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INTRODUCTION

J'espère que lorsque les passions seront calmées, lorsque les événements et les hommes paraîtront dans tout leur jour et tels qu'ils furent, on ne trouvera pas si méprisable un gouvernement qui fut chargé de l'administration de la France dans un moment où partout régnait le plus affreux désordre et le plus complet dénûment; un gouvernement, qui, à la tête d'une nation sans argent, sans pain, sans revenus, sans police, avait dans son sein deux hommes conspirant chacun de leur côté...un gouvernement qui était environné de pièges, assailli sans relâche par le royalisme et l'anarchie, jaloué par les membres des deux conseils législatifs, qui ne lui accordèrent jamais franchement et loyalement les moyens de faire prospérer le pays; un gouvernement qui, malgré tant d'obstacles, était parvenu à réorganiser l'administration intérieure et à soutenir l'honneur de la république vis-à-vis des puissances étrangères...

– Ce gouvernement, j'ose le croire, s'il ne paraît pas exempt de censures méritées (et qui en est exempt dans ce monde?) obtiendra néanmoins quelque justice de l'impertiale postérité.

–Memoirs of La Revellière, Paris, 1895, vol. 1, pp. 308–9

Only recently has La Revellière's modest plea for a balanced consideration of the Directory been answered. There has been no systematic survey of the Directory since the four-volume work of Sciout, published in the 1890s. Although richly documented, Sciout's book is consistently hostile to the régime. Students have for years referred to Lefebvre's short works on the thermidoreans and the Directory, published as long ago as 1937 and 1946 respectively, and only belatedly translated into English. These works, based on Lefebvre's lectures at the Sorbonne, are essentially chronological in structure, and are influenced by the socialist tradition of revolutionary historiography, inherited from Jaurès and Mathiez. In recent years, several publications have rescued the period from 1795 to 1799 from the comparative oblivion to which it had been consigned by post-war revolutionary historians. Soboul's short book in the 'Que sais-je?' series (1967),¹ for example, had the merit of emphasising the links

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between the Directory and the Consulate. The excellent book produced by Denis Woronoff in 1972 synthesises the findings of recent research in this period.¹

Critics on the left and the right have joined in relegating the period of thermidor and the Directory to its unenviable status in French history. For the left, the Directory represented a betrayal of the ideal of social equality expressed by the revolutionaries of the Year 2. For the propagandists of Bonapartism, the Directory was a régime paralysed by factional in-fighting, and inherently unstable, a parliamentary system riddled with corruption, in the same way that the Fourth Republic was described by the Gaullists. The drama of the Terror on the one hand, and of the Grand Empire on the other, the great personalities of Robespierre and Napoleon, threw the intervening period into the dark shadows of neglect. The Directory became the 'poor relation of revolutionary historiography', to borrow the phrase of Furet and Richet, an embarrassing hiatus, which happens to separate the fall of Robespierre from the foundation of the Consulate. A whole multitude of books, chapters of books, and articles entitled or subtitled 'From Thermidor to Brumaire' illustrate the enduring nature of this approach.

The balance, however, is being restored. In a well-known article of 1937,² Professor Goodwin attacked the myth that the period of the Directory was one of venality and corruption, and asserted that the government's '*politique de bascule*' was a source not of weakness, but of strength. Yet it has taken over two decades for the work of reinterpretation to bear fruit. Many historians would now accept many of Goodwin's arguments, and pay tribute to the importance of, for instance, the Directory's administrative reforms. This book aims at continuing this process of demystification, or of revisionism, as some may have it, and at making the results of recent research available to the English student of French history.

Traditions live on. For committed Jacobin critics of the Directory, the topic which best deserves attention is still perhaps the conspiracy of Babeuf, whose study has now been elevated into a vast academic industry. Nevertheless, the study of the period has been rejuvenated by the research of Cobb and Rudé into the popular movement, and by the work of the American historians

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² Bibliography no. 19.

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Woloch and Mitchell in the study of Jacobinism and the Counter-Revolution. New insights have been provided by Church into the Directorial bureaucracy, and by Suratteau in his scrutiny of the elections of the period. In a period when the powers of the central government were weakened, local studies have also made an important contribution to our understanding of the provinces.

There is no doubt, however, that we still need a full demographic study of the crisis of the Year 3, and full biographies of important Directorial figures like Reubell (although Suratteau has recently stressed the hazards of such an enterprise). Furthermore, local studies of the Midi during the Directory are still lacking. In drawing wherever possible on my own investigations into the history of Toulouse, I hope I shall be forgiven for any geographical imbalance which this might entail.

This book, however, is primarily intended to bring together the diffuse secondary material on the subject for the English reader. It has tried to escape from the strictly narrative form employed by Lefebvre, and it has perhaps given more weight to the intellectual and cultural aspects of the period than Woronoff was able to do. Above all, it is intended to encourage the study of the thermidorean and Directorial régimes in their own right, to emphasise their successes as well as their failures, while placing them firmly inside, rather than outside, the history of the French Revolution as a whole.

The Directorial régime gave France her first experience of representative institutions. This book tries to explain how and why this experiment failed, and why a series of *coups d'état* were necessary to prevent the régime's collapse. The Directory attempted to provide a stable and liberal form of government, which would preserve the moderate social gains of the Revolution, but would avoid a repetition of the repressive violence and tyrannical dictatorship associated with the Terror. Yet the legacy of the past weighed heavily on the régime. Its refusal to compromise with either ex-Terrorists or supporters of the monarchy, and the government's lack of respect for the will of the electorate, stifled the growth of a moderate, centre party on which the Directory could rely.

The Directory's problems, however, were not all political ones. Both the Girondins and the Montagnards had considered the task of social reconstruction, but their schemes had been tem-

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porarily set aside, until the nation had been unified to expel the invading armies of Ancien Régime Europe. After the Terror, however, the thermidoreans and the Directory resumed this gigantic task, attempting to renew the liberal ideals of 1790 and 1791, although the rebuilding of the social institutions of France was still vitiated by the financial and military burdens of a continental war. While, for example, the Directory conspicuously failed to heal the religious schism, it introduced important and long-lasting administrative reforms.

The treatment of these problems falls roughly into three sections. The first, narrative section of three chapters is mainly concerned with the political history of the period between 9 thermidor and the *coup* of fructidor Year 5, and discusses the opposition to the Directory on the Left and on the Right. The central, more thematic section begins with a discussion of the victims and beneficiaries of Directorial society, within the framework of the crude contemporary division of society into 'Les Gros' and 'Les Maigres'. The following chapters (6 to 10) examine the Directory's approach to its main social and cultural problems, and discuss the nature of education, religion, science, art, and the army in a Republican society. Chapter 11 deals with the Directory's administrative reforms, and this is followed by chapters on the economy and the war. The political narrative is resumed in the final section of the book, and finally the fall of the Directory in brumaire is analysed.

The revolutionaries of 1789 might have been astounded to learn that within three years France would be a Republic. As far as they were concerned, their task was to provide France with a Constitution, which would give the country political liberty under the monarchy. In modern terms, their view of political liberty was not a generous one. Only men of wealth and property, they considered, had the leisure and sense of responsibility which entitled them to participate in the electoral system. They looked forward to a society in which all men would be equal before the law, and in which justice would be clear, rational, and impartial. Since many of them were lawyers, the provision of a just legal system and a humane penal code were vital preoccupations. They would liberate economic life from the restrictive practices of the guilds, and from the many internal customs barriers, which hindered the growth of trade. They believed in a rational system of govern-

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ment, and in the rights of the individual. While not all men could enjoy equal rights, all could enjoy equal opportunity to pursue the career of their choice. They attempted to create a society whose greatest honours were no longer a privilege of birth or of family connections, but in which individual merit would find its true reward.

Such were the liberal, rational, and individualistic aims of the Constituent Assembly. By 1791, they seemed to have been essentially achieved. In the summer of that year, Barnave declared, 'This revolutionary movement has destroyed all that it set out to destroy, and has brought us to the point where it is necessary to halt...one step further towards liberty must destroy the monarchy, one more towards equality must abolish private property.'

Why did Barnave and the Feuillants fail to stem the revolutionary tide? They failed, firstly, because the monarchy itself did not genuinely accept the limitation of its own powers, and worked to persuade the foreign powers to enforce a full restoration of its authority. They failed because the establishment of a Constitutional Church had already caused a deep rift in French society. The inflation of the *assignats*, the revolutionary paper currency, was to introduce a further element of weakness. The peasant agitation, for the abolition of the seigneurial system without compensation, continued after the Assembly had accepted a very limited reduction in feudal obligations in August 1789. The peasants' demands were not fully satisfied until July 1793. The urban lower classes, who had made an essential contribution to the overthrow of the Ancien Régime, would not passively allow the propertied and professional classes to appropriate the spoils of the Revolution. Barnave failed, too, because the European war catapulted the Revolution into extremism.

The Brissotins had adopted a war policy in order to tear away the veil which disguised the monarchy's real intentions, and to bring themselves to power. The very disparate group of deputies known as the Girondins, however, were ultimately not prepared to take the vigorous measures necessary to win the war. Their rivals, the Montagnards, persuaded the majority of the National Convention that they alone were capable of defeating invading armies, civil war, and the Royalist rebellion in the Vendée. On 31 May 1793, the Montagnards came to power.

The government of the Terror, which they established, was constructed in a spontaneous and piecemeal fashion to meet the

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particular and immediate threats of invasion and internal subversion. The dictatorial government, centred in the leading Committees of Public Safety and General Security, entered into a tactical alliance with the popular movement. It conceded to the *sans-culottes* the regulation of prices and legislation for the arrest and execution of suspects (September 1793). The demands of the militant sections of Paris were appeased by the admission into the Committee of Public Safety of Collot d'Herbois and Billaud-Varenne. The Revolutionary Government mobilised the entire economic resources of the nation to support the war effort. Carnot, Prieur, and Robert Lindet, in the Committee of Public Safety, worked ceaselessly to supply the army and administer the war machine. In the provinces, the central government delegated the struggle against Counter-Revolution to local revolutionary committees, Jacobin clubs, *armées révolutionnaires*, and its own *Représentants en mission*, whose multifarious activities it found difficult to control.

Gradually, however, the anarchy of the early period of the Terror gave way to a more centralised and bureaucratised system of government. The law of 14 frimaire II attempted to lay down a blueprint for a streamlined administration, which would curtail the local initiatives of *sans-culotte* institutions like the revolutionary committees. The great show-trials of the Dantonists and the Hébertistes, stage-managed by the public prosecutor Fouquier-Tinville, eliminated some of the corrupt parasites who surrounded the Revolutionary Government, and liquidated deviationists to the Right and the Left. Danton was a potential focus for opposition to the Terror, while the proscription of the Hébertistes was the first occasion when the Revolutionary Government crushed militants on its Left. The law of 22 prairial II established a draconian judicial procedure, empowering the Parisian Revolutionary Tribunal to give one of only two sentences: acquittal or death. The moderates in the Convention reluctantly renewed the powers of its executive committees, in the interests of the war effort, and out of fear of purges of its own members. Robespierre, in the Committee of Public Safety, demanded absolute unanimity, loyalty to the new cult of the Supreme Being, and observance of the Republican calendar. Yet the increasing tendency towards dictatorial centralisation in the Year 2 stifled revolutionary inspiration at the grass-roots. 'La Révolution', St-Just could claim, 'est glacée.'

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The late summer of the Year 2 saw the increasing isolation of the men closest to Robespierre: St-Just and Couthon in the Committee of Public Safety, Lebas and David in the Committee of General Security, Hanriot in charge of the Parisian National Guard, and the personnel of the Paris Commune and of the Revolutionary Tribunal. While the country as a whole grew weary of a régime which seemed to have achieved its main military objectives, and thus outlived its usefulness, a group of deputies worked to bring down Robespierre, in the parliamentary coup of 9 thermidor II. On this day, the Republic entered a new phase in its history. The Terrorist dictatorship was at an end; the Convention once more raised its head.

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I

‘NONANTE-CINQ’

By 3 a.m. on 10 thermidor II, the Place de Grève was littered with the human debris of the Revolutionary Government. In the Hôtel de Ville, Philippe Lebas had shot himself in the head; Robespierre's younger brother, Augustin, who had thrown himself from a top-storey window on the arrival of the forces of the Convention, had broken his thigh, and was not executed till sunset; Couthon, a cripple, had either fallen or thrown himself from his wheelchair down the stone staircase of the Hôtel de Ville, where he lay with a gaping wound in the forehead; the giant Coffinhal of the Revolutionary Tribunal, enraged by the Commune's failure, which he attributed to the drunken incompetence of Hanriot, Commander of the National Guard, seized Hanriot, and threw him bodily out of a third-floor window. Hanriot lay half-dead in an interior courtyard of the Hôtel de Ville, undiscovered for another twelve hours. Coffinhal himself escaped, but after hiding for five days amongst the waste and faecal matter on the Île des Cygnes, returned starving to Paris, and was arrested. St-Just surrendered stoically, but he was now a broken man. Robespierre, who had attempted to blow out his brains but succeeded only in breaking a jaw, lay in great pain, but apparently conscious, on the great table of the Committee of Public Safety, where curious *sans-culottes* taunted him mercilessly, asking, ‘Ne v'la-t-il pas un beau roi?’, and ‘Sire, votre majesté souffre?’

How had the government been reduced to this scene of desolation? The *sections* of Paris had not responded to the call to insurrection issued by the rebel Commune of Paris. Only ten of the forty-eight *sections* supported Robespierre for long enough to compromise themselves. Since the proscription of the Hébertistes, the militants had lost their leading spokesmen. In any case, they had no desire to support an administration which, four days earlier, had introduced a new Wage Maximum scale, which threatened to actually reduce wages in certain trades. There was little popular enthusiasm left for a government of puritanical

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lawyers, who demanded complete unanimity, dictated the organisation of leisure time and family life, and regarded every form of popular amusement with suspicion.

In the victorious Convention itself, the opposition had been formed by a coalition of different groups of Montagnards, who united with the Plain to defeat Robespierre. This Montagnard defection included old followers of Danton, like Thuriot, and moderates like Bourdon de l’Oise, whose principal concern was to reform the Revolutionary Tribunal; ex-*Représentants en mission*, like Fouché, Barras, Fréron, and Tallien, hated by orthodox Robespierrists for their extreme policies in the provinces, and considered also to be corrupt; and some members of the Committee of General Security, like Vadier, Amar, and Voulland, who resented the way in which the Committee of Public Safety had encroached upon their police powers, and perhaps had serious objections to Robespierre’s new policy of religious appeasement, and his own pontifical rôle in it.

These, then, were the thermidoreans, who emerged from weeks of fear and tension to lead France. They had temporarily combined to forestall a purge of the Convention by Robespierre, believing themselves to be the imminent targets for sudden arrest and summary trial, if not, like Collot d’Herbois, of assassination attempts. Yet if they had united to defeat Robespierre, they had little else in common. Some wanted to moderate the Terror, others to maintain it for their own advantage. Some, like Thuriot, were intent on avenging the ghost of Danton; others, like Vadier, had been personally responsible for executing him. Within three months after 9 thermidor, this marriage of convenience ended in divorce. Their different views, however, of the purpose and significance of 9 thermidor, were to alarm patriots and foreshadow the bitter political disputes of the Directory. The Jacobin club of Toulouse prophetically warned the Convention in vendémiaire III, ‘Si les Romains n’eussent pas été divisés, Caesar n’eut pas osé passer le Rubicon.’

These thermidorean Montagnards were a minority in the Convention. They had won control on 9 thermidor only with the support of the deputies of the Plain, ‘*les crapauds du marais*’, as they were insultingly known, the great majority of uncommitted deputies in the Convention. In the opinion of the Plain, military victories had destroyed the necessity for the Terror. It was time to relax the hunt for suspects, end the dictatorship of the Com-

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mittee of Public Safety, and liberate the economy from the restrictions imposed during the emergency. Robespierre himself had persuaded them that extraordinary measures were justified as a means of national defence. Since the military threat was receding, the Republic of Virtue could now be discarded.

After the overthrow of the Jacobin leaders, the Plain found itself responsible for the government of the country. Men who had sat cowed and silent before the rhetorical onslaughts of Robespierre and St-Just now began illustrious careers in the service of the Republic, and later, the Empire. Magistrates and civil servants under the Ancien Régime, expert advisers on the committees of the various revolutionary assemblies, now emerged from relative obscurity to take a leading parliamentary rôle. For a Thibaudeau, a Cambacérès, or a Merlin de Douai, the hour had come. Robespierriest sympathisers regarded these survivors from the Convention's silent majority as pygmies, attempting to shoulder the yoke of the Titans. Even Royalists like Mallet du Pan interpreted 9 thermidor as a victory for mediocrity over talent and character. 'Ce sont des valets', he wrote, 'qui ont pris le sceptre de leurs maîtres après les avoir assassinés.' The long process of denigration of the thermidorean and Directorial régimes had begun. The thermidoreans, however, had no desire to occupy the throne of Robespierre. They intended to end dictatorship and restore parliamentary government and the rule of law. They inaugurated an experiment in representative parliamentary government, which gave the period from 1795 to 1799 its unique importance. It is now time to consider how they carried out these aims.

The Centre exacted a price for its support of the dissident Montagnards on 9 thermidor. It demanded an end to political repression. It was not immediately clear that the Terror was over. Within a month, however, the Convention had started to dismantle the apparatus of the Revolutionary Government of the Year 2. The law of 7 fructidor II weakened the executive committees, and introduced a greater degree of decentralisation into government. The Committee of Public Safety was stripped of its police powers, which even the Montagnards considered illegal, and of its control of the ministries. The powers of the two great committees were dispersed among twelve different government committees, among which the Committee of Legislation began to play a leading rôle, in virtue of its power of appoint-