

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Ideas as Evidence

Three questions have usually been asked about the French Revolution: why did it happen?; why was it so violent?; and what was its legacy? At first sight all three questions seem to beg other, more conceptually ambitious questions, whether about causation, violence or legacies. The aim of this short book is to answer both sets of questions by bringing together events with ideas. Combining the two actually helps to make the answers to the second, more conceptually oriented set of questions more historically and analytically focussed. It does so because the French Revolution owes much of its complexity to ideas and, more particularly, to the range and multiplicity of appearances and temporalities that ideas can lend to events. Complexity, not only in France and not only at the time of the French Revolution, is more than an effect of large numbers of people living in different circumstances with different, sometimes antagonistic, interests. It is also an effect of the range of occasionally compelling, but occasionally competing, emotional responses, moral evaluations and causal assessments made by, or of, people living in similar circumstances with similar, overlapping or complementary interests. Complexity, in short, has as much to do with interpretation and context as with multiplicity and diversity because descriptions, as is well known, can be either thick or thin, and evaluations in their turn can have as much to do with empathy, identity and distinction as with measurement, comparison and analysis. Physiology, it is said, cannot identify the difference between a tic and a wink.¹ The world, it is also said, can be seen

¹ On thick description, see, famously, Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 15–42, and, on distinction, Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* [1979] (London, 1984). ‘The difference between the Parthenon and the World Trade Center, between a French wine glass and a German beer mug, between Bach and

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

either through rose-tinted spectacles or through a glass darkly. It will be the same world but it will, nonetheless, look different. The same set of people can, in a similar sense, be described as flourishing or failing, equal or unequal, subject or free, just as praying while smoking differs from smoking while praying, and lives, like glasses of water, seem to have different prospects if they are said to be half full or half empty. Appearances, it seems, count, but not only – or not really – because of the appearances themselves.

Appearances do, however, capture something distinctive about events, whether, in the first instance, as a simple set of names, dates, times and places or, in something nearer to the last instance, as an intricate combination of actions, intentions, causes and meanings that, conceptually and symbolically, anchor appearances to history and give them what has sometimes been called their historicity, or the qualities of singularity and particularity that, more fundamentally, make them what they were. The French Revolution, from this perspective, was one of many revolutions but it was also, nonetheless, *the* French Revolution. Appearances are, therefore, both a starting point and an end point. They form a link between the idea of the beginning of a sequence and the idea of a completed whole, or between what could be called serial time and affective time. The resulting combination of unity and multiplicity seems to mean that appearances have an ability to make events and ideas add up to something historically distinct or, as it has sometimes been called, a totality.² Writing at the time when the French Revolution had run much of its course, the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel gave the name of phenomenology to this way of thinking about appearances and set out to show how something envisaged as both a sequence and a whole (*Ganze*) could enable events and ideas to cohere.³ As he set out to show, the flexibility that comes with language and

John Philip Souza, between Sophocles and Shakespeare, between a bicycle and a horse, though explicable by historical moment, necessity, and destiny, is before all a difference of imagination.' Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination* (San Francisco, 1981), 1.

² For a helpful overview, see John E Grumley, *History and Totality. Radical Historicism from Hegel to Foucault* (London, 1989) and, earlier, Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Cambridge, 1984).

³ For an initial indication of Hegel's conceptual vocabulary in his treatment of wholeness, see Shterna Friedman, 'Freedom and Totality: How Hegel Became

1 INTRODUCTION: IDEAS AS EVIDENCE

thinking not only helps to explain how something can be made up of many things but also how both aspects of this fusion of unity and multiplicity can remain conceptually distinct. Many minutes, for example, make up a day, but Tuesday is still different from Wednesday. Many years later, a more context-oriented version of the same approach was given the name of ‘thick description’ by the British philosopher Gilbert Ryle and, in this guise, the concept was taken over to become one of the keys to the interpretation of cultures in the works of the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz.⁴ A brief account of the origins and significance of this two-sided approach to appearances, centred particularly on the events of the French Revolution, can be found towards the end of this book. Here, however, it is important to begin with appearances in their initial, more straightforward sense, as the names, dates, times and places that, cumulatively, made up the sequence of events that became the French Revolution.

That sequence began on 20 August 1786 with a memorandum to France’s king Louis XVI drafted by his controller-general of finances, Charles-Alexandre de Calonne. In it, Calonne indicated that projected royal expenditure in 1787 was likely to exceed projected royal income by some 115 million livres (at that time forty French livres were equivalent to some three English pounds). The point of the memorandum was to set out an agenda for an assembly of the kingdom’s most notable subjects which, accordingly, was summoned by Louis XVI to meet on 22 February 1787 to address the problem of the deficit. Its immediate brief was to discuss and, Calonne hoped, to endorse a substantial package of fiscal, financial and institutional reforms. On the fiscal side, Calonne proposed the creation of a land tax, to be paid in kind, not cash, and at rates that were calibrated to four different levels of fertility of cultivated land. On the institutional side, there would be a network of elected provincial assemblies whose members would be drawn from a broad cross section of property owners rather than from the three separate French estates of the clergy, nobility and commoners. The responsibilities

Hegel’, *History of Political Thought*, 45 (2024), 124–56. See more fully Jean Hyppolite, *Logique et existence* (Paris, 1952), 7–26.

⁴ Gilbert Ryle, ‘Thinking and Reflecting’ [1966], in his *Collected Papers*, 2 vols. (London, 1971), 2, 465–79.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

of these provincial assemblies would include the administration of tax assessments and the collection of tax revenue, a proposal indicating the likely abolition of the many existing offices, including the various royal tax farmers and the thousands of others that could be bought and sold, bequeathed or inherited, adding up to a total of some 60,000 venal offices in all. Finally, on the financial side, a public bank was to be established, internal customs barriers were to be removed, restrictions on the grain trade were to be lifted, forced labour was to be replaced by a monetary tax and the duty raised on salt was to be standardised throughout the kingdom.

Calonne's proposals were rejected by the Assembly of Notables and, on 8 April 1787, he was dismissed. After a short interlude, his successor, the archbishop of Toulouse, Etienne Loménie de Brienne, dissolved the Assembly of Notables on 25 May 1787 and, over the course of that year and the next, tried to persuade, then force, the thirteen French high courts of appeal, or Parlements, to adopt much the same set of reforms. In addition to being high courts of appeal in civil and criminal legal matters, the Parlements also had a long-standing, if somewhat indeterminate, right to object to – or remonstrate on – projected royal legislation, usually by invoking some – equally indeterminate – interpretation of the fundamental laws of the monarchy, or the kingdom or, sometimes, both. In keeping with this tradition, the several hundred law officers, or magistrates, of the Parlements flatly refused to endorse Brienne's proposals. As their opposition became firmer, the stage seemed set for a replay of events that had unfolded in France in 1771 and 1772 when, in what was called the Maupeou coup, the French royal army had been used to dissolve all thirteen Parlements, enabling the government of Louis XVI's grandfather, Louis XV, to impose a new set of legal institutions on the kingdom. Although Louis XVI reinstated the Parlements when he became king in 1774, something similar to the Maupeou coup seemed likely to recur when, some sixteen years later on 8 May 1788, a royal edict established a plenary court and stripped the Parlements of their status as high courts of appeal. But, by the late summer of 1788, in the wake of open resistance from the Parlements, notably from the Parlement of the province of the Dauphiné situated in the southern French city of Grenoble, conditions began to change. The royal government began to backtrack, and on 8 August 1788, Louis XVI issued an invitation to his subjects to discuss

1 INTRODUCTION: IDEAS AS EVIDENCE

the composition of a meeting of the Estates-General of the whole kingdom. The meeting was set initially to take place several years in the future but, as the problem of the deficit became more acute, it was brought forward to begin in May 1789. Before it began to meet, the king's subjects were invited to discuss a number of preliminary questions about its composition, procedures and powers.

The initial question that they were expected to address was whether the Estates-General should meet as it had done when it had last been convened almost 175 years earlier in 1614, with three separate sets of delegates representing the first, second and third estates, or the clergy, nobility and commoners, each elected by separate electoral assemblies in every province, bailiwick, town and parish. This initial question about the scale and level of continuity between 1614 and 1789 was, in reality, made up of three further and more substantive questions. The first was a question about the respective size of each delegation, particularly in the light of the increase in size of the third estate and the urban population of France since 1614. The second was a more difficult question about whether the representatives of the three estates should meet separately, but with a requirement to reconcile their respective views under ministerial guidance or supervision, as had been the case when the Estates-General were last summoned to deliberate on the grievances (*doléances*) of the assorted orders, provinces, corporations and estates of the kingdom. The third question arose directly from the second and was a large, composite and potentially intractable question about the rights, powers, offices, procedures, responsibilities and obligations of the Estates-General if, unprecedentedly, it was to deliberate and decide as a single body.

On 16 August 1788, however, before any of these questions could be answered, the royal treasury suspended cash payments on bills presented for financial settlement and began to issue promissory paper notes to cover the deficit. A week later, on 24 August, Brienne resigned and was replaced two days later by Jacques Necker, a Swiss banker who had held the office of director general of finance between 1776 and 1783 when France had intervened in support of American independence in the war between Britain and the nascent United States. The meeting of the Estates-General was now brought forwards to 5 May 1789. The period before it met was filled by an immense number of local and provincial

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

meetings and electoral assemblies where grievances were drafted, delegates were elected and mandated powers were discussed and defined. When, however, the meeting began, it quickly became deadlocked on the three questions that had arisen over its composition, procedures and powers. The deadlock paralysed the Estates-General and seeped into the royal ministry, the royal court and the royal family, with different ministers and rival clients of the king and queen advocating competing policies or incompatible measures to move ahead. As the deadlock continued into the early summer, and despite a unilateral declaration by the representatives of the Third Estate on 17 June 1789 proclaiming themselves to be a National Assembly, it was still possible to think that decisive royal action would deliver a replay of the Maupeou coup of 1771–72. When, finally, the expected show of force seemed about to appear, with news of the abrupt dismissal of Jacques Necker on 11 July 1789 and the simultaneous appointment of a new, reputedly hard-line ministry, continuing high-level wrangling and ministerial hesitation allowed large swathes of the population of Paris to take to the streets in search of arms to counter the anticipated royal coup. The search for arms gave rise to a siege of the royal fortress known as the Bastille on the eastern side of Paris and, as the crowd grew in size over the three following days, sheer force of numbers blocked the long-anticipated recourse to force. Faced with the prospect of carnage, the army high command did not act and, on 14 July 1789, the Bastille fell. After its fall, the short-lived ministry appointed by Louis XVI after Necker's dismissal was given the derisive name of the Ministry of the Hundred Hours.

The most obvious and immediate question arising from this sequence of events is how to explain why the deficit that was predicted in the autumn of 1786 gave rise to the French Revolution and, more specifically, to the armed insurrection that began in Paris on 11 July 1789 and culminated on 14 July 1789 with the fall of the Bastille, the event still commemorated in France over 200 years later. This initial question is connected, equally obviously, to a further set of questions centred on explaining why, after the Bastille fell, a further seven Parisian insurrections and intermittent outbursts of street fighting – on 5–6 October 1789, 17 July 1791, 20 June 1792, 10 August 1792, 31 May–2 June 1793, 5 September 1793 and 27 July 1794 – gave rise to, or helped to produce, the various, sometimes deliberately orchestrated political turning points

1 INTRODUCTION: IDEAS AS EVIDENCE

and organised acts of retribution that came to be known generically as the Terror. By the time of the Terror, starting in the spring of 1793 and continuing into the summer of 1794, France had become a republic, loudly proclaimed soon after the Parisian insurrection of 10 August 1792. In place of the old French monarchy, this first French republic was governed by a combination of an elected constitutional Convention, a name that echoed the one given to its counterpart in the United States, and its two great Committees of Public Safety and General Security established in the spring of 1793. In conjunction with the Convention and its committees, the republic was also governed less formally by the purely voluntary membership of a network of political clubs headed, famously, by the Jacobin club of Paris. It is not clear how or why a voluntary association like the Jacobin club, initially one of many societies established in 1789 or 1790 and modelled on the earlier English Society for Constitutional Information established in 1780, could turn into something like a virtual government and become the power base of Maximilien Robespierre, Louis-Antoine Saint-Just, Georges Couthon and their political allies until they were overthrown on 27 July 1794 (or 9 Thermidor Year II according to the new French republican calendar) by a Parisian insurrection initiated by dissident members of the Convention. Nor, finally, is it clear why the political upheaval in France gave rise to a huge European war, beginning on 20 April 1792 and ending only twenty three years later with the final defeat of Napoleon's army at the battle of Waterloo, long after a military coup in 1799 brought the French republic to an end and replaced it, first by the French Consulate and then, in 1804, by the first French Empire.

Deficits usually cause tax rises, expenditure cuts or a mixture of both, not revolutions or major wars. Nor have many revolutions given rise to new territorial and administrative divisions, a new calendar, new weights and measures, a new currency, a new religion and a proliferation of new or replacement names – such as 'Brumaire', 'Germinal', 'Anaxagoras', 'Anacharsis' and 'Commune-Affranchie' instead, for example, of 'Marie', 'Joseph', 'Louis', 'Saint' or 'Lyon' – for people, places, months or years. There was a *levée en masse* in France in 1793 followed by more-or-less permanent mass conscription until the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815. In 1792 and 1793, there were also *armées révolutionnaires*, or revolutionary militias, established not to fight at the fronts, but to promote the virtues of patriotism and cement allegiance to the republic in face of the

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

adverse economic, political and military conditions generated by war and civil war. At different times, particularly in 1792–93 and 1795, the new French paper currency (named the *assignat*) lost its purchasing power at frightening speed and the prices of cereals and other basic subsistence goods rose equally alarmingly. In 1793 and 1794, an administratively enforced maximum was imposed on prices and wages but revoked when, after Robespierre's fall, the Committees of Public Safety and General Security were stripped of their powers and the Jacobin club was closed down. There was a Cult of Reason during the French Revolution, but there was also a Cult of the Supreme Being, as well as something called 'Theophilanthropy'. There was a Jacobin club, but also a Cordeliers club, a Social Circle, a Society of Friends of the Blacks, a Fraternal Society of the Two Sexes and many other lesser-known voluntary associations, some associated with people called *sans-culottes* and others with those named *bonnets de laine* (flat caps), *hommes à piques* (pikemen) or, sometimes, *hommes à moustaches* (men with a moustache). Breeches or their absence, along with red caps of liberty, the *Marseillaise* and the still intellectually and hermeneutically challenging paintings of Jacques-Louis David and Jacques Réattu were as much a part of the French Revolution as were open-air guillotines and women knitting when the blade fell. As these particularities indicate, quite a lot more is required to explain why the deficit that Calonne forecast in 1786 gave rise to the type of revolution that the French Revolution became.

This is why ideas matter. The claim should not be taken to mean that ideas have some special causal power, as would be the case if such concepts as language, discourse, symbols, culture or ideology are taken to be more like historical agents than analytical distinctions and exposed, consequently, to much the same charge of circularity that once used to be made to what was called the social interpretation of the French Revolution.⁵ Ideas, instead, are best seen as simply part of human life, like food or song or sex or work, with as much or as little causal power as any of the rest. The aim of this book is, accordingly, to use ideas as evidence, just as social, political, economic or cultural historians use other types of evidence to make the historical interpretations or explanations that they make. Importantly, however, using ideas as evidence

⁵ Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1964).

1 INTRODUCTION: IDEAS AS EVIDENCE

means doing something significantly different from using other forms of historical evidence, whether economic, military, religious, cultural, demographic or biographical. Most historical evidence is largely retrospective in character and firmly part of a time and place. Ideas, however, can have a prospective quality that is unavailable in other types of historical evidence because ideas can address the future as well as the past. They can, inversely, also remain long buried before being brought back to life, sometimes in a new or unexpected guise. In either sense, ideas can have a synthetic quality that can straddle the boundaries of time and place. Something about Oliver Cromwell and George Washington, for example, made both significant figures in the politics of the French Revolution even though the first had been dead for over a century, while the second was living several thousands of kilometres away from France. Although neither was actually there, both Cromwell and Washington still had a presence in the French Revolution.

As these examples suggest, ideas can refer to what might have been, but never was, while other types of historical evidence usually have a more unambiguously positive and finite quality. Using ideas as evidence can involve reconstructing forgotten visions of the future, piecing together frustrated expectations of change or working out the point of past precepts that, in fact, were never practically applied. Investigating ideas sometimes calls, therefore, for finding out more about what once seemed possible but never became actual. This, it should be emphasised, does not mean that using ideas as evidence is like doing what is sometimes called counterfactual or virtual history because, unlike something counterfactual (such as a French victory at the Battle of Waterloo or a successful escape from Paris by Louis XVI in 1791), ideas really did exist and can still be objects of historical inquiry. The past might well be another country but it is usually easier to identify and describe than the future because the future, by definition, does not exist. It can, of course, be guessed at, speculated about, predicted and sometimes even prophesied but it can, nonetheless, never actually happen. The past, however, really did.

There is, however, still a residual gap between the factual existence of the past and its frequently different factual presence. One description of what this difference could mean was set out famously some two generations after the French Revolution by Karl Marx. ‘Tradition’, he wrote,

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And, just when they appear to be revolutionising themselves and their circumstances in creating something unprecedented, in just such moments of revolutionary crisis, that is when they nervously summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders and uniforms in order to enact new scenes in world history, but in this time-honoured guise and with this borrowed language.⁶

This gap between the factual past and its factual presence is another reason why ideas matter. It is not necessary to be a follower of Martin Heidegger to register that historicity and creativity are quite closely connected and that quite a lot is involved in explaining how and why something living can be distinguished from something dead and made available for extraction in some mysteriously more than purely factual sense from the long kaleidoscope of the past.⁷ Something distinctive in the history and politics of the French Revolution occurred for example when, early in May 1793, François-Noël Babeuf changed his name to Gracchus Babeuf. The point was not only the change of name but also the change of values that the change was intended to signify. It was a change designed to bring together past and future in some quite strongly moral sense and to refer as much to present injustice as to the potential for justice of future possibilities. In this case, the change of name changed little else but, after Babeuf's trial and execution in 1797, his name was revived in the 1820s to become a symbol of the many questions about property, community and citizenship that, in the context of the arguments over restitution and retribution that developed after 1815, came to be associated with the French Revolution. As this example indicates, the several different temporal dimensions involved in using ideas as evidence add something extra to historical explanation. Explaining how and why a potentially large number of initial possibilities crystallised into a more specific set of historical actualities means that this type of historical

⁶ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [1852], in *Karl Marx, Later Political Writings*, ed. Terrell Carver (Cambridge, 1996), 32.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Qu'est-ce que la métaphysique?* [1929], translated by Henry Corbin [1938], ed. Marc Froment-Meurice (Paris, 1985), particularly pp. 48–50. For a helpful way in, see Leslie Paul Thiele, 'Heidegger, History, and Hermeneutics', *Journal of Modern History*, 69 (1997), 534–56.