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Introduction

> If we try to establish exactly what the greatest good for all consists in, which must be the true end of any system of legislation, we find it comes down to these two main objects: *liberty* and *equality*.
>
> Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, 1762[1]

The social and economic history of the French Revolution has been receiving a poor press in recent years and it may appear foolhardy to propose a new interpretation of Jacobin egalitarianism at a time when it has come under fire as extremist, dangerously utopian and inherently violent. Yet the central question at issue has been left unanswered by historians for whom intolerance and terror appear integral to the entire revolutionary project. How, in practice as well as in the legislative texts, were the egalitarian principles proclaimed by the Jacobins put into effect? What, in the context of a Revolution dedicated to liberalism and to individualism, could be achieved by democrats whose prime purpose was not to impose equality, but to reduce inequality?

While the language of redistribution has several registers, some quite threatening, the prevailing one is altogether less strident and seems to indicate that the various tendencies at play in mainstream Jacobinism favoured the emergence of a broad-based consensus where matters of fundamental principle were involved. Commitment to social justice did not necessarily entail adherence to a single rigid ideology, or imply a willingness to resort to force. It grew out of the liberal critique of aristocracy, privilege and wealth heard in

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[1] J.-J. Rousseau, 'Du contrat social', book II, chapter 11 ('Des divers systèmes de législation'), *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by J. Fabre and M. Launay, 3 vols. (Paris, 1967–71), vol. II, p. 538.

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the early days of the Revolution and voiced in many of the *cahiers de doléance*, the widely felt sense of grievance at the enduring nature of economic inequalities, reinforced by a shared awareness of what was legitimate or illegitimate, right or wrong in the pattern of social relations. Respect for the material needs of others was bound up with perceptions of the common good. A set of moral assumptions inherited from the past helped fashion this deep-seated notion of natural justice, justice as fairness in the Rawlsian sense,[2] dedicated to the welfare of society as a whole, but implying a vision of honourable decency and equal opportunities for all its members: fair shares, rather than equal shares, for all.

If this reading is correct, the Jacobin egalitarian agenda has much to tell us about the Revolution and deserves critical analysis. By choosing to focus on the policies pursued away from the centre, in the depths of the French provinces, I have sought to achieve two things: firstly, to move away from the ingrained habit of discussing such issues in terms of the Terror alone; and secondly, to use the opportunity this distance affords to take into account not just the theoretical discourse of the Revolution, but also the practical measures which gave it substance, the words *and* the deeds. One of the virtues of examining Jacobinism in the field is that the researcher does not feel obliged at the outset to question the politics of men whose bold claims to radical reform may at times sound hollow or even appear, to some sceptical observers, as little more than empty posturing. As Alan Forrest points out in a recent work, if the language of the Revolution is unfailingly political, much of the action of the revolutionary assemblies was aimed at ending social wrongs.[3] That serious attempts were made to carry this action through at the local level is apparent from archival sources, which are very rich in this regard and provide a sound empirical base from which to mount a balanced assessment.[4] Moreover, the fact that the policies implemented seldom produced spectacular or

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[2] See John Rawls's 'two principles of justice': in short, that each person has an equal right to liberty and that inequalities must work out for everyone's advantage: J. Rawls, 'Justice as Fairness', *Philosophical Review* 67 (April 1958), pp. 164–94, and further expanded in *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, 1972), p. 60, and *Political Liberalism* (New York, 1993), pp. 6–7.

[3] A. Forrest, *The French Revolution* (Oxford, 1995), p. 10.

[4] On the desirability of maintaining the empiricist foundations to historiography, see G. Noiriel, 'Foucault and History: The Lessons of a Disillusion' (review article), *Journal of Modern History* 66 (September 1994), p. 567.

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substantial results, or that such as there were proved ephemeral, should not detract from the need for an objective review of their content.

No historian of political discourse would deny the existence of a strong egalitarian component to revolutionary ideology, nor fail to recognise in the promise of civic equality the implicit prospect of greater economic equality. The evils of oppression and subjugation, and the resulting extremes of wealth and poverty, were subjects which engaged the minds of Montesquieu, Rousseau and Mably, and remained an important consideration in the awakening of the revolutionary conscience during the second half of the eighteenth century. Mably, for example, indulged in day-dreaming about a golden age of social equality which depended upon the community of goods, but concluded that it was an unrealisable ideal in a society irreversibly marked by property, commerce and luxury, an ideal against which, in the words of Keith Baker, 'the achievement of liberty would not be mortgaged'.[5] Hence Mably's dream did not induce him to propose a radical programme for social transformation. The logic of this pragmatic conclusion was not lost on the Jacobins, faced as they were with the practical problems of policy-making and policy implementation. But this is not to say that Mably's utopian vision did not stir their consciences or have a profound impact on their project. Conversely, recognition of the undoubted influence of Mably's visionary thinking on revolutionary egalitarianism does not oblige us to adopt a linear interpretation of the history of doctrines, such as that put forward by J. L. Talmon in the early 1950s, seeking to show that Mably's idea of egalitarian happiness directly inspired Jacobin attempts to enthrone virtue and thus accounts for the perceived drift of the French Revolution into totalitarianism.[6]

The tendency during the Jacobin phase of the Revolution to move away from an overriding interest in the abolition of privilege and the achievement of equal rights, as in 1789, to a deeper concern with issues of ownership and the reduction of real inequalities, in keeping with the intellectual legacy handed down by the Enlightenment, is clearly reflected in the legislation of the years 1793 and

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[5] K. M. Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 104.

[6] J. L. Talmon, *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* (London, 1952), pp. 52–65; Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, p. 19.

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1794. It is evident that this development occurred in parallel with a gradual radicalisation of the Revolution and with the emergence of a radical theory of revolutionary violence, that it coincided with the apparent drive to fashion a 'new man' and forge a 'new society' based on a single and indivisible republican identity.[7] To acknowledge these various trends together with their ideological antecedents, however, is not to endorse the view, inherited from Talmon, that they were one and the same, or that the reactions and interactions which they bred made the Terror inevitable, and that consequently efforts to achieve greater equality were tantamount to 'regenerating' society from above, by checking people's arbitrary selfish urges and attempting to make them equal and identical by constraint.[8]

No doubt the earliest acts of economic levelling in which François Furet identifies a 'frumentarious' version of the 'terrorist idea' at work[9] are ominous indeed. Thus, the spectre of forcible redistribution is already perceptible in July 1789, when the heads of Foullon and Bertier de Sauvigny, the 'starvers of the people', were carried around Paris impaled on pikes; or in Marat's call on the famished to throttle the well-fed and 'devour their palpitating flesh';[10] or when, in October, Carlyle's avenging furies took hostage the 'baker, the baker's wife and the little baker's boy' and marched them under duress from Versailles to Paris; or when, as Furet suggests, 'the psychological and political mechanism of the Terror' was put to the test during the September massacres of 1792; or when finally a year later the spectre came home to roost, with the Convention bowing to plebeian threats, instituting the guillotine as an instrument of economic leverage and sending forth firebrand

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[7] Colin Lucas refers in this context to 'the remapping of absolutism onto an indivisible sovereign people': C. Lucas, 'Revolutionary Violence, the People and the Terror', in K. M. Baker (ed.), *The Terror*, vol. IV in K. M. Baker, C. Lucas, Fr. Furet and M. Ozouf (eds.), *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1987–94), p. 58.

[8] Fr. Furet, 'Terreur', in Fr. Furet and M. Ozouf (eds.), *Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française*, 2nd rev. edn, 4 vols. (Paris, 1992), vol. I, *Evénements*, pp. 293–314, and M. Ozouf, 'Egalité', *ibid.*, vol. IV, *Idées*, pp. 139–63; this view stems from Talmon, *Origins of Totalitarian Democracy*, p. 143; see also Lucas, 'Revolutionary Violence', p. 58.

[9] Furet, 'Terreur', pp. 294–6.

[10] J.-P. Marat, 'Projet de déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen', in *Œuvres politiques, 1789–1793*, ed. by J. de Cock and C. Goëtz, 10 vols. (Brussels, 1989–95), vol. I, p. 74.

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revolutionaries into the countryside to extract grain from the forestallers at bayonet-point.

While it is undeniable that a punitive brand of egalitarianism was present in the Revolution from its beginnings and contributed to the spiral of violence characteristic of the Terror, a more measured version of distributive justice made its appearance in the speeches delivered to the Constituent Assembly by members of the third estate and the enlightened nobility. Robespierre, the self-appointed champion of the underdog, was forever lambasting the excessive self-indulgence of the very rich, but stopped short of incitement to violence.[11] Mirabeau was sensitive to extreme inequalities of fortune but confined himself to seeking a more equitable distribution of the tax burden, based on proportionality and the ability to pay.[12] The duc de La Rochefoucauld d'Enville, the rapporteur of the tax committee, alert to the arguments of his friend, the marquis de Condorcet, in favour of graduated taxation, acknowledged that it was only fair 'to relieve the less well-off by making slightly greater demands on the rich'.[13] And his cousin La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, the noted philanthropist and influential chairman of the welfare committee, pointed to a significant omission in the recently adopted Declaration of the Rights of Man, namely the 'right to subsistence'.[14] No one doubted these men's sincerity. The philanthropists of the Comité de mendicité were only too keenly aware of the incidence of poverty and were determined to do something about it. Olwen Hufton estimates that in 1789 more than a third, 'perhaps as much as half', of the total population were 'poor' and comprised working men and their families, whose main economic feature was vulnerability: they were chronically undernourished

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[11] 'Mémoire pour François Deteuf' (Arras, 1783), 'Adresse à la nation artésienne' (early 1789), speeches of 22 October 1789, 25 January, 26 March and 23 October 1790, and April 1791: C. Mazauric (ed.), *Robespierre, écrits* (Paris, 1989), pp. 20–1, 67–9, 78–80, 96–100.

[12] Ozouf, 'Egalité', p. 149.

[13] L. A. de La Rochefoucauld, 'Idées générales sur le mode constitutionnel de l'impôt', 18 August 1790, in *Archives parlementaires des Chambres françaises: première série, 1787 à 1797*, 98 vols. (Paris, 1862–1995), *Assemblée constituante*, vol. XVIII, pp. 143–6.

[14] January 1790, in Ch. Rist, 'Les rapports du Comité de mendicité de l'Assemblée constituante', *La Révol. fr.* 29 (1895), p. 267; O. H. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750–1789* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 167–8; J. D. de La Rochefoucauld, C. Wolikow and G. R. Ikni, *Le duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, 1747–1827, de Louis XV à Charles X, un grand seigneur patriote et le mouvement populaire* (Paris, 1980), pp. 182–98.

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and liable to fall into indigence at the slightest mishap.[15] The sheer scale of poverty made the reduction of inequality an issue the first revolutionary Assembly could not circumvent, let alone ignore.

It is of course true that some Constituents used formal equality as a smokescreen to preserve material *in*equality, but their concern with the latter was very real, and even the opponents to further egalitarian concessions, such as the comte de Clermont-Tonnerre, feared the potential or even imminent extension of civic equality into the economic arena. Abbé Sieyès's concern with equal rights as a precondition to liberty and Jérôme Pétion's desire to see the principle of equal shares enacted in inheritance law reform bear out Aléxis de Tocqueville's claim that the Constituent Assembly was obsessed with equality in all its forms from a very early stage, and that 'equality' was far from being a Jacobin invention.[16] Indeed, as Isser Woloch reminds us, in Tocqueville's view the gradual movement of French society toward an increasing 'equality of condition' had already begun under the old regime and straddled the great divide of 1789.[17]

The ongoing discourse on equality, pursued against a background of recurring food riots, was nonetheless to find its natural home in the Jacobin Club, attuned to the pressing demands of the Parisian sans-culottes, yet always at one remove from extremist intimidation. As the Revolution entered its radical phase after the fall of the monarchy in August 1792, the National Convention rose to the occasion in its long-drawn-out economic debate on the corn trade, to which I shall of necessity return; so that when the crisis point was reached in the spring of 1793, there was a general awareness among deputies of all persuasions that the time had come to 'terminate the Revolution' by making urgent concessions to the poor and giving them at last a fair deal. Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul both held the view that the measures which ensued were imposed by 'popular pressure' from below rather than resolute conviction from above, though their case was far from conclusive.[18] It is at all events worthy of note that the period

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[15] Hufton, *The Poor*, pp. 19–24.

[16] Ozouf, 'Egalité', pp. 148, 152–5; Fr. Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*, 2nd rev. edn (Paris, 1983), p. 81; E. H. Lemay, *Dictionnaire des Constituants, 1789–1791*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1991), vol. I, pp. 220–3, and vol. II, pp. 748, 863.

[17] I. Woloch, *The New Regime: Transformations of the French Civic Order, 1789–1820s* (New York, 1994), p. 13.

[18] G. Lefebvre was of the opinion that the Montagnards 'yielded' in April 1793, but

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between the first *maximum* of 4 May 1793, which established price ceilings for grain and flour, and the imposition of the death penalty on hoarders on 26 July was one of intense social legislation which saw the enactment by the Montagne of a wide range of radical reforms. It is not without significance that this reform programme reached the statute book well before the September timeframe and the official declaration of the Terror, and coincided with Robespierre's first serious confrontation with extremist lobbies and a refusal on his part to allow his radical pre-eminence to be subverted and his image as popular leader to be appropriated by Jean-François Varlet, Jacques Roux and the Enragés.[19] It can therefore be argued that social justice pre-empted the Terror, if only by a short head.

Admittedly, the two appeared to merge in the autumn of 1793, when Joseph Fouché's 'bread of equality' served as a prelude to a sort of class war waged against the well-to-do, and Claude Javogue's melodramatic attempts at social rectification walked roughshod over sacrosanct property rights.[20] Likewise, the 'official' Terror, as implemented by members of the governing Committee of Public Safety, at times seemed bent on systematic levelling, with the institution of a 'reign of equality' in the hapless city of Lyons by Collot-d'Herbois, and Saint-Just's ruthless economic clampdown on the city of Strasburg, where the wealthy merchant Mayno was exposed on the scaffold for trying to evade exorbitant revolutionary taxes, and citizen Schauer saw his house dismantled brick by brick for having speculated on the public purse and circumvented price regulations.[21]

that their 'reluctance persisted', and faced with the *maximum*, 'the Committee [of Public Safety] and the Convention, clinging desperately to the principles of a liberal economy, only backed down step by step': *La Révolution française*, 3rd rev. edn (Paris, 1963), pp. 344, 367; Albert Soboul likewise considered that 'the Montagnards were so attached to economic liberty that it required the extreme peril of the summer of 1793 and the popular pressure which ensued for them to consent in adopting, against their will and under constraint, the law of 29 September 1793': Saint-Just, *Discours et rapports*, ed. by A. Soboul, 2nd edn (Paris, 1970), p. 86.

[19] Lefebvre, *La Révolution française*, 3rd rev. edn, pp. 360–1, 368.

[20] E. Liris, 'On rougit ici d'être riche', *Annales hist. Révol. fr.* 300 (April–June 1995), pp. 295–301; and C. Lucas, *The Structure of the Terror: The Example of Javogues and the Loire* (Oxford, 1973), pp. 61–95, 156–256, 282–4.

[21] Instruction of 26 Brumaire II, in M. Biard, *Jean-Marie Collot-d'Herbois, homme de théâtre et homme de pouvoir (1749–1796)* (Lyons, 1995), part III, chapter 4; and J.-P. Gross, *Saint-Just: sa politique et ses missions* (Paris, 1976), pp. 291, 298.

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Is it fair, however, to imply, as does Mona Ozouf, that the desire to achieve greater equality and the consent to the use of force went hand in hand? That the combination of these two urges in revolutionary practice represents a watershed, the true dividing line between Girondins and Montagnards, the point of no return at which democratic politics gave way to a moral crusade, when Robespierre and his followers threw in their lot with the militant sans-culottes and demonstrated their conviction that equality could and should be imposed by coercion? That the only way to correct the anti-social inclinations of the recalcitrant rich was to 'force them to be good'?[22]

There is an understandable tendency among historians to equate 'the Terror' with the radical phase of revolution as such, an assimilation which has obvious implications for the nature of Jacobin egalitarianism and which results from the lack of any commonly agreed definition of the term. To what extent in particular are we justified in referring to the Terror as an 'economic and social programme'?[23] There is, for example, a marked difference, which is more than semantic, between price controls brought about by bread riots or the violent rhetoric of subsistence[24] and a consciously elaborated and coherently executed programme of food rationing. Crisis management of vital supplies necessitated by wartime mobilisation relied heavily not on the Terror, but on the power of requisition exercised by the revolutionary government for the duration of the emergency. Arms production and full employment in the defence industries were governed by the war effort, not by the Terror, even if at times fear of political reprisals prompted workshop managers to yield to workers' demands.[25] The degree to which the Terror actually coincided with agrarian policy has taxed specialists of land reform without any consistent correlation emerging from their investigations.[26] Again, the fact that a number of democratic practices were initiated 'during the period of the Terror' does not make the Terror synonymous with civic egalitarianism; it rather invites reflection on the symbiosis of the two.[27] The basic

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[22] Ozouf, 'Egalité', pp. 157–8.

[23] Baker, Introduction, *The Terror*, p. xxiv.

[24] W. H. Sewell Jr, 'The Sans-Culotte Rhetoric of Subsistence', *ibid.*, pp. 249–69.

[25] H. Burstin, 'Problems of Work During the Terror', *ibid.*, p. 288.

[26] J.-P. Hirsch, 'Terror and Property', and J.-P. Jessenne, 'The Land: Redefinition of the Rural Community', *ibid.*, pp. 211–22, 223, 235, 238–9.

[27] I. Woloch, 'The Contraction and Expansion of Democratic Space During the Period of the Terror', *ibid.*, p. 310.

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problem, which is one of philosophy rather than terminology, would appear to lie in the inadequacy of any generalisation linking the Terror, or more broadly revolutionary violence, with the determination to reduce inequality and achieve greater fairness, which implies at the outset a deeply rooted concern for the individual.

In what way do 'fair shares' differ from 'equal shares'? The policies on offer in Year II reveal interesting variations in this respect and the chapters which follow endeavour to elucidate and illustrate the uneasy relationship between 'equality' and 'equity'. The latter is clearly relevant to the kind of liberal community posited by the French Revolution as a replacement for the *ancien régime*. Montesquieu, who was anxious to avoid both too much inequality *and* too much equality, had argued that freedom was more desirable than equality, and inequality a lesser evil than despotism.[28] *Liberté* was consequently the single most cherished value proclaimed by the Revolution. *Egalité* came second in the hierarchy of priorities established in 1789, although this sequence was to be reversed in 1793. Some modern thinkers continue to share Montesquieu's view that the two really are incompatible. Thus, Jean Baechler is of the opinion that you cannot maximise liberty and equality simultaneously: the more liberty you allow, the more inequality tends to thrive; and conversely, the harder you push equality, the more you encroach on people's freedom, by redistributing assets, power or prestige. There is, claims Baechler, 'no solution to this very profound contradiction'.[29]

Rousseau, for his part, would have disagreed, one of the arguments of his *Social Contract* being that liberty cannot exist without equality and it is therefore essential to give the same weight to each. Sieyès in turn predicated his conception of citizenship upon this duality.[30] Historical dictionaries, which separate the two, tend to gloss over contemporary perceptions of their complementary

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[28] Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, ed. by R. Derathé, 2 vols. (Paris, 1973), vol. I, pp. iv–v, 234–8, and vol. II, pp. 4–8; see also R. Shackleton, *Montesquieu: une biographie critique*, trans. by J. Loiseau (Grenoble, 1977), pp. 208–16.

[29] Interview with J. Baechler in *Le Monde* of 4 October 1985; see also J. Baechler, *Démocraties* (Paris, 1985).

[30] Rousseau, 'Du contrat social', book II, chapter 11, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, p. 538; E. J. Sieyès, *Essai sur les privilèges* (Paris, 1788) and *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers Etat?* (Paris, 1789); see J.-D. Bredin, *Sieyès, la clé de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1988).

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role.[31] The 'hidden' egalitarian foundation that another modern philosopher and economist detects in utilitarianism is not without relevance to the passionate discussions which took place not only in the Jacobin Club, but also in the Cercle Social, and which hinged on domestic free trade, equal property rights, freedom of enterprise and the capability of self-fulfilment. As Amartya Sen points out, not only is equality an essential feature of liberal theories of social arrangement (equal liberty for all, equal consideration for all), but the opposition between liberty and equality is faulty and inaccurate: liberty being among the possible fields of application of equality, and equality among the possible patterns of distribution of liberty.[32] The deceptive Manichaean antinomy between equality and freedom, collective rights versus possessive individualism, Montagnard egalitarians at loggerheads with liberal Girondins, tends to obfuscate the main issues at stake during the crisis years of the Revolution – namely, the right to existence, fair distribution of vital commodities, fair shares in property ownership, a fair division of tenancies and other economic resources and social benefits – all of which imply a shared vision of the equal right to freedom.

The powerful eighteenth-century rhetoric surrounding the 'equality of man' ('all men are born equal', and so on) should be seen in this light. The revolutionary focus, as from late 1792 onward, came to rest on the central issue of poverty, or rather on the threshold between abject and decent poverty, the threshold at which equality becomes meaningful, at which individual rights can begin to flourish. Inasmuch as poverty is 'lack of freedom', as Sen contends,[33] then well-being in Jacobin perception was understood as the ability to enjoy freedom ('honourable poverty' in Robespierre's parlance).[34]

Hence the close affinity between Girondins and Montagnards and the difficulty authors have had in differentiating between their

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[31] Furet and M. Ozouf in their *Dictionnaire critique*, while Soboul's *Dictionnaire historique* leaves out liberty altogether: P. Goujard, 'Egalité', in A. Soboul, *Dictionnaire historique de la Révolution française*, ed. by J.-R. Suratteau and Fr. Gendron (Paris, 1989), pp. 403–4.

[32] A. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (New York and Oxford, 1992), pp. 13, 16–17, 21–3.

[33] *Ibid.*, pp. 110, 152.

[34] Speeches of April 1791 and 24 April 1793, in *Œuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, ed. by M. Bouloiseau, J. Dautry, E. Déprez, G. Laurent, G. Lefebvre, E. Lesueur, G. Michon, and A. Soboul, 10 vols. (Paris, Nancy and Gap, 1910–67), vol. VII, p. 165, and vol. IX, p. 459.