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PARISIAN LIFE IN THE
FRENCH REVOLUTION

1 Passersby

Paris at dawn. Shadowy figures with blackened faces, dressed in dark pants and jackets, unload wagons of coal in front of restaurants at the still silent Palais-Royal. In the dim light, one can barely distinguish a young woman bent beneath a sack; her name is Louise Catherine Vignot, nicknamed *La Charbonnière* (the coal woman). An orphan at fifteen, she first lived with her sister. They both worked at unloading coal, dressed as men because women's clothes hampered their movements. After her sister married a fellow worker, Catherine rented a room from a family of coal sellers in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, and daybreak after daybreak, sack after sack, she carried coal along with her brother-in-law. Around 5 A.M., when the cart was empty, she would return, exhausted, to her room, dressed in the colors of the departed night and pursued by the cries and laughter of those who now began to fill the streets, open their shops, and greet each other in the new day. In her room, Catherine ate her soup and slept until midafternoon. After a quick chat with her landlady, she would check if the coal cart had arrived; not seeing it, she would drink a pint of wine with a friend her own age who had just finished her work. The two young girls strolled in the neighborhood, hailing one acquaintance, laughing up their sleeves at each other's jokes. Then *La Charbonnière* would return to her coal. Except for one fine day in Prairial Year III (May 1795), when a gang of female rebels, demanding bread and the Constitution, crossed her path and Catherine, crowned with a three-cornered hat and armed with a saber, placed herself at their head.¹

1. A.N., W 547 no. 46, F7 4775⁴⁵ d. Vignot.

Revolutionaries were not only to be found in insurrections, in political assemblies, or standing in line outside bakeries. Before examining the role of women in the French Revolution, I wish to portray them in their day-to-day, private lives. We will have greater insight into their social aspirations and political practices if we understand the difficulties of their domestic, emotional, and working lives. A human being, although composed of many facets, still constitutes a single being, and it is this unity of experience that we wish to apprehend. What was the life of a working-class woman during the Revolution? What were her joys, her pains, her domestic concerns and satisfactions, her fears and aggravations over food shortages and the events of the Revolution?

At the time of the French Revolution, there were more women than men in Paris. Censuses were unreliable, but according to various estimates,² between six hundred thousand and seven hundred thousand people lived in Paris in 1789. The census of 1797, which underestimates the population but has the advantage of distinguishing between men and women, shows women as representing 53.84 percent of the Parisian population. Women were especially numerous south of the Seine, particularly in faubourgs such as Saint-Marcel and Saint-Jacques, as well as in the central and north-eastern *quartiers* (districts or neighborhoods). This female majority reflected population movements that originated before the Revolution, when many young women came from the country to work as domestics in the capital. During the Revolution, men—including, for example, priests, or nobles who left their wives to look after the patrimony—tended to emigrate for political reasons more often than women. Above all, the departure of numerous citizens for the army depleted the Parisian male population.

During this period, Paris was divided into forty-eight sections. Like the *quartier* of the Old Regime, each served as an administrative, electoral, and political unit.³ Their inhabitants gathered in the evenings in general assemblies where they would discuss problems of the Revolution and local political quarrels, men would vote, and private and social conflicts would be-

2. See Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, trans. Marie Evans in association with Gwynne Lewis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Jeffry Kaplow, *The Names of Kings: The Parisian Laboring Poor in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1972); Albert Soboul, *Les Sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II. Mouvement populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire, 2 juin 1793–9 thermidor an II* (1958; reprint Paris: Flammarion, 1973); 1797 Census: A.N., F²⁰ 123, F²⁰ 124.

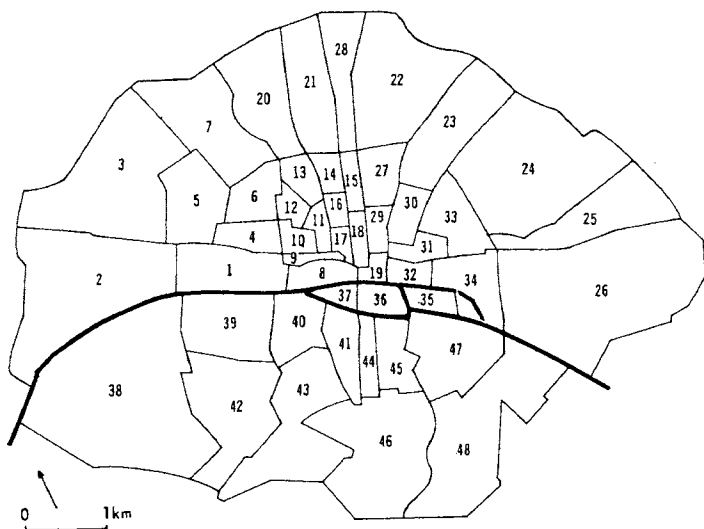
3. On the *quartier*, see Arlette Farge, *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power, and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, trans. Carol Shelton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

come public. As representative of the sovereign people according to popular conception, the general assemblies often made their voices heard in the form of petitions in the National Assembly (first known as the Constituent Assembly, then the Legislative Assembly, and later the National Convention). Each section had its own administrative and revolutionary personnel: the superintendent of police, revolutionary commissioners who were militant sansculottes, and civil commissioners who gained in importance after the fall of Robespierre and his followers, when twelve surveillance committees organized by arrondissement replaced the revolutionary committees.⁴ Every section had its own distinct character, such as the bourgeois, moderate, and even royalist populations of the west (Tuileries, Palais-Royal), the revolutionary sections of Faubourg Saint-Antoine and Faubourg Saint-Marcel, and the popular central sections. Their names changed with new developments in the popular movement. In the Marais district, the Droits-de-l'Homme (rights of man) replaced the Roi-de-Sicile (king of Sicily); in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, the Croix-Rouge (red cross) became the Bonnet-Rouge (red bonnet), then the Bonnet-de-la-Liberté (liberty bonnet), to end up, at the close of the Revolution, as the cold and discreet "de l'Ouest" (the west end) (see maps 1 and 2 and appendix 2).

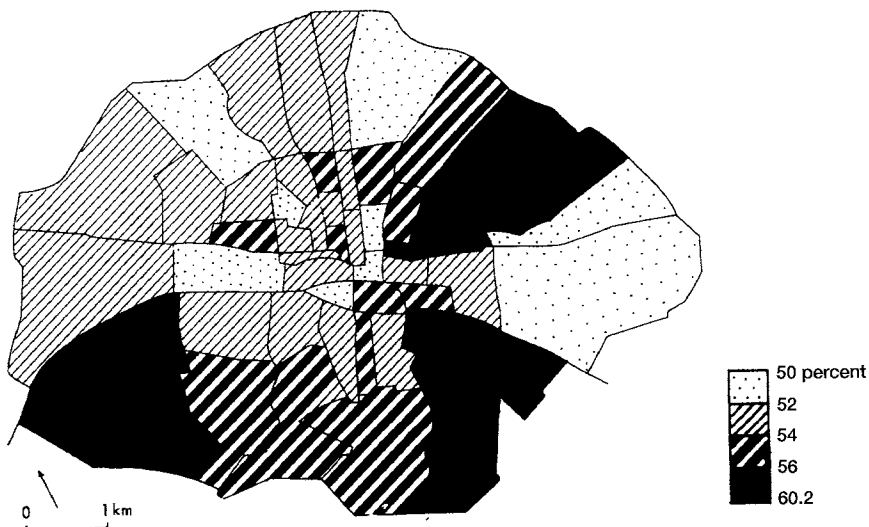
Revolutionary Paris possessed specific gathering places, permanently animated by groups discussing politics, where men and women would rush to gain information about rumors. The garden of the Palais-Royal, renamed the Maison-Egalité in 1793, played a prominent role during the months of June and July 1789. Its walks were bordered by dress and perfume shops, jewelers, and bookstores; fruitsellers and *femmes du monde* (prostitutes) promenaded through its galleries. But the political heart of revolutionary Paris was the Convention, which convened in a room of the Tuileries. Petitioners and demonstrators marched to this destination; all around it, in the National Garden (today's Jardin des Tuileries), on its steps and its terrace, men and women harangued passersby on whatever they thought was needed to preserve the Revolution. Revolutionary crowds also congregated, to a lesser extent, in front of city hall and at the Jacobin club on the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré.

Police spies worked at these hot spots, in the sections, the streets, the cabarets, the markets, and the theaters. The goal of these informers was

4. See Soboul, *Les Sans-culottes parisiens*. A partial translation into English can be found in Albert Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes: The Popular Movement and Revolutionary Government, 1793–1794*, trans. Remy Inglis Hall (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980).



Map 1. The forty-eight sections of Paris in 1790 (see appendix 2).



Map 2. Percentage of women in the total population. Source: Census of Pluviôse Year V.

not to aid the police by identifying thieves, criminals, and counterrevolutionaries but rather to study the mood of the public. Their job was to observe, without intervening, what occurred around them, and then to inform the minister of the interior on the state of public opinion. Their daily reports constitute a particularly rich resource for the historian.⁵ For the most part, informers were intellectuals—teachers, lawyers, journalists, painters, and printers—frequently from modest backgrounds, who supported the Revolution.

Throughout the eighteenth century and during the Revolution, the division between public and private space was not as sharply demarcated as it would be later, nor had public space been identified as specifically masculine.⁶ On the contrary, women of the people, wearing skirts and short gowns striped in the three national colors and caps “in the style of the nation,” were often in the streets. Militant women proclaimed their political opinions by wearing medallions representing Marat or Robespierre around their necks, or a liberty cap. Hair cut short, *à la jacobine*, could indicate a political stance; tricolor cockades and ribbons were signs of revolutionary sympathy. And in this Revolution, which borrowed many of its symbols from antiquity, women dressed themselves *en amazone*. The costume of Louise Catherine Vignot, *La Charbonnière*, was not unusual: women preferred pants to heavy skirts for convenience, for security when they traveled, for deception when they wished to enlist in the army, out of habit when they returned from military service, or just out of whimsy. Dressed in this manner, housewives in search of provisions and workers trying to earn their living passed one another, jostled each other, and railed at one another in the streets of the capital.

Here in the streets were the washerwomen returning linen to their customers, hurrying with their irons and their small portable stoves to the washerwomen’s boats moored on the Seine, and worrying about the price of soap or the difficulty of procuring it.⁷ Their status was diverse. Some, to

5. These reports have been partially published in Pierre Caron, *Paris pendant la Terreur: Rapports des agents secrets du Ministère de l’Intérieur* (27 août 1793–germinal an II), 6 vols. (Paris: 1920–1949), and Alphonse Aulard, *Paris pendant la réaction thermidorienne et sous le Directoire: Recueil de documents pour l’histoire de l’esprit public à Paris*, 5 vols. (Paris: 1898–1902). Examples without references are extracts from these police reports.

6. See Arlette Farge, *Vivre dans la rue à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979).

7. Soap, which cost 14 sous a pound in 1789, continued to increase in price until its price was set at 25 sous a pound (the legal maximum price on 29 September 1793). During the Year II, it was sold by coupon and delivered very slowly. Following the

their profit, laundered, mended, and ironed their customer's linen with the help of an apprentice or a charwoman. Some were specialists in the upkeep of fine linen. Some hired day laborers in the morning; others were small contractors who directed as many as twenty employees. The laundresses marked the physiognomy of the districts where they lived in great number: the Faubourg Saint-Marcel, le Gros-Caillou section of the Invalides, and the sections of the center that bordered the Seine. They were known for their bad character, their loose tongues, and their quick reactions. When, on the evening of 28 January 1794, a boat with approximately seventy laundresses on board broke loose and almost ran aground, the passersby who heard them cry at first shrugged their shoulders, convinced that the laundresses were arguing among themselves "as usual."⁸ When necessary, women took advantage of the image of the virago, the label that society had given women who worked with other women and had an independent social life. The woman Marquet, accused of biting and kicking the corporal who interrupted her while she was stirring up a crowd against a pork butcher, responded "that she was born with an extremely violent character, that she is a laundress and that laundresses in general are not well-behaved people."⁹ But make no mistake, laundresses' invectives targeted the privileged: merchants, the "rich," and the "moderates." And they were quick to leave their boats or their irons to defend an attacked sansculotte or lead a crowd of rebellious women. In a way, laundresses represented for women what shoemakers represented for men: they were a professional group with sansculotte tendencies. Thus, laundresses supported the spirit of one of the members of Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals in Floréal Year IV (May 1796): "Salutations in democracy," he wrote, "yes, in democracy, because now we hear water carriers and laundresses say 'we are sovereign.'"¹⁰

When crossing the capital, it was difficult not to bump into one of the innumerable strolling female merchants who were inseparable from the Parisian landscape. At every street corner, they offered matches, tobacco, tinder, soap, thread, old hats, used clothes, canes, snuff boxes, stamped paper, cockades, ribbons, tisanes, coffee, rolls of bread, cakes, ginger bread, cherries, chestnuts, bunches of asparagus. . . . One could con-

suppression of the maximum on 4 Nivôse Year II (24 December 1794) and galloping inflation, the cost of soap increased in the Year III to the record price of 14 livres (one livre = 20 sous).

8. A.N., W 191, 9 Pluviôse Year II.

9. A.P.P., AA 136 f. 89.

10. A.N., F⁷ 4277.

tinue this inventory in the manner of Prévert, a reflection of the misery and the rage to survive of these women peddlers who lived "from day to day," ready to take advantage of the least opportunity, the smallest transaction that would enable them to pay their rent. Among them were workers without employment who sold their own belongings, rags, fruit, or anything else while they waited for better days. The riverside residents often complained of these peddlers whose cries troubled their tranquillity and whose displays of merchandise obstructed entry to their homes. In September 1793, the inhabitants of Rues Grenatat and Bourg-l'Abbé (a section of the Amis-de-la-Patrie), a gathering place for the merchants of pocketbooks, petitioned that these merchants be evicted because the "public road was interrupted" by their commerce and they were disturbed from five in the morning on by the "continuous uproar of the street fair."¹¹

Some women possessed fragile wooden booths that, when bumped by a carriage, would fall and shatter. Hastily constructed, these booths were quickly demolished if they were built on another merchant's site. The widow Langlois, a vendor of bouquets and of oranges, had the habit of displaying her wares at the corner of the Quai de Gèvres and the Rue Planche-Mibray, an area that was forbidden to her many times because she blocked the thoroughfare. Thus she had the idea of constructing "a little booth" on the Notre Dame bridge; no sooner said than done, and at five o'clock in the morning, a carpenter showed it to her. Unfortunately, a merchant who had displayed rags for a long time on that spot, unable to "endure that anyone would set up a booth in her place," demolished it immediately with a hammer and the help of other vendors of the Notre Dame bridge.¹² These sorts of booths bordered the embankments of the right bank or were set against public monuments like the Louvre. In reality, these "booths" or "shops" were little more than a bit of tapestry for protection against the wind, a plank resting on wooden legs, a roof, or just a piece of ground to which merchants clung for economic and social reasons. These makeshift shelters represented integration into a community; they were proof that a merchant possessed her stable "place," that she did not have to "walk the streets" to sell her merchandise.

Dealers in secondhand goods were supposed to keep a book in which to write the names and addresses of people who had sold them their belongings, which they then resold. But many were quick to close their eyes on the

11. A.P.P., AA 49 f. 228.

12. A.P.P., AA 61 f. 151.

often suspicious origin of the merchandise offered to them; others, out of negligence or incapacity—many did not know how to read or write—did not keep their register up to date and ran the risk of arrest or severe reprimand.

Newspaper vendors shouted the titles of newspapers and pamphlets that they had gotten in the morning at the printer or the bookstore: "Robespierre has been arrested!" "The people are weary, they are dying of hunger, it is time that this ends!" These vendors, capable of moving public opinion and provoking gatherings by their announcements, served, voluntarily or not, the cause of various political groups. Thus, in the months after the fall of Robespierre, certain vendors contributed to the movement against the Jacobins by selling pamphlets hostile to them. In the Year III, many vendors were interrogated who, through militancy or ignorance, sold newspapers like Babeuf's *Le Tribun du Peuple*. On 23 Ventôse Year III (13 March 1795), the widow Vignon was questioned because she sold the insurrectional brochures *Peuple, réveille-toi, il est temps* and *Au Peuple des vérités terribles mais indispensables*; upon her release, she was arrested for the same offense two days later, and the authorities took care to note that her newspapers' ink was still fresh. Thérèse Pillet, who at the moment of her arrest two months later made certain that her newspapers rapidly disappeared, had the habit when announcing her titles of adding phrases judged to be "contrary to the preservation of public order": "Here is *Le Courrier républicain*, which screws us with hunger," "Discourse of General Pichegru, who is now getting his for having smacked us with his whip."¹³

In the center of Paris, la Halle, like all the other Parisian markets (at the Place Maubert, Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Patriarches, and so on), was a space populated by women. Female merchants and housewives contested the price of basic food items but had to come to terms with the great merchant monopolizers—those who hoarded products to increase their price or secretly resold goods above the maximum legal price. On the square paving stones of la Halle, women discussed the price of goods as well as the course of the Revolution; police observers noted with concern their "murmurings," the signs of their "bad humor." The women of la Halle were small re-

13. A.N., F⁷ 4687 d. Dumont and F⁷ 4775⁴⁶ d. Vignon; F⁷ 4775²⁶ d. Tessier and F⁷ 4774⁷⁵ d. Pillet.

tailers who sold their merchandise in small quantities to women who lived on the outskirts of Paris and came to sell their products on the Parisian market. As intermediaries in the market, these women had all kinds of problems; when it was difficult to get merchandise from the suburbs, as in spring of the Year II (1794), they were obliged to go out in the early morning before the provision carts, thus breaking the ordinances that forbade the circulation of merchandise at night. As retailers, they depended on larger, more important merchants and had to deal with them directly as consumers. The menacing crowd of fish merchants that formed on 25 Pluviôse Year II (13 February 1794) on the bridge of Saint-Paul exemplifies this aspect of their work. There was very little fish available at the ports on that day, and the retail merchants who had come to stock up threatened a wholesale dealer whom they accused of carrying fish in the night to large merchants and to caterers. Their complaints illustrate their position perfectly: "We who rush to sell in the streets, we cannot earn our living at all; when we come in the morning to get our merchandise we are told there is none, that the stock has already been distributed today. We know that the boats are still full. . . . This is a trick to support the hoarders."¹⁴ These words are similar to the consumers' complaints. But, as "middlewomen," the merchants were often arrested for selling above the legal limit, which was too low for them to make the little profit necessary to buy bread. As members of the common people, wives or mothers of volunteer soldiers, they loved the Revolution and took pride in having "chased the tyrant out of his criminal lair, Versailles" on the fifth and sixth of October 1789. However, their trade inclined them to favor the rich who paid better, and it was convenient for them to adopt moderate political positions.

In the markets, very poor women shelled peas and grouped them by size, or peeled chestnuts for merchants. Female porters carried on their backs merchants' baskets that frequently weighed at least forty kilos. Other women passed in the street, bent under loads of charcoal, wood, or water for private clients. Ragpickers, practically beggars, rummaged through refuse with their hooks. There was probably not a single occupation in Paris in which women without work did not take part in order to gain the several sous that were still often not enough for their basic needs. Let the least accident, the least sickness, fall on the poorest families, and you would meet them "racing across Paris" to offer their services to whoever might need them.

14. A.N., W 191, 25 Pluviôse Year II.

Thus women were busy from dawn to twilight; the day passed, filled with the daily occurrences of work, the announcements and discussions of revolutionary events, interspersed with stops on the steps of the Tuileries, meetings of the Convention, or with breaks at the tavern when work became too onerous. In the evenings, the knitting women, their work under their arms, gathered in the galleries of the sections or the clubs. Households did not immediately fall asleep; when the weather was good, renters brought chairs into the courtyard or onto the doorstep, read the newspaper together, and gave their opinions on recent events. One example among others: on 5 July 1793, at 9:30 at night, Mazurier's wife and daughter enjoyed the coolness of the evening, "seated in the street at the door of their house" in the company of two neighbor women and a neighbor man, and "they discussed whether the section would accept the constitutional act" (the Constitution of 1793, submitted to popular referendum).¹⁵ Then night fell and prostitutes took possession of the streets.

On 4 October 1793, city hall passed a decree that forbade "all prostitutes to gather in the streets, promenades, and public places and incite men to libertine behavior and debauchery, under pain of arrest and transport to the court of petty sessions as corrupters of morality and disturbers of public order." The police commissioners were instructed "to make frequent visits to the neighborhoods infected with libertine behavior," and the patrols were told to arrest "all the girls and women of bad life whom they found inciting to libertine behavior."¹⁶ From this date on, the commissioners organized street sweeps of prostitutes.

Most arrests were concentrated in several neighborhoods. Almost 42 percent of the arrests were made on the border of the Seine, around the Place de Grève, in the sections of Arcis, and near city hall. In these streets, male and female lodging-house keepers, couples who acted as procurers and kept bordellos, "gave asylum" to the wretched "swallows of Port-au-Blé" in return for a percentage or an exorbitant rent. Toward the west, in the galleries of the Palais-Royal, in adjoining passages, or in the Jardin des Tuileries, patrols questioned women who denied being "public women" but admitted that they were kept by several "friends"; those who were arrested while soliciting were in a difficult financial situation. In happier times, though, they sometimes lived on a grand scale with several domestic ser-

15. A.P.P., AA 176, 6 July 1793.

16. *Moniteur*, XVIII, 41-42.

vants, gave elegant suppers, and were on a first name basis with young bourgeois and with fashionable actors and singers (the golden youth of the Year III), counterrevolutionaries who supported them. Outside of these two great centers, Paris sheltered other islands of prostitution: the garden and taverns of the Champs-Élysées; the Courtille; the streets of Champ-Fleuri, Jean-Saint-Denis, and Chantierine; Place Maubert; and the courtyard of the Palais de Justice.

For the most part, prostitutes were very young girls who lived outside the context of a stable family unit, as in the classic case of the young provincial woman arriving in Paris who, after seeking work in vain, was obliged to prostitute herself in order to live. An impressive number of "public women" admitted that they turned tricks "for lack of work." Many affirmed that poverty and need drove them to streetwalking, and that they preferred this work to stealing, adding sometimes that they hurt no one except themselves. When they were arrested, some expressed aversion for their circumstances. Admitted to the guard house of Arcis section in the night of 29 Germinal Year II (18 April 1794), Françoise Rousseau, a thirty-five-year-old dressmaker, explained that she was "a poor unhappy prostitute" who had spent the night outside and asked permission to warm herself; she declared to the police commissioner that without work and having sold all her belongings, "she had to do something in order to live" and addressed to him the following request: "Citizen Commissioner, please send me to the hospital where I will be much better off than in practicing this trade." She had worked as a prostitute for only one month. Others who had adopted prostitution as their trade were constantly repelled by it. Gabrielle Saron, a twenty-four-year-old prostitute, was found dead on 13 August 1793. The inquest suggested that this was a case of suicide, and her neighbors all affirmed that when she was drunk, she would repeat "that she was weary of her trade and wanted to kill herself."¹⁷

Although unemployment was usually the reason women became prostitutes, all prostitutes were not in the same situation. Some women completely abandoned their first occupation, whereas others solicited only periodically, as part-time work. A significant number of "women of the world" practiced another trade but solicited after their work was finished. Others had been sent to prison or to the hospital, for whatever reason, and

17. A.P.P., AA 60, 23 Pluviôse Year II, 29 Germinal Year II (Françoise Rousseau) and AA 249, 13 August 1793 (Gabrielle Saron).

had to prostitute themselves when they got out, lacking other resources to earn their living. Some prostitutes were arrested many times and incarcerated again only a few days after their liberation: Madeleine Deshayes was arrested on 1 April 1793; set free on 29 June, she was arrested again the next day, then on the first and the twenty-sixth of December 1793, and finally on 17 October 1794, although it had been only two days since she had gotten out of the Hôtel-Dieu.¹⁸

Prostitutes were often in contact with a milieu composed of thieves, gamblers, swindlers, and deserters. The men acted as pimps; the prostitutes sometimes gave their pimps almost all of their profit or the wallets stolen from customers, and warned them when they were about to be arrested. In contrast, certain prostitutes informed the authorities about thieves and deserters.¹⁹ Others, out of patriotism or fear of being compromised, came of their own accord to denounce counterrevolutionaries whom they often met.

Believing that "the Revolution and liberty . . . could stand only on public morality," revolutionaries judged prostitution and prostitutes with severity.²⁰ In 1789, women proposed that prostitutes be forced to wear a distinctive badge or be restricted to specific neighborhoods.²¹ Others, aware of the economic causes of prostitution, wished to remedy this through education that would mix reading and writing with professional apprenticeship.²² In line with these projects, in September 1793, the Parisian club of the Société des Citoyennes Républicaines Révolutionnaires (Society of Revolutionary Republican Women) demanded that "prostitutes be moved to state-run houses in order to occupy them with useful work and, if possible, return these unhappy victims of libertine behavior, whose hearts were often good, and whom poverty alone almost always reduced to this deplorable state, to morality through patriotic lectures."²³ This was no longer simply a question of vocational training, but the club's demand was not just repressive;

18. A.P.P., AA 59, 30 June 1793, 11 Frimaire Year II, AA 60, 6 Nivôse Year II, AA 61, 26 Vendémiaire Year II.

19. See E. M. Benabou, *La Prostitution et la police des mœurs au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Perrin, 1987).

20. See note 17.

21. See for example *Pétition des femmes du tiers-état au roi*, 1 January 1789, or Olympe de Gouges's postface to her *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne*, in *Cahiers de doléances des femmes et autres textes*, ed. P. M. Duhet (Paris: Editions des femmes, 1981).

22. See, for example, *Vues législatives pour les femmes*; Mademoiselle Jodin, *Mémoire sur l'éducation des filles* (1790); or Bachelier, in *Les Femmes dans la Révolution* (Paris: Edhis, 1982), nos. 24 and 4.

23. *Moniteur*, XVII, 661, 679, 699.

it expressed the wish for a reformation of prostitutes through civic and political education. It took into account the condition of prostitutes, who were not considered to be irrevocably lost—their hearts remained “good” but they were the victims of poverty and needed to be educated. Thus, the Society of Revolutionary Republican Women demanded that they “be treated with all the goodness and humanity that their sex and position required in order that, when peace returned, they could be sent back redeemed into society, act as good citizens and become wives and mothers.” Of this program, the decree of 4 October 1793, taken from an indictment by the city prosecutor Chaumette, showed only the repressive side with not a word about the poverty of prostitutes or their individual fates, or the possibility of reintegrating them into society. They were no longer considered to be victims, and incarceration, without any possibility of moral or professional rehabilitation, became the means envisioned to “save the country” by “purifying the atmosphere of liberty from the contagious breath of libertine behavior.” The concern was more to hide “vice” from the eyes of young men than to fight prostitution. The exercise of prostitution was not expressly forbidden; rather, prostitutes were forbidden “to incite libertine behavior and debauchery” in public places.

After this decree, some prostitutes sought “honest” work to survive, but this was difficult. The work crisis that affected many professions, salaries for women that were often too meager to support a decent life, the departure into the army of men who could have helped them financially, and the terrible situation of the Year III ceaselessly pushed women into the shadow of the night.

Night and day, working-class women crossed narrow, dirty, and muddy streets, sometimes brightened by red caps or allegories of Liberty that were painted by inhabitants on the walls of houses. Violence was everywhere; it was necessary to be on guard to avoid becoming the target of an individual’s fury. Moreover, female passersby had to evade “indecent physical contact” and “fraternal kisses” demanded by drunken male citizens. However—a sign of the times—a coachman who accosted an unknown woman with “hey honey, hey good looking, would you like a ride in my carriage” was apt to be severely reminded by the police commissioner “that a lack of respect is a violation of the law and the oath of republicans.”²⁴ Women were

24. A.P.P., AA 92, 15 October 1793.