

# Introduction: Interpreting the French Revolution

J'avais vu que tout tenoit radicalement à la politique, et que, de quelque façon qu'on s'y prit, aucun peuple ne seroit jamais que ce que la nature de son Gouvernement le feroit être; ainsi cette grande question du meilleur Gouvernement possible me paroissoit se reduire à celle-ci. Quelle est la nature de Gouvernement propre à former un Peuple le plus vertueux, le plus éclairé, le plus sage, le meilleur enfin à prendre ce mot dans son plus grand sens.

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *Les Confessions*<sup>1</sup>

I saw that everything depended fundamentally on politics, and that, no matter how one looked at it, no people could ever be anything but what the nature of its government made it; thus this great question of the best possible government seemed to me to reduce itself to this. What is the nature of government suitable for forming a people that is the most virtuous, the most enlightened, the wisest, in short the best, taking this word in its broadest sense.

WHEN Rousseau proclaimed that "everything depended fundamentally on politics," he was making a provocative and ambiguous statement. In his view, politics, rather than custom, morals, or religion, was the root of social life. The character of a people depended on the nature of its government. By posing "the great question of the best possible government," Rousseau indicated that government might well be different from what it was; it might be better. But where was this government to come from? How could any mortal determine what made a people "the most virtuous, the most enlightened, the wisest, the best"? How could a government be more enlightened than the people it was meant to mold? French revolutionaries had to confront just these issues.

<sup>1</sup> *Oeuvres complètes* 1 (Dijon, 1959): 404–5. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

They took Rousseau as their spiritual guide, but Rousseau was vaguest precisely where they faced the most momentous decisions. Given the unique opportunity to renegotiate the social contract, what form should it take? What was the general will in France in the 1790s? What was the best government possible, taking government, as Rousseau did, "in its broadest sense"?

The Revolution showed how much everything depended on politics, but it did so in ways that would have surprised Rousseau had he lived fifteen years longer. Revolutionaries did not just debate the classical questions of government, such as the virtues of monarchy versus republic or aristocracy versus democracy. They also acted on them in new and surprising ways. In the heat of debate and political conflict, the very notion of "the political" expanded and changed shape. The structure of the polity changed under the impact of increasing political participation and popular mobilization; political language, political ritual, and political organization all took on new forms and meanings. In ways that Rousseau prophesied but could himself only dimly imagine, government became an instrument for fashioning a people. As the deputy Grégoire proclaimed in January 1794: "The French people have gone beyond all other peoples; however, the detestable regime whose remnants we are shaking off keeps us still a great distance from nature; there is still an enormous gap between what we are and what we could be. Let us hurry to fill this gap; let us reconstitute human nature by giving it a new stamp."<sup>2</sup>

Out of the remarkable experience shaped by this goal of reconstitution and regeneration came most of our ideas and practices of politics. By the end of the decade of revolution, French people (and Westerners more generally) had learned a new political repertoire: ideology appeared as a concept, and competing ideologies challenged the traditional European cosmology of order and harmony; propaganda became associated with political purposes; the Jacobin clubs demonstrated the potential of mass political parties; and Napoleon established the first secular police state with his claim to stand above parties.

Neither politics nor the concept of the political was invented by the French, but, for reasons that are still not well understood, the

<sup>2</sup> *Rapport sur l'ouverture d'un concours pour les livres élémentaires de la première éducation, par Grégoire* (Séance du 3 pluviôse an II).

French managed to invest them with extraordinary emotional and symbolic significance. Step by step, sometimes with only a vague awareness of what was taking place, the French founded a revolutionary tradition that has endured down to our time. Paradoxically, while multiplying the forms and meanings of politics, the most revolutionary of the French acted out of a profound distrust of anything explicitly political. Leading political figures never called themselves politicians; they served "the public good" (*la chose publique*), not a narrow "partisan spirit" (*esprit de parti*). Politics and politicking were consistently identified with narrowness, meanness, divisiveness, factionalism, opportunism, egotism, and selfishness. While denouncing all these perversions of the ancient ideal of *homo politicus*, the revolutionaries crossed into the modern age: they opened up a new, internal political frontier and reaped the unforeseen fruits of democracy and authoritarianism, socialism and terror, revolutionary dictatorship and the guillotine. The unexpected invention of revolutionary politics is the subject of this book.

We have little sense now of how surprising revolutionary politics were in the 1790s. Almost every history textbook cites 1789 as the watershed of the modern era, and the French Revolution is one of the most written about events in Western history. Yet, as it has become commonplace, it has lost its freshness and novelty. In retrospect the turning point seems so obvious; what would our world be like without parties, ideologies, dictators, mass movements, and even antipolitical, political rhetoric? Recent scholarly debates about the Revolution also seem to take the event for granted. At issue in the controversies is not the character of the experience itself, but rather its long-term origins and outcomes. The Revolution merely serves as the vehicle of transportation between long-term causes and effects; as a result, the emergence of a revolutionary politics has become a foregone conclusion. The three major interpretive positions all share this preoccupation with origins and outcomes.

The Marxist interpretation of the Revolution has come under heavy fire in recent years, in part because it is the most theoretically developed account.<sup>3</sup> Marx himself was passionately interested

<sup>3</sup>Useful reviews of the literature can be found in William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1980) and Geoffrey Ellis, "Review Article: The 'Marxist Interpretation' of the French Revolution," *English Historical Review* 93 (1978): 353-76.

in the history of the French Revolution. In the mid-1840s, he gathered documentation and read widely in preparation for writing a history of the National Convention.<sup>4</sup> Immediate political interests and then his more general study of capitalism kept him from pursuing this project to completion. Nevertheless, in all of Marx's historical writings, the Revolution served as a touchstone; it fostered the development of capitalism by breaking the feudal stranglehold on production, and it brought the bourgeoisie as a class to power. These two, inseparable elements—the establishment of a suitable legal framework for capitalist development and the class struggle won by the bourgeoisie—have characterized Marxist historical accounts of the Revolution ever since. As the most recent defender of “the classic historiography of the French Revolution,” Albert Soboul maintained that the Revolution marked “the appearance, the growth, and the final triumph of the bourgeoisie.”<sup>5</sup>

In the Marxist account, the Revolution was bourgeois in nature because its origins and outcomes were bourgeois. Marxist historians trace the origins of the Revolution to the aggressive self-assertion of the bourgeoisie in the face of aristocratic reaction in the 1780s, and they consider the outcome to be the distinctly bourgeois triumph of the capitalist mode of production.<sup>6</sup> The intervening variable—the revolutionary experience—is read in terms of its contribution to this scenario. The bourgeoisie had to ally with the popular classes in order to break the back of the feudal aristocracy; it had to break with the popular classes when the system of the Terror threatened to get out of hand; and it had to ally with Napoleon in order to ensure the consolidation of bourgeois gains in property and legal reform. The outcome (bourgeois economic and social hegemony) followed from the origins (class conflict between bourgeoisie and aristocracy) in seemingly inexorable fashion.

The “revisionist” position challenges the Marxist account on virtually every front, but for the most part revisionists implicitly ac-

<sup>4</sup>Jean Bruhat, “La Révolution française et la formation de la pensée de Marx,” *AHRF* 38 (1966): 125–70.

<sup>5</sup>“L’Historiographie classique de la Révolution française: Sur des controverses récentes,” *Historical Reflections: Réflexions historiques* 1 (1974): 141–68, quote from p. 142. Reprinted in *Comprendre la Révolution: Problèmes politiques de la Révolution française (1789–1797)* (Paris, 1981).

<sup>6</sup>See, e.g., Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution, 1787–1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon*, trans. by Alan Forrest and Colin Jones (New York, 1974).

cept the central premise of the Marxist argument, that is, that an interpretation of the Revolution consists of an account of social origins and outcomes. In the first, wide-ranging attack on Marxist orthodoxy, Alfred Cobban insisted that the Revolution was not made by the bourgeoisie in the interests of capitalist development but rather by venal officeholders and professionals whose fortunes were declining. In the end, their actions benefited landowners in general; the experience of revolution actually retarded the development of capitalism in France.<sup>7</sup> The Marxist account, or what Cobban called "the social interpretation," was mistaken both about the origins and the outcomes of the decade of revolution.

In the same vein, other critics have argued that there was no conscious class conflict between bourgeoisie and aristocracy before the Revolution. Aristocrats did not stand in the way of the bourgeoisie; indeed, they shared many economic, social, and political interests.<sup>8</sup> It was the liberal aristocracy, not a frustrated bourgeoisie, that initiated the revolution against monarchical despotism.<sup>9</sup> When they come to offering an alternative version, the revisionists, following Cobban, still base their analysis on social origins and outcomes. The revisionist position has been most cogently summarized in articles by François Furet and Colin Lucas.<sup>10</sup> Both argue that the origins of the Revolution are to be found in a crisis of social mobility and status anxiety within an amalgamated elite made up of nobles and bourgeois. The growth of population and prosperity in the eighteenth century had not been matched by a widening of the channels of social promotion; as a consequence,

<sup>7</sup> *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> For the most recent overview of an enormous literature, see Doyle, *Origins*. The most important specific studies are George V. Taylor, "Non-Capitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 72 (1967): 469–96; David D. Bien, "La Réaction aristocratique avant 1789: L'Exemple de l'armée," *AESC* 29 (1974): 23–48 and 505–34; and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *La Noblesse au XVIIIe siècle: De la féodalité aux lumières* (Paris, 1976).

<sup>9</sup> Denis Richet, "Autour des origines idéologiques lointaines de la Révolution française: Elites et despotisme," *AESC* 24 (1969): 1–23; and, more specifically on 1788–89, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, "Who Intervened in 1788? A Commentary on *The Coming of the French Revolution*," *American Historical Review* 71 (1965): 77–103.

<sup>10</sup> Furet, "Le Catéchisme de la Révolution française," *AESC* 26 (1971): 255–89, reprinted in his *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris, 1978), English version, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. by Elborg Forster (Cambridge, 1981); and Lucas, "Nobles, Bourgeois and the Origins of the French Revolution," *Past and Present*, no. 60 (1973): 84–126.

friction increased in the various social "stress zones" within the elite. This tension erupted into revolution when the Parlement of Paris obstinately insisted that the newly convoked Estates General follow the procedures established in 1614. This fateful decision precipitated an understandable but unnecessary break between the noble and commoner sections of the elite.<sup>11</sup>

Implicit in this argument about origins is the view that the main outcome of the Revolution was not capitalism but the creation of a more unified elite of notables, whose primary self-definition rested on landowning.<sup>12</sup> Once nobles and commoners alike had learned the price of their misunderstandings and misperceptions, they were able to reunite on the basis of their essential common interests in a status society open to wealth and service. In the revisionist account, the Revolution loses its predetermined quality, because it appears as something of a mistake. However, its meaning is still read in terms of its contribution to long-term social and political outcomes; the revolutionary experience simply serves as a corrective to previous social and political misconceptions and as a learning process of trial and (mostly) error; for example, the bourgeoisie learned that reliance on popular support would jeopardize its cherished legal reforms and even its ability to maintain law and order.<sup>13</sup> In this view, the Revolution was a dramatic, but ephemeral, deviation from the trend toward liberal, elite rule.

On the margins of the debate over the social interpretation stands Alexis de Tocqueville and the modernization account. Tocqueville did not deny the importance of social tensions, but he placed social conflict in an essentially political framework; for him, the Revolution represented the aggrandizement of state power and centralization rather than the triumph of capitalism. No one class won this contest. Frenchmen simply became more equal in their unwitting slavishness to an authoritarian government. Tocqueville traced the origins of the Revolution (and of eighteenth-century social ten-

<sup>11</sup> Lucas, "Nobles, Bourgeois," 120–21.

<sup>12</sup> The successful amalgamation may not have been achieved until ca. 1848. See, e.g., Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, Louis Bergeron, and Robert Forster, "Les Notables du 'Grand Empire' en 1810," *AESC* 26 (1971): 1052–75.

<sup>13</sup> I am exaggerating the coherence and unity of the revisionist argument here for the sake of schematic presentation. The most comprehensive statement of this view can be found in François Furet and Denis Richet, *La Révolution française*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1965), English version (London, 1970). Other revisionists may well disagree with some particulars of this account.

sions) to the practices of the absolute monarchy. In order to increase state power, the monarchy destroyed the political rights of nobles and thereby made aristocratic social pretensions intolerable to other social groups.<sup>14</sup> Although revolutionaries thought they were contesting monarchical government, they ended up creating an even more powerful state modeled on that same absolute monarchy. Thus, for Tocqueville too, the Revolution was but a link in the chain between origins and outcomes; the revolutionary experience facilitated willy-nilly the transition from Louis XIV to Napoleon.

In a recent comparative study, Theda Skocpol revives the Tocquevillian theme of growing state power.<sup>15</sup> Although she agrees with Tocqueville that the most important outcome of the Revolution was a more centralized and bureaucratic state, she analyzes the origins of the Revolution somewhat differently. Like the Russian and Chinese states later, the French state crumbled because it could not meet the military exigencies of modern international competition. The structural weaknesses of the "agrarian monarchical regimes" also made them susceptible to peasant revolts, which in the context of revolution destroyed former agrarian class relations. War (international competition again) then fostered the emergence of centralizing and bureaucratizing revolutionary elites, who created a "modern state edifice." Despite her emphasis on social structural preconditions and the role of peasant uprisings, Skocpol resembles Tocqueville in the way she sandwiches the revolutionary experience between its long-term origins and outcomes; the actual event of revolution appears only in the interstices of the schema. Here, as in Tocqueville's classic analysis, the Revolution appears as the vehicle of state modernization.<sup>16</sup>

Because current interpretive debates focus on the analysis of ori-

<sup>14</sup>Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1955). A useful essay on Tocqueville can be found in Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*, though in his introduction, Furet overemphasizes the differences between Tocqueville and "narrative" historians.

<sup>15</sup>*States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge, 1979).

<sup>16</sup>I have not considered Barrington Moore, Jr. in this context, though his account shares many similarities with Skocpol's. The important point is that his interpretation also emphasizes origins and outcomes, especially the outcome of modernization (*Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* [Boston, 1966], esp. pp. 106–7).

gins and outcomes, it is not surprising that research efforts have been increasingly devoted to the periods preceding and following the revolutionary decade.<sup>17</sup> Most research has been undertaken to test the Marxist account. Army officers, magistrates, and elite cultural institutions of the Old Regime have all been examined in order to determine the reality of prerevolutionary class cleavages.<sup>18</sup> Napoleonic and post-Napoleonic elites have also been studied, because their social character is relevant to the analysis of outcomes of the Revolution.<sup>19</sup> Even though such studies have contributed to the elaboration of a revisionist position, they have not forced Marxist historians to abandon their ground. Marxists simply argue in reply that the reality of class and capitalism has to be sought in another place or in another manner.<sup>20</sup>

Although Marxist and revisionist historians have studied revolutionaries and their activities, these studies have had little impact on their overall origins-outcomes schema. Revisionists maintain either that revolutionary conflicts had no particular social significance or had only very broad and ambiguous social meaning (rich vs. poor, town vs. country, Paris vs. the provinces).<sup>21</sup> As the par-

<sup>17</sup> Research on the revolutionary decade itself has continued, but it cannot be denied that the theoretical and empirical center of interest has shifted away from the decade of revolution to the periods preceding and following it. Moreover, most research on the revolutionary decade has failed to make much of an impact on the contours of historiographical debate about the Revolution. The most important recent areas of research on the revolutionary decade have been histories of the press, analyses of various forms of cultural revolution (education, festivals, de-Christianization), and local studies.

<sup>18</sup> The most significant results are contained in Bien, "La Réaction aristocratique." On the cultural side, see Daniel Roche, *Le Siècle des lumières en province: Académies et académiciens provinciaux, 1680-1789*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1978); and Jean Quéniart, *Culture et société urbaines dans la France de l'Ouest au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1978). Somewhat to the side of investigations of social milieus stand recent studies of the intellectual origins of the Revolution. For an overview, see Keith Michael Baker, "On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution," in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1982), pp. 197-219.

<sup>19</sup> Chaussinand-Nogaret, Bergeron, and Forster, "Les Notables du 'Grand Empire'"; Louis Bergeron and Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *Les "Masses de granit": Cent mille notables du Premier Empire* (Paris, 1979); and Thomas D. Beck, *French Legislators, 1800-1834: A Study in Quantitative History* (Berkeley, 1974).

<sup>20</sup> Claude Mazauric, "Quelques voies nouvelles pour l'histoire politique de la Révolution française," *AHRF* 47 (1975): 134-73.

<sup>21</sup> Cobban led the way in emphasizing the importance of these other kinds of social division in *The Social Interpretation*.



particulars of the Marxist account have come under increasing attack, Marxist historians have withdrawn to more structural positions: what difference does it make who initiated the Revolution or who held power at any particular time as long as its origins and outcomes can be traced far enough back or far enough forward to substantiate the import of class struggle and the development of capitalism?<sup>22</sup>

The Tocquevillian interpretation, by contrast, has provoked almost no empirical research. Although it resembles the Marxist and revisionist accounts in its emphasis on origins and outcomes, these are conceived in such long and broad terms that it has proved difficult to test empirically. Tocqueville himself, for example, did not tie the development of state power to any particular social group; "democracy" and "equality" were pervasive structural trends, and, though they may have acted as "gigantic brooms," no one seemed to have a handle on their action. As a consequence, the identity and intentions of revolutionary actors have little relevance in the Tocquevillian account: "they had no inkling of this," "nothing was further from their intentions"; the "destined course" of the Revolution had nothing to do with what the revolutionaries thought they were accomplishing.<sup>23</sup>

All three interpretive positions share this programmatic disregard for revolutionary intentions. Tocqueville and those inspired by his analysis deny the significance of who the revolutionaries were or what they thought on the grounds that the revolutionaries were unconsciously caught up in dreams of absolute power, which ultimately shaped the course of the Revolution. Marxists and revisionists alike appear to grant the importance of social identity, yet despite their different analyses, they end up espousing the same Tocquevillian distrust of revolutionary intentions and aims. Because the identity of the revolutionaries fits into neither the Marxist nor the revisionist account (the revolutionaries were neither capitalists nor—after 1791—liberal nobles and elite commoners), both end up denying the importance of who the revolutionaries were or what they thought they were doing. In the Marxist interpretation the revolutionaries facilitated the triumph of capitalism,

<sup>22</sup> Mazauric, "Quelques voies nouvelles."

<sup>23</sup> *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, quotes from pp. vii, 3.

even while expressing hostility to capital, and in the revisionist interpretation revolutionaries mistakenly dragged the process off its course of liberal, notable rule. What the revolutionaries intended is not what came out of the Revolution, hence what the revolutionaries intended matters little. Thus, the focus on origins and outcomes has made the revolutionary experience itself seem irrelevant.

As a consequence, revolutionary innovations in the forms and meanings of politics often seem either predetermined or entirely accidental. In the Marxist account, liberal constitutionalism, democracy, terror, and authoritarian rule all appear as the handmaidens of the consolidation of bourgeois hegemony. In the Tocquevillian analysis, they all serve the progress of centralized power. Revisionist accounts are less consistent in this regard, because revisionists do not refer to a common original text, such as the works of Marx or Tocqueville. In the writings of Richard Cobb, for instance, revolutionary politics express the resentments and frustrations of a militant minority; there is no compelling historical logic behind their actions. People became "terrorists," for example, because they held grudges against their neighbors.<sup>24</sup> Whereas in the Marxist and Tocquevillian interpretations, the politics of revolution are determined by the necessary course from origins to outcomes, in revisionist versions, politics seem haphazard because they do not fit into the origins-outcomes schema. The end result, however, is the same; politics lose significance as an object of study.

This book aims to rehabilitate the politics of revolution. Yet it is not at all a political history. Rather than recounting the narrative of revolutionary events, I have tried to uncover the rules of political behavior. Historians cannot simply add up all the professed intentions of individual actors in the Revolution to get a sense of what they thought about what they were doing. If there was any unity or coherence in the revolutionary experience, it came from common values and shared expectations of behavior. These values and expectations are the primary focus of my account. The values, expectations, and implicit rules that expressed and shaped collective intentions and actions are what I call the political culture of the

<sup>24</sup>R. C. Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789–1820* (Oxford, 1970). For example, "The *sans-culotte* then is not a social or economic being; he is a political accident" (p. 120).

Revolution; that political culture provided the logic of revolutionary political action.

Most scholars who now emphasize "politics" in the French Revolution do so from an anti-Marxist point of view. In an influential article on "Non-Capitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution," George V. Taylor concluded that "it was essentially a political revolution with social consequences and not a social revolution with political consequences."<sup>25</sup> François Furet took the distinction between the social and the political and blew it up into an explanation for the Terror, which in his view was predicated on "the liberty of the social in relation to the political."<sup>26</sup> The Terror was the logical consequence of the revolutionary distortion of the normal relationship between society and politics; politics was no longer the arena for the representation of competing social interests, but rather a terrorizing instrument for the reshaping of society. Both of these critics have questioned Marxist assumptions about the relationship between politics and society. They argue that revolutionary politics did not follow from social structural preconditions; instead, politics shaped society, at least at certain moments.

Furet's recent book, *Penser la Révolution française*, has the great merit of drawing attention to the importance of "the political." In his efforts to undermine the Marxist "catechism," he has insisted on the necessity of viewing the political in broad terms, not just as policies, decisions, and organizations, but as the fount of new kinds of actions in the world. However, his own discussion of revolutionary politics is entirely abstract. He argues that the political innovations of the decade were revolutionary because they were used to reshape society, but he devotes little attention to showing either how this happened or who participated in such endeavors. As a result, though he succeeds admirably in contesting a mechanistic deduction of politics from social structure, he makes revolutionary politics seem detached from any context. The new political culture is driven only by its own internal logic of democracy.<sup>27</sup>

Much of the difficulty in analyzing the relationship between politics and society comes from our now commonplace language of social analysis. When discussing "the political," metaphors of struc-

<sup>25</sup>P. 491.

<sup>26</sup>*Penser la Révolution française*, p. 41.

<sup>27</sup>See my review in *History and Theory* 20 (1981): 313-23.

ture and especially the metaphors of a hierarchy of relationships in space come most readily to mind: levels, tiers, bases, foundations. Politics seem naturally to rest on a social base or substructure, whether one subscribes to a specifically Marxist theory or not. Social networks, groups, classes, or structures are thought to give politics their enduring patterns as well as their potential for change. As a consequence, most debate, whether in general or over the French Revolution in particular, has concerned the relationship between a previously existing social base and the specific political arrangement that is taken as following from it. The character of politics is explained by reference to society, and changes in the political arrangement are traced to prior changes in social relations. Almost all discussion proceeds from the assumption that the essential characteristics of politics can only be explained by their relation to a social ground. Even those who try to escape from this mode of thinking often end up confirming it in spite of themselves. Thus, Furet characterizes revolutionary government as in some sense pathological precisely because its politics do not represent social interests in the normal or expected fashion. When politics come first, the situation is by definition abnormal.

In the analysis presented here, I have endeavored to avoid the metaphor of levels. Revolutionary political culture cannot be deduced from social structures, social conflicts, or the social identity of revolutionaries. Political practices were not simply the expression of "underlying" economic and social interests. Through their language, images, and daily political activities, revolutionaries worked to reconstitute society and social relations. They consciously sought to break with the French past and to establish the basis for a new national community. In the process, they created new social and political relations and new kinds of social and political divisions. Their experience of political and social struggle forced them to see the world in new ways.

One of the most fateful consequences of the revolutionary attempt to break with the past was the invention of ideology. Hesitantly, even reluctantly, revolutionaries and their opponents came to see that the relationship between politics and society was deeply problematic. Tradition lost its givenness, and French people found themselves acting on Rousseau's conviction that the relationship between the social and the political (the social contract) could be

rearranged. As disagreement over the nature of the rearrangement became apparent, different ideologies were invented in order to explain this development. Socialism, conservatism, authoritarianism, and democratic republicanism were all practical answers to the theoretical question raised by Rousseau. Rather than expressing an ideology, therefore, revolutionary politics brought ideology into being. In the process of revolution, the French recast the categories of social thought and political action.

This is not to say, however, that the Revolution was only intellectual or that politics had primacy over society rather than vice versa. The revolution in politics was an explosive interaction between ideas and reality, between intention and circumstance, between collective practices and social context. If revolutionary politics cannot be deduced from the social identity of revolutionaries, then neither can it be divorced from it: the Revolution was made by people, and some people were more attracted than others to the politics of revolution. A better metaphor for the relationship between society and politics is the knot or the Möbius strip, because the two sides were inextricably intertwined, with no permanent "above" and "below." The politics of revolution appealed to certain individuals and groups, who in turn shaped the uses of revolutionary politics. The new political class (using class in a broad sense) was formed by its relationship to revolutionary politics as much as it formed them.

In order to reconstruct the logic of revolutionary action and innovation, it is thus essential to examine both the politics of revolution and the people who practiced them. My contention is that there was a fit or affinity between them, not that one can be deduced from the other. The political culture of revolution was made up of symbolic practices, such as language, imagery, and gestures. These symbolic practices were embraced more enthusiastically in some places and by some groups than in other places and groups. In many ways, the symbolic practices—the use of a certain rhetoric, the spread of certain symbols and rituals—called the new political class into existence; talk of national regeneration and festivals of federation, for instance, gave the new political elite a sense of unity and purpose. On the other hand, the differences in reception of the new practices also had their impact on the way revolutionary politics worked, and especially on its successes and failures. The

rhetoric of universalism did not appeal to everyone, but it appealed to enough people to make its influence deep and lasting.

For analytical purposes, the politics and the people who practiced them have been separated. The three chapters in part I investigate the logic of political action as it was expressed symbolically: in the ways people talked, and in the ways they put the Revolution and themselves as revolutionaries into images and gestures. The chapters in part II establish the social context of the revolutionary experience and in particular the disparities in that experience. What were the geographical and social lines of division in revolutionary France; where was revolutionary political culture best received? In both parts the emphasis is on the creation of a new political culture, that is, on the ways in which "the Revolution" took shape as a coherent experience. There is no shortage of scholarly work showing that the Revolution meant different things to different people.<sup>28</sup> I have tried to show instead how it came to have some unity, even in its diversity. Unity and coherence came from several sources, which are discussed here under two general rubrics: the symbolic and the social. The symbolic sources of unity included the constant repetition of key words and principles, shared attitudes toward politics as an activity, and use of the same symbols, such as the liberty tree or female representations of the Republic. The social sources of coherence included the appearance of the same kinds of leaders in different places and the same kinds of places in the forefront of revolutionary action.

Although the subject of this book is politics, there is little in it about specific policies, politicians, partisan conflicts, formal institutions, or organizations. Emphasized instead are the underlying patterns in political culture that made possible the emergence of distinctive policies and the appearance of new kinds of politicians, conflicts, and organizations. Rather than focusing on the grain price maximum, Robespierre, or the Jacobin clubs, for instance, attention is drawn to the general principles of revolutionary language, to the operation of revolutionary symbols, and to the

<sup>28</sup>The emphasis on particularism is especially prominent in the works of those who are inspired by Richard Cobb and Alfred Cobban, e.g., Martyn Lyons, *Revolution in Toulouse: An Essay on Provincial Terrorism* (Berne, 1978) and Gwynne Lewis, *The Second Vendée: The Continuity of Counterrevolution in the Department of the Gard, 1789–1815* (Oxford, 1978).

pervasive concern with ritual and gesture. The investment of symbolic actions with political significance gave specific policies, individuals, and organizations greater impact than they would have had in nonrevolutionary times.

This method of proceeding relies on the work of three French historians who have pioneered in the study of revolutionary political culture (though they do not necessarily use the term themselves). The first is François Furet, who has done more than anyone else to revive the historiographical debates and point them in new directions. In a more specific vein Maurice Agulhon showed how images of the Republic on seals and statues actively shaped French political perceptions.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Mona Ozouf demonstrated how revolutionary festivals were used to forge a new national consensus.<sup>30</sup> The studies of Agulhon and Ozouf show that cultural manifestations were part and parcel of revolutionary politics, and Ozouf in particular shows that there was a logic to revolutionary rituals. Historians can no longer assume that politics exists in a clearly separate realm from culture.

The chief accomplishment of the French Revolution was the institution of a dramatically new political culture. The Revolution did not startle its contemporaries because it laid the foundations for capitalist development or political modernization. The English found more effective ways to encourage the former, and the Prussians showed that countries could pursue the latter without democracy or revolution. Revolution in France contributed little to economic growth or to political stabilization. What it did establish, however, was the mobilizing potential of democratic republicanism and the compelling intensity of revolutionary change. The language of national regeneration, the gestures of equality and fraternity, and the rituals of republicanism were not soon forgotten. Democracy, terror, Jacobinism, and the police state all became recurrent features of political life.

The origins of the new political culture in the years or decades before 1789 were not very evident, and its outcome was not at first sight impressive: Napoleon and the Bourbons after him labored mightily to remove any remnants of that culture, and in many

<sup>29</sup> *Marianne au combat: L'Imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1789 à 1880* (Paris, 1979), English version (Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>30</sup> *La Fête révolutionnaire, 1789–1799* (Paris, 1976).

respects they appeared to succeed. Yet the new tradition of revolution, with its values and expectations, did not disappear. Even outside of France, it continued to have a vigorous life in the underground, and its specter was kept alive in the fears and writings of the defenders of that new ideology—conservatism. Even in the new police powers developed to contain it, the memory of revolution continued. Once revolutionaries acted on Rousseau's belief that government could form a new people, the West was never again the same.