 1787–89, some date from as far back as the sixteenth-century wars of religion. In contrast, therefore, to the Tocquevillian distinction between long-term and mid-term causes and short-term precipitants adopted by Peter Campbell in his recent and similarly titled book on the origins of the French Revolution,[11] the classification of "origins" adopted by this volume corresponds to the various aspects or dimensions of experience—social, fiscal, religious, diplomatic, intellectual—as they acted simultaneously, sometimes over long periods of time. As the essays demonstrate, while all these origins helped change the nature and subject matter of political contestation, they surely did not remain within these reified categories, but on the contrary, interacted with each other along the road to 1789. If, therefore, this book's principal thesis is that the Revolution arose out of the politicization of multiple origins, one of its major subthemes is the reciprocal permeability of these origins.

In contrast to the distinction between the causes of the collapse of the Old Regime and those that shaped the French Revolution governing

the organization of Peter Campbell's volume, at least some of the "origins" figuring in these essays will range across the revolutionary divide of 1789. The point is to show not only that the revolutionary rupture was not "uncaused," but also that some of the causes figuring in the collapse of the Old Regime operated differently in the altered conditions brought about by the revolutionary rupture itself. Thus, for example, if the monarchy's insolvency made the Revolution possible, the same ongoing state fiscal crisis prompted the National Assembly to help itself to the French Catholic Church's property and then to reform the penniless church, thereby causing a religious schism that turned opposition to the Revolution into a holy cause. Or if, to take another example, off-stage factional court rivalries figure among the political causes of the demise of the Old Regime, recognizably related factional rivalries continued to operate with literally deadlier effect in the more open and openly ideological political stage ushered in by the revolutionary rupture of 1789. Causal continuity as well as revolutionary rupture therefore joins the diversity and reciprocal permeability of the Revolution's causes as a second subtheme of this volume.

II. Marxism, Revisionism, and Post-Revisionism

If this volume argues on behalf of multiple, overlapping origins of the French Revolution, it does so in opposition to the single socio-economic origin once attributed to it in Marxist interpretation, as well as to a broad, loose "revisionism" that gradually replaced the once dominant Marxist school over the past forty years.

The Marxist theory envisioned the French Revolution as a seizure of political power by a capitalist bourgeoisie from a moribund landed nobility headed by a king.[12] As the bourgeoisie's newfound political clout derived from its possession of industrial and mercantile capital, which had replaced land as the chief source of wealth since the Middle Ages, this origin was economic as well as social. The French Revolution could thus be represented as the culmination of a conflict between two classes: the hitherto dominant nobility whose economic power had derived from the exploitation of peasant labor in a primarily subsistence agricultural economy, and the up-and-coming bourgeoisie already in the process of transforming agriculture itself into a capitalistic and market-oriented en-

terprise. In this interpretation, classes were defined as groups with clear and distinguishable relations to the dominant mode of production. Although both the peasantry and urban wage earners in this scenario participated in the Revolution, they did so not as classes in their own right but as differently exploited social groups led by the bourgeoisie in a campaign to destroy the vestiges of a decadent "feudalism." When threatened by a counter-revolutionary coalition of powers abroad and subversion by remnants of the noble-ecclesiastic elite at home, the bourgeoisie persuaded the peasantry and urban wage earners to participate in the defense of "its" revolution via the raising of a massive conscript army and the prosecution of the Terror. The "cunning" of history mandated that the new bourgeois capitalist order could only come into its own through the vast spilling of blood.

One inelegant complication in this otherwise parsimonious class-based theory of the French Revolution was the undeniable, even conspicuous role played by segments of the nobility in opposing royal "despotism" during the period 1787–89. How was it possible that a nobility supposedly wedded to the Old Regime by its class interests was the first to shake its foundations? The thesis of an "aristocratic revolution" disposed of this anomaly. It held that, in the wake of Louis XIV's alleged assault on their prerogatives, the French nobility had sought to recoup its lost powers and privileges over the eighteenth century by reviving long forgotten "feudal" obligations at the expense of the peasantry, by obtaining a stranglehold on all ennobling offices at the expense of the bourgeoisie, and by reasserting political power by means of the parlements at the expense of the monarchy. Propounded by Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul, the thesis of "aristocratic reaction" also found many American adherents and contributors, among them Robert Palmer, Franklin Ford, and Elinor Barber.[13] While sharing the view of the French Revolution as a chiefly bourgeois affair, they did not perceive in the events of 1789 the prelude to a final, proletarian revolution, as did the more doctrinaire Marxist historians of the French Left.

The achievements of the Marxist school were many and manifold. Focusing unprecedented attention on economic phenomena and the unsung masses, historians inspired by the Marxist model opened up hitherto untapped archival sources and produced prodigious gains in knowledge

about the late Old Regime and the French Revolution.[14] Its clear, parsimonious narrative, its explanation not only of the Revolution's origins but also the Revolution's successive stages, and its compelling account of the Revolution's place within a world-historical perspective—all these strengths made the Marxist version of the social interpretation irresistibly persuasive to a broad range of scholars during the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, including most historians on the liberal Left. In France, the defiant dissent on the part of a few backbenchers among the neo-royalist Right did not prevent this "classical" interpretation of the origins and historical significance of the French Revolution from attaining a consensus unrivaled in breadth before or since.[15]

The story of the demolition of the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution has become almost as familiar to historians as the events of the Revolution themselves. Commencing with the publication of Alfred Cobban's *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* in 1964 and culminating with the first volume of the international bicentennial colloquia in 1989, Marxist orthodoxy got dismantled bit by bit, leaving very little of it entirely intact.[16] No longer the bourgeoisie's comrades in arms rising against a nonexistent "feudalism" in 1789, peasants in the new revisionist script directed their pitchforks against a nascent agricultural capitalism that had been spreading within the remnants of the supposedly "feudal" seigniory. The most revolutionary portion of the bourgeoisie—those who showed up, that is, as delegates of the Third Estate in 1789—turned out to be not very capitalistic at all. Far from constituting the avant-garde of the commercial and industrial revolutions, most Third Estate delegates were barristers whose wealth took the form of annuities, venal offices, and land—that is, much the same "conservative" form as that of most nobles. Such entrepreneurial capitalism as there was in late-eighteenth-century France seemed to involve the nobility as much as it did the bourgeoisie, and the same was true of state finance. Revisionist research on the fiscal system revealed that exemptions from taxation—a privilege deemed a prerogative of nobility—were common among the Third Estate's elite, while it turned out that nobles paid royal taxes too, in some cases the ignoble tax on wealth and/or persons, the *taille*.[17] A fresh look at the Enlightenment, supposedly the ideological reflex of a rising capitalist class, revealed that its producers and consumers were chiefly nobles, clergy, and "traditional"

bourgeois.[18] The same was true of the initial "patriotic" coalition that led the Revolution into 1789.[19]

The most damaging blows to the Marxist model came from the quarter of what Robert Darnton has uncharitably called "Anglo-Saxon empiricism." Beginning with Cobban, scholars of this persuasion demonstrated the inadequacy of industrial capitalism as a force capable of carrying all before it in France in 1789. There was, they argued, at best an imperfect "fit" between the Marxist concept of "class" as that group occupying a definable relation to the regnant means of production and those social groups assigned to play the roles of adversarial or auxiliary "classes" in the Marxist script of the Revolution. These included not only the "capitalistic" bourgeoisie and the "feudal" nobility, but also such groups as the proto-proletarian sans-culottes, which even under the microscope of the Albert Soboul's research had appeared to be a socially heterogeneous group of artisans, shopkeepers, and members of the "bourgeois" professions.[20] Singularly decisive was George V. Taylor's demonstration that the "revolutionary bourgeoisie" preferred to invest its wealth not in risky industrial or commercial enterprises, but in such typically "aristocratic" commodities as annuities, and in venal offices and seigniorial estates with a view toward a noble style of life and the long-term survival of the family.[21] Indeed, the more that "revisionist" historians examined the social structure of the late Old Regime, the more it seemed as if the nobility and "bourgeoisie," far from preparing for a bloody class struggle motivated by irreconcilable interests and ideological perspectives, had been moving toward a cultural and political fusion that foreshadowed the coming of the cohort of "notables" in the nineteenth century.

Other, mostly Anglo-American, historians went iconoclastically to work on the thesis that an "aristocratic reaction" had preceded the French Revolution. Nothing could be concluded from the revival of long unused or forgotten seigniorial obligations of peasants to lords—argued William Doyle, one of the most prominent "revisionists"—because the revival of the records of these dues, or *terriers*, was a cyclical phenomenon, and a new cycle had fallen due before 1789.[22] If a few exceptionally blue-blooded royal courts or parlements such as Aix or Rennes required four successive generations of nobility for admission in the 1760s, and if the minister of war, Henri-Philippe, marquis de Ségur, imposed a four-generational rule