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Michael Sonenscher: Before the Deluge

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INTRODUCTION

THE phrase *après moi, le déluge* (“after me, the deluge”) is sometimes attributed to Louis XV, France’s penultimate eighteenth-century king. It seems, however, to have been coined by his mistress, Mme de Pompadour, and she seems to have used it to refer to “us,” not “me” (as in *après nous, le déluge*).¹ The phrase, and the various attitudes towards intimations of disaster that it might have been intended to express (shocked recognition, grim resignation, or selfish heedlessness, for example), have often been associated loosely with the French Revolution, even though Mme de Pompadour died in 1764, and even though it is not entirely clear what kind of equivalent of a biblical flood she may have had in mind.² Curiously, however, the phrase was current, even before 1789, and it did mean something like what it is now usually taken to mean (selfish heedlessness, rather than shocked recognition or grim resignation). In this usage, it was connected directly to the subject-matter of this book, because it was applied to public debt. This, for example, is how it was used in a book entitled *Entretiens d’un jeune prince avec son gouverneur* (Conversations between a Young Prince and His Governor) published in 1785 by Victor Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, the father of the better-known revolutionary orator Honoré-Gabriel Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau. Part of the content of the book had actually been written nearly two decades earlier and first appeared in instalments in the monthly periodical the *Ephémérides du citoyen* (The Citizen’s Ephemerides) in 1769.³ Mirabeau applied the phrase to the practice of government borrowing and, more particularly, to the practice

¹ See [Jean-Baptiste-Denis Desprès], “Essai sur la marquise de Pompadour,” in Nicole du Hausset, *Mémoires de Madame du Hausset, femme de chambre de Mme de Pompadour*, ed. Quintin Crauford (Paris, 1824), pp. xix–xxxviii (p. xix). Unless stated otherwise, translations of this and subsequent quotations from French texts are my own. I have usually dropped eighteenth-century capitalisations of words like “nation” or “republic” and have modernised the original punctuation.

² See, for example, Evelyn Farr, *Before the Deluge: Parisian Society in the Reign of Louis XVI* (London, Owen, 1994), although she did not actually examine the phrase itself.

³ They began to appear, under the title of “Dialogues entre un enfant de sept ans & son mentor, par Mr B,” in the sixth part of the *Ephémérides du citoyen* in 1769. The “Mr B” in question may have been the first editor of the *Ephémérides*, the abbé Nicolas Baudeau, but this may still mean that Mirabeau was the author, if not the actual writer, of the articles. In keeping with the practice of more or less collective authorship that was one of the features of Physiocracy, the book-length version of the *Entretiens* was also the work of another of Mirabeau’s collaborators, Charles Grivel, just as Mirabeau was the author of several (“une cinquantaine,” he wrote) of the articles that Grivel contributed to the volumes on *Economie politique* in the *Encyclopédie Méthodique* (see Musée Arbaud, Aix-en-Provence, Fonds Mirabeau, 20, Mirabeau to Longo, 30 September 1783; fol. 147, 11 October 1784; fol. 176, 27 February

of using life annuities to fund the costs of government debt. Life annuities, he wrote, were the quintessence of what he called “that misanthropic sentiment (*ce sentiment ennemi*), *après moi, le déluge*.”⁴ In the milder English-language equivalent of the phrase, they were a way of drawing bills on posterity. Like all forms of public credit, Mirabeau argued, they consumed wealth before it was produced and, because of this, could erode the resources required for new production, leaving a state that placed its future in the hands of capitalists (the eighteenth-century French word for investors in the public funds) with the possibility of having to face that future without the accumulated assets that it might need to maintain its long-term domestic prosperity and external security. Public debt, Mirabeau warned, could, quite literally, destroy what, in 1756, he had been the first to call “civilisation.”⁵

This is a book about how this kind of vision of the future was registered in eighteenth-century thought, and, more specifically, about how it can be connected to the political thought of the period of the French Revolution. Its argument, outlined in what follows in this introduction, can be summarised quite briefly. It is that the modern idea of representative government,

1785; and see A. Dauphin-Meunier, “Les dernières années du marquis de Mirabeau,” *Le Correspondant*, January 1913, p. 258).

⁴ Victor Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau, *Entretiens d'un jeune prince avec son gouverneur*, 4 vols. (London and Paris, 1785), 2:525. A life annuity was a form of government borrowing that came to be widely used in the eighteenth century, particularly in France. At its simplest, it was stock that carried a rate of interest for the lifetime of the lender. A combination of an increasingly sophisticated capacity to calculate life expectancy (notably that of a sample of young Genevan women, the famous *trente demoiselles de Genève*) and the syndication of state-backed loans among a large number of international banking houses turned life annuities into a major, but controversial, source of state credit in the second half of the eighteenth century. For the broader background, see Herbert Lüthy, *La banque protestante en France de la révocation de l'édit de Nantes à la Révolution*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1959–61); James C. Riley, *The Seven Years War and the Old Regime in France: The Economic and Financial Toll* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1986); and the more detailed bibliography on p. 38, n. 40, below.

⁵ On the eighteenth-century concept of “civilisation,” see Jean Starobinski, *Blessings in Disguise; or the Morality of Evil* [Paris, 1989], trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Polity Press, 1993), pp. 1–35; Bernard Plongeron, “Affirmation et transformations d’une ‘civilisation chrétienne’ à la fin du xviii^e siècle,” in Jean-René Derré, Jacques Gadille, Xavier de Montclos, and Bernard Plongeron, eds., *Civilisation chrétienne. Approche historique d’une idéologie xviii^e–xix^e siècle* (Paris, 1975), pp. 9–21 (p. 17); Bernard Plongeron, “Bonheur et ‘civilisation chrétienne’: une nouvelle apologétique après 1760,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 154 (1976): 1637–55; Bernard Plongeron, “Echec à la sécularisation des lumières? La religion comme lien social,” in Michel Mat, ed., *Problèmes d'histoire du christianisme* (Brussels, 1984), pp. 91–126; Joachim Moras, *Ursprung und Entwicklung des Begriffs der Zivilisation in Frankreich, 1756–1830* (Hamburg, 1930); and, for a general overview, Jörg Fisch, “Zivilisation, Kultur,” in Otto Bruner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 8 vols. (Stuttgart, 1972–97), 7:679–774. On Mirabeau’s use of the term, see below, chapter 3.

notably the one developed by the abbé Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, owes rather more than it may now seem to the type of future-oriented speculation about public debt that, among other things, was captured by the phrase *après moi, le déluge*.⁶ To see why it does, two aspects of public credit need, in the first instance, to be distinguished from one another. Public credit may, as several historians have argued, entail constitutional government and economic growth.⁷ But public credit was also a product of war and continuous preparations for war. The practice of borrowing money against the state's future tax revenue to fund the costs of the large, permanent array of armed forces required for modern warfare began in a durable way during the period of the Wars of the League of Augsburg and the Spanish Succession in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and has continued ever since.⁸ These two aspects of public credit were easier to distinguish in the eighteenth century than they are now, mainly because expenditure on warfare, not welfare, was then responsible for almost all government borrowing.⁹ Together, they served to give public credit, or

⁶ Two gestures at the direction of this argument can be found in Michael Sonenscher, "The Nation's Debt and the Birth of the Modern Republic: The French Fiscal Deficit and the Politics of the Revolution of 1789," *History of Political Thought* 18 (1997): 64–103, 267–325; and "Republicanism, State Finances and the Emergence of Commercial Society in Eighteenth-Century France—or from Royal to Ancient Republicanism and Back," in Martin Van Gelderen and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, CUP, 2002), pp. 275–91. Full bibliographical details on Sieyès's life and thought can be found in the notes to chapter 1.

⁷ See, particularly, the work of Douglass C. North, from his *The Rise of the Western World: A New Economic History* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press [henceforth CUP], 1973) to his *Institutions, Institutional Change, and Economic Performance* (Cambridge, CUP, 1990), and, in more detail, Douglass C. North and Barry Weingast, "Constitutions and Commitment: The Evolution of Institutions Governing Public Choice in Seventeenth-Century England," *Journal of Economic History* 49 (1989): 803–32. For a generalisation of North's argument, see Niall Ferguson, *The Cash Nexus: Money and Power in the Modern World 1700–2000* (London, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2001). Two other recent books deal with the same subject: see James Macdonald, *A Free Nation Deep in Debt: The Financial Roots of Democracy* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), and, from a more sceptically analytical standpoint, David Stasavage, *Public Debt and the Birth of the Democratic State: France and Great Britain, 1688–1789* (Cambridge, CUP, 2003). On the bearing of institutional economics on the historiography of the French Revolution, see the works referred to below, p. 56, n. 105.

⁸ See notably P.G.M. Dickson, *The Financial Revolution in England: A Study in the Development of Public Credit, 1688–1756* (London, Macmillan, 1967), and, more recently, John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (London, Collins, 1989).

⁹ On the wider issues surrounding warfare and welfare as these were construed in the eighteenth century, see, classically, Jacob Viner, "Power versus Plenty as Objectives of Foreign Policy in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries" [1948], reprinted in his *Essays on the Intellectual History of Economics*, ed. D. A. Irwin (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991), and, for overviews of early modern public finance, see Richard Bonney, ed., *The Rise of the Fiscal State in Europe: 1200–1815* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), and Charles Tilly,

what came to be called the modern funding system, a distinctly Janus-faced appearance. On the one hand, it seemed to be established most firmly in countries like Britain and the United Provinces of the Netherlands where economic prosperity and political representation were strongly entrenched. On the other hand, it seemed to be responsible for some, if not most, of the scale, scope, and frequency of eighteenth-century warfare. The urgency underlying the way that Mirabeau used the phrase *après moi, le déluge* grew out of this Janus-faced aspect of public credit. It implied that the very properties of public credit that favoured prosperity and stability might also favour the kind of social collapse that could be represented by the image of a biblical flood. At the limit, Mirabeau suggested, public credit could destroy what it had been established to preserve. This, a generation earlier, had been the reason why the philosopher David Hume had written, “either the nation must destroy public credit, or public credit will destroy the nation.”¹⁰

The two faces of public credit go some way towards explaining why, in the eighteenth century, thinking about politics could sometimes take place under the sign of a biblical flood. This strand of thought may look like the other side of the Enlightenment, but it did, in fact, form part of the context that gave that well-worn word much of its original theological and teleological charge. Referring to enlightenment, *lumières*, or *Aufklärung* (although the French and German usually require the definite article) implied making some kind of claim about what, ultimately, human society was supposed to be for, despite the often hideous appearance of the world as it was, or the even more terminally catastrophic prospect that its future could appear to hold.¹¹ Getting behind that appearance could, in the eighteenth century, take the form of a theodicy, or an argument that was designed to explain how the all-too-visible existence of evil and injustice in the world could, under more careful inspection, be reconciled with the idea of a good,

ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975) and his *Coercion, Capital, and European States AD 990–1990* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990).

¹⁰ David Hume, “Of Public Credit” [1752], in David Hume, *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis, Liberty Press, 1985), pp. 360–1. The phrase “to draw bills upon posterity” was Hume’s: see p. 352. On the essay and its argument, see Istvan Hont, “The Rhapsody of Public Debt: David Hume and Voluntary State Bankruptcy,” in Nicholas Phillipson and Quentin Skinner, eds., *Political Discourse in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, CUP, 1993), pp. 321–48, now reprinted in his *Jealousy of Trade: International Competition and the Nation-State in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 325–53.

¹¹ The description can, I think, be reconciled with the more polemical argument in John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680–1760* (Cambridge, CUP, 2005).

just, and omnipotent God.¹² In a less obviously spiritual way, it could also take the form of a more secular, but still philosophical, examination of human history and the reasons underlying the more directly visible arrangements of the world as it was.¹³ As the mixture of biblical and financial connotations in the phrase *après moi, le déluge* suggests, the subject-matter of this book straddles these two kinds of concern. Its focus is almost entirely historical, but this does not mean that the more theological dimension of its subject-matter was totally absent from thinking about both the promise and the menace of public debt. “I do not blame anyone if political evils make him begin to despair of the welfare and progress of mankind,” wrote the philosopher Immanuel Kant in 1798. “But I have confidence in the heroic medicine which Hume prescribes, for it ought to produce a speedy cure.”¹⁴ Here, it was the menace of public credit that loomed largest. For Sieyès, however, it was its sheer unavoidability, which meant that coming to terms with the system of modern war finance had to involve finding a way to deal with Hume’s stark alternatives. This, too, had a speculative dimension. As for many of the post-Kantian German idealists who were intrigued by his thought, God, for Sieyès, was simply the *ultra-mètre*, the ultimate measure that lay beyond even the grandest of achievements that human history might display and the ever-receding symbol of a not entirely consoling intimation that there was more still to come.¹⁵ A great deal of Sieyès’s interest in the details of social organisation and how they could be fitted together to form something systematic was connected to this radically open-ended historical vision.

Generally, however, it was the more immediately menacing aspect of public credit that dominated speculation about the future. It supplied much of the content of a way of thinking about eighteenth-century power politics

¹² For a helpful way into the subject of theodicy in eighteenth-century thought, see Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002).

¹³ A good way into eighteenth-century philosophical history is Duncan Forbes, *Hume’s Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge, CUP, 1975), along with his introduction to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (Cambridge, CUP, 1975) and the following articles: “Sceptical Whiggism, Commerce and Liberty,” in Andrew S. Skinner and Thomas Wilson, eds., *Essays on Adam Smith* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 179–201; “Natural Law and the Scottish Enlightenment,” in Roy H. Campbell and Andrew S. Skinner, eds., *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, John Donald, 1982), pp. 186–204.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties* [1798], trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge, CUP, 1996), p. 308. I have preferred the translation in Immanuel Kant, *The Contest of the Faculties*, in Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge, CUP, 1991), p. 189.

¹⁵ The text is published in Jacques Guilhaumou, “Fragments d’un discours sur Dieu: Sieyès et la religion,” in *Mélanges Michel Vovelle* (Aix-en-Provence, Publications d’Université de Provence, 1997), pp. 257–65.

and, more specifically, of a peculiarly explosive concept of revolution that have both been largely forgotten.¹⁶ Both predated the events of the French Revolution by some considerable time and, after 1789, soon came to be overshadowed, first by its real social, political, and military history and then by the strongly teleological claims about its wider historical significance embedded in the philosophies of history of Hegel, Comte, and Marx in the nineteenth century. Before then, however, the related subjects of war, debt, and revolution helped to give the theme of decline and fall a resonance that went beyond the way that, at least in the Anglophone world, it came to be transmitted to posterity by Edward Gibbon.¹⁷ They did so because they lent themselves to a new and alarming variation on the well-established parallel between the modern world and its ancient counterpart. Chronologically, the modern world was its heir. What came to matter in the eighteenth century was whether it might also have its fate. The details of this possibility were certainly cloudy, but its content was still quite determinate.¹⁸ In this version of the parallel, eighteenth-century Europe might have to face the prospect of a replay of the ancient cycle of decline and fall under modern conditions of war and debt. Here, the threat to established power and prosperity was not so much the inequality and luxury that, according to a long-standing tradition of political and historical analysis, had been responsible for earlier cycles of decline and fall, but the new financial instruments and fiscal resources that had accompanied the transformation of warfare during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.¹⁹ The revolution that was anticipated surprisingly frequently in the eighteenth century was, it was claimed, likely to be a product of the huge standing armies and the intense financial pressures that had come to dominate the great power politics of the modern world coupled with the violent conflict between the rich and the poor that had been one of the features of the politics of the ancient world. Together, they were taken to be likely to lead, suddenly

¹⁶ See, however, Hont, “The Rhapsody of Public Debt.”

¹⁷ On Gibbon and the wider theme of decline and fall, see now J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 4 vols. to date (Cambridge, CUP, 1999–2005).

¹⁸ On broader eighteenth-century concepts of revolution, see, particularly, Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002), chs. 5–10, 12–4; and Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, vol. 3, *The First Decline and Fall* (2003), chs. 14–6. The interrelationship of public debt, power politics, and political upheaval described in chapter 1 below supplies part of the content of the concepts of revolution discussed in these works.

¹⁹ On the political dimensions of the themes of inequality and luxury, see, classically, J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* [1975], 2nd edition (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2003). See also the comments by Istvan Hont in his “The Rhapsody of Public Debt” on J.G.A. Pocock, “Hume and the American Revolution: The Dying Thoughts of a North Briton,” in his *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, CUP, 1985), pp. 125–41.

and brutally, to the emergence of a highly militarised dictatorial regime equipped with a capacity to destroy much of the civility, culture, and liberty that had been built up in Europe since the age of the Renaissance. From this perspective, the eighteenth century appeared to have created the conditions that might, once again, favour the emergence of either a Caesar or a Spartacus.

In this concept of revolution, the modern system of war finance would make most types of private property the property of the state and, by doing so, would give the state itself despotic power. Here, the Janus-faced quality of public credit was the crucial ingredient. Public credit might well give rise to economic prosperity and constitutional government, but economic prosperity and constitutional government could, in their turn, give rise to new political risks. Adding a debt to a state could either make it easier to embark upon an ill-judged foreign adventure or might make it more difficult to take preemptive action against a less constitutionally constrained enemy. Borrowing money could make it easier for a government to avoid raising taxes, but could also make it difficult to avoid subsequent conflict over the distribution of the resulting tax burden. Public credit could give a government more financial latitude, but could then leave it with less room for manoeuvre in political decision-making, either because of a state's dependence on other powers for the trade required to generate the tax revenue needed for debt service, or because of its need to observe constitutional proprieties in meeting its commitments to its creditors, or because of the political divisions produced by a debt-generated tax burden. In all these ways, adding a debt to a state introduced a new dimension of uncertainty into political life, raising the possibility that, in conditions of international rivalry, orderly constitutional politics might switch quite suddenly into a hectic scramble for survival. The result was something like a political double-bind. The very constitutional and institutional arrangements that helped to make public credit secure could begin to look like obstacles to the wider security of the state as a whole. The dynamics of power politics and the intensity of the debt-driven financial pressure generated by what, in the German-speaking world, was already called "nationalism" could, it was claimed, lead to a state of affairs in which a government might either have to choose, or might simply be forced, to sacrifice the interests of its creditors to the imperatives of national survival.²⁰ In these circumstances, it would simply default on its debt and, since it still had a tax base but now paid no interest, it would be in position to use the resources that it now had available to promote war on a massive scale. The future-oriented

²⁰ On "nationalism" in the eighteenth century, see, particularly, Istvan Hont, "The Permanent Crisis of a Divided Mankind: 'Nation-State' and 'Nationalism' in Historical Perspective," in his *Jealousy of Trade*, pp. 447–528 (at, specifically, pp. 499–504).

speculation of the eighteenth century was a product of this dilemma because it seemed to indicate that all roads led to state bankruptcy.

This was the prospect raised by the phrase *après moi, le déluge*. The combination of a public debt, an existing tax base, and an established administrative system meant that if, for one reason or another, a government opted for a voluntary debt default, it might be stronger, not weaker, because it would, de facto, be in possession of much of the available wealth of society. The result was a political paradox. Constitutional government might make public credit secure, but once public credit really was secure, it could give rise to conditions in which constitutional government might have to go. And, if one state were to apply the sponge (the eighteenth-century metaphor for a voluntary state bankruptcy), the rest would have to follow. An absolute government might be able to default more easily than one with a less centralised system of political decision-making, but if the chain-reaction were ever to start, then every type of government would have to suspend constitutional propriety. Necessity, as the ancient Roman republican maxim put it, had no law (*necessitas non habet legem*). The imperatives of survival would force every state to use the resources generated by the modern funding system to fight for hearth and home (*pro aris et focis*) because, as yet another celebrated Roman republican maxim had it, the public safety had to be the supreme law (*salus populi suprema lex esto*).²¹ From this perspective, one that was more familiar in the eighteenth century than it is now, modern economics appeared to have paved a way for a revival of ancient politics. From a parallel perspective, the modern funding system appeared to have produced a range of fiscal and administrative institutions capable of equipping a republic with something like the same command structure as an absolute government without, however, requiring it to have an absolute monarch. Well before the Bastille fell, the eighteenth century already had something like a prospective history of the violent political trajectory that was to lead, first to Maximilien Robespierre and the revolutionary government of the Year II of the first French republic, and then to Napoleon Bonaparte's imperial regime.

The broad aim of this book is to describe some of the ways by which this sort of projection can be connected to both the history and historiography of the French Revolution and, more particularly, to the political thought of the abbé Sieyès. By doing so, it is intended to show what the French Revolution might begin to look like in the light of a detailed historical examination of the range of ideas and more ambitious political theories

²¹ On these themes in the history of European political thought, see the classic Friedrich Meinecke, *Machiavellism: The Doctrine of Raison d'Etat and Its Place in Modern History* [1924], trans. D. Scott, ed. W. Stark (London, Routledge, 1957), and, more recently, Richard Tuck, *The Laws of War and Peace* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999).

that, directly or indirectly, can be associated with the menace underlying the phrase *après moi, le déluge*. This, in the first instance, means reversing the perspective that the sequence of events of the French Revolution came to pass on to posterity. From the vantage point of 1740 or 1780, an image of the type of regime now associated with the Terror was already in existence well before any of the political conflicts that preceded and followed the fall of the Bastille. “We are poor,” wrote Montesquieu in *The Spirit of Laws* in 1748, “with the riches and commerce of the whole world; and soon, by thus augmenting our troops, we shall all be soldiers, and be reduced to the very same situation as the Tartars.”²² This was the prospect raised by the modern system of war finance. From this perspective, the Terror came first. It may not have been associated with France (the “we” in Montesquieu’s sentence referred to Europe’s “three most opulent powers”), but it imposed a firmly limited horizon of expectation upon the future. Taking that idea seriously may help to throw a new, but historically more accurate, light upon the very elaborate set of constitutional and institutional arrangements that Sieyès envisaged in 1789. These were designed to secure public credit’s promise, but to avoid its menace. This is what this book is about.

Its more immediate historiographical starting point is, perhaps, best indicated by a question raised by François Furet and Ran Halévi in one of the last books that Furet published before his death. As they put it, the French Revolution has presented two classic problems to posterity: the causes of 1789 and the causes of the Terror. The second, they went on to suggest, may now be less intractable than the first, because, they continued, it may now be easier to explain the radicalisation of the revolution after 1789 than the radicalism of 1789 itself.²³ The radicalisation of the revolution, Furet famously wrote, was a largely unforeseen effect of the unitary sovereignty of the nation established in 1789 and the way that it opened up towards an increasingly strident sequence of competing claims about the location and purposes of sovereign power.²⁴ This, he argued, was why the initial radicalism of 1789, or the unilateral seizure of power by the representatives of the French Third Estate as a National and Constituent Assembly, had so problematic a significance, and why the question of the interrelationship of reform, revolution, and the financial problems of the eighteenth-century French monarchy was still a subject of real historical interest. Although the claim may, in fact, presuppose too much about the

²² Charles-Louis de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu, *De l’esprit des lois* [1748], bk. 13, ch. 17. I have used the reprinted edition of the eighteenth-century English translation by Thomas Nugent, entitled *The Spirit of Laws*, ed. Franz Neumann (New York, Hafner Publishing Company, 1949) and abbreviated it to *SL* (here, *SL*, bk. 13, ch. 17, p. 217).

²³ François Furet and Ran Halévi, eds., *Orateurs de la révolution française*, (Paris, Gallimard, 1989), p. xcvi.

²⁴ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* [1978] (Cambridge, CUP, 1981).

politics of Jacobinism, it does highlight something genuinely historically puzzling about the revolution of 1789. Right from the start, the strong claims about sovereignty made by what was soon to be the French National and Constituent Assembly and the controversial rejection of an English-style system of mixed or balanced government that accompanied those claims provoked a mixture of enthusiastic acclaim, puzzled surprise, and horrified indignation.²⁵ Even if some of the details of the argument set out in Sieyès's famous pamphlet *What Is the Third Estate?* can be found in many other contemporary publications, the one-word answer—"everything"—that, at the very beginning of his pamphlet, he gave to the question it posed is an indication of the radicalism to which Furet and Halévi referred.²⁶ Even if, too, much of the boldness of that answer may, perhaps, have had its origins in Sieyès's private life or in his unarticulated ideological allegiances, its theoretical point and wider political and institutional ramifications still have to be explained.²⁷

The suggestion developed here is that what Furet and Halévi called the radicalism of 1789, or, more simply, the difference between revolution and reform, is best understood in the light of the Janus-faced quality of public credit and the theoretical and practical difficulties involved in separating its promise from its menace. Modern historiography has focused largely on its promise. The eighteenth century focused largely on its menace. The system of representative government that Sieyès conceived was the first systematic attempt to address the question of how to have the one without the other. Although Sieyès was an important political actor both in 1789 and in 1799, it has only begun to become clear relatively recently, now that his own unpublished papers have begun to be more widely studied, that he was a more significant political thinker than he was taken to be for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁸ Since, however, he published nothing of a comprehensively theoretical character, it is still quite hard to see what the system of representative government that he envisaged might have looked like. One of the effects of putting back eighteenth-century speculation about Europe's future into the prehistory of the French Revolution is to help to make that system clearer. The key move that Sieyès

²⁵ For these assessments, see below, chapter 1.

²⁶ Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *What Is the Third Estate?* [1789], in *Sieyès: Political Writings*, ed. Michael Sonenscher (Indianapolis, Hackett, 2003), p. 94.

²⁷ For the claim about Sieyès's ideological allegiances, see William H. Sewall, *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The abbé Sieyès and "What Is the Third Estate?"* (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 1994).

²⁸ On Sieyès's political thought, see, particularly, Paul Bastid, *Sieyès et sa pensée*, 2nd ed. (Paris, Hachette, 1970); Murray Forsyth, *Reason and Revolution: The Political Thought of the Abbé Sieyès* (Leicester, Leicester University Press, 1987); and Pasquale Pasquino, *Sieyès et l'invention de la constitution en France* (Paris, Editions Odile Jacob, 1998).

made was to see that adding a debt to a state required more than a purely constitutional solution to produce a durably stable social and political outcome. The corollary of that move was a renewed interest in what, in the eighteenth century, was usually called the distinction of ranks. Adding a debt to a state certainly called for constitutional government to make public credit secure. But it also called for rethinking the whole organisation of society and the various economic and social hierarchies that it housed in order, by extension, to make the constitution itself secure. In the context of 1789, this meant revolution, not reform.

Sieyès's initial move was predicated upon a recognition that a constitution might well secure a public debt, but, by doing so, it might also give rise to problems that threatened the security of the state itself. In this sense, adding a debt to a state created something like a prefiguration of what, in the nineteenth century, came to be called the "social question" (even though the latter was a question about the propertied and the propertyless and not, as in this case, about the owners of different types of property).²⁹ As with the later social question and its concern with the tension between legal equality and economic inequality, the right kind of constitutional and institutional arrangements could give rise to the wrong kind of social and political divisions. It could do so because of the two different claims about justice that the government of a state with a debt had to meet. The first arose from the state's obligations to its creditors, while the second arose from its obligations to society as a whole. The two types of obligation could pull quite strongly against one another. Raising taxes to pay interest could clash with demands to reduce economic and social inequality. Covering interest payments to investors in the public funds could clash with demands for emergency expenditure in times of economic hardship or war. The relatively high levels of taxation secured by political representation, coupled with the way that state-backed government bonds could be used to fund the costs of private transactions, could make it easier to avoid a trade-off between public and private prosperity. But the fact that public credit could, in this way, spill over quite quickly from its initial use as war finance to become a more deep-seated part of the whole economic and social fabric could either narrow down the range of policy options to something like a single track or generate so many different policy options that no broad consensus would be easy to reach. The interest of the owners of government stock might serve the interests of the state, but it might equally be-

²⁹ For helpful starting points on the literature on the "social question," see Giovanna Procacci, *Gouverner la misère: la question sociale en France (1789–1848)* (Paris, Seuil, 1993); Donald R. Kelley and Bonnie G. Smith, "What Was Property? Legal Dimensions of the Social Question in France," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 128 (1984): 200–30, and their introduction to Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What Is Property?* [1840] (Cambridge, CUP, 1994).

come an interest in its own right. Ambiguities like these meant that even if public credit and constitutional government went hand in hand, the likely outcome of the combination remained, at best, indeterminate and, at worst, might threaten the survival of constitutional government itself.

This type of double-bind called for something more comprehensive than a purely constitutional solution. It called for detailed examination of all the components of modern political societies as these had emerged from Europe's ancient, feudal, and absolute pasts, and for thinking about how they could be put together to give a political society the allegiance of most of its members for most of the time. This was the intellectual setting in which Sieyès's system took shape. It was, in a real sense, a system. Its starting point was the modern economy and the array of occupations, activities, and social distinctions that had come into being over the previous several hundred years. But its aim was to establish a further level of political and social distinction above those generated by wealth, birth, or connection. Sieyès called the kind of theoretical enterprise that this involved "social science" or "social mechanics," meaning that it had much the same kind of concern with a limited array of fundamental principles as the natural jurisprudence of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had done, but that it also had a historical dimension that pointed as much towards natural outcomes as towards natural foundations.³⁰ Its starting point was a radical reformulation of the idea of representation so that it referred, initially, to something more basic than was usually implied by established legal or political usage.³¹ In Sieyès's usage, anyone acting on someone else's behalf was acting as that person's representative, even if the action in question amounted to no more than doing something that someone could have done all by himself (or, as Sieyès also indicated, herself). Someone who made your shoes, he noted, was, in this sense, acting as your representative.³²

This simple idea meant that representation was built into even the most rudimentary social and economic transactions, irrespective of the existence of separate political societies. Representation was simply the division of labour in another guise. From this perspective, political representation was a particular species of this broader genus, and, since it was, it had to have

³⁰ On these aspects of Sieyès's thought, see Sieyès, *Political Writings*, ed. Sonenscher, pp. ix, xiv, xlvi, 4–5, 15, 39, 50, 115, 131–2, 134. On natural jurisprudence, see Richard Tuck, "The Modern Theory of Natural Law," in Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, CUP, 1987); "Grotius and Selden," in J. H. Burns and Mark Goldie, eds., *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge, CUP, 1991); and his *Philosophy and Government, 1572–1651* (Cambridge, CUP, 1993).

³¹ For a starting point on the idea of representation, see, classically, Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1967).

³² Sieyès, *Political Writings*, ed. Sonenscher, p. xxix, note 47.

attributes that were consonant with the initial idea. In a generic sense, representation was stateless. In a particular sense, it was what gave government its right to rule. Combining the two, or fitting politics and the economy together, involved finding a way to integrate the two types of representation into a single system, but one that would still have a capacity to keep them distinct, so that both the initial and the modified ideas of representation could each exist, even under conditions of war and debt. This was what the system of representative government that Sieyès envisaged was designed to do. It was intended to produce a new, meritocratic level of social distinction out of the mixture of economic and political representation to be found in a large, developed nation like France and, once it was in place, to allow the merit-based inequality involved in this kind of social distinction to act as a moral counterweight to both economic and political inequality. What Sieyès called a “monarchical republic” was designed to produce an extra level of social distinction above the property- or office-based hierarchies involved in economic, political, and administrative life. The further level of social distinction that this entailed would, in addition, make it easier to build a bridge between the multiple and unitary forms of political representation involved in republican and royal systems of rule. Sieyès (anticipating more recent political science) called the first a polyarchy and the second a monarchy.³³ The first, he argued, could be combined with the second through the use of a constitutionally specified mixture of election and eligibility as a filtering mechanism to produce a single head of state. The outcome would be a system of government that would join the unity of monarchy to the pluralism of a republic and, by doing so, would bypass the need to have to make a choice between the two.

The result was a framework for thinking about how to add a debt to a state in a way that was compatible with all the various political and nonpolitical forms of representation that Sieyès had identified. A constitution and the fundamental principles that it embodied could secure a separation of powers between the legislative, executive, and judicial functions of the state and, by doing so, could supply the conditions required for keeping the public faith. But it could not, in itself, prevent the possibility of the damaging political conflicts or the wider political risks that keeping the public faith might involve. This was why the vertical separation of powers involved in constitutional government had to be complemented by a horizontal separation of different levels of political and administrative responsibility, on the one hand, and of different levels of social distinction and moral authority, on the other. The system of representative government that Sieyès envisaged was designed, in this sense, to have two distinct parts, a political part that would be elected and a nonpolitical part that, although

³³ For this opposition, see Sieyès, *Political Writings*, ed. Sonenscher, p. 172.

it would also be elected, would play no part at all in the way that the government itself worked. It would, however, play a vital part in giving the whole system its moral authority, so that, if conflicts or hard political choices were to arise, the system as a whole would retain its legitimacy, however divisive or contentious any particular issue might prove to be. The ingenious aspect of Sieyès's system was the way that it was designed to bypass every actually existing social hierarchy and to subsume them all within a broader, dual hierarchy of political power and moral authority. As Pierre-Louis Roederer, one of Sieyès's closest political allies, put it in 1804, the whole system was intended to rely on both a balance of powers and what he called "the artifice of hierarchies."³⁴ It was designed, in the first place, to segment the many different types of inequality built into economic and social life and prevent any one of them from dominating political power. But it was also designed, in the second place, to integrate them all within a broader system of political and moral representation. It was intended to secure public credit, but to prevent it from becoming a threat to either the internal or external security of the nation as a whole. In this sense, Sieyès's idea of representative government is, perhaps, best characterised as a daringly modernist answer to the eighteenth century's often lurid speculations about modernity's future.

Sieyès had no illusions about the way that public credit could produce what, in 1795, he was to call a *ré-total* (as against a *ré-publique*), but was still prepared to accept the fact that public debts were an unavoidable part of modern political societies and the multiple forms of representation that they housed.³⁵ The system of government that this entailed was one that was not mixed in the sense that the eighteenth-century British or American systems of government could be said to be mixed, but still did not have the kind of single centre that was built into the absolute governments of the eighteenth century. Sieyès called it a monarchical republic, as against a republican monarchy. In the first, sovereignty began from below (hence its republican nature) but would give rise to a form of government with many of the attributes of a monarchy. In the second, sovereignty began from above (hence its monarchical nature) but would give rise to a form of government with many of the attributes of a republic. Paradoxically, it was the monarchical structure of the first, not the republican structure of second, that, according to Sieyès, was best able to maintain the very inclusive idea of sovereignty

³⁴ Pierre-Louis Roederer, "De l'hérédité du pouvoir suprême dans le gouvernement français" [an xiii/1804], reprinted in *Oeuvres du comte P. L. Roederer*, ed. A. M. Roederer, 8 vols. (Paris, 1852–9), 7:269. For further details, see below, chapter 1.

³⁵ Sieyès introduced the neologism in his *Opinion de Sieyès sur plusieurs articles des titres IV et V du projet de constitution de l'an III* (Paris, 1795). On the coinage, see Pierre-Louis Roederer, "Du néologisme de Sieyès" [1795], reprinted in his *Oeuvres*, 4:204–5.

on which the whole system was based.³⁶ The mechanisms of political representation that the system housed were designed to produce a single, largely symbolic, head of state and a multiple set of political representatives. They were also intended to work in a way that would keep the single representative of the whole nation quite separate from the multiple representatives of its members. Sovereignty and government would, in short, be kept as far apart as possible. To accomplish this, the system of representation that Sieyès envisaged was based on a mechanism that its advocates called “graduated promotion” or “gradual election.”³⁷ This was not simply a form of indirect election but, as its name indicates, a hierarchical system of eligibility for election to office. The idea underlying the system was to ensure that, however well-provided with all the goods of fortune (wealth, birth, or connection) anyone might be, the eligibility requirements built into the system would require everyone to start at the bottom of the political pyramid and work their way, step by step, all the way up to the top. Ultimately, it would leave just one eligible candidate for the office of head of state. The shape of the whole system would be monarchical, but its republican nature would be based on eliminating inheritance from all of its constitutionally specified parts. It was intended to be compatible with every aspect of an economically developed society and the many different types of division of labour that it might house, but it was also intended to generate a further, nonpolitical and meritocratic hierarchy based on public service. This was the original idea underlying what, in 1802, became the French Legion of Honour.³⁸ The result, if the system had ever been implemented fully, would have been the formation of two distinct types of social hierarchy. One would have been property-based, but the other would have been service-based, with the moral authority of the second acting, in conjunction with free public discussion, as a barrier against the emergence of either an oligarchy or a plutocracy out of the first. Over time, the system of gradual election and the limitations on inheritance imposed on the membership of the service-based hierarchy would prevent this higher level of social distinction from being reabsorbed by the property-based hierarchy.

The corollary of Sieyès’s initial insight into the double-bind that could be produced by securing public credit by purely constitutional means was a strong interest in the part played by multiple forms of social distinction in maintaining political stability. This, in part, was connected to the way that public credit could intensify the kind of symbiosis of land, money, and office that Sieyès was to highlight in some of the more vitriolic passages of

³⁶ See Sieyès, *Political Writings*, ed. Sonenscher, pp. 163–73.

³⁷ On this idea of political representation, see below, chapter 1.

³⁸ On this aspect of the system, see below, chapter 1.

the pamphlets that he published in 1788 and 1789.³⁹ There, the French nobility was presented as either a parasitic aristocracy or a plutocracy, a class of titled mendicants feeding on the resources supplied by a court-centred absolute government and a burgeoning public debt. But Sieyès's interest in different types of social distinction and the various, and often incommensurable, kinds of public or private good with which they could be associated had a further, more positive, dimension. As the future-oriented speculation of the eighteenth century indicated, adding a debt to a state gave rise to a particularly vivid case of the more general problem of identifying and fixing the limits of state power. One way of establishing such limits was provided by the mechanisms involved in constitutional government. But the double-bind that these could produce required a further layer of moral and political constraint to make the constitution itself secure. This, for Sieyès, was why the multiple goods associated with a variety of different types of social hierarchy mattered. Although they might all, in the last instance, still have to be subordinate to the state and might all still have to give way to its final role in preserving the public good, their very variety and incommensurability could set powerful limits on what the content of that ultimate value might be. The multiple goods and services supplied by a complex commercial and industrial society meant that preserving the public good would still have to leave room both for the kind of instrumental trade-offs involved in comparing one type of good against another and for the less instrumental and more aesthetic attractions of social diversity itself. Different types of good might not have much in common, but their very incommensurability and the pluralistic set of values that this entailed could play a part in making a whole social and political system acceptable, however much it might fall short at one time or another or frustrate the interests of one or other of its component parts.

Here, the promise of public credit could begin to outweigh its menace. What had begun as war finance could also be used to promote the public welfare. In part this was an effect of the protean character of public credit and the way that part of the revenue raised through the issue of state-backed debt would feed back into the economy either because of government expenditure or because of the way that interest-bearing paper could be used as security for private credit. In a larger measure, however, it was an effect of the power supplied by the combination of permanent taxation

³⁹ Notably in his *Essay on Privileges*, in Sieyès, *Political Writings*, ed. Sonenscher, pp. 68–91. Compare to Hilton L. Root, *The Fountain of Privilege: Political Foundations of Markets in Old Regime France and England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993), which, in other respects, relies on the literature on institutional economics and public choice referred to in note 7 above and, in a weaker sense, on the kind of characterisation of the English constitution described in Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws*. For Montesquieu's own views, see below, chapter 2.

and permanent influence over the money supply that public credit produced. The combination gave government real leverage over economic and social life. Here, too, Sieyès was uncompromisingly on the side of the moderns. He opposed all the monetary schemes developed to eliminate the nation's debt during the period of the revolution, including the decision to confiscate the property of the French church in November 1789 and all the increasingly ambitious debt-reduction programmes to which that decision gave rise.⁴⁰ He was attacked very strongly for doing so, mainly because it was easy to claim that his view had been shaped by his clerical allegiances. There is no reason, however, to think that this was the case. Instead, his position followed quite logically from his disabused acceptance of the fact of public credit and the permanent capacity for social and economic leverage that adding a debt to a state entailed. If there could be no taxation without representation, the opposite also applied. In a world made up of many states, war was always a possibility, and, if there was war, there would also be debt. Just as there could be no taxation without representation, there also had to be no representation without taxation and, in the absence of perpetual peace, a government that was strong enough to be able to do both. It is the kind of government that we have. It may not be quite like the kind of government that Sieyès envisaged, but the state-funded combination of welfare and warfare that is one of its most deep-seated features was what, instead of the deluge, came next.

Sieyès sometimes claimed that he had thought of most of the features of what he usually called the representative system well before 1789. He did so most pointedly in the public debate that he had with the Anglo-American republican Tom Paine in 1791.⁴¹ Much of the content of this book is intended to explain why it is not particularly surprising that Sieyès should have made that claim. It is, accordingly, arranged in a way that is designed to show how the system of representative government that he envisaged went with the grain of a great deal of thinking about domestic and international politics in the second half of the eighteenth century and, in particular, with the interest in different types of social hierarchy and their relationship to political power that developed in the wake of the publication of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws* in 1748. Montesquieu associated one type of hierarchy with what he called the English system of government and another with what he called the "monarchies we are acquainted with," or the absolute monarchies of the European mainland.⁴² He also hinted that the second, not the first, might be more able to withstand the combination

⁴⁰ For his alternative to confiscating the property of the church, see Sieyès, *Political Writings*, ed. Sonenscher, p. xlv.

⁴¹ Sieyès, *Political Writings*, ed. Sonenscher, p. 172.

⁴² Montesquieu, *SL*, bk. 11, ch. 7, p. 162.

of military and financial pressure that was one of the hallmarks of the modern world, because the kind of hierarchy that it sustained was outside, not inside, the formally political part of the whole system of government and could, therefore, form a real obstacle to the untrammelled exercise of state power. The purpose of the initial chapter of this book is, first, to show how this suggestion was registered and, second, to explain how the related subjects of war, debt, and revolution formed the historical and analytical context in which it came to be assessed. The starting point of the whole chapter is the concept of revolution that, in the eighteenth century, could be associated with the phrase *après moi, le déluge*. Setting Sieyès's political thought in this context may make it easier to see what it was designed to forestall as well as what it was intended to achieve, and how, in this setting, it can also be seen to be the most elaborate (but certainly not the last) of a number of different attempts to think about how to preserve modernity's potential for prosperity, culture, and civility while avoiding its potential for collapse. The system of representative government that he envisaged is perhaps best described as a point-by-point reworking of Montesquieu's conception of monarchy, using a different version of the now largely forgotten idea of representation on which that concept was based.⁴³ Where Montesquieu's idea of monarchy was a single system made up of two parts, based respectively on the inheritance of property and the inheritance of thrones, Sieyès's idea of a republic was a single system that was also made up of two parts, but where election, not inheritance, filled the hierarchy of positions in the whole social machine.

Several moves were required to get from Montesquieu to Sieyès. Looming over them all was the idea of a unitary, but representative, sovereign state set out in the seventeenth century by the English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes.⁴⁴ "The error concerning mixed government," Hobbes had written in his *Elements of Law*, "hath proceeded from want of understanding of what is meant by this word *body politic*, and how it signifieth not the concord, but the union of many men."⁴⁵ A political society, in Hobbes's terms, involved union, not simply concord. But public credit seemed to require something like the opposite. It required, on the one hand, investments made severally by banks or individuals with capital at their disposal either at home or abroad and, on the other hand, interest payments made severally to all the various owners of government stock both at home and

⁴³ On this idea of representation and the part that it played in Montesquieu's conception of monarchy, see below, chapter 2.

⁴⁴ On this aspect of eighteenth-century thought, see, particularly, Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of the Modern Society* (Cambridge, Mass., M.I.T. Press; Leamington Spa, Berg Press, 1988).

⁴⁵ Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Law Natural & Politic* [1640], ed. Ferdinand Tönnies, introd. M. M. Goldsmith (London, Cass, 1969), pt. 2, ch. 8, sec. 7, pp. 173–4.

abroad. The whole idea of keeping the public faith presupposed concord. The state that was best equipped to maintain it was likely to be the winner in the international capital markets and to reap the reward of lower interest rates and the virtuous circle of public and private prosperity that they brought in their wake. But the double-bind to which this could lead also seemed to call for union. Concord might be required for keeping the public faith, but union might still be required for unleashing state power. Hobbes's theory of political representation lent itself very well to this latter purpose but left very little room for the former. Adding a debt to a state seemed to call for both. It seemed to require the concord that Hobbes associated with mixed government without, however, actually having a system of government that was really mixed. The political crisis that developed over the French monarchy's financial deficit in 1787 made the sequencing issue clear. Union had to come first, so that concord could then have a chance to take root. *What Is the Third Estate?* spelled out the message. First the nation had to exercise sovereign power; then, under the aegis of the system of representative government that Sieyès had in mind, private and public prosperity could work together.

The next three chapters describe how this outcome acquired its shape in the sequence of moves that, in a not particularly stylised way, can be said to have led from Montesquieu to Sieyès. The thread connecting them is the subject of inequality, both within and between states. It was central to Montesquieu's conception of monarchy, described in chapter 2, and to the various replies to that concept produced by Rousseau, the Physiocrats, and the members of the Gournay group, described in chapter 3. The focus of chapter 4 is on the political and economic thought of a number of individuals, beginning with Claude-Adrien Helvétius and ending with Jean-Baptiste Say, who began to show how it might be possible to move beyond the binary opposition between equality and inequality dominating discussions of modern political societies in the third quarter of the eighteenth century. This interest in the origins of different forms of inequality and the various types of social hierarchy that they could generate pointed towards a range of claims about the compatibility between an English-style system of balanced government and many of the most fundamental features of the modern world. But it was also particularly exposed to the equally powerful claims about the dangers of public credit and the kind of double-bind to which it could expose a system of mixed or balanced government. The dilemma pointed back towards the comparison that Montesquieu had made between monarchy and the English system of government. But the intervening interest in the multiple origins of different types of inequality and the composite character of the distinction of ranks opened up a way to avoid the double-bind. This, effectively, was what Sieyès did. The idea of both political and nonpolitical representation that this involved

amounted to the superimposition of a radically modified version of Montesquieu's conception of monarchy upon an English-style commercial society. The final chapter of this book picks up the subject of the relationship between representation and different types of inequality as it was discussed at the time of the formation of the first French Empire. It ends by examining some of the dilemmas that these revealed (and may still do) by describing how the kind of future-oriented speculation that had occurred before the French Revolution was carried through into the first three decades of the nineteenth century in both Europe and the United States of America to form a more open-ended counterpoint to the better-known philosophies of history of Hegel, Comte, and Marx.

The theme of inequality and its political implications that runs through this book forms a further connection between its subject-matter and the historiography of the French Revolution. If the debt problem supplies a context for establishing a clearer historical understanding of what François Furet and Ran Halévi called the radicalism of 1789, it also forms a link between two long-standing interpretations of the French Revolution itself. A generation ago there used to be a "social" interpretation of the French Revolution and a "political" one.⁴⁶ This is a book about the bridge between the two. In less metaphorical terms, it is about the social and political dimensions of the future-oriented speculation associated with the phrase *après moi, le déluge* and the light thrown by them both on what was at stake in 1789. The content of this book may, perhaps, make it easier to see why both types of retrospective characterisation of the French Revolution make partial sense, and why, therefore, there is no need to have to opt for either the one or the other, because the real historical question is, rather, to try to identify how they could be taken to be connected. Its content may also, perhaps, form a further bridge to other, more recent, developments in the historiography of the French Revolution, notably the rediscovery of eighteenth-century French Jansenism, the renewal of real historical research into the high politics of the French monarchy, and the broader revival of interest in the content of eighteenth-century thought.⁴⁷ The picture of the

⁴⁶ See, famously, Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, CUP, 1964); George V. Taylor, "Non-capitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 72 (1967): 469–96. For a modified version of the "social" interpretation, see Colin Jones, "The Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere and the Origins of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 13–40. For general overviews and recent discussions, see William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999), and Peter R. Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution* (London, Palgrave, 2006).

⁴⁷ On these developments, see, on Jansenism, Dale Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France, 1757–65* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1975); *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Old Regime* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984); "Pierre Nicole, Jansenism, and the Morality of Enlightened Self-Interest," in Alan Charles

French Revolution presented here is not very like those that can be extrapolated from these recent historiographical developments, but this does not mean that they are mutually incompatible. Much of the difference arises from the way that this book begins. Its starting point is not what the French Revolution was, or how or why it occurred. It begins, instead, with a revolution that, at least in the first instance, was simply predicted. But this does not mean that it had no bearing upon the French Revolution. What follows is designed to show how it did.

Kors and Paul J. Korshin, eds., *Anticipations of the Enlightenment in England, France and Germany* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); "The Jansenist Constitutional Legacy in the French Pre-revolution," in Keith Michael Baker, ed., *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1987), pp. 169–201; "The French Estates-General as Ecumenical Council," *Journal of Modern History* 61 (1989): 1–52; *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996); "Christianity as Casualty and Chrysalis of Modernity: The Problem of Dechristianization in the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 1081–103; and Dale Van Kley, ed., *The French Idea of Freedom* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994). On the high politics of the eighteenth-century French monarchy, see John Hardman, *French Politics 1774–1789: From the Accession of Louis XVI to the Fall of the Bastille* (London, Longman, 1995); Julian Swann, *Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV* (Cambridge, CUP, 1995); and, particularly, Munro Price, *The Fall of the French Monarchy* (London, Macmillan, 2002). On the broader intellectual history of eighteenth-century France, see, most notably, Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, CUP, 1990).