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978-0-521-45942-6 - Reform and Revolution in France: The Politics of Transition, 1774-1791

P. M. Jones

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This textbook has been written to help teachers and students to pilot their way through the enormous and ever expanding literature on the French Revolution.

The author makes a conscious effort to combine social and political interpretations of the origin of the Revolution and offers a synthesis which takes full account of current debates. He also seeks to restore the Revolution to its domestic environment. Notwithstanding the powerful contemporary myth of rupture, the author argues that the dramatic events of 1789 need to be considered alongside the reform achievements of Bourbon absolute monarchy. The result is a new account of the gestation of the Revolution which is both up-to-date and satisfying in its range of vision.

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Preface

Every year thousands of items of literature about the French Revolution appear in print. Even scholars of the period find the task of choosing what to read and what to discard a daunting exercise. For teachers and students the challenge can be insurmountable. The present book has been written with the needs of the latter firmly in mind. It knits together a considerable amount of research, often of a fairly unyielding or inaccessible character. The aim is to provide an account of the gestation of the French Revolution which is both up-to-date and satisfying in its range of vision.

Studies of the turbulent history of late eighteenth-century France are prone to suffer from two shortcomings in particular. They tend either to begin, or to end, in 1789, thereby placing 'old' and 'new' regimes in two water-tight compartments. Moreover, a tendency to emphasise political explanations and narratives at the expense of socio-economic factors has become apparent of late. Of course there are good, even telling, arguments to support these perspectives. This book makes no claim to redirect the thrust of modern scholarship. On the other hand, it does seek to balance arguments envisioning a total rupture in 1789 with evidence of continuity. Similarly, a conscious effort is made to link together the socio-economic and the political legacies of Bourbon absolutism. Only by this route does it seem possible to explain why the outcome of the crisis was not reform 'from above', but full-blown revolution.

The opening chapters of the book provide a structural anatomy of France in the latter half of the eighteenth century. The country's institutions of government, social make-up and economic characteristics are each examined in turn. Chapter 4 shifts the presentation into a dynamic mode and explores the pressure for reform that the monarchy itself did so much to promote. The inevitable contradictions that resulted from piecemeal, or faint-hearted, reform within a state still nominally absolutist form the subject-matter of chapter 5. The nerve-racking leap from antiquated notions of the polity to a conception of the

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nation containing unlimited potential for revolutionary change is described in chapter 6. That leap accomplished, chapter 7 investigates the ideological construction of the new regime, the process of bargaining with new political forces and the attempt to anchor the freedoms proclaimed in 1789 by means of a fresh set of institutions.

Acknowledgements

The writing of a book is usually a solitary business. But the effort is sustained by the imagined dialogue which the historian conducts with his sources. This work of synthesis is the product of many such conversations, nearly all of them anonymous. May these 'voices' find appropriate acknowledgement of their contribution in the endnotes and in the bibliography. However, the character of my book has also been shaped by more immediate and identifiable sources. Innocent, yet probing, questioning by generations of French Revolution 'Special Subject' students has left a perceptible mark. The same can be said of scholarly exchanges with Malcolm Crook, William Doyle, Melvin Edelstein, Alan Forrest, John Harris, Peter McPhee, John Markoff and other academic historians too numerous to mention. In particular, I feel indebted to the regulars of the George Rudé Seminar whose biennial gatherings have been a fount of refreshment to many French historians. The meeting held in Adelaide in 1992 provided the first opportunity to test some of the ideas that have germinated in this book. Subsequent scholarly encounters in Washington DC (Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, 1992) and Atlanta (Annual Meeting of the Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1993) pushed the process of intellectual gestation a stage further.

On a more concrete level, specific debts have been incurred which demand acknowledgement. In 1992 the fellows of the British Academy made available funds to meet some of the research costs of this book, just as they responded to claims upon their resources made in earlier years. I am profoundly grateful for their continued support. Similarly, the Faculty of Arts Research Grants Committee of Birmingham University has made it possible for me to attend a satisfying number of French history conferences over the years. I also owe a debt of gratitude to John Markoff of the University of Pittsburgh (and to his publisher Pennsylvania State University Press) for allowing me to reproduce several of the figures in his forthcoming book.