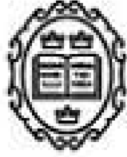

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Public Opinion and Political Culture in France During the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century

COMMON sense would tell us that, like poverty, public opinion has always been with us. Among leading scholars of the Enlightenment, Daniel Mornet considered the role of government in orienting and shaping public opinion, Peter Gay referred to 'that new, still shapeless phenomenon, public opinion', through which, it was hoped, the *philosophes* might eventually influence policy, and Robert Darnton maintained that public opinion in fact limited what was in theory an absolute monarchy.[1] Tocqueville ascribed great power to public opinion, asserting that 'The King still used the language of a master but in actual fact he always deferred to public opinion and was guided by it in his handling of day-to-day affairs. Indeed, he made a point of consulting it, feared it, and bowed to it invariably.'[2] Tocqueville perhaps overstated his case, but that is not the point. What I wish to suggest is that 'public opinion' in the loose and general sense in which it is used by the authors just cited is significantly different from the term as it has come to be used by a number of leading historians in France and the United States. For most historians of ideas, public opinion is the prevailing sentiment of the majority on any given issue or set of issues. It reflects what is generally thought or believed at a given time. For François Furet, Keith Baker, Lynn Hunt and others who have followed their lead, and who for the purposes of this article I will refer to as neo-revisionists[3], on the other hand, the status of public opinion has been elevated. It is defined as rational, rather than simply the reflection of what most people believe, whether reasonable or not. And even

1. Daniel Mornet, *Les Origines intellectuelles de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1967; first edition 1993); Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (2 vols, New York, 1966 and 1969), ii, 450; Robert Darnton, 'The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France', in *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 33 and 'A Police Inspector Sorts His Files', in his *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1984), pp. 146 and 181.
2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York, 1955), pp. 174–5.
3. In the context of the French Revolution historians such as Alfred Cobban and George Taylor, who questioned the main categories and logic of the social, or Marxist interpretation of the Revolution, and who sought to shift emphasis from social to political categories, can be termed revisionist. A related though distinct school, represented by scholars such as Furet, Baker and Hunt, has invested heavily in theory, especially in the fields of semiotics, literary theory, literary criticism, communications theory and cultural anthropology, and has focused its attention less on politics than on what it terms political culture. It is appropriate to term this school neo-revisionist. Other historians who have commented on significant differences among revisionists are Sara Maza, who distinguishes the 'soft' revisionism of Cobban and Taylor from the 'hard' revisionism of Furet and Baker ('Politics, Culture and the Origins of the French Revolution', *Journal of Modern History*, lxi (1989), 704–23) and Gary Kates who interestingly terms the school of revolutionary historiography influenced by Furet 'Neo-Conservative Revisionism' ('Introduction' to *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies*, ed. G. Kates, New York, 1998, p. 11).

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more important for neo-revisionists, public opinion is normative and authoritative.

The neo-revisionist view of public opinion is, with certain significant modifications, taken over from Jürgen Habermas's important study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.[4] In this book Habermas set out to gain a more independent appreciation of cultural phenomena than the premisses of Marxism normally allow. He posited that the emergence of a 'public sphere' was a necessary prerequisite to the emergence of 'public opinion' in the precise and technical meaning that this term acquires in his hands. The preconditions for the emergence of the public sphere were the development of finance and capitalism, which formed the basis of an economically defined and autonomous civil society (pp. 14 and 19) on the one hand, and a bureaucratized, impersonal state authority on the other (p. 19). Developing at the intersection of dynamic commercialism and depersonalized state authority, the public sphere provided an environment in which a new, more affective form of the family could emerge (p. 30), and a significant degree of individualism be nurtured. The press, both in its commercial and literary aspects, plays an important constitutive role in articulating the public sphere (pp. 20–2, 41–3, 51 and 60), in which individuals freely engage in rational thought and argument. At first restricted to aesthetics and *belles lettres*, critical reason comes to be applied to social and political issues (pp. 33 and 51). Thus politicized, and claiming for its rationalism a normative status, public opinion was now able to compel public authority to justify itself before it (pp. 25–6). 'A political consciousness developed in the public sphere of civil society which, in opposition to absolute sovereignty, articulated the concept of and demand for general and abstract laws and which ultimately came to assert itself (i.e. public opinion) as the only legitimate source of this law.' (p. 54).

Habermas is explicit about two other points that are relevant here. First, public opinion as he described it is something radically new, emerging in England at the end of the seventeenth century, and in France around the middle of the eighteenth (pp. 57–9 and 67). The socio-political conditions for private individuals coming together to exercise their reason on matters of public concern did not exist before this time, and in the absence of the institutional frameworks in which such meetings might take place – cafés, salons, masonic lodges, reading societies and the like – public opinion could not have existed earlier. In Habermas's analysis the emergence of the public sphere was the necessary condition for the development of public opinion. Secondly, Habermas emphasizes that the public sphere is bourgeois in character. Civil society was a sphere of freedom for the owners of property and

4. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1991); first published in 1962; first translated into English in 1989.

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commodities, not for all members of society (pp. 37 and 55). Indeed, the overwhelming majority of the population had neither the leisure nor the means to acquire the cultural commodities, such as books, periodicals, tickets for concerts or plays, without which there was no participation in the elitist culture based on those things. In the eighteenth century Habermas's public 'was still extremely small' (p. 37). Moreover, even where sufficient wealth was available to assure access to enlightened cultural activity, patterns of property ownership privileged the father of the family over the wife and children (pp. 43 and 47). For Habermas, the public consisted of 'private persons whose autonomy [was] based on ownership of private property' (p. 55). It was clear, further, that 'only property owners were in a position to form a public that could legislatively protect the foundations of the existing property order' and he affirmed unambiguously that 'Class interest was the basis of public opinion' (p. 87). Habermas comments incisively on the discrepancy between the universalist principles of Enlightenment thought and the restricted bases of class and gender on which the movement rested (pp. 47 and 55–6). Indeed, the way Habermas comprehensively weaves together threads of sociological, philosophical, political and economic analysis, is one of the most impressive, and to my mind, most convincing features of this powerful study.

For the rational and hence normative aspect of public opinion Habermas draws on Kant's notion of publicity (pp. 102–17). In his 1784 essay, 'What is Enlightenment?' Kant distinguishes in a downright idiosyncratic but nonetheless influential way, between private and public. A pastor preaching to his flock in the name of his Church, or an officer passing a command to his subordinates are taken by Kant as examples of *private* uses of reason. The same pastor and officer, seated at their desks and writing treatises on theology, military tactics, philosophy, or indeed any other subject, are instances of *public* uses of reason.[5] It is noteworthy that in drawing his distinction between the public and the private realms, Kant altogether ignores the domestic sphere, which in classical thought is taken as the counterpoint to the public and political world of the *ekklesia.* Instead, he distinguishes, on the one hand, between situations in which an individual, even in a position of leadership, is subject to the authority of an institution or agency of state, such as the church or the army, and, on the other, the blessed situation in which a scholar seated at his or her desk addresses an issue that is to be judged dispassionately by other scholars on the basis of their critical faculties informed by reason. Now public opinion so defined is, at least potentially, truly rational, and hence authoritative. But this rationality of Kant's public sphere is bought at no small price. On the one hand, it is so insulated from the exigencies of practical life – from the influence of

5. Immanuel Kant, 'What is Enlightenment?' in *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*, ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley, 1996), pp. 59–61.

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the courtier who might corrupt the monarch as well as from the demagogue who might mislead the people – that it is applicable only to the most disinterested and reified of intellectuals, such as, say, Kant himself. On the other hand, the individual acting as the agent of an established state or ecclesiastical organization, is obliged to follow the directives of his superiors, even if that requires subordinating more rational or more decent courses of action to them. The clergyman must preach the doctrine of his Church, and the officer must obey and pass on the orders he has been given. There is no place for the individual to question or challenge authority in real life. Criticism is confined to the reified realm of isolated scholars addressing each other by means of print – as if such scholars were not themselves created by political and economic forces, and as if they were truly isolated from the market place, law courts and back rooms where interested and pragmatic decisions were and are made. Nevertheless, though Kant has perhaps done violence to common sense in formulating his distinction between the public and the private spheres, he also achieved a significant breakthrough. He has established a normative and authoritative intellectual sphere that could, at least in theory, stand independently against existing structures, and even be used as a criterion by which to judge them. Habermas, I would argue, should be seen as restoring social and economic dimensions to Kant's reified and intellectualized framework while retaining the normative character of the public sphere.[6]

Arguably, the very remoteness of the pure and rational public sphere envisaged by Kant is potentially liberating, for it provides an escape from the empirical trap of uni-dimensional particularity. The existence and functioning of institutions provides a Burkean, and a common sense, legitimacy for them. Maintaining a society and keeping it running is no small achievement, and the degree of order and well-being attained are their own validation. What Kant offers is a conceptual means of moving beyond a self-justifying empirical reality. Moreover, the mechanism for change that he constructs is pacific and non-disruptive. Policy will change and institutions be reformed only when there emerges a consensus, achieved by rational debate, among enlightened and propertied members of the public sphere.[7] And yet, reified though it seems, the public sphere is not altogether dissociated from immediate and practical

6. There remains an idealized quality in Habermas's conceptualization of the public sphere. This is partly the result of Habermas's adaptation of Kant described above, but partly, too, the consequence of the eighteenth-century public sphere being compared favourably in the last parts of *The Structural Transformation* to the cultural and political situation in the developed world in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where the independence and rationality of the public sphere have been fatally compromised by commercialism and manipulation, so that 'public opinion' has lost its critical faculty and comes to designate collectively and passively held views and prejudices (*The Structural Transformation*, pp. 241–43).

7. Michel Foucault sees a political dimension to Kant's 1784 essay, and speaks of 'a sort of contract – what might be called the contract of rational despotism with free reason . . .' Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?' in *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), p. 37.

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issues. For this sphere is constituted by individuals who also inhabit and function in the imperfect and less than rational world of social, economic and political practicalities. The co-existence of public and private functions in the same people potentially mitigates the abstraction of Kant's schema. Habermas, for his part, integrates domestic and economic dimensions into Kant's conceptual model, but still asserts the authoritative nature of the public sphere, and of its product, public opinion.

The conceptualization of the public sphere and of public opinion as adapted from Kant by Habermas has been taken over and come to play a central role in neo-revisionist thinking about the French Revolution. But in the process of appropriation, certain of Habermas's ideas and arguments were adapted and modified, sometimes in significant ways. Most prominently, the core, rather reified Kantian conceptualization of public opinion has received renewed emphasis, while Habermas's attempt to modernize the notion by providing it with a social and economic context has been downplayed or overlooked.

We have observed that in his account of the emergence of the public sphere, Habermas comprehensively links cultural to economic and social factors. He speaks of a 'bourgeois public sphere', and is explicit that the public opinion that he was considering had a socially specific locus. While it did not necessarily exclude the aristocracy, it was the preserve of those with sufficient wealth to acquire the cultural artefacts on which participation in enlightened culture depended and to create an environment that afforded the comfort and privacy conducive to the development of an independent and critical view of the world. For Habermas, eighteenth-century French public opinion is overwhelmingly bourgeois public opinion. The working classes had no part in it.[8] The salons, masonic lodges, cafés, books and periodicals in which this opinion was articulated were overwhelmingly the affair of elites.

In Keith Baker's influential adaptation of Habermas, all discussion of the social bases of public opinion has been dropped.[9] There is no mention of a bourgeoisie nor of the relationship of property to the opinion-bearing public. These issues simply do not interest Baker. For him, public opinion is important as a political category that serves as a normative basis for contesting established authority. It is said to have taken shape 'as a political or ideological construct rather than as a

8. Habermas states: 'Our investigation is limited to the *liberal* model of the bourgeois public sphere, to its emergence and transformation. Thus it refers to those features of a historical constellation that attained dominance and leaves aside the *plebeian* public sphere as a variant that in a sense was suppressed in the historical process.' *The Structural Transformation*, p. xviii.

9. This shift in emphasis in the adaptation of Habermas by some historians of eighteenth-century France has also been commented upon by T. C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolution: Class War or Culture Clash?* 2nd edn (London, 1998), p. 27. Dale Van Kley has observed that, 'If Habermas's book has successfully resisted the decline of Marxian explanations, it is mainly because historians have ignored his Marxism.' 'In Search of Eighteenth-Century Parisian Public Opinion', *French Historical Studies*, xix (1995), 216.

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discrete sociological function' and is described by Baker as 'the abstract source of legitimacy in a transformed political culture', which stood in opposition to the ideology of absolutism.[10] Roger Chartier similarly notes that 'defined as a conceptual entity, and not in sociological terms', public opinion exerted great influence in the second half of the eighteenth century, though he is unsure whether it achieved this influence because of its lack of sociological specificity or despite it.[11] In a recent article Baker has reasserted his indifference to the sociology of the public, writing ' . . . I have tended to put more emphasis on the concept of "public opinion" as a political invention appearing in the context of a crisis of absolute authority in which actors within an absolutist political system appealed to a "public" beyond as a way of reformulating institutional claims that could no longer be negotiated within the traditional political language. Little seems to be gained by attempting to analyse these political developments in conventional Marxist terms of class used by Habermas in 1962.'[12]

The workings of public opinion and its place in political culture are central for most neo-revisionists, while the sociology of the public is deemed unimportant. In a more rounded treatment of the same subject, Mona Ozouf also emphasizes the normative character of eighteenth-century views of public opinion, and the status of a tribunal of ultimate appeal that was often assigned to it. But Ozouf also places emphasis on the polemical, as opposed to normative, nature of the concept, and she further identifies specific bearers of public opinion, namely, men of letters and the *parlements*. In addition to a unified, authoritative and archaic concept of public opinion, Ozouf notes the existence of a

10. Keith Michael Baker, 'Politics and Public Opinion Under the Old Regime: Some Reflections', in *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France*, ed. Jack Censer and Jeremy Popkin (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1987), pp. 212–13 and 231. This influential article has appeared in slightly different form as 'Politique et opinion publique sous l'ancien régime', in *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, xlii (1987), 41–71 and 'Public Opinion as Political Invention' in a collection of Baker's essays entitled *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 167–99.

11. Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Durham, NC, 1991), pp. 36–7.

12. Keith Baker, 'Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations on a Theme by Habermas,' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), p. 192. However, Baker nowhere attempts to replace a Marxist with a non-Marxist sociology, largely because public opinion has significance for him as a principle of authority which he regards as independent of specific sociological configurations. It is worth noting that in the same volume from which this citation from Baker is taken, Habermas was still comfortable in using the same sociological categories he had used thirty years earlier. Indeed, he asserts that he regards 'social theory in the Marxian tradition . . . as a still meaningful enterprise'; Habermas, 'Concluding Remarks,' in Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, p. 464. What is gained in taking Baker's position will be considered below. Some recent treatments of Habermas which take into account the nature of the eighteenth-century public are Jeremy Popkin, 'The Concept of Public Opinion in the Historiography of the French Revolution: A Critique', *Storia della Storiografia*, xx (1991), 77–92, Anthony J. La Vopa, 'Conceiving a Public: Ideas and Society in Eighteenth-Century Europe', *Journal of Modern History*, lxiv (1992), 79–116, and Jon Cowans, 'Habermas and French History: The Public Sphere and the Problem of Political Legitimacy', *French History*, xiii (1999), 134–60.

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pluralistic and liberal version of the notion that formed the second aspect of 'a genuinely contradictory concept'.[13] During the Revolution, Ozouf argues, the unitary and archaic version of the idea came to predominate, and was used to explain the ideological rigor of the Terror.[14]

This authoritarian variant of public opinion which Ozouf, and with her Furet and Baker, find in the Terror is a direct descendant of Kant's notion of public opinion. As an oppositional doctrine under the old regime, public opinion could have recourse to no strategy other than rational argument and persuasion. This absolved it from dealing with what is probably the central problem of any form of politics, namely coercion, or the use of force against those who disobey established laws and guidelines. Keith Baker has astutely termed the appeal to public opinion under the old regime 'a politics without politics', and referred to it as a 'politics of rational consensus'.[15] Though most *philosophes* adhered to a rational and unitary view of public opinion, they did not have means of coercion available to them. Lacking direct power, they were not tempted to abuse it. The sin of the Jacobins of 1792 to 1794 was not so much adherence to a unitary notion of public opinion as finding themselves in a situation in which the question of enforcing their laws by coercion could not be avoided. In similar situations pluralistic and liberal political systems exercise their coercive powers no less freely, though usually in rough proportion to the seriousness of the crisis at hand.

The rational, unified and normative concept of public opinion that figures prominently in Habermas's *The Structural Transformation* and appears frequently in political writings of the second half of the eighteenth century offers neo-revisionists what is probably the key element in their reconstruction of pre-revolutionary and revolutionary political culture.[16] It is important, therefore, to consider whether this notion can sustain the interpretative weight placed on it.

It is clear why eighteenth-century authors such as Peuchet and Necker[17] identified public opinion with reason, for rationality formed the basis of its putative universality and authority. Polemically, this was

13. Mona Ozouf, 'Public Opinion at the End of the Old Regime', *Journal of Modern History*, lx (1988), supplement, S1–S21 at S–21. This article was originally published in French in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. I, *The Political Culture of the Old Regime*, ed. Keith Michael Baker (Oxford, 1987), pp. 419–34.

14. See Ozouf's article, 'Public Spirit' in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, ed. F. Furet and M. Ozouf, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 1989), pp. 771–9.

15. Baker, 'Politics and Public Opinion', p. 246.

16. Baker and Ozouf have worked specifically with the notion of public opinion, while Furet, in the key essay 'The French Revolution is Over' in his collection of articles *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, 1990), writes in more general terms of language and semiotics, and Lynn Hunt focuses on language, values and imagery (*Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984, pp. 10 and 13). These components of the political culture of the period are all closely related to public opinion.

17. See Baker, 'Politics and Public Opinion', pp. 238–45.

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an astute position to adopt, for it provided an alternate principle of authority, both effective and non-violent, to state authority. It is not difficult to understand why opponents or critics of a regime, especially if they are writers and intellectuals, emphasize the importance of ideas and of opinion in their struggles with constituted authorities. Lacking wealth, power and access to the machinery of social control, they make maximal claims for the value and importance of the only tools available to them: their ideas. The claim to speak for the public is an impressive one, though its force seems diminished when confronted with the realities of state support for writers it favoured and the threat of jail for those of whom it disapproved.[18] To be sure, ascribing to public opinion the status of a court of final appeal is an effective polemical and rhetorical stance, and conceptualizing public opinion as an abstract principle of authority is an appropriate tactic for intellectuals and those in opposition who do not have state budgets or means of coercion available to them. However, rhetorical force is not a guarantee of effectiveness, or of cogency as a tool of historical analysis.

This claim for the maximal authority and efficacy of public opinion is based on the assumptions of the rationality of this opinion and its universality. 'Public' opinion is thus defined as the opinion of the rational and the enlightened and, as Habermas explicitly says, is the opinion of a small elite. This is the sense in which Kant uses the concept. Now philosophers and scholars are entitled to define terms as they choose. But in this case, the technical sense given the term 'public opinion' goes against common usage. In this technical sense 'public opinion' has become the rational opinion of an enlightened elite and has ceased to be simply the opinions, such as they are, of most people. This becomes clear the moment a referent is supplied for the term 'public'. Indeed, the issue of the social basis of public opinion is one that the neo-revisionists not only do not, but cannot, take up. For once the question is asked, we inevitably discover that the public is neither unified, because there are different points of view on any issue, nor universal, for discussion is never all-inclusive. Since it is not possible to maintain the normative character of a divided and partial public opinion, to which any social analysis will inevitably lead, the validity of neo-revisionism's claim for public opinion depends in large part on its ability convincingly to deny the relevance of this question. Furet does this by directing great ire, and even greater scorn, at the whole enterprise of social history, and by boldly asserting the all-power of the word.[19] Baker argues explicitly that the social composition of the public is unimportant. Habermas, we have seen, readily admits that his public

18. See Robert Darnton, 'The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France', and 'A Police Inspector Sorts His Files'. This is not a point that Darnton set out to make in these studies, but it nevertheless emerges from them.

19. François Furet, 'The Revolutionary Catechism' and 'The French Revolution is Over', both in *Interpreting the French Revolution*.

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is a small social and intellectual elite, the universality of whose opinion consists in its rationality.[20] Furet and Baker, however, perhaps because of their aversion to Marxism or to social interpretation, avoid the question of the social grounding of public opinion, and tend to treat an ideal type as if it were a concrete reality.[21]

The assumption that public opinion embodies reason confers moral authority. The issue of who constitutes the public whose opinions are being expressed, raises questions that call for a basic reconsideration of both the universality and the authority of the notion of public opinion. It is a question that Furet and Baker do not ask. For posing this question restores the distinction between the technical definition of the public as rational and enlightened, and the public as the collection of such men and women as happen to be in the street at any given time with their particular interests, prejudices, and illusions.

At the heart of the neo-revisionist interpretation of the French Revolution is the elision of the distinction between these two uses of the term 'public'. For Furet and Baker, the enlightened public are the bearers of what they call 'public opinion'. Implicit in this view is the assumption that should the uneducated and unenlightened ever rise to a higher cultural level, they would necessarily subscribe to the rationally determined views of enlightened 'public opinion'. In this sense Furet's and Baker's notion of public opinion is universal, and the enlightened public – that of Kant and Habermas – truly is the public. Now, this normative approach is one way of understanding the public. Another way, arguably no less valid, is to begin with a given population and ask what views and opinions its members in fact hold. Methodologically empirical, and promising only descriptive, not normative, results, this approach has frequently been used in analysing public opinion.

John Stuart Mill, for example, writing in middle of the nineteenth century, observed:

> Those whose opinions go by the name of public opinion are not always the same sort of public: in America, they are the whole white population: in

20. This is clear from later sections of *The Structural Transformation* in which Habermas asserts that the critical publicity of the eighteenth-century public sphere has been subverted and replaced by non-public and group opinion that is manipulated by economic and political interests.

21. On the theoretical nature of Habermas's thesis in *The Structural Transformation*, the following observations are useful: 'It should also be noted that America's "public sphere" (like all others?) lacked the critical rationality of Habermas's "ideal-type" public discourse.' Lloyd S. Kramer, 'The French Revolution and the Creation of American Political Culture', in *The Global Ramifications of the French Revolution*, ed. Joseph Klaits and Michael H. Haltzel (Cambridge, 1994), p. 34, n. 15, and 'The recognition of limits tends to support Habermas's views that this [the eighteenth century] was an age in which "critical reason" triumphed. However, Habermas's incautious view is flawed: it is not the triumph of critical reason itself, but the victory of limited issues and historical analysis.' Marvin B. Becker, *The Emergence of Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century: A Privileged Moment in the History of England, Scotland and France* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994), p. xxii.

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England, chiefly the middle class. But they are always a mass, that is to say, collective mediocrity. And what is still a greater novelty, the mass do not now take their opinions from dignitaries in Church or State, from ostensible leaders, or from books. Their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name on the spur of the moment, through the newspapers.[22]

Mill, while providing a breakdown of the elements of public opinion and questioning its competence ('collective mediocrity') does not underestimate its power. He acknowledges that 'public opinion now rules the world'.[23] Yet this power is based on the views of 'that miscellaneous collection of a few wise men and many foolish individuals called the public'.[24] The views of the public, one might reasonably expect, will reflect its moral and intellectual level, so that in many cases ' . . . public opinion means, at the best, some people's opinion of what is good or bad for other people, while very often it does not mean even that . . . '.[25] Mill's younger contemporary, Walter Bagehot, agreed that public opinion exercised great power in England in the second half of the nineteenth century, and he too questioned both its universality and its competence. On the one hand, he held that public opinion was determined more by material interests than by reason.[26] On the other, he suggested that the solid middle class which he took as constituting public opinion was far from sovereign. He wrote:

> The middle classes – the ordinary majority of educated men – are in the present day the despotic power in England. 'Public opinion', nowadays, 'is the opinion of the bald-headed man at the back of the omnibus.' It is *not* the opinion of the aristocratical classes as such; or of the most educated and refined classes as such; it is simply the opinion of the ordinary mass of educated, but still commonplace mankind. If you look at the mass of the constituencies, you will see that they are not very interesting people; and perhaps if you look behind the scenes and see the people who manipulate and work the constituencies, you will find that these are yet more uninteresting.[27]

The issues that Mill and Bagehot raise here are problematic for a view of public opinion that focuses exclusively on its legitimizing function. In the first place, this British, liberal analysis denies the universality and generality of public opinion. By identifying the opinion of the public with a certain race, class or gender, Mill and Bagehot implicitly deny that it expresses the views or formulates the interests of the public as a whole. To the degree that the legitimizing function of public opinion depends

22. Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis, 1978; first published 1859), p. 63.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., p.20.
25. Ibid., p.81.
26. 'I maintain that Parliament ought to embody the public opinion of the English nation; and, certainly that opinion is much more fixed by its property than by its mind.' Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (Oxford, 1968; first published 1867), p. 152.
27. Ibid., pp. 235–6. I have not been able to identify the source of the sentence Bagehot cites here.

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on its generality or universality, its claim to legitimacy is undermined. It is, for example, a stronger political claim to maintain that a certain policy is required in the interests of the nation or the people than to argue that it should be implemented for the benefit of a certain sector, interest group, or class.[28] The tendency of this line of analysis is to shift the discussion of opinion from the abstract level of its theoretical functions to a more concrete one at which the formation and manipulation of opinion and the influence of propaganda upon it become the key questions.[29]

Secondly, the terms in which Mill and Bagehot cast their observations lead inevitably back to the concerns of historians who worked within the paradigm of the social interpretation of the French Revolution. In part because it is unitary, the notion of public opinion did not recommend itself to Marxist historians, or indeed, to social historians of any persuasion. One of the first questions such historians are inclined to ask is, of whom and of which social and political groupings is the opinion-bearing public composed? Virtually any empirically based answer to this question will show that the 'public' is not unitary, but is composed of different groups whose voices are heard differentially, and often out of all proportion to their size. The *cahiers*, though their use is far from straightforward, can fairly be said to represent the views of all levels of the French population, including the peasantry, which comprised the vast majority.[30] But whose views can the periodical press, which has been extensively studied in recent years, or the enormous pamphlet literature of the Revolution be said to represent, and who bought and read this literature? Certainly not the public or the people, in Michelet's broad and inclusive sense. Rather, it appears from recent research to consist in something very like Mill's middle classes, together with a generous admixture of elites that under the old regime could fairly

28. The claim to speak for the public is often strategic and propagandistic. Whatever its objective validity, the claim that 'What's good for GM is good for America', is an exceptionally clear example of the attempt to generalize a particularist position.

29. Among neo-revisionist historians, Mona Ozouf is exceptional in bringing attention to these limitations and to non-normative aspects of public opinion. See her article, 'L'Opinion publique à la fin de l'ancien régime', I, 421–9.

30. While it is not a simple matter to determine whether and to what degree the views expressed in peasant *cahiers* were influenced by intermediaries such as lawyers, curés and local notables, the consensus is that the voices of the more humble members of society are clearly and dominantly audible in these documents. See, for example, Roger Chartier, 'From Words to Texts: the *Cahiers de doléances* of 1789', in *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern Europe*, trans. L. B. Cochrane (Princeton, 1987), pp. 112–17 and 143–4; John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1996), pp. 6–7 and 20–2; and Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de doléances* (Stanford, 1998), Part II, ch. 9. Shapiro and Markoff, in what is probably the most comprehensive analysis to date of the *cahiers* as a historical source, have found evidence of specific and limited elite influence in the *cahiers* of the peasantry, but assert 'the absence of such influence for the vast majority of subjects'. Ibid., p. 165.

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be identified with the aristocracy.[31] Moreover, upon examination we find that this fairly restricted but highly vocal middle class and elite opinion is often bitterly and acrimoniously divided and re-divided. It did not take long after 1789 for interest groups and parties to organize in order to publicize their own views and to combat those of others. The fragmented public that reveals itself once we begin to ask just who expressed their views through journals, pamphlets and speeches is not a unified entity that can majestically confer legitimacy. Rather, empirically determined, the public appears to be comprised of more or less well organized and mutually hostile groups whose goals, interests and activities can more effectively be analysed in terms of traditional political and social history than in linguistic and cultural terms alone.

While Mill and Bagehot offer particularly clear examples of empirical and descriptive treatments of public opinion, such treatments are also readily available for eighteenth-century France. To be sure, neo-revisionists have a rich variety of statements expressing the normative view of public opinion available to them. But as we have suggested, those who did not care for what this normative public opinion had to say could counter its influence by questioning its universality and rationality. There is no shortage of eighteenth-century authors who did just this.

Condorcet, for example, once distinguished between three kinds of opinion: enlightened, public and popular, and he described popular opinion as 'that of the stupidest and most miserable section of the population'.[32] Talleyrand asserted that before the Revolution 'An entirely new power sprang up in France, that of opinion . . . the opinion of an impetuous and inexperienced people.'[33] On the right, authors pointed out that views put forward in the name of the people as a whole often represented only a small, interested group, or those of the unwashed and uninstructed many. Burke, for example, noted that the Bill of Rights of the Reverend Richard Price and the Revolution Society, 'though made in the name of the whole people, belongs to those gentlemen and their faction only'.[34] The abbé Royou, editor of the influential royalist daily the *Ami du Roi*, lamented in his 'Notice to Subscribers' that:

31. On the readership of the periodical press see Jeremy Popkin, *The Right-wing Press in France, 1792–1800* (Chapel Hill, 1980), pp. 64–83 and *Revolutionary News: the Press in France, 1789–99* (Duham, NC, 1990), pp. 78–95; Hugh Gough, *The Newspaper Press in the French Revolution* (Chicago, 1988), ch. 7; Harvey Chisick, *The Production, Distribution and Readership of a Conservative Journal of the Early French Revolution: The Ami du Roi of the Abbé Royou*, vol. 198 of the Memoirs of the American Philosophical Society (Philadelphia, 1992), chs 5 and 6.

32. Harry Payne, *The Philosophes and the People* (New Haven, 1976), p. 188; Arlette Farge, *Subversive Words: Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France*, trans. Rosemary Morris (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1994; first French edition, 1992), p. 2.

33. Cited in J. F. Bosher, *The French Revolution* (New York, 1988), p. 46.

34. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis, 1987), p. 14. In the same spirit he challenged, 'Let these gentlemen state who that *representative* public is to whom they will affirm the king, as a servant, to be responsible'. Ibid., p. 26.

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> Liberty only exists for those who have nothing to lose; it is this kind of man who today forms public opinion: who, by his active influence calls forth or annuls laws at will, protects the legislators or makes them tremble; and one sees no end to these evils, because the social bond is broken . . .[35]

Of course historians whom I have identified with neo-revisionism also have had to concede that in practice the normative view of public opinion does not hold uniformly, and that in some circumstances opinion is neither rational nor general.[36] However, on the whole, they still retain and favour the normative model of public opinion.

If the public is fragmented, unprincipled and uninformed, it follows that it is subject to various kinds of pressures and influences. Considered positively, thinkers and journalists might be said to shape and inform public opinion, to help it constructively to realize itself. Negatively considered, public opinion appears subject to manipulation, and thus loses its authoritative and normative status. Burke observed that 'Writers, especially when they act in a body, and with one direction, have great influence on the public mind . . . '[37] and asserted that the *philosophes* of eighteenth-century France joined with monied wealth to discredit the established social institutions and political authority. 'They became a sort of demagogues. They served as a link to unite, in favour of one object, obnoxious wealth to restless and desperate poverty.'[38] In Louis Sébastien Mercier's vision of an ideal world as summarized by Robert Darnton, 'Writers rule the world, not directly, but by guiding public opinion, which has become the supreme force in society, thanks to the enlightened system of education and a free press.'[39] But outside Utopia, the question of who controlled the writers was central. Burke was concerned about the link between money and opinion because in his

35. *L'Ami du Roi*, 'Avis aux Souscripteurs,' p. 2. Bibliothèque Nationale, 4° Lc^2398.

36. Habermas, for example, notes that the working population was excluded from the public: 'Of course, the "lowest classes of the people", the *sansculottes*, did not belong to them [the informed, who were the basis of public opinion], because under the pressure of need and drudgery, they had neither the leisure nor the opportunity to be concerned with things that do not have an immediate bearing on their physical needs.' (*The Structural Transformation*, p. 102). Mona Ozouf, referring to groups that were bearers of public opinion, specifically authors and *parlementaires*, recognizes that opinion does have a sociological dimension, and that during the old regime 'The public was not the people, who were quick to err, so undefinable, and so easily inflamed.' ('Public Opinion', pp. S7–8). Even Furet, commenting on the contrast between the moderation of the *cahiers* and the radicalism of Sieyès, says 'That divergence forewarns the historian against simplification and allows him to grasp, even if crudely, the existence of several kinds of public opinion.' (*Revolutionary France 1770–1880*, trans. Antonia Nevill, Oxford, 1992, p. 58). In a book predating the debates begun by the works of Cobban and Furet, the outstanding American historian of the French Revolution, R. R. Palmer wrote, 'Opinion meant public opinion, which in turn meant the opinion of Jacobins and sans-culottes, other opinions being considered merely private.' *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution*, Princeton, 1969; first published 1941, p. 113).

37. Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, p. 98.

38. Ibid.

39. Robert Darnton, 'The Forbidden Books of Pre-revolutionary France' in *Rewriting the French Revolution: The Andrew Browning Lectures 1989*, ed. Colin Lucas (Oxford, 1991), p. 24.

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view the former bought the latter.[40] As Robert Darnton has shown in his own earlier work, the government deployed considerable resources in the form of grants and appointments, and maintained an intimidating police apparatus to influence and control writers.[41] Academies provided both prestige and income for intellectuals acceptable to the authorities. While ministers kept and paid stables of pamphleteers, or simply commissioned pamphlets when they needed them from sympathetic or dependent writers,[42] the police, as in the case of the Chevalier de Mouchy, had news sheets written according to their directives, and so demonstrate 'how the police manipulated public opinion'.[43] William Reddy is certainly right in asserting that 'Public opinion was created by writers and journalists in search of the openings and protection necessary for successful careers.'[44] With the outbreak of the Revolution, Jacobins and other clubs 'agitated public opinion',[45] and in the absence of regular and recognized institutions public opinion came to play an increased role in public life. There can be no doubt that both under the old regime and during the earlier years of the Revolution, public opinion was generally deemed to have great power. By those who sought to speak in its name and to work it, public opinion was presented as normative and authoritative. For others, however, it was little more than a rhetorical stance or tactical ploy.

During the 1780s two of the best known writers of the time brought attention to the ambivalence of the notion of public opinion, and particularly to the mutually contradictory ideal and practical aspects of it. These were Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet and Louis Sébastien Mercier. At a time when the pre-revolution seemed to be escaping the control of the King and his ministers, Linguet published in his influential *Annales politiques, civiles et littéraires du dixhuitième siècle* an article entitled 'Reflections on Public Opinion & on the Respect that is due to It',[46] He begins the article with an extensive citation (pp. 296–9) from an addition to Necker's *Compte rendu* of 1781 that the Minister had just republished, and in which he made a strong statement of the

40. Harvey Mitchell, 'Edmund Burke's Language of Politics and His Audience', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, cclxxxvii (1991), 328–9.

41. See especially his 'High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature' and 'A Police Inspector Sorts His Files.' The full references are to be found in note 1, *supra*.

42. See, for example, George A. Kelley, 'The Machine of the Duc d'Orléans and the New Politics', *Journal of Modern History*, li (1979), 677; Jeremy Popkin and Dale Van Kley, 'The Pre-Revolutionary Debate', in *The French Revolutionary Research Collection*, Section 5, *The Pre-Revolutionary Debate*, ed. Colin Lucas, p. 1; Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, p. 181.

43. Farge, *Subversive Words*, p. 99. 'These news sheets', she continues, 'tell us the news, but also the news which was invented to influence the public'.

44. William M. Reddy, *Money and Liberty in Modern Europe: A Critique of Historical Understanding* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 129.

45. Isser Woloch, *The Jacobin Legacy: The Democratic Movement Under the Directory* (Princeton, 1970), p. 4.

46. Simon-Nicolas-Henri Linguet, *Annales politiques, civiles et littéraires du dixhuitième siècle* (19 vols, London, Geneva and Paris, 1770–1792), xv, 296–313.

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normative view of public opinion. In the section cited Necker both asserts the power of public opinion and insists that it poses no threat to royal authority. It is worth quoting part of this passage at length:

> It is a very certain truth that in all circumstances, known and unknown, it is important to the *French* Nation to take care of PUBLIC OPINION, to maintain its ascendancy, & to remember its *benefits:* but to benefit from its assistance, one must be careful never to make of public Opinion an instrument of *caprice or of tyranny*; for if one were to brandish its sceptre indifferently; if one were to discourage those who cultivate it, & those who honour its Court, one would risk losing, one would risk weakening, the only power that would constantly be in harmony with our manners [moeurs] & with our social spirit; the only power by which one might introduce rewards preferable to grandeur & to fortune; the only one by which one might, in the name of justice and of honour, direct Administrators, & make them amenable, sooner or later, to the yoke of reason, should they wish to free themselves of it; the only power, finally, which is not the rival of the throne, because it reinforces the beneficent intentions of the Sovereign, in standing guard against all those who seek to surprise him (p. 297).

While ascribing great power to public opinion, Necker recognizes that it is not altogether autonomous, for there are 'those who cultivate it'. And while he ascribes to it the attribute of sovereignty in speaking of its 'sceptre', he insists that it is supportive of, and in no way threatening to, the king and his administration. Powerful, beneficent, normative, subject to abuse, yet no threat to the established authorities, this is a concept of public opinion that would appeal particularly to a politician holding high office. What Linguet sets out to do is to question, and ultimately to discredit, the notion of the normative and anodyne public opinion that Necker puts forth.

Linguet ironically compliments Necker on his homage to an opinion which all share (pp. 299–300), but then asks 'precisely what the term in question means' and 'which part of the public has the right to form it?' (p. 300). As one would expect, in the absence of unanimity, Linguet does not recognize the right of one part of the public to speak authoritatively for the whole. 'For in questions of this sort one cannot expect unanimity: there is no *Opinion* so generally accepted that it may not be contradicted: it is even controversy, it is the division of voices, in which publicity consists' (p. 300). Mathematical proofs and theological dogmas may compel general assent, but these subjects are not the province of public opinion. How, then, is the voice of public opinion to be determined? Not through espionage.[47] Nor through popular demonstrations or uprisings ['explosions du peuple'], for 'this unhappy people,

47. Espionage is presented as a primary means of determining public opinion probably because the Paris police employed spies whose job it was to listen to conversations in public places, such as cafés or parks, or indeed anywhere they could, and to report what they had heard. While the police found these reports useful, Linguet denies them legitimacy.

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does it know what it wants, what it says, what it does?' (p. 301).[48] Linguet is perhaps more generous than most thinkers of the Enlightenment in believing that the people is capable of recognizing its immediate interests,[49] but he is typical in approving its views when it accepts the policies of those who govern it, and condemning them when, as a 'mad multitude' it breaks out against its well intentioned rulers (p. 301).[50] Where Linguet differs from most of his educated contemporaries (and he usually differs somewhere) is in rejecting the elites as bearers of public opinion on the grounds that they are no less motivated by their passions and interests than other social groups (p. 302).

Linguet's attention then shifts to a pamphlet putting forth the views of the Intermediary Mission of Brittany, which for the most part denounces reform measures of the Brienne ministry (1787–8) for deviation from traditional constitutional forms. While a fairly typical production of the period, Linguet saw it as a threat to the regime, and hence extremist and irresponsible. After citing several pages of its heated rhetoric he asks, 'In good faith, is that the cry of *public opinion*?' (p. 306). Notwithstanding the pamphlet's popularity, Linguet emphatically denied it that status. What would be the consequence of partial interests, perhaps with the aid of subsidized journals, influencing the atmosphere and leading the sovereign astray? In that case, '. . . if he defers, is it to *Public opinion* that he will have deferred?' (p. 307). Again, the question is rhetorical. Linguet's probing of the notion of public opinion has the effect of implicitly denying its objectivity and unity, and hence its normative status. But this is not to say that he despairs of public opinion altogether.

For Linguet a 'true public opinion' does exist, and it can be determined by discovering, not unanimous consent as extremists require, but the views of the majority (pp. 307–8). The best means of allowing this opinion to emerge is to assure comprehensive freedom of the press on the English model (pp. 308–10). Linguet is aware that, as in the case of hired pamphleteers, attempts can be made to influence and manipulate public opinion (p. 310). Beyond this, Linguet notes, politicians endowed with both firmness and virtue go untroubled by public opinion '. . . because they direct it, & are themselves the object of its veneration. Even those who only have *firmness* succeed more easily in mastering this opinion.' (p. 313). More virtuous politicians who lack

48. The question is of course rhetorical. For virtually all Enlightenment thinkers the working population, which was doubtless the majority, was disqualified by its ignorance and prejudices from constituting the basis of public opinion.

49. 'But in which case, on what matter can the multitude of that order make a judgment that is unerring and necessarily just? In those things that touch it closely, in that which concerns it immediately, & in which it cannot be seduced or blinded' (p. 301). Later, however, Linguet also refers to 'this unfortunate people which never sees its own [interests]'. Ibid., p. 308.

50. On attitudes toward the lower classes in the Enlightenment, see Harry Payne, *The Philosophes and the People*, and Benoït Garnot, *Le Peuple au siècle des lumières: Echec d'un dressage culturel* (Paris, 1990).

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firmness are appreciated only by a few enlightened observers but, asks Linguet, 'is it necessary to revere the bellowings [brouissement] of the thoughtless majority ... as the expression of PUBLIC OPINION?' (p. 313).

Linguet's article can be seen as the reaction of an accomplished polemicist who finds works claiming to embody public opinion adopting a tone and expressing views that to him were unacceptable. Unwilling to give up the advantages that speaking in the name of public opinion confers, Linguet analyses the concept in such a way as to distinguish between extreme views that claim the status of public opinion but do not deserve it, and 'true' public opinion of which he of course sees himself as the spokesman. In its attempt to deny the status of authoritative public opinion to the views of the ignorant and hungry masses, or to those of interested elites, or the radicals of Brittany, Linguet's article works well enough. But can Linguet expect that his implicit claim to represent reason, and thus 'true' public opinion, will be recognized? His claims to speak for the public are subject to the same criticisms he himself made of others, and once they are made, it is difficult to defend any normative notion of public opinion.

Linguet's essay is one in engaged political journalism, and was part of the heated pamphlet and journal debate of the pre-revolution. In the sixth volume of his best-selling *Tableau de Paris*, written and published during the 1780s, L. S. Mercier also addresses the question of public opinion. Free from immediate political pressures and more literary in orientation, Mercier's brief article entitled 'Monsieur le public' contains both an assertion of an objective and normative public opinion, and a negation of this same notion, but the flow of his brief essay is the reverse of that in Linguet's article.

Mercier opens by questioning the existence and nature of the public. He asks:

> Does the public exist? What is the public? Where is it? By what organ does it manifest its will? Does it not often imagine itself pronouncing an authoritative opinion when it disdains something, or is taken with it? Tell a man in power, *the public disapproves;* he will respond: *I also have my public, which approves, and I hold with that one.*

Another says:

> The public, I make it say what I want; it is up to me alone to give it one impression or another. And what he says is true, at least for a certain time.[51]

Undefinable, manipulable, fragmented: one could hardly ask for a more thorough debunking of the notion of normative public opinion. But this is not the position with which Mercier, at least at this time, is

51. Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Tableau de Paris*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (2 vols, Paris, 1994), i, 1473–4. In the twelve volume edition of the 1780's, vi, dxxxiii.

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comfortable. He begins working back towards an authoritative view of public opinion with a satirical and wonderfully fanciful characterization of the public:

> A painter who wished to represent it [the public] under its true characteristics could paint it in the guise of a person with long hair, in clothes with gold braid, a skullcap on his head and a sword at his side, wearing a short coat and red heels, holding in his hand a cane *à bec de corbin*, having epaulettes, a cross [of Saint Louis?] in the left button hole and a length of fur on the right arm. You see that this Gentleman must reason more or less as he is dressed.[52]

If Bagehot's typical representative of nineteenth-century British public opinion is 'the bald-headed man at the back of the omnibus' (probably, though Bagehot does not say so, wearing a bowler hat), Mercier's composite portrait of eighteenth-century French public opinion is also male, but emphatically aristocratic, as his sword, expensive attire and coloured heels indicate, though in other ways he may just as well have been a member of the mixed elite of birth, wealth and talent which historians now tend to see as the dynamic force at the apex of old-regime society. By packing the main characteristics of the opinion-bearing public into a single figure, Mercier has given it the focus he earlier denied it. After returning to the theme of a manipulable public by presenting a street barker addressing a crowd as if it was made up of mannequins, Mercier concludes his sketch with a rather more familiar portrayal of the public, asserting:

> There is, then, a public; but it is not one that has the mania of judging before it understands. From the collision of all opinions, there results a pronouncement which is the voice of truth, and which cannot be effaced. But this public is not numerous; it has neither heat, party spirit nor is it precipitous; it is not to be found in the antechambers of men in power; and it is of this public that Madame de Sévigné has said: *The public is neither mad nor unjust;* or as another intelligent woman said: *Reason always ends up being right. [C'est que la raison finit toujours par avoir raison.]*[53]

This elitist, rationalist, normative view of public opinion is not, however, Mercier's last word on the subject. After an eventful career during the Revolution, which included journalism, serving as a deputy to the Convention and spending time in jail during the Terror, Mercier wrote a sequel to the *Tableau de Paris*, entitled *Le Nouveau Paris*. In it he returned to the question of public opinion, now termed 'public spirit', but by this time he no longer put forward a normative view of it. He wrote:

> Nothing is more amusing than all the efforts of authors to define *public opinion.* Each one wishes to locate it in his coterie or in his journal. One falls into

52. Ibid., p. 1474.
53. Ibid., p. 1475.

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> opposition without knowing it, another, by his unconsidered statements and without wanting to, serves the government.
>
> It is impossible that there should have been a public opinion [*esprit public*] in the midst of these great commotions, or at least that it was possible to determine just where [*où*] it was.[54]

The sensible elite, Mercier states, has withdrawn into silence, and no fixed and accepted meaning could be attached to the term 'public spirit'. Further, 'Ten people who speak make more noise than ten thousand who keep silent; but their noise [*bruit*] also passes.'[55] His experiences in the Revolution seem to have taught Mercier that there was no substantive entity that one could call public opinion, or what amounted to nearly the same thing, that if it existed, it could not be known. He refers to an Office of Public Opinion, which actually existed for a time, but which, while engaged in trying to monitor and control public opinion, merely pursued shadows, since all that really existed in Paris was a 'spirit of opposition', which had no content of its own.[56] Elites were more interested in satire and amusement, and the Revolution could be seen as theatre, so that the public was ineluctably divided between actors and observers, and so deprived of the unity without which authority was impossible. Mercier, it seems, had serious doubts about the notion of normative public opinion before the Revolution, and by the time he had come to write the *Nouveau Paris*, had given it up entirely.[57]

I have tried to show that the notion of public opinion that lies at the heart of the neo-revisionist reinterpretation of the French Revolution is based on a number of premisses that are problematic. The public sphere, which is the source of public opinion, and which comes to us from Kant by way of Habermas, is an ideal form or model which is unified, universal, rational and authoritative. In fact, however, ideas do not exist independently from people or groups of people who bear and articulate them. Any consideration of the social or political bases of public opinion shows this opinion to be divided, particular, interested and contestatory. Once particularized, public opinion is seen to embody not the views of the public at large, but those of bald-headed gentlemen at the back of London omnibuses, or of elegantly dressed Parisian ladies and gentlemen. Such people must, as Mercier observed, think and speak pretty much as they dress. Their particular interests, once recognized, will probably subvert the overall rationality of their views, and these same interests will, by the same token, remove the justification for these views being considered as general, and hence authoritative. Instead of public

54. Louis Sébastien Mercier, *Le Nouveau Paris*, ed. Jean-Claude Bonnet (Paris, 1994), pp. 505–6.
55. Ibid., p. 506.
56. On the Office of Public Opinion see ibid., note 2, p. 1516.
57. Baker cites a number of passages from the *Tableau de Paris* reflecting the normative view of public opinion, but avoids more critical treatments of the notion. See 'Politics and Public Opinion', pp. 233–4.

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opinion appearing as a majestic tribunal of final appeal, it begins to look much more like a rhetorical strategy; instead of an imposing judge of a supreme court, a rather humble barrister, who, uncertain of the logic and justice of his case, has recourse to the timeless artifice of raising his voice.

Why did the leading neo-revisionists invest, and it would seem, over-invest, in an abstract model of this sort which cannot withstand the incursion of the empirical reality of the historical phenomena that it is intended to explain? It may be that having rejected social and economic factors as the driving forces of history, they were disposed to look in the direction of ideas and culture. The authority of Tocqueville, who argued forcefully for the central role of intellectuals in political life may have played a role here.[58] Certainly Kant's paradigm of the public sphere is highly compatible with the neo-revisionist emphasis on writers, artists and intellectuals. What the preceding consideration of public opinion has, I hope, demonstrated, is that the model of an ideal, uniform, rational and normative public opinion is incompatible with any empirical approach to the subject. And if that is so, then there is a significant gap between the abstract Kantian conceptualization of the public sphere and anything a historian might try to identify as the views of men and women of flesh and blood in the last decades of the old regime. If the neo-revisionist view of public opinion is going to make a lasting contribution to our understanding of the political culture of the old regime and Revolution, it is going to have to begin by demonstrating that it is capable of moving from the high ground of Kantian analysis to the ideas, aspirations and prejudices of real people. But then it is questionable whether Kant's basic assumptions will admit the intrusion of pedestrian and not infrequently irrational ideas of the man and woman in the street, or of the particular interests of any social, political or economic groups.

One of the areas in which the shortcomings of the neo-revisionist concept of public opinion is clearest concerns the *cahiers de doléances*, written by virtually every parish and every corporation in France during the spring of 1789. Probably 60,000 of these documents were written, and more than half of them are still extant. They form a uniquely rich body of source materials for getting at issues that concerned or interested or troubled all levels of the population and, this being the case, they comprise an exceptionally promising source for the study of public opinion. Yet the neo-revisionists have not put significant effort into studying them. The reasons for this are not far to seek.

In the first place, the *cahiers* do not properly belong to the public sphere, representing, as they do, the interests and concerns of specific

58. Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, pp. 139–40; Chartier, *Cultural Origins*, p. 37.

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villages, guilds and other corporations. The *cahiers* of the clergy or nobility of a given *bailliage* expressed the immediate concerns of the members of the first and second estates of that circumscription, and the parish *cahiers* reflected, often in highly specific terms, the immediate conditions in which the local peasantry lived. It is true that some of the urban and general *cahiers*, and some of the *cahiers* of the privileged orders, did apply rational criticism to broad issues and so can be seen as fulfilling the conditions of Kantian publicity.[59] However, such *cahiers* were a small minority of the total, and their official function, which was to represent the interests and concerns of only a part of the population, deprived them of the generality required for participation in the public sphere.

A second reason the *cahiers* do not recommend themselves as a source to neo-revisionists is that their independence and authenticity have often been challenged. The circulation of model *cahiers* has been alleged to have influenced less sophisticated parish assemblies, while the almost universal election of legal officials and local notables to chair the meetings in which the *cahiers* were drawn up has raised the question of the influence of such figures on the content of the *cahiers*. While such influence cannot be ruled out altogether, historians who have addressed these questions recently have tended to see the *cahiers* as more or less faithfully mirroring the concerns and interests of the communities and corporations that bear their names.[60]

There is, too, the question of the relationship between what those who drafted the *cahiers* may really have wanted and what they eventually asked for or recommended. In the public sphere speech and writing are assumed to be transparent. The writer says clearly and precisely what he or she means, so that there is identity, or near identity, between what is said and what is intended. Some *cahiers* of the elites may well contain the transparency of discourse characteristic of the public sphere, but these, again, are a small minority. In their landmark study of the *cahiers* Shapiro and Markoff apply the category of 'strategic speech' to these documents. They observe that 'Peasant political action', of which the *cahiers* were a part, 'follows a complex calculus aimed at minimizing risk'.[61] It was more practical, as well as more prudent, to make limited demands because radical ones would be more likely to be ignored. The gap between what was said and what was desired was significant. As Shapiro and Markoff put it, 'we need to conceive of the *cahiers*

59. Such *cahiers* were often published, and circulated as pamphlets. When this was done the *cahiers* in question took on another and more genuinely public character.

60. Chartier, 'From Words to Texts', pp. 112–17; Shapiro and Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands*, pp. 136–65.

61. Ibid., p. 135.

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asstrategic speech within a field of perceived possibilities'.[62] Further, Shapiro and Markoff assert, this approach held not just for the peasantry: it was a strategy used also by the elites.[63]

The relevance of the notion of strategic speech is not restricted to the *cahiers*. Works of pure theory (assuming that such there are) aside, most speech can be seen as strategic speech. The more material and political interests are involved, and the more ideology is identified with such interests, the more likely it is that strategic speech will be used. I do not think that posing a mutually exclusive dichotomy of pragmatic, bargaining, strategic speech on the one hand, and the critical rationality of discourse of the public sphere on the other, is very fruitful. Rather, it seems preferable to view the critical discourse of the public sphere as constantly and unevenly interacting with pedestrian and pragmatic strategic speech. Montesquieu's *De l'esprit des loix*, for example, is a masterwork of political theory. But it is also closely involved with the long struggle between the aristocracy and the crown, and it ascribes a particularly important role to the *parlements*, to which Montesquieu himself belonged earlier in his career. Do Montesquieu's corporate and class interests invalidate his political theory, or call into question the critical rationality of his great book? While arguments can be made either way, I am inclined to see this text as embodying both strategic speech and critical rationality. If this is so, then the Olympian aloofness of the public sphere and the normative status of the public opinion that is articulated in it are contaminated by the often short-term objectives and *marchandage* involved in strategic speech.

The overlapping and interaction of critical and strategic discourses suggests a less neat model of political culture than one in which discourse flows uninhibited from critical rationality. But it is a model that is more immediately applicable to the political and intellectual history of the second half of the eighteenth century. Certainly the Jansenist pursuit of the Jesuits in the Parlement of Paris which resulted in the expulsion of the Order from France in the early 1760s was influenced as much by the visceral hatred of the Jansenists and their desire for revenge after generations of persecution as it was by constitutional theory. Similarly, the political debates, as well as the denigration of the monarchy, that accompanied the Maupeou reforms owed as much to the corporate interests of the *parlements* and their supporters as to the ideology of their spokesmen. Their appeal to public opinion, which was important in stimulating serious discussion of political issues, and so contributed to

62. loc. cit.
63. Ibid., pp. 135–6.

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the political education of the nation, was part of a strategy in a long term conflict with the Crown.[64]

While the issue of public opinion continues to attract the attention of researchers working on eighteenth-century France, the only book-length treatment of the subject to date is *Subversive Words* by Arlette Farge.[65] Explicitly inspired by Habermas (p. 1), Farge's study is an attempt to reconstitute a 'plebeian public sphere', a category which Habermas recognizes, but which he did not seek to develop in his own work.[66] Farge is impressively successful in her undertaking.[67] The result is less to fill out Habermas's model than to suggest an alternative model that raises fundamental questions about the bourgeois public sphere and the opinion that derives from it.

It is worthwhile, first, to consider Farge's method. Seeking to describe popular opinion, she turns to one of the few places in the administrative records of the old regime where the voices of ordinary people and the working population, however filtered and refracted, are audible, namely, the reports of police and authorities charged with maintaining order. Her chief sources are the Archives de la Bastille, the Joly de Fleury archive, which was constituted in the aftermath of the attempt by Damiens on the life of Louis XV in 1757, and the reports of police informers. To these she adds the memoirs of a number of observers of Parisian life in the first part of the eighteenth century, the rumour-filled *nouvelles à la main* and the Jansenist newspaper, the *Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques*, which is subjected to a searching and original analysis. In contrast to Habermas, who based his sweeping survey of a thousand years of European history on secondary sources and some printed primary sources, Farge went to the archives and selected sources in which she found evidence relating to the 'people' and popular discourse. She then empirically determined the views of an aggregate of individuals, and took these views and opinions as constituting popular public opinion. And while Farge shows considerable sophistication in her use and evaluation of archives[68] there

64. On the Jansenist assault on the Jesuits see Dale Van Kley, *The Jansenists and the Expulsion of the Jesuits from France* (New Haven, 1975). Marisa Linton uses the notion of rhetoric effectively to explore the relationship between the language and ideology of the *parlements* in her article 'The Rhetoric of Virtue and the *Parlements*, 1770–75', *French History*, ix (1995), 180–201. The debates around the reforms of Maupeou have been examined in Jean Egret, *Louis XV et l'opposition parlementaire, 1715–1774* (Paris, 1970); Durand Echeverria, *The Maupeou Revolution: A Study in the History of Libertarianism; France, 1770–74* (Baton Rouge, 1985); Bailey Stone, *The French Parlements and the Crisis of the Old Regime* (Chapel Hill, 1986); J. Swann, *Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754–1774* (Cambridge, 1995); and Keith Baker, ed., *The Maupeou Revolution: the Transformation of Politics at the End of the Old Regime; Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques*, xviii, no. 2 (1992).

65. Arlette Farge, *Subversive Words*. For the full reference, see *supra*, note 32.

66. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, p. xviii.

67. Dale Van Kley does not agree with this evaluation of Farge's work. 'In Search of Eighteenth-Century Parisian Public Opinion', p. 220.

68. See her comments in *Subversive Words*, pp. 126–7, 162–4 and 174 and the 'Introduction' to her *Fragile Lives: Violence, Power and Solidarity in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, trans. Carol Shelton (Cambridge, Mass., 1993; originally published 1986).

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can be no doubt that her work derives its force from her extensive reading in, and incisive use of, archival materials. Farge thus begins from a broad set of assumptions about cultural and political changes, but addresses a closely defined body of sources and works it through to arrive at an empirically based view of the elements of popular opinion.

From these sources, secondly, Farge extracts the political opinions embedded in a broader popular mentality (pp. 78–89 and 139–42). She finds within this mentality a notion of 'forced immediacy' (p. 133) between sovereign and subject, an immediacy in which the dialectic of love given and love denied played a key role (pp. 129, 137), and in which hovered an archetypal and atemporal notion of the right to kill the king (pp. 132–36).[69] Farge further shows how a more generalized form of popular political sensibility came to be generated and articulated in the heated atmosphere created by the conflict between the authorities and the religious enthusiasm of the Jansenist convulsionaries of Saint-Médard in the years between 1728 and 1732. Noteworthy in this episode is the way a largely popular movement used elements of print culture, such as placards and brochures, to articulate its position, and the way its case was taken up and presented by a normally elitist medium, namely journalism, in the case of the *Nouvelles Ecclésiastiques*.[70] Moreover, Farge finds that popular political opinion developed out of a superstition-ridden popular culture on the one hand, and the experience of an intense form of religious sensibility on the other. Farge thus presents us with a form of public opinion that differs fundamentally from the rational opinion grounded in the institutional and familial organization of the socio-economic elites analysed by Habermas.

Thirdly, Farge's evocation and description of popular public opinion makes it difficult to continue to call what was, basically, enlightened opinion, 'public' opinion. To the dialectic of the conflict of authority and enlightened opinion, an additional element, namely, popular opinion, will have to be added. For while it is gratifyingly simple to speak in terms of a single public sphere, there is little evidence for the objective existence of such a uniform and undifferentiated entity. Within elite culture we find supporters and critics of the government, earnest secularizers and devout Catholics, spokesmen for a free market and advocates of economic controls. Nor did agreement about norms of rational discourse harmonize conflicting views on every conceivable subject. Beside rigorous materialistic tracts of d'Holbach we find the

69. Unlike Lynn Hunt, who in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1992) uses Freudian theory in an attempt to elucidate the masculine and republican politics of the French Revolution, Farge avoids Freud's highly charged father–son relationship in her discussion of popular belief in a right to kill the king (ch. 5). While this is a theme that would seem to invite a Freudian interpretation, Farge resists the temptation. Though she uses the term 'archetype', she does so without invoking Jung, and avoids any explicitly psychological treatment of her themes.

70. For Farge's highly original reading of this journal see *Subversive Words*, pp. 36–48.

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sentimentalism and moral exhortation of Rousseau and his disciples, and beside them defamatory political pornography in the form of *libelles*, a genre that can hardly be accommodated within the Kantian paradigm of rational discourse, but which played a significant role in the literary marketplace of the old regime, and which was sold by the same booksellers that handled the clandestine classics of the Enlightenment.[71]

It is questionable, then, whether it makes sense to speak of a single public sphere even for the hugely variegated elite cultures of the late eighteenth century. Historians have long been aware of an extensive popular literature that consisted of romances, fairy tales, devotional works, almanacs and the like that were produced and distributed separately from works for elite markets. While the connections between elite and popular literature have received attention, this literature for the masses has not so far been treated as a phenomenon genuinely parallel to the bourgeois public sphere. Yet when historians of nineteenth-century England, for example, have tried to conceptualize the world of reading, writing and publishing in terms of Habermas's public sphere, their results are formulated not in terms of a unitary public, but of multiple publics and public spheres. Geoff Eley, while asserting that Habermas's central thesis stands up well in the light of recent historical scholarship, notes that the author of *The Structural Transformation* 'confines his discussion too much to the bourgeoisie', and ignores forms of publicness that emerged among workers and radicals.[72] Eley further asserts that, 'It is important to acknowledge the existence of *competing* publics not just later in the nineteenth century, when Habermas sees a fragmentation of the classical liberal model of *öffentlichkeit*, but at every stage in the history of the public sphere and, indeed, from the very beginning.'[73] Similarly, Kevin Gilmartin speaks of 'alternate public spheres', of 'counterpublics', and of a bourgeois public sphere largely restricted to 'the virtual space of print', while the radical public remained 'active and physical.'[74] It is not just Arlette Farge, then, who by identifying multiple and conflicting publics, calls into question the validity of a unitary and

71. Robert Darnton first brought attention to the *libelle* literature and argued for its political significance in his path breaking article 'The High Enlightenment and the Low Life of Literature', and he has more recently returned to this theme in his book *The Forbidden Bestsellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, 1995). Political pornography has also received attention in Vivian Cameron, 'Political Exposures: Sexuality and Caricature in the French Revolution', in *Eroticism and the Body Politic*, ed. Lynn Hunt (Baltimore, 1991), pp. 90–107, Lynn Hunt, 'The Many Bodies of Marie Antoinette: Political Pornography and the Problem of the Feminine in the French Revolution', in ibid., pp. 108–30, in the same author's *Family Romance of the French Revolution*, chs 4 and 5, and in Antoine de Baecque, 'Pamphlets: Libel and Political Mythology' in *Revolution in Print: The Press in France, 1775–1800*, ed. Robert Darnton and Daniel Roche (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989), pp. 165–76.

72. Geoff Eley, 'Nations, Publics and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century', in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, pp. 294 and 304–5.

73. Ibid., p. 30. The emphasis is in the original.

74. Kevin Gilmartin, *Print Politics: The Press and Radical Opposition in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 3 and 30.

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normative view of the public sphere. Indeed, in a reconsideration of *The Structural Transformation* written thirty years after the book's first appearance, Habermas himself accepts the need to recognize multiple publics and 'competing public spheres'.[75] Moreover, he has come to appreciate the independence of popular culture.[76]

By finding sources for the study of popular opinion in the 1660s and noting a 'sudden amazing new vigour of popular thinking' around 1730 (p. 24), Farge calls into question the generally agreed upon date of 1750 for the emergence of public opinion as a key force and concept in France. For if Habermas and those who follow him see the middle of the eighteenth century as the time when the public sphere, and with it public opinion, became established in France, Farge has shown that a public opinion of another sort had been active well before.

In *The Structural Transformation*, Habermas takes the position that the public sphere, characterized by rational–critical discourse, could not have emerged before the broad socio-economic changes that created the necessary associational and cultural conditions. Hence the relatively late datings for the appearance of a public sphere in England toward the end of the seventeenth century and in France in the mid-eighteenth century. And yet historically there can be no doubt that rational–critical discourse, including political discourse, is to be found in western Europe well before these times. If pamphlets can be taken as characteristic productions of political contestation, we indeed find huge outpourings of them just before and during the French Revolution.[77] But the English civil war of 1640–60 also saw the publication of a vast and variegated pamphlet literature, and the last great rebellion of the disaffected nobility in France, the Fronde of 1648–53, was likewise accompanied by the production of thousands of pamphlets.[78] A pamphlet war was also a feature of the struggle for control of the government under the young Louis XIII. This last episode has been analysed in depth, with special attention having been given to the pamphlets accompanying the crisis and the role they played.[79] While J. M. Hayden's studies of the political

75. Habermas, 'Further Reflections', pp. 424–5.

76. Habermas ascribes his new appreciation of 'plebeian culture' and its autonomy to his reading of Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*. Habermas, 'Further Reflections', p. 427.

77. For an account of the main features of this literature see Roger Chartier, 'Pamphlets et gazettes', in *Histoire de l'édition française*, ed. Henri-Jean Martin and Roger Chartier (4 vols, Paris, 1982–6), i, 407–11; Harvey Chisick, 'The Pamphlet Literature of the French Revolution: An Overview', *History of European Ideas*, xvii (1993), 149–66.

78. Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1978), p. 263. For the pamphlets of the Fronde see Christian Jouhaud, *Mazarinades – La Fronde des mots* (Paris, 1985) and Hubert Carrier, *La Presse de la Fronde (1648–1653): Les Mazarinades – La Conqête de l'opinion* (Geneva, 1989).

79. J. M. Hayden, 'The Uses of Political Pamphlets: The Example of 1614–15 in France', *Canadian Journal of History*, xxi (1986), 143–65; by the same author, *France and the Estates General of 1614* (Cambridge, 1974); and Jeffrey Sawyer, *Printed Poison: Pamphlet Propaganda, Faction Politics, and the Public Sphere in Seventeenth-Century France* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990).

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crises around the Estates General of 1614 are uninfluenced by Habermas, Jeffrey Sawyer adapts the theory of *The Structural Transformation* to this period, and includes the term 'public sphere' in its subtitle. Sawyer emphasizes – rightly, I believe – the importance of the constitutive role of the printing press in forming new channels of communication, and asserts that one of his main theses is that during the 1614–17 conflict, 'France possessed a broadly accessible sphere of public communications'.[80] If so, it makes sense to speak of a public sphere in France well over a hundred years before Habermas was willing to do so. Indeed, some historians have applied the category of 'publicity' to the printed polemics of the Reformation in late sixteenth-century France.[81]

It is no doubt possible to find consensual structures that we could reasonably identify as public opinion before the advent of printing. Indeed, it is not easy to see how societies could function without broad consensus on a wide range of basic issues. While no doubt there is merit in Habermas's assertion that the complex of salons, cafés, reading rooms, masonic lodges, academies and the like provided the institutional framework for what he calls the public sphere, it perhaps makes sense to think of this public sphere emerging gradually and imperfectly as these institutions were established, but before they reached the critical mass that Habermas apparently felt was achieved around 1750 in France. It seems reasonable to expect that the few salons and cafés existing toward the end of the reign of Louis XIV would have had some influence on those frequenting them. It is also likely that alternate structures, such as patronage networks, characteristic of royal but also of oppositional aristocratic political and cultural organization, or early print shops, which housed humanist scholars and economically motivated entrepreneurs under the same roof, contributed to developing outlooks compatible with, or partially constituent of, the public sphere as characterized by Habermas. In historical terms it seems more likely that the culture characteristic of the public sphere emerged unevenly and piecemeal over an extended period during which its institutional framework was being elaborated than that it appeared suddenly once all the necessary preconditions for it had been achieved.

At bottom, Farge's treatment of popular public opinion does not, I believe, contradict that of Habermas. In a real sense her work pays *The Structural Transformation* the ultimate compliment of extending, enlarging and enriching the thesis of the earlier book. Perhaps the main reason that Farge complements and extends Habermas's work as impressively as she does is methodological. Habermas, we have seen, analysed a wide range of political, economic and cultural phenomena over nearly a millennium and developed a comprehensive theory to explain these

80. Sawyer, *Printed Poison*, p. 10.

81. Donald R. Kelley, *The Beginning of Ideology: Consciousness and Society in the French Reformation* (Cambridge, 1981), ch. 6.

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phenomena. What Farge found in the archives was popular opinion with a political dimension that had grown out of largely irrational elements of popular culture and popular religion. This is a form of public opinion that differs fundamentally from the rationally based opinion of the bourgeois public sphere analysed by Habermas. Indeed, lacking the critical publicity of the public sphere, this popular opinion would not have been seen by Habermas as constituting public opinion at all. In bringing attention to popular opinion independent of, but potentially interacting with, elite opinion, Farge opens the way to a more comprehensive and complex evaluation of events during the second half of the eighteenth century, and she implicitly restores the issue of the social context of opinion to the historian's agenda.

Farge's findings seem to require that treatment of public opinion in the eighteenth century be broadened beyond the realm of enlightened discourse to which it has largely been restricted. Originating in the realms of popular culture and traditional religion, popular opinion, in order properly to be understood, must be analysed at least in part in these terms. As Habermas has analysed the socio-economic conditions in which the bourgeois public sphere arose, we must also now bring to bear what we know of the social and material conditions in which popular opinion developed,[82] and attempt to integrate into our treatment of the late old regime and Revolution the main features of popular mentality and the ways this mentality interacted with those of elites. Though this may seem an excessively demanding suggestion, this is not in fact so. We possess a rich and extensive literature on popular culture during the eighteenth century, and we need begin only by consulting it.[83] In their focus on the vivifying power of the word and on the structuring functions of ideology, neo-revisionist historians have tended to emphasize symbolic representation and to privilege the roles of intellectuals, artists and political elites to the virtual exclusion of the

82. On the material conditions affecting popular culture see Jeffry Kaplow, *The Names of Kings: The Parisian Labouring Poor in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1972); Daniel Roche, *The People of Paris: An Essay in Popular Culture*, trans. Marie Evans with Gwynne Lewis (Berkeley, 1987; first published 1981); and Benoît Garnot, *Le Peuple au siècle des lumières* are helpful.

83. See, for example, Geneviève Bollème, *Les Almanachs populaires aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: Essai d'histoire sociale* (Paris and La Haye, 1969); Robert Mandrou, *De la culture populaire aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: La Bibliothèque bleue de Troyes* (Paris, 1975); Robert Muchembled, *Popular and Elite Culture in France, 1400–1750*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Louisiana State UP, 1985; 1978); Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*; Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People: French Popular Protest, 1789–1820* (Oxford, 1970); Steven L. Kaplan, *The Famine Plot Persuasion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia, 1982); E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, no. 50 (1971), 71–36; Robert M. Isherwood, *Farce and Fantasy: Popular Entertainment in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford, 1986); Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *The Vanishing Children of Paris: Rumour and Politics before the French Revolution*, trans. Claudia Miéville (Cambridge MA, 1991; 1988); and two important studies by Dale Van Kley, *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Old Regime* (Princeton, 1984) and *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven, 1996). We should also bear in mind that significant and extensive work on popular mentalities has been carried out by scholars such as Georges Lefebvre, Richard Cobb, George Rudé and Albert Soboul in their studies of crowds and the popular movement in the French Revolution.

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lower classes.[84] All history of course implies selection, and at the time revisionist and neo-revisionist historians began to turn away from 'history from below', it was, it seems, in part because they felt that too strong an emphasis on this sort of history distorted our perceptions of broader processes. Even if one regards Alfred Cobban's dismissal of the role of the sans-culottes in the Revolution[85] as fundamentally mistaken, which surely it is, one can still appreciate the need he felt to escape what he regarded as a restrictive and stifling interpretational framework. Specialization is inherent in modern historical research, so that research or writing directed against one thesis or set of assumptions tends to mirror the limited scope of the original thesis. At a later stage of research, historians seek to re-establish an interpretative balance that avoids the excesses of both sides. The suggestion that we seek to reintegrate the experience of the working population into the accounts we give of the Revolution should be seen in that light.

Neo-revisionist historiography on the French Revolution deserves credit for having opened up subjects largely neglected by historians working within the paradigm of the social interpretation. And yet, innovative and stimulating as much of the work that it has inspired is, neo-revisionism seems to have reached a dead end.[86] To break away from the kind of history established by the social interpretation, the neo-revisionists had recourse to a high-level, conceptual critique of social history. Having redefined the forces moving history and having reconceptualized what the French Revolution was about, Furet and those who work along similar lines opted for an idea-oriented and rather reified account of the Revolution. Perhaps too much Marx invites a return to Hegel. But if so, too much Hegel encourages a new appreciation of Marx, or at least of an account of things that explains the social and economic dimensions of human activity more convincingly than do projections of linguistic, literary or semiotic theory.

Central to the neo-revisionist historiography of the French Revolution, and playing a role in it analogous to class struggle in the social interpretation, is the notion of public opinion. As a normative model, it works well enough. But once introduced to the everyday world of Machiavellian or Hobbesian realities of conflicting interests, personal jealousies and unending manipulation and violence, the explanatory power of this model is weakened. Once opinion is assigned social bases and political or material interests, it loses its unity, loses its putative rationality, loses its authority.

84. See, for example, Furet, 'The French Revolution is Over'; Hunt, the first part of *Politics, Culture and Society*, *The Family Romance*; and Baker's articles conveniently collected in *Inventing the French Revolution*.

85. Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 131.

86. Without explicitly examining public opinion, Susanne Desan raises the question of the continued validity of the broader historiographical context to which it is central in her article, 'What's After Political Culture?', *French Historical Studies*, xxiii (2000), 163–96.

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Habermas posited an effective existence for the public sphere during the eighteenth century, but recognized that critical publicity had been eclipsed by the 'culture industry' and the manipulation of the media by the twentieth century. Habermas's work, and the writings of others who aspire to impartiality and rationality characteristic of the uncorrupted public sphere of the eighteenth century, are proof that critical publicity is not altogether extinguished, even in our own day. Yet one may wonder whether the public sphere of the eighteenth century was quite so comprehensive and consistent as Habermas, and even more the neo-revisionionists, seem to have believed.

Moreau and Morellet and Voltaire, who lent or sold their pens to the ministerial faction to support reforms the monarchy had undertaken in the last decades of the old regime were not necessarily insincere or wrong in the arguments they made. Nor were the spokesmen of the *parlements*, which opposed the Crown's reforms when these were perceived or believed to infringe on existing laws, or the interests of the magistrates, necessarily rational or right. Montesquieu's humane and moderate liberalism was not elaborated without regard to the long struggle between monarchy and aristocracy, and it is clear whose interests his political thought served. Academicians received stipends from the government, intellectuals and artists who attended salons were indebted to their hostesses for the food they provided and often for the patronage they extended, and the hacks of Grub Street felt themselves debased and exploited by the political and economic forces to which they were subject. Not immediately apparent, then, the Olympian impartiality on which the public sphere was said to rest. Rousseau, it is true, retained his independence, and produced works worthy of the objective and critical standards set for the public sphere. His portrait deservedly hung in Kant's study. But it hung there alone. And in any case, one genius, who was also a bit of a crank, could not by himself, or even with a few others, constitute a public sphere.

Perhaps by the end of the eighteenth century public opinion had become what it was for Napoleon – a force to be monitored and controlled by government in the interests of more effective and efficient administration. This puts us at some distance from public opinion as a sovereign and decisive force in politics, a position it can only maintain at a high level of abstraction. But then it is precisely the untenability of this level of abstraction that calls the neo-revisionist project into question.

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