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## Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France\*

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When Louis XVI's flight to Varennes in 1791 prompted open calls for a republic in revolutionary France, they came from two quite distinct directions. One is best represented by Condorcet and Tom Paine, who formed a little "society of republicans" determined to "enlighten minds regarding that republicanism which is made an object of calumny because it is not known, and the uselessness, vices and abuses of royalty which prejudice is determined to defend even when they are known." This republicanism was couched in the language of rights, reason, and representation; it deployed the rationalist discourse of modernity and social progress, the individualist discourse of civil society. For Condorcet and Paine, the progress of modern society had quite simply rendered kingship outmoded and dangerous, a source of contingency and disorder in a progressively more rational social order. It was time to rethink the exercise of executive power in order to discover some more intelligent and less arbitrary method of delegating executive power within a representative constitution. Paine spoke for them both when he insisted, on July 16, 1791, that "I do not understand by republicanism that which bears the name in Holland or some Italian states. I mean simply a government by representation; a government founded on the principles of the Declaration of Rights."2 He expressed their common view, too, a few months later in the second part of his Rights of Man, when he mobilized the claims of modern society against outmoded and irrational political forms. In this analysis, the logic of republicanism derived from the principles of that "representative system [which] takes society and civilization for its basis; nature, reason, and experience for its guide."3 This was the republicanism of the moderns.

- \* The paper on which this article is based was presented to a conference on republicanism organized by the Agnelli Foundation in Turin in 1996. An Italian version is being published in Maurizio Viroli, ed., *Libertà politica e virtù civile: Il significato storico e teorico del republicanesimo* (Turin, 2000).
- <sup>1</sup> [Marie-Jean-Antoine-Nicolas Caritat de Condorcet, Thomas Paine, and Achille Duchâtelet], *Le Républicain, ou Défenseur du gouvernement représentatif; par une société des républicains*, 4 nos. (Paris, July 1791), no. 1, p. 5.
  - <sup>2</sup> Thomas Paine, Réimpression de l'ancien Moniteur, 32 vols. (Paris, 1858–63), 9:137.
  - <sup>3</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man*, pt. 2.

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Other advocates of the republic sounded a very different note, best epitomized, perhaps, by the Journal du Club des Cordeliers, which began to appear at the end of June 1791. This journal called for the people's active surveillance of its representatives (the first issue, indeed, came with its title emblazoned with an eye surmounted by the watchword Surveillance) as the vigilance without which the nation would be lulled into the sleep that heralded despotism. It charged the National Assembly, in the name of a sovereign people, to declare the immediate destruction of monarchy, "that scourge of liberty." It declared the "patrie . . . never in more imminent danger." It insisted on the superiority of the general will of "the person of the people, the mass of citizens . . . recognized as sovereign" over the particular will of its mandators, whose decisions this sovereign had the right to revoke or ratify.4 Strikingly, too, the journal gave prominent space to the review of a book translated by one of the club's members, to which had been given an epigraph from Rousseau's Gouvernement de Pologne: "The circumstance of the present event must be seized to raise souls to the pitch of the souls of the ancients." This work, praised by the reviewer as the most profound ever written before Rousseau's Du contrat social, "examined all peoples, the means by which they conserved their liberty, how they were suddenly deprived of it, the means of and reasons for their rise, decadence, and annihilation."5 Entitled De la souveraineté du peuple et de l'excellence d'un état libre, it was translated from the English of Marchamont Needham and enriched for the French audience with notes from Rousseau, Mably, Bossuet, Condillac, Montesquieu, Letrosne, Raynal, and others by Théophile Mandar, "citoyen de la section du Temple et membre du club des Cordeliers." Even had it not been immediately declared "worthy of the happy centuries of Athens and ancient Rome," one would recognize in this review the tones of classical republicanism. Against the republicanism of the moderns propounded by the likes of Condorcet and Paine, the Journal du Club des Cordeliers upheld the republicanism of the ancients. In the pages that follow, I shall look particularly at this strand of classical republicanism in eighteenthcentury France, at the variations played upon it before 1789, and at the remarkable transformations to which it was subject in the course of the French Revolution.

## FRENCH VARIATIONS ON A EUROPEAN THEME

Classical republicanism, now so well mapped out by historians of political thought in its anglophone manifestations, still remains largely terra incognita

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Journal du Club des Cordeliers, prospectus plus 10 nos. (Paris, June–August 1791), passim.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Ibid., no. 4, pp. 32-34.

in its francophone forms.<sup>6</sup> It is symptomatic of this situation that an essay on the republican idea in eighteenth-century France published in an important recent volume could be written without extended reference to the categories of classical republicanism or civic humanism.<sup>7</sup> It is no less striking that its author, Jean-Marie Goulemot, found little grounds to identify republicanism as an important feature of French political thought in the decades before the Revolution. The republican idea, he argued, belonged to a vanished past that lived on only in books, devoid of relevance as a political model and lacking any referent in contemporary political debate. The disparities between the republics of antiquity and those few republics still visible in the eighteenth-century political landscape only underlined the extent to which republicanism was a "cultural fantasy" or a vague "nostalgia" quite incompatible with enlightened conceptions of historical progress. The political thought of the Enlightenment looked elsewhere for its utopia.

There is, of course, some evidence to support this analysis. Indeed, it can hardly be claimed that the republic represented the form of government preferred by many eighteenth-century French thinkers. Among his ideal types of political regime, Montesquieu provided a powerful description of the republic as a form of government in which "the people as a body, or only a part of the people, have sovereign power,"8 but he hardly offered it as a prescription to his contemporaries in France, or elsewhere. If Rousseau yearned for the kind of political community he associated above all with the ancient city-states and which he celebrated in the Lettre à d'Alembert sur le théatre and in the Dedication of his Second Discourse to the city of Geneva—he nevertheless allowed in Du contrat social that several forms of government could be termed "republican" if they rested legitimately on the will of the sovereign people. Even Mably, often seen, then as now, as the most austere republican of them all, did not necessarily advocate the establishment of a republic in France. His most radical political work, Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen, which offered a quite explicit script for a French revolution, called rather for the institution

<sup>6</sup> The essential work is, of course, J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton, N.J., 1975), a study that has by now stimulated a large body of research seeking to extend, refine, or refute its analyses. Much of that literature, particularly as it relates to the place of classical republicanism in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America, is discussed critically in Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* 79 (1992–93): 11–38. Rodgers concludes that the utility of the concept has now been exhausted, at least in research on American history. I would suggest that its usefulness in mapping French political discourse in the late eighteenth century has barely been assayed.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Marie Goulemot, "Du républicanisme et de l'idée républicaine au XVIIIe siècle," in *Le siècle de l'avènement républicain*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Paris, 1993), pp. 25–56.

<sup>8</sup> Montesquieu, De l'esprit des lois, bk. 2, chap. 1.

of a mixed form of government as a means of rescuing his countrymen from despotism. As for other Enlightenment thinkers, it can readily be conceded that they were often more interested in transforming monarchy in the service of a modern society than they were in recovering the lost republics of the ancients.<sup>9</sup>

But two distinctions are important in this respect. First, we cannot identify the eighteenth century solely with the thinking of the Enlightenment: there were other political languages in play, in France as elsewhere. Second, it is important to distinguish republicanism as the belief in a specific form of government from classical republicanism as a political idiom. The latter, as we now know from John Pocock's work and other studies of its English-language versions, offered a discourse of political diagnosis rather than a model of an ideal regime of government. In its eighteenth-century manifestation, it was, above all, a language of opposition to an increasingly administrative state that simultaneously fed and was fed by the individualism of a modern commercial society, a state that stimulated commerce in order to increase its tax revenues while deploying the instruments of the credit market (rather differently configured, of course, in England and France) to finance a standing army and a more permanent bureaucracy. For all the differences between French and English forms of government during the eighteenth century, both represented modernizing monarchies responding to the competitive political pressures generated by an international commercial and military system.

As this system was international, so was the language of opposition to it. It is scarcely surprising, then, that the canonical English texts of classical republicanism appeared and reappeared in French translation throughout the century. Sidney's *Discourses on Government*, Gordon's commentaries on Sallust and Tacitus, and the political writings of Bolingbroke were only the most notable works in the canon to appear in French. Other authors included Ludlow and Molesworth, Toland and Hoadly, Brown, Blackwell, and Berkeley. Revolutionary translators, in their turn, added Harrington and (as we have noticed) Marchamont Needham.<sup>10</sup>

Seen as an oppositional language rather than as a prescriptive model, as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> On this theme, see Franco Venturi, *Utopia and Reform in the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1971). Chantal Grell, *Le dix-huitième siècle et l'antiquité en France, 1680–1789*, 2 vols., Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, vols. 330–31 (Oxford, 1995), also minimizes the significance of the antique model in the political thinking of the Enlightenment. But if we think of the classical referent as offering not a model but a diagnostic language, then the work of Catherine Volpilhac-Auger, *Tacite en France de Montesquieu à Chateaubriand*, Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, vol. 313 (Oxford, 1993) suggests one basis for a very different view.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> For fuller references to these translations, see Charles Alfred Rochedieu, *Bibliography of French Translations of English Works*, 1700–1800 (Chicago, 1948).

offering a diagnosis rather than an ideal, classical republicanism was, above all, a discourse of political will. It saw disorder and vicissitude as the natural state of human existence deriving from the unstable play of the passions, which could be contained only by a political order in which individual interests were identified with the common good through the inculcation of civic virtue. In such a universe, disorder could be countered only by an enduring common will, liberty secured only by the exercise of that civic virtue which constituted an active commitment and participation of each citizen in public affairs. The erosion of civic virtue by individualism and self-interest led to despotism, just as, no less inevitably, encroaching despotism fostered the destruction of civic virtue. Thus the essential problem of classical republicanism was that of sustaining civic virtue, and with it the life of the political body through time. Hence the centrality in this idiom of organic metaphors: images of vigor and weakness, health and sickness, and life and death. Hence, too, the metaphor of crisis—the moment in which the very existence of the body politic hangs in the balance, in which it will either recover its health and vigor or fall into an irreversible, fatal sickness, the moment in which liberty will live or die.

Organic metaphors notwithstanding, however, classical republicanism was antithetical to any attempt to naturalize power by deriving it from the conditions or potentialities of some prepolitical state, just as it stood in opposition to efforts to sacralize power (by deriving it from a divine order) or to legitimate it historically as the expression of custom or tradition. To the contrary, it saw political order as always radically contingent on the exercise of a political will. Either that will was common or it was particular; either it was the condition of a collective freedom or it was arbitrarily imposed by the yoke of despotism; either it was growing stronger or it was being undermined. In this sense, then, classical-republican discourse was essentially defensive and oppositional. Allowing for no stable middle ground between liberty and despotism, it preached eternal vigilance and constant suspicion in the face of despotic encroachments on the one hand, growing selfishness and apathy on the other. It celebrated political paranoia as the last vestige of civic virtue in the twilight of expiring liberty. Potentially, it made every political situation a moment of contingency, a time for radical political choice.

As a discourse of political will, rather than as a mere preference for the republican form of government, classical republicanism found recurrent expression in prerevolutionary France, not in the form of bookish nostalgia or cultural fantasy but as a language of opposition to the claims of absolute monarchy, to the governmental practices of a modernizing administrative state, and to the corrupting seductions of an expanding commercial economy. As such, it was a critical ingredient in contemporary political debates. One can recognize many of its elements, for example, in the subversive accounts of French history offered by both Boulainvilliers and Mably. In Boulainvilliers's

analysis, the French state owed its origins to the invasion of Gaul by a virile race of Germanic warriors whose aristocratic liberties, the fruit of that conquest, had long since been undermined by a centralizing absolutist state that had sapped the foundations of a national political will.<sup>11</sup> Mably, too, began his historical narrative with the appearance of the Franks in Gaul as a "sovereignly free" people that soon proved incapable of preserving its liberty. Thereafter his tale was one of anarchy, disorder, and usurpation, rarely interrupted by fleeting moments of stability. The Observations sur l'histoire de France destroyed the claims of the absolute monarchy that it had secured an enduring political order in France through the exercise of a unitary will, just as it exposed as a sham the parlementary appeals to an ancient French constitution limiting the exercise of absolute power. In this analysis, the French lacked fundamental laws precisely because they had long since lost the political will that could sustain a settled political order. Far from being a story of constitutional continuity or the growth of stability under monarchical rule, French history was laid bare as a succession of "revolutions" leading only to encroaching despotism. It remained to be seen whether the nation could recover its will and seize on a moment of crisis to overthrow despotism and institute a new order of liberty.12

These accounts of French history were far from being mere flights of erudition or plays of nostalgic fantasy, as defenders of the monarchy quickly recognized. They struck at the very foundations of absolutism and engaged apologists of the monarchy in an ideological battle over the nature of the French constitution that lasted several decades. <sup>13</sup> They had a powerful impact on the pamphlet debate of the period immediately preceding the Revolution.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Henri de Boulainvilliers, *Histoire de l'ancien gouvernement de France, avec XIV lettres historiques sur les parlements ou états généraux* (The Hague and Amsterdam, 1727). See François Furet and Mona Ozouf, "Deux légitimations historiques de la société française au XVIIIe siècle: Mably et Boulainvilliers," in François Furet, *L'atelier de l'histoire* (Paris, 1982), pp. 165–83. For further consideration of Boulainvilliers, the works of Harold A. Ellis are indispensable; see his *Boulainvilliers and the French Monarchy: Aristocratic Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1988), and "Boulainvilliers Ideologue and Publicist: Ideologies of Aristocratic Reaction and the Uses of History in Early-Eighteenth Century France," 2 vols. (Ph.D. diss., Washington University, 1981).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> I have discussed Mably as a classical republican more fully in a chapter of my *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 86–106. For a more comprehensive analysis, see now the excellent study of Johnson Kent Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably* (Stanford, Calif., 1997).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> See Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, pp. 31–85. Much may still be learned on this topic from E. Carcassonne, *Montesquieu et le problème de la constitution française au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1927).

It is important to add, moreover, that Mably, whose writings have puzzled so many of his interpreters and have been the subject of so many anachronistic readings, makes much more sense when restored to the classical-republican tradition than he ever did as a protocommunist, a theorist of the petty bourgeoisie, or an avatar of utopian socialism. This is most obviously true of his works on ancient history. But it is no less clearly the case in regard to the Observations sur l'histoire de France, as of Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen, which explicitly took the form of a dialogue between a Frenchman eager to learn about politics and an English Commonwealthman assigned the task of anatomizing the despotism afflicting France. Since the importance of these latter works is often minimized on the grounds that they were not published until shortly before the French Revolution, it is worth emphasizing that the first part of the Observations sur l'histoire de France was published in 1765 and began to elicit responses shortly thereafter; only the appearance of the second part, completed at the time of the Maupeou coup, was delayed by government pressure until 1788. Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen itself was not published until 1789, though it may have circulated in manuscript before then. Moreover, Mably's classical-republican language is by no means limited to these works. It is also evident in his polemic against the Physiocrats, the Doutes proposés aux philosophes économistes, published in 1768. In this distinctively French confrontation between the ancients and the moderns, physiocracy offered a rationalized version of absolute monarchy in the service of a modern commercial society, a vision of a natural social order in which politics would be rendered redundant by the self-evident authority of reason and the self-harmonizing choices of enlightened individuals acting in pursuit of their own interests. Predictably, Mably responded by appealing to the experience of the ancients and the record of history, insisting that the ordering of the passions could be achieved only by the sustained assertion of a common political will, never by the purportedly self-necessitating rule of reason.

Nor should one forget that Mably was actively engaged in the renewed international debate over the nature of republicanism and the feasibility of a republic in modern conditions, which began in the 1770s. The overture to this discussion was struck up by that other "Citizen of Geneva," Jean Louis Delolme, whose influential *Constitution de l'Angleterre* was published in the first of many French editions in 1771—a time, he noted, when the French "dare today to discuss opinions, and argue for positions, that would have been denounced as blasphemy under Louis XIV."<sup>14</sup> Drawing on the experience of political revolution in Geneva, Delolme moved from a passionate critique of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Jean Louis Delolme, Constitution de l'Angleterre, ou Etat du gouvernement anglais, comparé avec la forme républicaine, et avec les autres monarchies de l'Europe, new ed. (Amsterdam, 1778), p. 1.

Rousseau's views on direct democracy to a sustained celebration of the English constitution as enshrining the liberty of the moderns as against that of the ancients. But the argument was fostered above all by the American constitutional experiment, which engaged the interest of so many in France as elsewhere in Europe, as the late Franco Venturi reminded us.<sup>15</sup> Mably's Observations sur les lois et le gouvernement des Etats Unis d'Amérique, published in 1783, judged the constitutions of the American states severely in the light of the political experience of the ancients. If that work called forth energetic responses on both sides of the Atlantic—not least in Filippo Mazzei's Recherches historiques et politiques sur les Etats-Unis de l'Amérique—it did so in a manner that kept the issue of classical republicanism very much alive, as did John Adams's Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States. 16 The relevance of ancient political models to the constitutions of modern political states was still being thoroughly canvassed and disputed—and was far from being resolved—on the eve of the French Revolution. It was to become a matter of supreme importance in the French constitutional debates of 1789.

It seems clear, then, that classical republicanism was available as an oppositional language in France throughout the eighteenth century. It was not the dominant idiom of resistance to royal power, which remained the discourse of justice embedded in the constitutionalist language of the *parlementaires*. This language rested on the assertion that France still possessed a fundamental constitution that existed from time immemorial, a constitution that limited the exercise of political will by requiring that it be expressed in legally constituted forms and through juridically sustained procedures. But even the parlementary magistrates flirted with notions of themselves as Roman senators, and when the very existence of the parlements was attacked by the revolutionary actions of Maupeou in 1771, their more radical defenders did not shrink from taking up the ideological weapons offered by the classical-republican tradition.

Ransacking the history of political thought for any usable defense against ministerial despotism, the proparlementary authors of the *Maximes du droit public* certainly did not overlook the contributions of the English Commonwealthman tradition.<sup>17</sup> But perhaps the most radical response to the Maupeou

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Franco Venturi, "Libertas americana," chap. 1 of *Settecento riformatore. La caduta dell'Antico Regime (1776–1789)*, vol. 1, *I grandi stati dell'Occidente* (Turin, 1984), translated by Burr Litchfield under the title *The End of the Old Regime in Europe, 1776–1789*, vol. 1, *The Great States of the West* (Princeton, N.J., 1991).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Ibid. For a rather different assessment of Adams's book, see Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> [Gabriel-Nicolas Maultrot, Claude Mey, et al.], Maximes du droit public français, tirées des capitulaires, des ordonnances du royaume, et des autres monuments de l'histoire de France, 2d ed., 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1775). The context in which the

revolution came from a disciple of Mably and Rousseau, the Bordeaux barrister Guillaume-Joseph Saige. His earliest work, Caton, ou Entretien sur la liberté et les vertus politiques, published in 1770, sounded all the themes in the classical-republican repertoire in decrying the process by which the growth of luxury and despotism in modern society had destroyed the political virtue that could alone sustain liberty, and could do so only in the direct democracy of a true republic. Between liberty and despotism, this text made clear, there could be no constituted middle; there was only a moment of choice, individual or collective. It remained for the French to decide whether such a moment had been irretrievably lost to them. Once Chancellor Maupeou's destruction of the parlements drove this point home, and as the success of the chancellor's coup seemed increasingly likely, Saige offered a second, more desperate pamphlet in 1776, the Catéchisme du citoyen, intended to awaken an enslaved nation into an active assertion of its will. It took the form of a question-and-answer exposition of the principal arguments of Rousseau's Du contrat social in which the judicial precedents and historical continuities invoked by parlementary theorists were redescribed as contingent on the immediate and sustained expression of the general will, changeable only by an explicit expression of that will in the Estates General for which opponents of the absolute monarchy now began to call. This argument for the immediacy of political will seemed far too dangerous to those whose authority it sought to uphold: Saige's pamphlet was denounced by the parlements of Paris and Bordeaux as soon as they were restored after Maupeou's fall. Nonetheless, it reappeared in 1787 and went through several editions in the course of the French Pre-Revolution.<sup>18</sup>

One feature of Saige's political thinking is that it illustrates the manner in which the classical-republican tradition became entwined in France with a radicalization of natural rights theory. In the Continental tradition of justial authority was justified on the grounds that it rested on the

Maximes was published has been discussed in several works of Dale Van Kley, culminating in his masterly *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791* (New Haven, Conn., 1996).

<sup>18</sup> I have discussed Guillaume-Joseph Saige more fully in *Inventing the French Revolution*, pp. 128–52. It could be argued that parlementary constitutionalism necessarily implied some notion of national sovereignty to the extent that the nation was seen as a party with the king to a contract instituting the fundamental constitution. The most notable passages of parlementary remonstrances suggesting this view are gathered together in Roger Bickart, *Les parlements et la notion de souveraineté nationale au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1932). Defenders of the parlements were indeed driven toward this view as they responded to increasingly emphatic assertions of the supremacy of the royal will in the prerevolutionary period. But their conception of the sovereignty of the nation generally remained an essentially defensive one: national sovereignty was understood as an ultimate limiting condition on the exercise of royal power rather than as a direct and immediate expression of a national political will, as in Saige's view.

consent of individuals who, in contracting together for self-preservation and the common pursuit of happiness, had also constituted a public power to protect their rights, preserve peace, and maintain tranquility. But social contract theory did not necessarily imply active political participation. In most cases, indeed, the modern theory of natural law had been deployed to justify monarchical power on the grounds that the latter best served the purposes of peace and tranquillity for which society and government had been instituted. It also gave priority to civil liberty, and the peaceful enjoyment of rights protected by law, over political participation. In immediate political terms, then, it frequently served to defend the status quo. This was Mably's charge against the writings of Grotius, Wolff, and Pufendorf. In placing law over liberty, he argued in Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen, the doctors of natural law had forgotten that unjust laws could destroy the state. Although he appropriated the language of rights, it was Mably's intention, as he put it, to demonstrate that "despotism, with its prisons, its gibbets, its pillage, its silent devastation, and its imbecile and cruel ineptitudes, is the inevitable result of the principles of our jurisconsults."19

Rousseau was no less critical of the absolutist arguments he found in Grotius, Pufendorf, and Barbeyrac, as of Burlamaqui's defense of oligarchic rule in Geneva. The version of the social contract that leads to the final, dismal denouement of the *Discours sur l'inégalité* is a caricature of a theory that validates egoism and legitimates despotism. Rousseau portrays it as the most brilliantly conceived plan ever contrived by the human species, the perfection of reason in the service of a depraved humanity. In effect, the Second Discourse turned the intellectual procedures of the school of modern natural law against the views they had been used to sustain: its negative version of the social contract was the centerpiece of an indictment of modern society.

But Rousseau also insisted, in *Du contrat social*, on using the jusnaturalist apparatus to demonstrate the legitimacy of an alternative political order. He imagined a new form of the social contract that would indeed preserve individual liberty and stabilize the human personality. On one level, the notion of the general will marks a democratization of social contract theory. On another level, it can be seen as Rousseau's reworking, in formal contractualist terms, of the classical-republican notion of civic virtue. Considered theoretically in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, *Des droits et des devoirs du citoyen*, ed. Jean-Louis Lecercle (Paris, 1972), p. 19.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> On Rousseau's relation to the theorists of natural jurisprudence, Jean Derathé, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau et la science politique de son temps*, rev. ed. (Paris, 1970), remains the classic work. However, the recent study by Helena Rosenblatt, *Rousseau and Geneva: From the First Discourse to the Social Contract, 1749–1762* (Cambridge, 1997), provides an excellent reconsideration of the manner in which Rousseau encountered their views as deployed in the Genevan context.

the language of social contract theory, the general will is the abstract, legitimate authority produced by the creation of an artificial political body through an act of free association among individuals: it is the condition of their common freedom, the authority that allows them to remain free and rational because they are free of all dependence on other particular wills. Understood experientially, however, it springs from that identification of citizens with the common good, that sense of communal belonging found only in small societies most closely resembling the ancient poleis. This is why Du contrat social is such a strange amalgam of political radicalism and sociological conservatism. Rousseau formulated the idea of the general will as an abstract theorem in the language of the theory of natural law, but he discussed the need for the preservation of the general will and the danger of its loss—the death of the political body—in the sociopolitical language of classical republicanism. It is thus a crucial feature of his political thinking that he brought to a classical-republican diagnosis of the corruption of civic virtue in modern commercial society a theoretical solution that involved a radical democratization of the theory of the social contract, understood as the fundamental basis for the direct political participation of the entire body of the citizenry in the conduct of political affairs. Civic virtue and the general will were inextricably linked: one could not survive without the other. This fusion of arguments led directly to Rousseau's insistence on the incompatibility of the practice of representation with the true exercise of the general will by the people as a body, an insistence that was to prove fateful after 1789.

It seems safe to conclude, then, that the language of classical republicanism was indeed a significant feature of French political culture on the eve of the French Revolution, in terms both of specific French manifestations of that language and of French participation in broader European debates. To French political actors, as to others elsewhere, it offered a critique of modern commercial society; an insistence on the primacy of political will; a constant dichotomization of political existence between liberty and despotism; and a corresponding invitation to see every situation as a moment of crisis, a point at which the political body would live or die. To follow classical republicanism into the French Revolution, however, is to discover remarkable transformations in its nature and power.<sup>21</sup> Only in France did this language mutate into the call for Terror. We need to ask how, and why.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> There is, as yet, no real study of the classical-republican strand (as defined here) in French Revolutionary discourse. This is not to say, of course, that the presence of the ancients in the revolutionary imaginary has not been very well established. Among general works on the topic, Harold T. Parker's *The Cult of Antiquity in the French Revolutionaries* (Chicago, 1937) is the classic study in English; Claude Mossé, *L'antiquité dans la Révolution française* (Paris, 1989), offers a more recent view.

## REVOLUTIONARY MUTATIONS

In response to these questions, I wish to point to three mutations of classical republicanism in the political discourse of the French Revolution. I shall call the first its metastasization, the second its moralization, and the third its transformation into a theory of revolution. The first I associate most clearly with Marat, the second with Robespierre, and the third with Saint-Just.

It has frequently been recognized that Marat raised political paranoia to a level incompatible with the very possibility of establishing, or even conceiving, a stable political order.<sup>22</sup> It becomes easier to make sense of his language, however, as soon as one recognizes it as an extreme version of the idiom of classical republicanism. In this respect, it is important to recall that Marat's first political work was published (anonymously) in England in 1774 under a title so revealing that it merits citation in full: The Chains of Slavery, A Work wherein the Clandestine and Villanous Attempts of Princes to Ruin Liberty are pointed out, and the Dreadful Scenes of Despotism Disclosed, to which is prefixed, An Address to the Electors of Great Britain, in order to draw their Timely Attention to the Choice of Proper Representatives in the Next Parliament.<sup>23</sup> Written in the context of Wilkesite agitation, this work urged English voters to use the opportunity of an approaching election to throw out the pensioners and placemen corrupting the independence of the unreformed House of Commons. But in doing so it mobilized the entire repertory of classical-republican themes in passionate denunciation of the infinite devices by

Jacques Bouineau, *Les toges de pouvoir: La révolution de droit antique (1789–1799)* (Toulouse, 1986), provides a remarkable statistical mapping of classical references in revolutionary discourse.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> On this theme, see the excellent analysis by Patrice Rolland, "Marat et la politique du soupçon," *Le débat* 57 (November–December 1989): 129–48.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> [Jean-Paul Marat], The Chains of Slavery, A Work wherein the Clandestine and Villanous Attempts of Princes to Ruin Liberty are pointed out, and the Dreadful Scenes of Despotism Disclosed, to which is prefixed, An Address to the Electors of Great Britain, in order to draw their Timely Attention to the Choice of Proper Representatives in the Next Parliament (London, 1774). The book was brought out by the radical publisher John Almon, a close associate of Wilkes. A useful modern edition has recently appeared, bringing together the English text of 1774 and the revised French text published by Marat in Paris in 1793; see Jean-Paul Marat, Les Chaînes de l'Esclavage 1793, The Chains of Slavery, 1774, édition française confronté au texte original anglais, ed. Charlotte Goëtz and Jacques De Cock (Brussels, 1995). Further references will cite this edition as Chains of Slavery. On this work, see especially the perceptive discussion by Luciano Guerci, "Marat prima della rivoluzione: Le Catena della Schiavitù," Rivista storica italiana 91 (1979): 434-69. There is a very suggestive discussion of Marat's use of Tacitus in developing a "fantasy of despotism," in Volpilhac-Auger (n. 9 above), pp. 376-82, 465-69. I wish to thank Jeremy Popkin for sharing with me copies of unpublished papers on Marat that parallel my own reading of this text in several regards.

which princes constantly sought to extend their arbitrary power and deprive peoples of their liberties by destroying all traces of public spirit.

Fifteen years later, the author of the Ami du peuple began to deploy the same language in revolutionary Paris. In Marat's new journal, hypervigilant patriotic watchfulness had to remain constantly opposed to the dangers of a civic slumber blind to the machinations of despotism. But the attack on placemen and pensioners was now redirected at the National Assembly, whose arrogation of sovereign authority in the name of the nation had simply given it all the more power to betray the people. As early as September 1789, Marat was sounding the call for surveillance, denunciation, and purge that he never abandoned: "Demented people . . . open your eyes, emerge, emerge from your lethargy, purge your committees, preserve their healthy members, sweep away the corrupt ones, those royal pensioners, those cunning aristocrats, those dishonored or suspect men, those false patriots."24

There is thus a striking similarity between the language of *The Chains of* Slavery and that of the Ami du peuple. But there is also a significant difference. The earlier work exhibited a remarkable gap between the violence of its attacks on encroaching despotism and the relative modesty of the action it proposed, which came down to voting out the rascals in the House of Commons. As long as it was oppositional and defensive in relationship to monarchical rule, the example of *The Chains of Slavery* suggests, the language of classical republicanism could be vitriolic, inflammatory, and hyperbolic. The more secure the power it attacked, the more extreme its language had to be. Yet the force of that language was checked, in effect, by two critical factors: one institutional and the other intellectual. Institutionally, classical republicanism found its limits in the sheer weight of the power against which it was directed. Intellectually, it found its limits in the essential pessimism of its historical consciousnessin the conviction that liberty must necessarily succumb to despotism in the fullness of time. Marat expressed this conviction in characteristic fashion. "Such are commonly the steps by which Princes advance to despotism," he concluded in The Chains of Slavery. "Thus Liberty has the fate of all other human things: It yields to Time which destroys everything, to Vice which corrupts everything, to Ignorance which crushes everything."25

Neither of these conditions, the institutional or the intellectual, obtained in France after 1789. As absolute monarchy was overthrown as an institutional constraint on its expression, so too was classical republicanism inscribed within new expectations of revolutionary transformation inspired by a very

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Jean-Paul Marat, L'ami du peuple, no. 15 (September 15, 1789), in his Oeuvres politiques, 1789–1793, ed. Jacques De Cock and Charlotte Goëtz, 10 vols. (Brussels, 1989-95), 1:189.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Marat, Chains of Slavery, p. 461.

different tradition within the Enlightenment. The best indication of this intellectual shift is the conception of "revolution" itself, which figured traditionally in the classical-republican lexicon as the disorder of events in the flow of human time, an expression of the instability of all things human. <sup>26</sup> In the course of the eighteenth century, however, this conception was joined by another: the "revolution" of the philosophes, understood as a dynamic transformational process, an expression of the historical rhythm of the progress of the human mind. In Enlightenment discourse, this process was seen as having universal implications: it was a phenomenon of world-historical significance, extending the horizon of expectation indefinitely into the future. It expressed the logic of a profound and irreversible transformation of society by enlightenment.

With the fall of the Bastille, the classical-republican conception of crisis merged with the Enlightenment conception of revolution in an explosive combination. The moment of recombination is well illustrated by one of the earliest and most popular of the revolutionary journals, the *Révolutions de Paris*, edited by Elysée Loustalot.<sup>27</sup> In this account of the daily events in Paris, the French were portrayed as carrying out a universal historical mission, acting not only for themselves but also on behalf of "all the nations which have not yet broken the chains of despotism." To be rightly understood, their fight against this monster—"as old as the world"—had to be placed within a global narrative. Loustalot's description of this enterprise took on emphatically classical-republican tones. "Since the origins of societies," he argued, "despotism has weighed on the universe. The history of revolutions is the story of the usurpations of power, the protests of reason, and the vengeances of force. It is the history of despotism. It was born with man, who was despotic as soon as there was rule to be exercised." But the classical-republican script was also given a profound

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Here and in what follows, I draw on the analyses of the idea of revolution I have sketched in two other essays: "Inventing the French Revolution," in my *Inventing the French Revolution* (n. 12 above), and "Revolutionizing Revolution," in *The Meanings of Modern Revolutions*, ed. François Furet and Nathan Tarcov (forthcoming). More comprehensive discussions are offered by Jean-Marie Goulemot, *Discours, révolutions et histoire: Représentations de l'histoire et discours sur les révolutions de l'Age Classique aux Lumières* (Paris, 1975); Alain Rey, "*Révolution*": *Histoire d'un mot* (Paris, 1989).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> The best analysis of the journal is Pierre Rétat, "Forme et discours d'un journal révolutionnaire: Les *Révolutions de Paris* en 1789," in Claude Labrosse, Pierre Rétat, and Henri Duranton, *L'instrument périodique: Le fonction de la presse au XVIIIe siècle* (Lyon, 1985), pp. 139–78. See also Marcellin Pellet, *Elysée Loustalot et les Revolutions de Paris (Juillet 1789–Septembre 1790)* (Paris, 1872).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> [Elysée Loustalot], "Introduction à la Révolution, servant de préliminaire aux Révolutions de Paris, ou Clef de la Révolution de 1789" (January 30, 1790), p. 1. The copy of this publication in the Stanford University Libraries is bound as an introduction into the first volume of the *Révolutions de Paris, dédiées à la nation et au district des Petits Augustins*, 17 vols. (Paris, 1789–93).

Enlightenment resonance as the French Revolution was raised to the level of a world-historical process effecting the transformation of humanity. For Loustalot, in short, the revolution of Enlightenment was being realized by a bitter and oppressed people, driven by the sheer force of misery. "Only excessive misery and the progress of enlightenment can bring about a revolution in a people that has grown old in the degradation of servitude," the *Révolutions de Paris* insisted.<sup>29</sup> Only in combination, as it were, could the experience of oppression and the progress of enlightenment effect the Revolution. And only from such a combination could there be a beneficent result. In this formulation, the revolution that was the transformation of society by enlightenment now assured the outcome of that revolution that was the frightful moment of crisis in the life of the body politic. The revolution of philosophy had fused with the revolt of the oppressed.

But if the promise of revolution was opened up and extended, so too was the experience of crisis. How could the French Revolution be brought to a close until humanity itself had been transformed? How could it be assured of the outcome promised by philosophy until all its enemies—ultimately, all those not yet transformed—had been destroyed? In effect, the sudden combination of the Enlightenment conception of indefinite progress and the classical-republican notion of (now extended) crisis produced an explosive escalation, a kind of sustained political chain reaction.<sup>30</sup> In these conditions, classical republicanism escaped the constraints of its defensive and oppositional limitations. In the light of infinite promise, it now projected infinite dangers and unending risks. The abyss over which the French were balanced now became universal. The moment of crisis now evoked a call for extended revolutionary action.

This effect was exacerbated by a second phenomenon. It goes without saying that power was destabilized during the French Revolution. But it is more important to suggest that it was destabilized in a way that particularly fostered the radicalization of classical-republican language. Instituting the practice of representation while insisting that sovereignty inhered in a unitary and indivisible general will, the Constituent Assembly rendered every legislative decision of the representative body suspect. Sovereignty represented could always be challenged in the name of sovereignty embodied in the people; claims to express the general will could always be indicted as particular. The unitary character of the general will thus required unity in the people, on the one hand, and unity within the representative body, on the other. Above all, it required that the unity of the one be reflected in the unity of the other. The revolution of August 10, 1792, that of May 31–June 2, 1793, and the Terror that became "the order of the day" after September 5, 1793, all sought to realize this end.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> [Loustalot], Révolutions de Paris, 16:2 (October 31, 1789).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> See Baker, "Revolutionizing Revolution."

Marat was prepared to escalate his denuncations until this impossible condition of unity was realized. "Six months ago, five or six hundred heads would have been enough to rescue us from the abyss," he argued in December 1790. "Today ... perhaps it will be necessary to lop off five thousand. But if it requires twenty thousand, we shouldn't hesitate for a moment."31 The number was revised in May 1791, but with the clear implication that it could never be large enough: "Felling five hundred heads would have sufficed to put things back in order eleven months ago; today it would take fifty thousand. Perhaps five hundred thousand will have fallen by the end of the year. France will have been inundated in blood, but it will not be free."32 Whether or not Marat actually demanded 270,000 heads after the September Massacres of 1792 is still disputed. Whatever the facts of the case, however, this call for terror had become revolutionary gospel a year later. "Never forget the sublime words of the prophet, Marat," the activists of the William Tell section reminded the Convention in November 1793: "Sacrifice 200,000 heads, and you will save a million."33 Classical republicanism had metastasized into a discourse of terror.

As it metastasized, so also was it moralized, and by none more than Robespierre. It is not difficult to demonstrate that the Incorruptible did indeed draw profoundly on classical-republican themes. These became particularly evident in the speeches he gave at the Jacobin Club during the period of the Legislative Assembly—from which he was excluded, along with the other former members of the Constituent Assembly, by the self-denying decree he demanded. Once outside the National Assembly, Robespierre immediately adopted the stance of surveillance and suspicion of those in place, celebrating *défiance* as the watchword of the citizen and the safeguard of the people, who could never sleep with impunity. The now familiar metaphors of sleep and watchfulness provided a steady rhythm within his discourse. Classical-republican anxieties also ran throughout the arguments he launched against the war strategy introduced by the Brissotins within the Legislative Assembly as a means to create the patriotic fervor that would secure the Revolution.

Warfare—not the virtue-enhancing kind once fought by a civic-minded citizen militia, but the modern, professionalized, deficit-financed, tax-generating, and despotism-fostering war fought by standing armies—this became Robespierre's great bugbear in late 1791 and early 1792, as it had been for all the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Marat, *L'ami du peuple*, no. 314 (December 18, 1790), in his *Oeuvres politiques*, 3:1926–27

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., no. 471 (May 27, 1791), 5:2937.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Walter Markov and Albert Soboul, eds., *Die Sansculotten von Paris: Dokumenten zur Geschichte der Volksbewegung, 1793–1794* (Berlin, 1957), p. 218. On classical-republican elements in the political language of the popular movement, see esp. Michael Sonenscher, *Work and Wages: Natural Law, Politics and the Eighteenth-Century French Trades* (Cambridge, 1989).

eighteenth-century Commonwealthmen. For him, as for them, it served the schemes of the ambitious and the greedy, fed the appetites of the generals and the speculators, and stifled liberty and inculcated habits of blind obedience. "War is good for the military officers, for the ambitious, for the speculators who wager investments on this sort of event," he warned the Jacobin Club in January 1792; "it is good for the ministers whose operations it covers with a more obscure and sacred veil; it is good for the court, as for the executive power whose authority, popularity, and dominance it augments; it is good for the coalition of nobles, intriguers, and moderates that governs France."34 Patriotic citizens, in contrast, could never forget that "a great armed and permanent body was always generally regarded as the institution most threatening to liberty."35 To the end, suspicion of the ministerial-military-financial complex within modern society remained strong in Robespierre's denunciation of Brissot and his allies. "You have been vehemently suspected of preferring the vices of monarchy to the manners of the Republic," he warned them in the spring of 1793, shortly before they were to be purged from the Convention by popular uprising; "you wanted to serve the tyrant."36

Constant suspicion—and with it the need for eternal watchfulness—is therefore an omnipresent theme in Robespierre's political language. So, too, is the accompanying topos of crisis, understood as the ultimate moment of contingency in political life. External war, he warned in 1792, is "a crisis that can lead to the death of the political body."37 The same metaphor ran through his arguments in the debate over the fate of the king: Louis must die, he insisted, that the patrie might live. By the end of 1793, as the Terror was being given its form, Robespierre was reviewing the entire Revolution as a series of "crises," each of which had suspended the political body between life and death before finally propelling it forward. It followed, then, that the first republic in the world had to be founded "in the midst of all the storms." And it had to be founded by a "revolutionary" government, the kind that Robespierre defined—in the celebrated speech on that topic on December 25, 1793—as a response precisely to crisis, to the ultimate imperatives of the moment in which the new republic would live or die. Between life and death, Robespierre had no doubt, it was better to risk an excess of energy than to fall into a state of paralysis: "A vigorous body tormented by a superabundance of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, "Discours sur la guerre" (January 2, 1792), in *Textes choisis*, ed. Jean Poperen, 3 vols. (Paris, 1956–58), 1:136–37.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 1:147.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> "Lettre à MM. Vergniaud, Gensonné, Brissot, Guadet, sur la souveraineté du peuple" (*Lettres à ses commettants*, 2d. ser., no. 1 [January 5, 1793]), in Poperen, ed., 2:92. <sup>37</sup> "Discours sur la guerre," in Poperen, ed., 1:136.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> "Discours sur la situation politique de la République" (November 18, 1793), in Poperen, ed., 3:78.

sap ends up with more resources than a cadaver."<sup>39</sup> Reworking the metaphor of crisis in the speech proposing the Festival of the Supreme Being, he still found it necessary to remind his listeners that "the human race is in a violent state which cannot be durable."<sup>40</sup> Those historians who cling to an interpretation of the Terror as an extreme response to extreme circumstances—an ultimate act of political will in defense of the *salus populi*—must also recognize that the language in which these circumstances were construed had a powerful life and resonance of its own.

Nested within this talk of crisis, it is scarcely surprising to find mention of civic virtue. 41 "Let us elevate our souls to the height of the republican virtues and of the ancient examples," Robespierre declared as he defined the principles of revolutionary government.<sup>42</sup> "What is the principle of democratic or popular government, the essential spring that maintains it and moves it?" he demanded in his speech on the principles of political morality, opting for a formulation that clearly owed much to Montesquieu. "It is virtue; I speak of the public virtue which produced so many marvels in Greece and Rome, and which must produce far more astonishing ones in republican France; of that virtue which is nothing more than love of the *patrie* and of its laws."43 The problem confronting the Convention, he now insisted, was that of sustaining and intensifying republican energy. "Thus everything that tends to excite love of the patrie, to purify its manners, to elevate souls, to direct the passions of the human heart toward the public interest, must be adopted or established by you. ... Ceaselessly rewind the sacred spring of republican government, instead of letting it slip."44 This was the authentic language of classical republicanism, the language of a Cato who tries to prevent as long as possible the fate that befalls a nation "when after having lost by degrees its character and its liberty, it passes from democracy to aristocracy or to monarchy . . . the death of the political body through decrepitude."45 In Robespierre's speech, examples of the fates of ancient republics quite naturally followed.

But even as the Incorruptible adopted classical-republican language in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> "Discours sur les principes du gouvernement révolutionnaire" (December 25, 1793), in Poperen, ed., 3:102.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> "Discours sur les rapports des idées religieuses et morales avec les principes républicains et sur les fêtes nationales" (May 7, 1794), in Poperen, ed., 3:157.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> The importance of the theme of virtue in the Jacobin discourse more generally has recently been emphasized by Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Robespierre, "Discours sur les principes du gouvernement révolutionnaire," in Poperen, ed., 3:103.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> "Discours sur les principes de morale politique qui doivent guider la Convention nationale dans l'administration intérieure de la République," in Poperen, ed., 3:114.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Ibid., 3:115.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 3:116.

speaking of virtue, this language underwent an important transformation. The virtue to which he referred was not simply a political effect of good laws that restrained human passions by identifying individual interest with the public good. It was innate in human nature. "Man is good as he leaves the hand of nature: whoever denies this principle should not think of teaching humanity," he insisted on January 10, 1793, in a discussion of education clearly inspired by Rousseau. "If man is corrupt, then this disorder must be imputed to the vices of social institutions. . . . If nature has created man good, to nature must we bring him back. If social institutions have depraved man, these institutions must be reformed." A year later, at the height of the Terror, Robespierre returned to this theme. "Happily, virtue is natural to the people, despite aristocratic prejudices," he insisted. "Moreover, one can say, in a sense, that to love justice and equality, the people has no need of a great virtue; it is enough for it to love itself."

Paradoxically, this assertion of the natural goodness of the people (rather than its acquired civic virtue) allowed Robespierre to expand and moralize the Terror. The more the people was good, the more its enemies had to be evil—and the more ruthlessly the instrument of terror had to be directed against them. The Terror, it might be said, was the use of power to recover the natural goodness of the people. In Robespierre's speech advocating the cult of the Supreme Being, it marked the line between two kinds of egoism: "one vile and cruel, isolating man from his fellows, which seeks an exclusive well-being purchased at the cost of the misery of another; the other generous and beneficent, which conjoins our own happiness with that of all, which attaches our own glory to that of the *patrie*." The evil immorality of the one was the basis of despotism; the virtuous morality of the other was the essence of the republic.

It need hardly be pointed out that Robespierre's two kinds of egoism—the one good, the other bad—were drawn from Rousseau. They were none other than the *amour de soi* the Citizen of Geneva found natural in every individual heart—and which he imagined could be preserved in society, and extended to the political body as a whole, through the operation of the general will—and the depraved *amour propre* he saw appearing as individuals in society become corrupted by their dependence on one another. In Robespierre's discourse, however, the corrupting force of society—the contamination that is shot through modern civilization in Rousseau's analysis—is focalized in the coun-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Maximilien Robespierre, *Lettres à ses commettants*, 2d ser., no. 2 (January 10, 1793), in *Oeuvres complètes de Robespierre*, vol. 5, ed. Gustave Laurent (Paris, 1961), pp. 207–8.

 $<sup>^{\</sup>rm 47}$  Robespierre, "Discours sur les principes de morale politique," 3:116–17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> "Discours sur les rapports des idées religieuses et morales avec les principes républicains," 3:158–59.

terrevolution. Hence his insistence on the insidious intimacy of the threat, and on the difficulty of detecting and exterminating the conspirators. Hence his profound sense that the traitor was within. "With what profound art the tyrants turn against us, I won't say our weaknesses, but even our patriotism. . . . They lurk around us; they discover our secrets, they caress our passions, they seek to inspire us even in our opinions, they turn our resolutions against us." <sup>49</sup> No wonder, then, that "in the system of the French Revolution that which is immoral is impolitic, that which is corrupting is counterrevolutionary." <sup>50</sup> No wonder that the goal of the Terror is "to substitute morality for egoism in our country." No wonder that the Rousseauian theme of hypocrisy—of the subversion of being by seeming—runs through Robespierre's speech on political morality. "If all hearts are not changed," he exclaimed, "how many faces are masked! how many traitors mingle in our affairs only to ruin them." <sup>51</sup>

One final mutation within Robespierre's classical republicanism might be noted here. It has been rendered messianic by its placement within the worldhistorical framework of the Enlightenment. If liberty were to perish in France, he announced on November 18, 1793, "despotism, like a boundless sea, would overflow the surface of the globe . . . it is not for a people that we fight, but for the universe, [not] for the men who live today, but for all those who will exist."52 This French Revolution was not one more engagement in a losing battle against political entropy. Instead, it was a great leap forward in the progress of humanity. "The French people," Robespierre insisted, "seems to have advanced by two thousand years beyond the rest of the human species; in comparison with them, one would be tempted to regard it as a different species."53 Within such a formulation, a profound shift had occurred in the notion of crisis itself. It was no longer simply the moment in which a republic faces the possibility of its own mortality, in which it will either be made to live by a reassertion of civic virtue or left to expire in corruption and apathy. It was now the moment in which humanity in its entirety will be liberated by the creation of a new kind of society. The revolution had become the engine of truth, the essential instrument of progress. This was why Robespierre denounced Camille Desmoulins (by whom he was now being portrayed as a despot, and this quite clearly in classical-republican terms)<sup>54</sup> as one of those

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> "Discours sur les principes du gouvernement révolutionnaire," 3:104-5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> "Discours sur les principes de morale politique," 3:115.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Ibid., 3:112, 125.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> "Discours sur la situation politique de la République" (n. 38 above), 3:76–77.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> "Discours sur les rapports des idées religieuses et morales avec les principes républicains," 3:157.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Desmoulins's use of Gordon's *Tacitus* in this polemic, and hence his link to the English tradition of classical republicanism, is well established. For a recent discussion, see Volpilhac-Auger (n. 9 above), pp. 469–73.

writers "more ignorant than perverse [who believe] that the plan of the French Revolution was written entirely in the books of Tacitus and Machiavelli." To criticize the Terror in the light of such teachings, Robespierre insisted, was not to recognize the great task that had now to be accomplished: "to fulfill the wishes of nature, accomplish the destiny of humanity, keep the promises of philosophy, absolve providence from the long reign of crime and tyranny."55 Were the Revolution to fail, Robespierre insisted, "nature in its entirety would be covered with a funeral veil, and human reason would recede to the very abysses of ignorance and barbarousness."56

This messianism of the French Revolution was most thoroughly theorized by Saint-Just.<sup>57</sup> A remarkable passage of his Esprit de la révolution et de la constitution announced the theme as early as 1791, as the young author reflected on the transformation of the Estates General into the National Assembly. "The first signified a message," he concluded, "the second a mission." The National Assembly did not exercise this mission "as did Lycurgus, Mohammed, and Jesus Christ, in the name of heaven, for heaven was no longer in the hearts of men; they required another bait more in conformity with human interest."58 In Saint-Just's subsequent speeches, the mythical legislator of the classical-republican tradition was transformed into the world-historical revolutionary working to regenerate human nature. "A revolution is a heroic undertaking whose authors walk between perils and immortality," he warned the Convention. "The latter is yours if you know how to immolate enemy factions."59 Saint-Just raised the moment of crisis to the level of the sublime, to the point where contingency met eternity in the exalted choices of historical actors. "Those who make revolutions" became a frequent refrain in his speeches. "Those who make revolutions, those who wish to do good, must sleep only in the tomb," he proclaimed. 60 Seized by the exhilaration of working the passage from an old world to a new, he found little appeal in half measures. "Those who make revolutions by half have only dug themselves a tomb."61 With this language, the austere legislator of classical republicanism had been

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Robespierre, "Discours sur les principes de morale politique," 3:111, 113.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> "Discours sur la situation politique de la République," 3:76.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> This analysis is also taken up in my "Revolutionizing Revolution" (n. 26 above).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Louis-Antoine-Léon de Saint-Just, *Esprit de la révolution et de la constitution de France*, in his *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Michèle Duval (Paris, 1984), p. 345.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Saint-Just, "Rapport sur la conjuration ourdie depuis plusieurs années par les factions criminelles pour absorber la Révolution française dans un changement de dynastie" (March 31, 1794), in Duval, ed., p. 761.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Saint-Just, "Rapport sur la nécessité de déclarer le gouvernement révolutionnaire jusqu'à la paix" (October 10, 1793), in Duval, ed., p. 526.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Saint-Just, "Rapport sur les personnes incarcérées" (February 26, 1794), in Duval, ed., p. 705.

transmuted into the figure of the modern revolutionary. "Yours is not to follow external impulsions," Saint-Just assured the Convention, "it is for the Earth to receive those of your genius. Be stronger, more rigorous to regenerate than [others are] to corrupt; be greater than past misfortunes; be better than our enemies. Make all principles, all ideas so precise that they are no longer travestied; that moderates are exposed even under a mask of violence; that happy exaltation is honored; that one remembers that Cato was an exalted man and Cataline was not . . . ; exaltation is virtue and not fury." Fused with philosophy, republican virtue had become metaphysical exaltation, the sheer exhilaration of transforming a world.

I need hardly point out, in conclusion, that this transformation of classical republicanism into a philosophy of terror saw its end in eighteenth-century France. When, after Thermidor, the Convention turned again to the task of creating a republican constitution, it was to the inspiration of the moderns that it looked, not to that of the ancients. How that came about is another story. But allow me to close this one by quoting the now celebrated analysis of Benjamin Constant. The mistake of the revolutionary disciples of Rousseau and Mably, the "modern imitators of the ancient republics," Constant argued, was to attempt to impose on a modern commercial society the form of liberty enjoyed by the ancients. "To form men for liberty they surrounded them with the spectacle of torture. . . . Thus there spread over France that inexplicable delirium that we call the Reign of Terror."63 I would want to reformulate that analysis in one respect. The Terror did not derive from the simple mistake of preferring the liberty of the ancients to the liberty of the moderns, classical republicanism to the discourse of Enlightenment. It derived from the explosive manner in which the French Revolution combined the two.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> Saint-Just, "Rapport sur la police générale, sur la justice, le commerce, la législation et les crimes des factions" (April 15, 1794), in Duval, ed., p. 818.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>63</sup> Benjamin Constant, "De l'esprit de conquête et de l'usurpation dans leurs rapports avec la civilisation europénne" (1814), in *De la liberté chez les modernes: Écrits politiques*, ed. Marcel Gauchet (Paris, 1980), pp. 194–95.