Peter McPhee

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Contributors to this volume


The French Revolution is one of the great turning-points in modern history. Never before had the people of a large and populous country sought to remake their society on the basis of the principles of popular sovereignty and civic equality. The drama, success, and tragedy of their endeavor, and of the attempts to arrest or reverse it, has attracted scholarly debate for more than two centuries. Why did the Revolution erupt in 1789? Why did it prove so difficult to stabilize the new regime? What factors caused the Revolution to take its particular course? And what were the consequences, domestic and international, of a decade of revolutionary change? Featuring contributions from an international cast of acclaimed historians, A Companion to the French Revolution addresses these and other critical questions as it points the way to future scholarship.
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For Lynn Hunt

whose innovative research and generous scholarship pervade this collection
Contents

Notes on Contributors x
Abbreviations xiv
Introduction xv

Peter McPhee

PART I THE ORIGINS AND NATURE OF THE CRISIS OF 1789 1
1 Rethinking the Origins of the French Revolution 3
Peter Campbell

2 The Social and Economic Crisis in France at the End of the Ancien Régime 24
Jean-Pierre Jessenne

3 The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution 42
Sarah Maza

4 France and the Atlantic World 57
Miranda Spieler

PART II RESHAPING FRANCE, 1789–91 73
5 The Principles of 1789 75
Michael P. Fitzsimmons

6 Reimagining Space and Power 91
Alan Forrest

7 “The Case against the King,” 1789–93 107
Barry M. Shapiro
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PART III CHURCH, STATE, AND WAR</th>
<th>121</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 The Ancien Régime, Catholic Europe, and the Revolution’s Religious Schism</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dale Van Kley</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 The Origins and Outcomes of Religious Schism, 1790–99</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward J. Woell</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 A Tale of Two Narratives: The French Revolution in International Context, 1787–93</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas E. Kaiser</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PART IV CONTESTING THE LIMITS OF REVOLUTION</th>
<th>179</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11 Whose Revolution?</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serge Aberdam</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Gender, Sexuality, and Political Culture</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Verjus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 The Peasantry, Feudalism, and the Environment, 1789–93</td>
<td>212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noelle Plack</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PART V REVOLUTIONARY AND COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY VIOLENCE</th>
<th>229</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14 Urban Crowds, Riot, Utopia, and Massacres, 1789–92</td>
<td>231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald Sutherland</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 The Vendée, Chouannerie, and the State, 1791–99</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean-Clément Martin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PART VI POLITICAL CHOICE AND PRACTICE</th>
<th>261</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16 Friends, Enemies, and the Role of the Individual</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marisa Linton</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Choosing Revolution and Counter-Revolution</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter M. Jones</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 The Course of the Terror, 1793–94</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Andress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PART VII SEARCHING FOR STABILITY, 1794–99</th>
<th>311</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19 The Thermidorian Reaction</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura Mason</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 The Political Culture of the Directory</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James Livesey</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
21 The New Security State  
   Howard G. Brown  

22 The White Terror: Factions, Reactions, and the Politics of Vengeance  
   Stephen Clay  

**PART VIII THE REVOLUTION IN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**  

23 The International Repercussions of the French Revolution  
   Mike Rapport  

24 Slavery and the Colonies  
   Frédéric Régent  

25 The Revolutionary Mediterranean  
   Ian Coller  

**PART IX CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN FRANCE**  

26 A Revolution in Political Culture  
   Isser Woloch  

27 The Economy, Society, and the Environment  
   Peter McPhee  

28 The French Revolution and the Family  
   Suzanne Desan  

29 The Revolution in History, Commemoration, and Memory  
   Pascal Dupuy  

Index  

503
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Peter McPhee was appointed to a Personal Chair at the University of Melbourne in 1993 and was the university’s provost in 2007–9. He has published widely on the history of modern France, most recently *Living the French Revolution* (2006) and *Robespierre: A Revolutionary Life* (2012). He is a Fellow of both the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Academy of Social Sciences.

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**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Journal Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>AHR</td>
<td>American Historical Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>AHRF</td>
<td>Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française</td>
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<tr>
<td>(AHRF changed from volumes to individual issue numbers in 1977)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Annales</td>
<td>Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales</td>
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<tr>
<td>CNRS</td>
<td>Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques</td>
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<td>CTHS</td>
<td>Comité des Travaux Historiques et Scientifiques</td>
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<tr>
<td>ÉHÉSS</td>
<td>École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales</td>
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<tr>
<td>EHR</td>
<td>English Historical Review</td>
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<tr>
<td>FH</td>
<td>French History</td>
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<td>FHS</td>
<td>French Historical Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>HJ</td>
<td>Historical Journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>JMH</td>
<td>Journal of Modern History</td>
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<td>JSH</td>
<td>Journal of Social History</td>
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<td>P&amp;P</td>
<td>Past and Present</td>
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<td>PUF</td>
<td>Presses Universitaires de France</td>
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<td>RÉ</td>
<td>Revue Économique</td>
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<td>RF</td>
<td>Révolution Française</td>
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<td>RHMC</td>
<td>Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine</td>
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<td>SÉR</td>
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</table>
Introduction

Peter McPhee

In the years after 1789 French revolutionaries sought to remake their society on the basis of the principles of popular sovereignty and civic equality. This was an awesome challenge in a large, diverse kingdom hitherto structured on custom, corporate and provincial privileges, and exemptions. Others, both French and foreign, took up arms in an attempt to destroy a revolution seen to be inimical to established practices of social hierarchy, religious belief, and authority.

In June 1789 commoner deputies to the Estates-General in Versailles vowed to achieve constitutional government; on 14 July several thousand armed Parisians seized the Bastille fortress in eastern Paris. Ever since, people have debated the origins and meaning of what had happened. By the time of Napoleon Bonaparte’s seizure of power in December 1799, the first historians of the Revolution had begun to outline their narratives of these years and their judgments about the consequences of revolutionary change. Why was there a Revolution in 1789? Why had it proved so difficult to stabilize a new regime based on representation and rights? Why did the Revolution take its particular course? What were the consequences of a decade of revolutionary change?

The drama, successes, and tragedies of the Revolution, and the scale of the attempts to arrest or reverse it, have attracted scholars to it for more than two centuries. Historians, like those who lived through those years, have agreed on the unprecedented and momentous nature of these and other acts of revolution in the months between May and October 1789. They have never agreed, however, on why what came to be called the ancien régime was overthrown with such widespread support, nor on why the Revolution took its subsequent course or on its outcomes.

The bicentenary of the Revolution in 1989 coincided with a new wave of revolutions, this time against Soviet hegemony in eastern Europe. Celebrations of the bicentenary in Paris occurred in the aftermath of the crushing of student protests in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Since the dominant historical interpretation of the French Revolution had been within a Marxist paradigm of explanation – that this
was essentially a triumph for urban bourgeois and landholding peasants which accelerated the transition from feudalism to capitalism – historians and journalists hostile to the Revolution rushed to proclaim that the lesson of contemporary rebellion against communist regimes was that Marxism was “dead” both as a tool for historical understanding and as a guide to a better future. The French Revolution was “over.”

Such claims were no more than wishful thinking. The consequences of the events of 1789 were so complex and significant that reflection and debate on their origins and course show no signs of concluding. The Revolution continues to fascinate, perplex, and inspire. The two great waves of revolutionary change since the 1980s – the overthrow of regimes in eastern and southeastern Europe and the “Arab spring” – have served to revivify our interest in the world-changing upheavals of the late eighteenth century. In the decades since 1989, however, a more supple and critical use of materialist explanations has been paralleled – and challenged – by the insights of discursive analysis and other forms of cultural history and by more probing application of categories drawn from histories of gender and race, often within a trans-Atlantic or even global context.

This Companion showcases the ways in which historians now respond to the most fundamental questions about the French Revolution. Why and how did an apparently stable regime collapse in 1789? Why did it prove to be so difficult to stabilize a new order? Did the political instability of these years disguise a more fundamental social and economic continuity? Was the French Revolution a major turning-point in French – even world – history, or instead a protracted period of violent upheaval and warfare which wrecked millions of lives? The collection draws on the expertise of many of those historians whose fresh approaches to the era of the French Revolution both exemplify the great richness of current historical writing on these questions and point the way to future directions in revolutionary historiography. The twenty-nine contributions – from France, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia – have all been written specifically for this volume. Approaches vary from wide-ranging reflections about key concepts, such as rights, gender, and terror, to cutting-edge archive-based research. None of the authors would claim that theirs is the final word: like all fine historical writing, their chapters pose questions while advancing our understanding.

One of the most fundamental and difficult questions about the French Revolution has always been how to explain its origins. France was apparently the most stable kingdom in western Europe, so how might one best explain why and how revolution occurred in 1789? Historians have long debated whether there were deep-seated, long-term causes of the political friction which erupted in 1787, and whether there were clear lines of social antagonism. Some have insisted that political conflict was short-term and avoidable: the royal state may have been under critical financial pressure, but its collapse was the outcome of a contingent political process. In his very wide-ranging overview of the current debates on the causes, Peter Campbell argues that the origins of the collapse of the ancien régime and of the Revolution are not the same question. A revolution which was
neither foreseen nor planned will never, he suggests, have a definitive, agreed cluster of causes.

Other historians have argued that the French Revolution was in large measure the work of a bourgeoisie determined to overthrow privilege and be accorded political and social recognition in accord with their economic importance. Urban and rural working people had their own reasons for responding collectively to the opportunities presented by the greater political liberties that accompanied the calling of the Estates-General of 1789. Jean-Pierre Jessenne provides both an overview of French society in the late eighteenth century and a powerful argument that a deep-seated and complex social and economic crisis could not be resolved within existing social relations nor by the monarchy. While recognizing the specificities of the political crisis that erupted in 1787–89, he demonstrates that this crisis was interdependent with socio-economic changes and grievances across the kingdom.

Others have identified different economic, social, and cultural shifts, best observed through an analysis of the material and political “cultures” of eighteenth-century France: that is, the objects and practices of economic life, and changing assumptions being made about legitimacy and opinion. Sarah Maza offers an elegant synthesis of this new research: the emergence of concepts such as “despotism,” “patriotism,” “public opinion,” and “nation” paralleling the rise of a commercial and consumer culture which, if not a direct “cause” of the crisis, informed the political culture through which it was expressed.

This material culture was inextricably linked to an expanding Atlantic economy of trade in colonial produce, French manufactures and wine, and slaves. The involvement of French armed forces in the American War of Independence led to the ruinous expenditure which prompted the calling of the Estates-General in 1789. Like contemporaries, however, historians have long reflected on the intellectual and cultural similarities and differences in what has been called the age of the “Atlantic” revolution. Miranda Spieler’s focus on the concept of “martial law,” introduced in Paris in October 1789, illuminates the importance of practices across the Atlantic, including North America, and demonstrates the explosive uncertainty about whether the colonies were part of metropolitan jurisdiction.

As Michael Fitzsimmons elaborates, deputies did not arrive for the meeting of the Estates-General in Versailles in May 1789 with clearly formulated revolutionary or conservative agendas. He stresses that the renunciation of privileges at the session of 4 August was not only a dramatic response to the revolts in much of the countryside but was also the moment which galvanized deputies into far more coherent and sweeping reforms than most had as yet contemplated. This unanticipated boldness had its most resounding expression in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen voted on 27 August 1789. The Declaration asserted the essence of liberalism, that “liberty consists of the power to do whatever is not injurious to others.” Accordingly, it guaranteed rights of free speech and association, of religion and opinion. This was to be a land in which all were to be equal in legal status, and subject to the same public responsibilities: it was an invitation to become citizens of a nation instead of subjects of a king. Some historians have instead highlighted an evidently bourgeois conception of property in the Assembly’s subsequent economic legislation, mirrored in the inconsistency between the
Declaration’s universalist proclamation of rights and its decision to limit formal politics to “active” citizens, property-owning white males.

Across the next two years the Assembly undertook the awesome task of remaking France in line with the Declaration’s principles. The reconstruction of public space was based on a belief in the common identity of French citizens whatever their social, ethnic, or geographic origin. As Alan Forrest explains, this was a fundamental change in the relationship between the state, its provinces, and the citizenry. In every aspect of public life – administration, the judiciary, the armed forces, the church, policing – traditions of corporate rights, appointment, and hierarchy gave way to civil equality, uniformity, and elections within national structures. Forrest highlights as well the imperative felt by revolutionaries to remake symbolic space in public places and festivals hitherto redolent of seigneurial and ecclesiastical authority.

Attitudes to royal authority were more ambiguous, since basing the new order on constitutional monarchy sat uneasily with evidence of Louis’ hesitation – and the outright opposition of members of his court – toward major revolutionary reform. Gendered attacks on the moral stature of the king and queen sapped the monarchy’s symbolic standing; Louis’ own incapacity to manage political upheaval further eroded popular goodwill. But was this apparent from the outset? Barry Shapiro’s thought-provoking chapter applies theories of emotional trauma to evidence of the ways deputies responded to intense feelings of betrayal and fear induced as early as the summer of 1789 by interpretations of the behavior of the king and court. His argument poses a challenge to established understandings of the importance of Louis’ image as the “restorer of French liberty” in the early period of the Revolution.

One of the most common themes in the cahiers de doléances of 1789 was the necessity of sweeping reform to the Catholic Church. There was no question of separating church and state: the public functions of the church were assumed to be integral to daily life, and the Assembly accepted that public revenues would financially support the church after the abolition of the tithe. It was argued that, like the monarchy before it, the government had the right to reform the church’s temporal organization. Many historians have seen the Assembly’s reforms – the Civil Constitution of the Clergy – as the moment which fatally fractured the Revolution, and have debated why the Assembly seemed unwilling to negotiate or compromise. Dale Van Kley offers original insights by considering the origins of the schism not only in terms of France’s particular religious and political history but from the perspective of the papacy and Catholic Europe. A revolution which began with high hopes for the “regeneration” of the church spiraled into reciprocal antipathy, laying the ideological groundwork, argues Van Kley, for the hostility to Catholicism later embedded in terroristic practices during the Year II.

Ultimately, only a handful of bishops and perhaps half the parish clergy took the civic oath to enable them to continue to officiate as clergy. Many of the latter subsequently retracted when, in April 1791, the pope, also antagonized by the absorption of his lands in and around Avignon into the new nation, condemned the Civil Constitution and the Declaration of the Rights of Man as inimical to a Christian life. Edward Woell explores how the sharp regional contrasts in clerical
preparedness to take the oath reflected not only individual choice or the influence of senior clergy, but also local ecclesiastical culture. As he demonstrates, the outcomes were to be fundamental to subsequent political choice and division at every level across the revolutionary decade.

Historians have agreed that, before 1789 and after 1791, issues of foreign policy and military strategy dominated the domestic reform agenda; they generally assume, too, that the two intervening years of sweeping revolutionary change, 1789–91, were a time when radical internal reform preoccupied the Assembly. Thomas Kaiser reveals instead that a major impulse for revolutionary reform was in fact the desire to “regenerate” as well France’s capacity to act as the key military and commercial player in international politics. Extensive research has enabled him to identify both France’s increasing diplomatic isolation and different narratives developed inside France to explain this. The narratives were to transform the course of the Revolution, for on 20 April 1792 the Legislative Assembly declared war on Austria. By early 1793 the nation would be surrounded by a hostile coalition.

By 1792 revolutionaries faced two fundamental questions: could the Revolution survive external military threat and increasing internal division; and in whose interests should the Revolution itself be concluded? The tension between the universalism of the Declaration of Rights and the exclusion of slaves and mulattoes was immediately apparent. Similarly, the contradiction between the inclusive promises of the Declaration and the exclusions enshrined in subsequent legislation was not lost on women activists. Finally, while religious liberty and civil equality were quickly granted to Protestants and the Sephardi Jews of Bordeaux and Avignon, it was only during the final sessions of the National Assembly in September 1791 that the Ashkenazi Jews of eastern France were granted full equality. In his challenging reflection, however, Serge Aberdam warns against an approach which measures the extensions of rights on a spectrum imposed by hindsight, arguing instead that contemporary understandings of “rights” about gender, race, and class were neither so fixed nor limited, and that the question of “whose” revolution this was is best answered by a close analysis of specific claims and struggles.

Some historians have argued that despite, or because of, the political challenge of radical women, the transition from absolutism – under which all were subjects of the king – to a republican fraternity of male citizens served to reinforce the subordinate political position of women. In contrast, others have stressed that the repeated strictures about “women’s place” must be understood as a prescriptive reaction to women’s political activism and the central importance of legislation on the family and citizenship rather than as a simple reflection of gendered actuality. Anne Verjus discusses incisively these and other approaches to gender and political culture, drawing as well on studies of English and American society to elaborate contemporary assumptions about the sovereignty of heads of households.

Battles over the limits to change were also played out in the countryside, where the flashpoints of continuing revolution concerned not only the incomplete abolition of seigneurial rights in August, but control of resources. From 1789 a plethora of reports poured in to Paris of seizures of land belonging to the state and to seigneurs, and of unchecked felling of trees in forests. Marginal, uncultivated land was seized and cleared by the rural poor, desperate for an arable plot. Noelle Plack
surveys legislation seeking to resolve rural conflict and to protect the environment; while seigneurial dues were not finally abolished until July 1793, she stresses the differential impact across rural society of this legislation, the sale of national property, and attempts to regulate common land.

All revolutionaries have to come to terms with large-scale popular violence, both its successes and its excesses. Such violence made the Revolution possible, but from the outset its particular cruelty startled contemporaries. Two of the most notorious examples of revolutionary bloodshed erupted in Paris. The governor of the Bastille had been killed in horrific fashion after his surrender on 14 July 1789. A few days later, the royal governor of Paris and his father-in-law were battered to death and decapitated, their heads paraded through Paris. Then, in early September 1792, convinced that “counter-revolutionaries” (whether nobles, priests, or common-law criminals) in prisons were waiting to break out and welcome the foreign invaders once the volunteers had left Paris for the war-front, about 1,200 of the 2,700 prisoners were killed, many after being brought before hastily convened popular courts. Donald Sutherland’s confronting chapter details the vindictiveness which horrified observers of these two episodes, noting that there were many other similar acts outside the capital. He uses these examples to question George Rudé’s longstanding linking of crowd action to the price and availability of bread, insisting on the importance instead of beliefs about inequitable taxation and political manipulation of food supply.

Revolutionary governments also had to come to terms with a range of anti- and counter-revolutionary insurrection. The Convention responded to military crisis by ordering a levy of 300,000 conscripts in February 1793. In the west the levy provoked massive armed rebellion, known, like the region itself, as “the Vendée.” Resulting in terrible loss of life, the civil war left permanent scars on French society and politics. Jean-Clément Martin’s challenging, lucid reflection explores the insurrection and meanings attributed to what contemporaries described as the “war” in the Vendée and differentiates it from the “chouannerie” to the north, where the army engaged in protracted but sporadic repression of rebels.

The course of the French Revolution has commonly been understood as a response to armed counter-revolution and military invasion at a time of deep internal division about the objectives of the Revolution itself. More recently, historians have sought to restore greater personal agency, acknowledging that revolutionaries were choosing between alternative ways of saving the Republic, and emphasizing personal friendships and antipathies. Those who battled over the implementation of the revolutionary project worked within pre-existing or newly formed networks of friends and the like-minded. There were others they came to mistrust, even to hate. How did particular individuals seen to personify particular phases of the Revolution come to be so loved or demonized? Marisa Linton considers three men at various points powerful within the Jacobin Club – Barnave, Brissot, and Desmoulins – and whose relationships became venomous and fatal. Linton teases out the tension between friendship and civic virtue, where personal ties and loyalties could be seen as inimical to the public good.

At a local level, too, the Revolution was mediated through existing networks of exchange, family, and faith, all tested and changed by the Revolution of 1789. The radical decentralization of power after 1789 created a situation where revolutionary
legislation from Paris was interpreted and adapted to local needs. In this process—the social history of administration—the one million or more men who were elected to local government, the judiciary, and administrative and national guard positions played the key role in the void that existed between the Assembly’s national program and the exigencies of the local situation. Where particular legislation was unpopular, especially that concerning the redemption of seigneurial dues or religious reform, this was a commitment which could also earn them isolation and contempt. How might we go about explaining the physical and social geography of opinion? Peter Jones argues convincingly that the choices that individuals, families, and communities made were neither scripted from the outset of the Revolution nor were they fixed. Polarities of “patriots” and “aristocrats” disguised complexities among those who were resistant to the Revolution rather than opposing it outright and between those who acquiesced in change rather than supporting it.

Certainly, however, the great internal and external crises of these years left no family untouched by or undecided about the Revolution. This was particularly the case as the crisis of war and counter-revolution reached a peak in the summer of 1793. Most historians have seen the Revolution as based on sincere liberal beliefs in tolerance and judicial process until the National Convention was forced by the circumstances of violent counter-revolution to compromise some of its founding principles through a policy of “terror until the peace”—only after Robespierre’s death in 1794 labeled “the Terror.” Recently, however, other historians have argued that the mentalité of the Terror was present at the very outset of the Revolution in May 1789, when “patriots” began stigmatizing their opponents as enemies of the new order of things rather than simply adherents of contrary points of view, culminating in a preparedness to make a millenarian attempt to force “regeneration” on an unwilling populace. David Andress demonstrates in contrast that “the Terror” was not a monolith of repression imposed at a particular moment in 1792 or 1793. Instead, he argues that internal counter-revolution and external military threat pushed deputies toward increasingly draconian controls and, as perceived and actual conspiracy further undermined the unity and moral resolve of Jacobins, so these ordinary men caught in extraordinary circumstances became more likely to turn on each other, with deadly consequences.

The ending of “the Terror” in Thermidor II (July 1794) has commonly been seen also as the “end” of revolution, at least in the sense of the most radical politics and popular intervention. Laura Mason engages explicitly with the seminal work of Bronislaw Baczko, agreeing that the Thermidorsians may have ended the Terror, but also managed to preserve the Republic. Mason argues, however, that this was at the expense of popular participation, a commitment to social welfare and even effective civil order. Their legacy was the Constitution of 1795, in its essentials a return to the provisions of the Constitution of 1791: while now a republic, France was again to be governed by representative, parliamentary government based on a property qualification and the safeguarding of economic and civil liberties. Gone now was the optimism of 1789–91, the belief that with the liberation of human creativity all could aspire to the “active” exercise of their capabilities. The men of 1795 now appended a declaration of “duties” to their constitution, exhorting respect for the law, the family, and property.
The years of the Directory, 1795–99, have thus commonly been seen as characterized by the increasingly unstable rule of a narrow elite of propertied conservatives who shunned popular participation in politics and embarked on territorial expansion, opening the way for military dictatorship. More recently, however, historians such as James Livesey have seen these years as an integral part of a revolutionary decade which further embedded the assumptions of a new “political culture” of popular sovereignty and citizenship. Livesey extends Laura Mason’s argument about the Thermidorians, for example, by teasing out the ways in which new property relationships and markets became embedded in the countryside, a “commercial republicanism.”

Such arguments have necessarily reopened debate on whether the foundation of the Directory in 1795 represented the “settlement” of the Revolution, or whether the years 1795–99 were an integral phase of a revolution which was only ended by Napoleon’s *coup d’état* of 1799. Howard Brown places emphasis on the way in which the men of the Directory, by choosing territorial expansion over social welfare and democracy at home, created a new bureaucratic and military professionalism which Napoleon was to use to replace them. Brown makes a telling case about the way the regime became more proficient in dealing with deserters, crime, and political insurrection: a “new security state” ready for strong rule.

Much of the political violence with which the Directory had to deal drew its visceral hatreds from the years of intense sacrifice and division in 1792–94. Stephen Clay draws on research in the Midi, Provence, and the valley of the Rhône, showing in rich detail how the powerful image of polarity of Terror/White Terror in 1794–95 misses the complexity and durability of violent division and revenge. He, like Jones, Martin, Woell, and others, points to the way these experiences would remain etched on memories and political choices.

By the time Napoleon seized power in December 1799, France had been at war with much of Europe for more than seven years. On 20 April 1792 the Assembly had declared that the war was “the rightful defence of a free people against the unjust aggression of a king.” By 1799 it was engaged in wars of national expansion that had abandoned any such defensive pretext, but the impact of the Revolution went well beyond military conquest, and challenged existing social structures and assumptions about power across the northern hemisphere. The concept of the Atlantic or democratic revolution – first articulated in the 1950s by Jacques Godechot and R.R. Palmer and long seen as sterile because of its perceived reflection of Cold War politics – has been revivified by recent histories of the republic of letters, of women’s cultures, and above all of slavery and revolt in our own context of the globalizing world of the twenty-first century.

The new historiography includes studies of global politics, personal and intellectual networks, Caribbean slave societies, and wider European and Mediterranean links. In his remarkable overview essay, Mike Rapport identifies the revolutionary wars as a major element in international relations and the internal politics of affected nations. Nowhere was this more explosive than in the French colonies of the Caribbean, as Frédéric Régent notes in his detailed outline, far more important in the total slave and colonial trade than hitherto assumed. Régent highlights a central paradox of these years, that the French abolitionists who wrestled with the
question of when and how to emancipate slaves should have hesitated, while the pragmatic Napoleon, who had no qualms about slavery, later agreed to a treaty which liberated forever the slaves of the main colony. The resolve of rebellious slaves explains the paradox. Like Miranda Spieler, Régent explores the tensions created by claims that the colonies should be governed within metropolitan jurisdiction. One of Rapport’s key points is that the international impact of the Revolution cannot be confined to Europe and the societies across the Atlantic, and included south Asia and the Mediterranean. In his innovative and thought-provoking chapter, Ian Coller explores the complexities of the reception and responses to the Revolution in the Muslim world of the Mediterranean. This was indeed a revolution which had an impact – profound but diverse – across much of the northern hemisphere and ultimately the globe.

A revolution which had begun in 1789 with boundless hopes for a golden era of political liberty and social change had ended in 1799 with a military seizure of power. It had not proved possible to stabilize the Revolution after the initial overthrow of the ancien régime. Instead, French people had had to endure a decade of political instability, civil war, and armed conflict with the rest of Europe, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of French lives. How “revolutionary” had been their experience? Responses to this question go to the heart of important and often trenchant divisions among historians. Certainly, historians agree that French political life had been fundamentally transformed by examining the practice of power within the context of “political culture” and the “public sphere” to consider a fuller array of ways in which people thought about and acted out politics. This imaginative approach is exemplified in the fertile discussion by Isser Woloch, which ranges across elections, the press, and political associations. In the end, however, an extraordinary decade of activity and contestation was compromised by a failure to produce a stable constitutional settlement; the Revolution’s legacy was innovative and profound but also unstable and deeply divisive. No less than the nature of local and national politics, the various genres of performance were cultural forms through which the Revolution was mediated but which were also necessarily implicated in the protracted process of revolution after 1789. From journalism and the novel to theater, music, and painting, the Revolution was embedded in cultural performance. These years shattered the conventions and privileges of the ancien régime, but the political dimension of cultural production left the arts vulnerable thereafter to new state controls. These political and cultural outcomes – transformative, contentious, ambiguous – are paralleled in economic structures and broader patterns of social relationships, including the place of ethnic minorities. Peter McPhee demonstrates the profound impact of institutional and regulatory change, of the abolition of seigneurialism and the sales of national property, and battles over the control of natural resources. At the same time, there was a remarkable continuity in the power of large landowners and, in many areas, of longstanding agricultural practices. Reforms to family life and challenges to patterns of personal relationships were of fundamental importance, argues Suzanne Desan, as were the attempts to wind them back. As she argues in a seminal chapter, reforms to family law opened up opportunities for many women within the family, and changes to inheritance laws strengthened the focus on the conjugal couple and put pressure on families to change their lineage strategies.
It is not surprising that the Revolution engendered personal and collective memories of sacrifice and triumph, suffering and loss. To the powerful revolutionary tradition which informed French and European politics and culture across the nineteenth century corresponded a *légende noire*, of mass killings, desecration, and destruction of family life and the natural environment. Until the Third Republic became embedded in institutional politics, politics of right and left were imbued with revolutionary imagery, and often personal memory. Only in the second half of the twentieth century did commemoration as “public” or “official” memory start to take on a life of its own independent of the earlier collective memory of regions and social groups. In his wide-ranging concluding chapter, Pascal Dupuy discusses how contested memories were paralleled in polarized histories and the controversies of commemoration. But he ponders whether, as this volume exemplifies, we may be at a point where a scholarly consideration of a revolutionary decade may be less rancorous and more fruitful than before.

Notes


3 Recent historiographical trends are charted and discussed in a special issue of *FHS*, 32 (2009). In 2011, the major journal devoted to the Revolution, the *AHRF*, devoted two special issues (363, 365) to the North and South American dimensions of “the age of revolutions.”

4 The six chapters by French historians have been translated by Juliet Flesch and Peter McPhee. Dr. Flesch’s contribution is warmly acknowledged.

PART I

The Origins and Nature of the Crisis of 1789
CHaPTER ONE

Rethinking the Origins of the French Revolution

PETER CAMPBELL

The origins of the Revolution have been a subject of debate and conjecture since the first year of the Revolution itself. After more than two centuries no one now believes it was primarily a “révolte de la misère,” as Michelet suggested, the very spirit of justice a long time coming, nor a philosophic plot, as the abbé Barruel argued, nor a Jansenist conspiracy (Michelet 1847). It would appear that millions of savages were not in fact launched into revolt and revolution by the babblings of the philosophes, as Hippolyte Taine argued after the Paris Commune of 1871, not least because illiteracy was widespread, education limited, and books very expensive. Nor was it predominantly caused by the rise of a democratic republican ideology that neatly prepared the way for the Third Republic in France, as in Alphonse Aulard’s interpretation a generation later (1910). Echoes of these can still be heard of course, for poor arguments never die, they just get recycled into novels and television. But one major early line of interpretation had a long posterity: the idea that the Revolution was caused by a rising bourgeoisie, harbingers of capitalism, eager for the political power from which the privileged ancien régime society excluded them. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards the notion of a bourgeois revolution was widely accepted; it was given an explicitly capitalist sense by Marx, then a socialist inflection by Jean Jaurès. For Albert Mathiez (1922), the Russian Revolution of 1917 seemed to confirm the diagnosis. The idea came to dominate scholarly work to such an extent that it could be called an orthodox view by the 1950s. As such, it was about to come under a sustained attack. This essay will consider what this view was and how it was undermined by two generations of work in social, cultural, economic, intellectual, and, finally political history.
Can We Explain the Origins?

Before moving ahead with this agenda let us pause for a moment to consider what it means to study the origins of something as shatteringly transformative of state and society as the French Revolution. Most historical arguments about the origins of the Revolution depend on a process of defining the Revolution first – itself a hugely controversial topic – and then reading back into the causes or origins of 1789 the elements that seemed to triumph later. Secondly, the occurrence of the Revolution is often assumed to have been an act of will by particular groups. This too is problematic, because if the notion of deliberate revolutionaries does fit some later revolutions and suits the process of constructing a new state and society by the various assemblies in and after 1789, it is much less clear that the process of the collapse of the ancien régime into revolution shows the same intentionality. The ancien régime collapsed and out of its crisis a revolution developed, but the origins of the collapse and the origins of the Revolution are not the same (Campbell 2006). The collapse should also be seen as a process in itself that fractured society (Cubells 1987), brought more groups into the public sphere, and, as interests became endangered, produced moments of choice for those involved. Even those who chose revolution did so rather late in the day in the early or mid-summer of 1789, for the most part. It is hard to discern bourgeois involvement in 1787 and before the autumn of 1788, while few would deny that the collapse of the state in 1789 opened the door to bourgeois participation in a new politics. Most historians have found a way around this problem of choice or intentionality by assuming that the collapse of state authority and local institutions was merely the occasion for a more intentional revolution, the precipitant of a revolution whose origins lay in impersonal factors like rising social tensions, economic transition, or cultural change. In short, they stress the long-term processes that go beyond the individual and the contingent.

In this way, the participants are seen to be in the grip of historical forces they were not aware of, but were nevertheless furthering. A classic example of this is Alexis de Tocqueville’s Old Regime and the Revolution (1856), in which the Revolution is defined as a further stage in a process of centralization going back to Louis XIV (though it would be a grave injustice to imply that his study argued no more than this). The same could be said about the role of the bourgeois or artisanal “actors” in a revolution that was thought to be essentially about class struggle. It is unsurprising that this approach should continue to dominate historical analysis, because History has long been about meaningful generalization, about finding patterns, and about making sense of the past for the present. The very essence of History is a dialectic of challenge and debate. But caution is required, especially when we are dealing with the problem of motivation. On the one hand we have a revolution that can be conceived as being about what the people at the time thought it was about – and remember they themselves differed in their views – and on the other hand we have a rather different set of revolutions postulated by historians that embodied wider processes of which the participants were partly or largely unaware. The latter approach today looks for example at economic trends and conjunctures, cultural developments, at shifts in the way society and politics