

Introduction

Historians may be forgiven for supposing that great events must have great causes; their status as professional investigators of the past demands as much. Fortunately, few serious students of the French Revolution have ever doubted the proposition. The events of the 1790s seem to mark a watershed between the old world and the new and they cry out for a major effort of explanation. This book joins many others in seeking to clarify the circumstances that produced the upheaval of 1789. Stated simply, it is about the transition from 'administrative' to constitutional monarchy in France between 1774 and 1791. Few things are as simple as they appear, however, and the present volume also puts forward an argument spurred by the scholarly discussions which marked the bicentenary of the French Revolution.

After three decades of research along pathways strewn with discarded theories, the enquiry into the origins of the French Revolution stands at the crossroads, unsure in which direction to proceed. Signposts beckon enticingly towards the 'political', the 'social' and even the 'cultural', but it is far from clear where they will lead. The old certainties sustaining the social or, more often, the socialist interpretation have crumbled amid a welter of new research which has yet to be welded into a constructive alternative. Teachers and even textbook writers find themselves in the uncomfortable position of relying on elderly models of causality which they know to have been undermined in detail. May the present writer not fall into the same trap! For this book is written with the needs of students and teachers very much in mind. It aims to bridge the principal fault line of modern research into the French Revolution, or what a recent scholar termed the 'two distinct centres of gravity at the heart of the debate, the one "political" and the other "social"'.¹ Specifically cultural explanations, it is true, receive shorter shrift: in this author's view they offer nothing which cannot be subsumed within the 'social', broadly defined. Whether the pages that follow amount to a satisfying synthesis is for the reader to judge. Probably they do not, for positions rigidly adhered to become irreconcilable which is another way of saying

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that some of the basic assumptions in the debate over the French Revolution are beyond the reach of historical proof. And in any case, the book has a thesis of its own to advance which challenges the current thrust of research at the most fundamental level.

If proponents of the ‘social’ as opposed to the ‘political’ agree on nothing else, they agree that 1789 marked a moment of discontinuity. The late Albert Soboul, like nearly all the Revolutionary scholars of his generation, believed the crisis to have been engendered by a class conflict which was resolved when the bourgeoisie overthrew the aristocracy and consolidated its political and economic supremacy. As a Marxist, indeed, Soboul tended to see this event in apocalyptic terms, as a classic ‘bourgeois revolution’ which signalled the destruction of feudalism and the emergence of capitalist modes of production and exchange. Embedded firmly in what is often termed the ‘orthodox’ or social interpretation of the French Revolution, then, is the notion that 1789 marked a sharp break with what contemporaries were pleased to call the ‘ancien régime’. Yet, curiously, this is precisely the position that vehement critics of the social interpretation have opted to defend. Impatient with notions of socio-economic causality and of seismic shifts from feudalism to capitalism, they prefer to depict the Revolution as a political watershed, as a dramatic moment of renewal in which old ideas were discarded and new practices elaborated. François Furet, whose secular dogmatism comes close to rivalling that of Albert Soboul, even invites us to comprehend 1789 as the ‘birth of political modernity’.² Amid the turmoil of a lightning scene change, the stage of history was cleared for the institutions and ideologies of the modern age. The methodology of Marxism is jettisoned, only to be replaced by a neo-Whig theory of development in which the basic frame of reference remains the same.

This book challenges the ‘rupture’ thesis as starkly presented above. It puts the case for viewing the years associated with the reign of Louis XVI as a whole, not two uneven and disjointed epochs. As such it is a study straddling conventional periodisation, an enquiry into outcomes which pursues answers deep into the fabric of the *ancien régime*. Enmeshed in a web of socio-economic and institutional contradictions, the French monarchy, it is argued, entered a phase of rapid evolution in the 1770s and 1780s. Each attempt to extricate itself in one direction tended to inhibit movement in another, and the energies released gave depth and purpose to the upheaval of 1789. Studied from this angle the Revolution loses the sharp focus in time that we associate with the taking of the Bastille or the 4 August decrees: it ceases to be an event purely and simply and becomes part of a process. That process is here dubbed

the transition from administrative to constitutional monarchy, a process completed only in 1791 when the antique Estates General (renamed the National Assembly) fulfilled its pledge to endow France with a written constitution.

Contemporaries appear to have experienced less difficulty in recognising the hybrid and makeshift character of the new regime than have historians subsequently. The term 'revolution', in the singular, entered political vocabulary quite quickly, it is true, but the phrase 'ancien régime' was slow to acquire the resonance of a global repudiation of the past. For as long as the new regime incorporated the institution of monarchy, the old regime had to be defined with care. The deputies of that first legislature were uncomfortably aware of the ambiguous position which they occupied. Most were cautious pragmatists, far removed in outlook from the zealots and iconoclasts of later years. Their job was to manage the transition so that regeneration could commence under the aegis of beneficent institutions. But this task would fall to a subsequent and post-Revolutionary legislature according to the neat (and optimistic) formulation of the deputy Le Chapelier.³ In the meantime extempore politics would determine the order of the day.

The perception of the historian Alexis de Tocqueville is relevant here, for he was the first non-contemporary to grasp the organic quality of the political transition. The Revolution simply 'came out of'⁴ the preceding regime: in the earlier stages, at least, it was the metamorphosed product of powerful forces unleashed during the reign of Louis XVI. Albert Sorel, another nineteenth-century observer, made a similar point albeit on a broader canvas. Comparing governmental practices across the watershed, he drew attention to 'the permanence of the same pressures, the propensity of accumulated habits, the strength of tradition'.⁵ Both of these historians were schematisers, of course, and some of their generalisations have proved vulnerable to more recent research. Indeed, a reassessment of Tocqueville's thesis on centralisation will be offered in the chapters that follow. Nevertheless, both writers have contributed powerfully to the thinking that lies behind this study. Their emphasis on continuities provided the initial encouragement to try and penetrate beyond the rhetoric of rupture.

A more important influence than either of these authorities, however, has been the renewed interest in institutional history. Over the past few years a younger generation of scholars has revitalised research into the late *ancien-régime* monarchy. The reform initiatives of the 1770s and 1780s, the dilemmas of institutionalised 'privilege' and the tensions generated by the growth of a definably 'public' opinion have all been found worthy of study in their own right, instead of being bracketed to

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an expiring *ancien régime* or a beckoning Pre-Revolution. Not every historian would find the phrase ‘administrative monarchy’ an apt description of the direction in which government was proceeding in these decades; courtly politics based on patronage and private interest continued to exert a powerful hold. Yet scholars now seem willing to allow ‘superstructures’ an active if not a determining role in the historical process. In particular, the agency of ‘state’ seems generally recognised and it is a contention of this study that the Bourbon administrative machine – at several levels – played an important part in the unfolding drama.

The reinterpretation of the final decades of the old monarchy as a period that witnessed significant reforms necessarily reopens the question of ‘enlightened absolutism’. This concept fell from favour among historians in the 1960s, but it now shows signs of making a comeback. French historians, it should be said at once, never showed much interest in the question. They had their Revolution and their *ancien régime* and nothing could be permitted to blur the distinction. The classical texts of republican historiography were austere teleological: Lavissee labelled the period 1781–9 ‘The Agony of the Old Regime’, while Sagnac put the monarchy on borrowed time from Maupeou’s coup in 1771 with the heading ‘Towards the Revolution’.⁶ The temptation to view the reforms of the 1770s and 1780s as minor, manipulative and cynical proved irresistible, as did the corollary notion of renewal solely through the cathartic act of revolution. Not surprisingly, therefore, synthetic studies of ‘enlightened absolutism’ scarcely mention the case of France. According to one influential textbook writer, ‘it is almost a truism that the French government for most of the eighteenth century before 1789 was distinguished less by reform than by a remarkable lack of it’.⁷

Louis XVI was no philosopher-king, to be sure. Nor did his ministers act under the immediate influence of enlightened authors, save for the possible exception of Turgot. Nonetheless, the middling reaches of the royal administration fairly hummed with reformist activity as this study will seek to demonstrate. By the mid-1780s, moreover, public opinion had become an inescapable factor in the process of ministerial decision-making. Daniel Hailes, England’s perspicacious diplomat at the Court of Versailles, alluded repeatedly to a spirit ‘of discussion of public matters which did not exist before’.⁸ None of this energy was coordinated, of course; at least not until Calonne’s ‘great project’ placed root-and-branch reform on the agenda of state in 1787. Nevertheless, we should not belittle the substance of the issues raised and the progress registered even before the onset of the Revolutionary climacteric. The

impetus for change came from several directions and, sometimes, from within corporate bodies which were themselves vulnerable to social criticism. 'Privilege', it is worth remembering, posed no insuperable barrier to reformist modes of thought. Even the magistrates of the sovereign courts, so often condemned as selfish protagonists of an 'aristocratic revolution' in government, expressed a breadth of interests which resists neat classification. The latest historian of the *parlements* calls those bodies to account less for their defence of 'privilege', than for their adherence to a static, non-evolving form of monarchism incapable of surmounting the pressures of the age.⁹

This study will examine closely the institutional tensions which the Bourbon monarchy sought both to exploit for fiscal advantage and to overcome for the sake of administrative efficiency. The failure to reconcile these divergent tendencies helps to explain the isolation of successive ministers of the crown when hard decisions had to be taken. However, we need also to look at the subaltern agencies of reform. As a body of men with considerable powers of initiative, the royal provincial intendants have not been well served by historians. *Parlementaire* rhetoric against the supposed organs of 'ministerial despotism', allied to Tocqueville's scathing and overstated descriptions of administrative centralisation, has reduced their role to that of robots. Yet the actions of these men contributed powerfully to the formation of a reform constituency in the second half of the eighteenth century. They launched discussions, tried out ideas and reported their experiences to central government. Some of those ideas germinated, many more remained dormant until the socio-political impediment to structural reform was thrust aside in 1788–9. Of course, not all the intendants were reformers and their formidable authority in the countryside could be used to contain as well as to promote pressures for change. On balance, however, they represented the single most effective force for a recasting of the functions and responsibilities of government in the mould of 'enlightened absolutism'. It will be argued that the speed and relative unanimity with which France was reconstructed between 1789 and 1791 owed much to men like Turgot in the Limousin, the Chaumont de la Galaizière in Lorraine, Bertrand de Boucheporn in Corsica and Bertier de Sauvigny *fils* in the *généralité* of Paris.

If the record of the intendants remains largely unexplored and hence unsung, that of central government has been minutely analysed. The verdict has not been flattering to Louis XVI and his ministers: inadequate budgetary controls over expenditure, factional instability at Court, stop-go reform policies and a general failure of political leadership have all been adduced as factors critical to the collapse of Europe's

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most powerful monarchy. No doubt; but a focus on the final, rather desperate years of absolute monarchy in France produces an unduly pathological reading of events. Widen the chronological focus and we find a state venturing upon the path of renewal, only to be dragged under by forces unleashed by that very process of modernisation. Tocqueville's dictum¹⁰ concerning the dangers faced by governments seeking to reform themselves is apposite here, and it serves as a further reminder that the Revolution emerged organically from the bosom of the *ancien régime*.

Recognition of the substance of *ancien-régime* reform legislation is slowly gaining ground, aided by the revival of scholarly interest in the career of Jacques Necker.¹¹ Calonne's ministerial career must surely be next in line for reassessment. But sustained commitment to root-and-branch reform can be traced back to Henri Bertin's tenure of the post of controller-general between 1759 and 1763. Bertin's efforts were concentrated in the field of economic policy and more especially in a desire to accomplish the restructuring of France's agricultural economy. Together with fellow royal bureaucrats Daniel Trudaine and the marquis d'Ormesson and a group of agronomists, he spent two decades pressing the case for the 'new agriculture' in the corridors of power. Agricultural societies were founded in the major towns, incentives introduced to encourage the clearance of waste, and between 1769 and 1781 a steady flow of royal legislation promoted enclosures, the partition of commons and the curtailment of collective rights such as free grazing which sapped the profits of freehold tenure. Bertin retired in 1781 and the agricultural reform lobby momentarily lost its privileged access to the councils of state, but in 1785 a savage drought prostrated the countryside and seriously perturbed the whole economy. Agricultural reform returned to the agenda of state, and the debate continued in the committee rooms of the National Assembly within a frame of reference little different from that established in the 1760s and 1770s.

It is true that reforming absolutism generated high hopes but small achievements in the agrarian sphere, yet so did the Revolutionary Assemblies. The continuities of policy formulation are the point that needs to be emphasised. The history of fiscal reform during these years might easily invite the opposite conclusion, for it is generally taken for granted that the Revolutionaries completely remodelled the taxation system which they inherited. Unglamorous and technical in nature, fiscal history has attracted few takers in recent decades and much remains to be discovered. Nevertheless, it is still worth trying to probe beyond the spectacular clashes that fiscal reform provoked in the 1770s and 1780s in order to capture the underlying trend. The first point to

note is that the transition to a new tax regime was neither quick nor painless. Direct taxes to replace the old *taille*, *capitation* and *vingtièmes* only came into force in 1791, and the new levies owed much to ideas put into circulation by the physiocrats some thirty and forty years earlier. Turgot was the first royal minister to distil a coherent plan of action from this body of thought: while still intendant of Limoges he demonstrated empirically the nefarious consequences of determining tax liability on the basis of presumed wealth and prejudice. His *Mémoire sur la surcharge*, penned in 1766, can be construed as a powerful plea for scientific taxation resting on a nationwide assessment of land holdings and values. Therein lay the germ of Napoleon's cadastral survey. Turgot also campaigned for a unitary land tax calculated on net rather than gross income and applicable to each and every landowner irrespective of birth or station. All these ideas, as we shall see, would enter the realm of practical politics between 1787 and 1791.

Whether Turgot's reformist vision extended to the political reconstruction of Bourbon government, or merely some kind of streamlined administrative super-monarchy, is an open question. He was dismissed from office after only twenty-two months and his comments while in retirement on Necker's scheme for Provincial Assemblies leave the matter unresolved. Yet no minister with an appetite for tax reform and the commutation of the *corvée* could have been unaware of the socio-political implications of such changes. Fiscal privileges and exemptions from labour service on the highways formed part of the 'constitution', as Keeper of the Seals Miromesnil remarked to the king in 1776, and to abolish these ancient rights was tantamount to unravelling the social fabric of the kingdom. Moreover, Turgot had other changes in mind on the eve of his downfall: measures to extinguish royal tolls and customs barriers, and perhaps legislation to curtail the burden of seigneurial dues on agriculture.

The intellectual debate on the utility of feudalism can be said to have started in earnest when Pierre-François Boncerf, a senior official in the Finance Ministry, published a brochure entitled *Les Inconvénients des droits féodaux* (1776). The Parlement of Paris, which was locked in a struggle with Turgot over the Six Edicts, condemned the tract to be burned in the belief that it was dealing with one of the minister's new-fangled schemes. In fact, reform of the seigneurial regime was another idea whose time was approaching. The physiocrats had long stigmatised forms of surplus extraction assessed on total yields with no allowance made for variable production costs; and feudal dues, like the ecclesiastical tithe, were notoriously vulnerable to this criticism. In 1779 a disciple of Quesnay, Guillaume-François Le Trosne, published a

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massive tome bearing the title *De l'administration provinciale et de la réforme de l'impôt* to which was appended an audacious essay denouncing both the theory and the practice of feudal tenure. The whole system, that is to say both the dues themselves and all ancillary running costs, he argued, placed an intolerable burden upon the wealth-producing sector of the economy. There followed a series of detailed recommendations for the redemption of harvest and casual dues which foreshadowed the liquidation legislation of the National Assembly.

The actual politics of the liquidation operation were infinitely complex, of course, and Turgot made virtually no headway on this front during his brief spell in ministerial office. His successor, Necker, contrived the only major alteration of the seigneurial regime when he persuaded the king to emancipate vassals of the Royal Domain from the servitude of *mainmorte* in 1779. As the preamble to the edict made clear this was to be a policy of reform by emulation, but it misfired. Only a trickle of seigneurs followed the royal example, and in the province of Franche-Comté where most of the population subject to *mainmorte* resided, the Parlement of Besançon managed to block the reform for nearly a decade. Even as feudalism was crumbling from below, the National Assembly displayed a marked reluctance to convert the fiery abolitionist rhetoric of 4 August 1789 into concrete legislation. *Mainmorte* was outlawed, more or less, but harvest and casual dues had to be bought out by vassals, failing which they would remain in force.

More important than any of the reforming initiatives mentioned so far, were efforts to remodel the institutions of local government which sought to alter the face of absolute monarchy in the decade before the Revolution. As usual the physiocrat writers led the way, but it fell to Jacques Necker to convert the blueprints of Dupont de Nemours and Le Trosne into a viable scheme of 'representative' bodies to mediate between the organs of central government, the intendants and the *parlements*. These Provincial Assemblies, two of which came into being in 1778–9, offered a bright hope for the social and political regeneration of the kingdom and they cemented Necker's contemporary reputation as the preeminent reform statesman of his generation. Subsequent historians have been less generous with their praise, notably Pierre Renouvin,¹² the only scholar to have studied the experiment in a systematic fashion. However, it is clear that Necker's stock is rising: both of his most recent biographers believe that the Provincial Assemblies offered a means of resolving the tensions engendered by the transition from administrative to constitutional monarchy. The present study examines this proposition closely, while trying to recapture the ripple of excite-

ment and anticipation that Necker's and Calonne's local government reforms provoked.

Necker resigned in 1781 amid mounting opposition to his plans to multiply Provincial Assemblies across the kingdom. But in a sense his work was done: the two prototype assemblies provided a political model which others would copy and improve upon. As the years passed they served to focus the arguments of reformers and to whet the public appetite for participation in the affairs of government. When, in 1787, Calonne decided to bid for this constituency of public-minded individuals with an elaboration and extension of Necker's Provincial Assemblies, Thomas Jefferson's shrewd-minded correspondent, John Adams, was moved to remark: 'All Europe resounds with Projects for reviving States and Assemblies, I think; and France is taking the lead. How such Assemblies will mix, with simple Monarchies, is the question.'¹³

That was indeed the question. *Parlementaire* critics had dubbed Necker's initial creations 'a monstrous coupling of republican and monarchical principles',¹⁴ yet by the end of 1787 around twenty of these bodies had come into existence. Moreover, they were flanked by Department and Municipal Assemblies established within the subdivisions of the *généralités*. Membership of the top two tiers was determined by a combination of royal appointment and cooption, but Calonne planned to substitute an electoral procedure after a trial period of three years. As for the Municipal Assemblies, they were thrown open to election from the outset. Such changes were not cosmetic: Calonne's speech to the assembled Notables made clear that the time for half measures had long since passed. Nor were they purely 'administrative' as is sometimes suggested. Integral to the local government reforms launched by Calonne was a theory of representation that implied a renegotiation of the foundations of monarchical power.

This issue of representation brings the discussion full circle, for it throws a bridge from the 'social' to the 'political' and invites a further and final comment upon the rupture thesis. Under reform proposals tabled by Calonne and implemented by his successor, Loménie de Brienne, tens of thousands of ordinary Frenchmen went to the polls in the summer and autumn of 1787 and thereby gave expression to an embryonic theory of representation based on individuals rather than interests or orders. They were only electing Municipal Assemblies, to be sure, but a broad swathe of contemporary opinion concluded that France was finally embarked upon the transition to constitutional monarchy. 'I think it possible', confided Thomas Jefferson, 'this country will within two or three years be in the enjoyment of a tolerably free constitution.'¹⁵ Obviously contemporaries could have no knowledge of

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what the immediate future held in store, and Jefferson went on to express his admiration for the lack of violence and bloodshed attending the transition. Yet this note of optimism serves as a salutary reminder to the historian girded with the analytical tool of retrospective vision. France in the 1780s presented all the signs of a country caught in the throes of institutional renewal, a renewal that did not wait upon the ‘birth of political modernity’ at a signal given by the National Assembly.

Agrarian and fiscal reforms, the burgeoning debate over feudalism, the emergence of representative institutions; all of these developments, and many others besides, tend to blur the conceptual clarity of the rupture thesis. Even François Furet, a firm believer in the vision of discontinuity, has acknowledged the instrumentality of the Bourbon monarchy in procuring change and progress. He likens it to an ‘ongoing workshop of “enlightened” reform’ and draws specific attention to Calonne’s achievement in generalising a hierarchy of deliberative assemblies. The setting up of these bodies consummated a kind of ‘revolution before the Revolution’ we are told.¹⁶

This is all very well, but it produces a logical tension in some of the most recent writing on the French Revolution which is not easily resolved. If the old monarchy contrived, through its reformist labours, to assemble the rudiments of liberal democracy, what price the invention of modern political culture in 1789? A partial solution to the problem might dwell upon the underlying purpose of ‘enlightened absolutism’, for it is far from certain that any of Louis XVI’s ministers actually willed the establishment of a constitutional monarchy. Their notions of ‘representation’ coincided imperfectly with those that would surface under the pressure of events in the Estates General. Indeed, it has been suggested that the history of both the theory and the practice of representation in France should be dated more properly from the famous declaration of the deputies of the Third Estate on 17 June 1789 explicitly vesting sovereignty in the social body of the nation.¹⁷ According to François Furet, this date marked the inception of a new form of absolutism based on sovereignty of the people. Its institutional counterpart followed on 4 August when the deputies mounted their celebrated attack on ‘privilege’.

These debates are important for they help us to determine where to place the boundary posts between the old regime and the new. Furet’s arguments bracket the National Assembly firmly to the new regime, and contain a gloomy prognostication about the subsequent course of events. They imply that Revolutionary France was proto-republican almost from the outset: the repudiation of the Monarchiens in the late summer of 1789 would merely underscore the constitutional rupture.