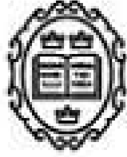

Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792

Author(s): Timothy Tackett

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"The Aristocracy Unmasked. Beware of its caresses, its thousand arms are ready to strike" (*ca*. 1791–1792 (anonymous, courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France). The theme of conspiracy and counterrevolution, hiding behind a reassuring mask, appeared widely in French revolutionary rhetoric. Here, the Janus-like depiction of the aristocratic woman and the priest, bound together by a serpent, is particularly intriguing, prefiguring a common motif in nineteenth-century France. Note the cloven hoof and the claw, only partly hidden by the clergyman's cassock and the woman's gown.

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Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789–1792

TIMOTHY TACKETT

On the morning of May 23, 1792, in the third year of the French Revolution, Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Armand Gensonné climbed to the rostrum to address the National Assembly. In successive speeches, the two deputies revealed the existence of a terrifying plot to destroy the Assembly and the revolution itself. The whole was masterminded by the "Machiavellian" Austrian minister, Prince Wenzel Von Kaunitz, but it was coordinated in France by a shadowy "Austrian Committee" of the king's closest advisers, and it was said to be responsible for almost all the ills besetting the new French regime: the disappointing results of the recently declared war, the counterrevolutionary movements in the countryside, and even the divisions within the Assembly itself. Brissot recognized that there was very little concrete proof of this plot. But it was the essence of conspiracies to be secret and impenetrable: "they leave no written records." The plotters had hidden their heinous activities behind a mask of pro-revolutionary pronouncements, and if one waited to uncover "legal proof" it might be too late. For the most part, one could only rely on a kind of deductive logic based on signs, unusual coincidences, and rumor.[1]

To what extent this "Austrian Committee" ever existed is difficult to know. Brissot was not above demagoguery, and in the previous months he had proposed several different and sometimes contradictory conspiracy theories.[2] But whatever

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[1] See *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860, recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des chambres françaises: Première série (1787–1799)*, Jérôme Mavidal, *et al.*, eds., 99 vols. (Paris, 1867–1995), 44: 33–43 (hereafter, *AP*). See also Michael Hochedlinger, "'La cause de tous les maux de la France': Die 'Austrophobie' im revolutionären Frankreich und der Sturz des Königstums, 1789–1792," *Francia: Forschungen zur westeuropäischen Geschichte* 24, no. 2 (1997): 73–120; and Thomas E. Kaiser, "Who's Afraid of Marie-Antoinette? Diplomacy, Austrophobia, and the Queen," *French History*, forthcoming.

[2] The accusations were also well timed to divert attention from the "Brissotins," who controlled the ministry and who had led the nation into its frustrating war situation. See especially H. A. Goetz-Bernstein, *La diplomatie de la Gironde: Jacques-Pierre Brissot* (Paris, 1912), 49, 57–58, 74–79. Pierre-Victor Malouet and A. F. Bertrand de Moleville, two supposed participants in the "Committee," both avowed that it never existed: Antoine-François Bertrand de Moleville, *Histoire de la Révolution de France pendant les dernières années du règne de Louis XVI*, 10 vols. (Paris, 1801–02), 8: 8–9, 36–37. Goetz-Bernstein thought that it did exist as a small coterie around the Habsburg queen, Marie-Antoinette, who regularly sent French war plans to the Austrian court: Goetz-Bernstein, 215–17.

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the reality of the "grand conspiracy" set out by Brissot and Gensonné, it is clear that a large number of their fellow deputies believed it was real. There was a long stunned silence after the two men had spoken. Individual members soon wrote home of the fear and uncertainty generated by the speeches.[3] A few days later, as the representatives continued to debate the accusations, a veritable panic swept through the hall. Word spread rapidly that a plot was about to break to spirit away the king and destroy the Assembly. The deputies went into permanent session, and Paris itself was placed on a war footing, patrolled continually, and illuminated throughout the night. The ultra-radical *sans-culotte* women and men, armed with pikes and "diverse aggressive instruments," were allowed to parade through the Assembly's hall, beating drums and singing revolutionary songs.[4]

Indeed, a consuming fear of the presence of conspiracy, of a small group of perpetrators or even a single master conspirator, willfully seeking to destroy the revolution and the revolutionaries through secret action, beset much of France's political elite between the spring of 1792 and the summer of 1794. During this period, over 90 percent of judicially ordered executions were against individuals accused of various forms of sedition or collusion with enemies of the republic.[5] An obsession with plots was clearly part and parcel of the political culture of the Reign of Terror.

The conspiracy fears of the French Revolution are all the more fascinating in that similar reactions have been associated with other revolutionary episodes in world history. Thucydides' grim description of the Hellenic world during the Peloponnesian War is well known: "When troubles had once begun in the cities, those who followed carried the revolutionary spirit further and further . . . He who succeeded in a plot was deemed knowing, but a still greater master in craft was he who detected one."[6] In the period of the American Revolution, as Bernard Bailyn persuasively demonstrated, large numbers of colonists were convinced that the British government or its ministers were engaged in a vast, secret and concerted conspiracy to pervert their liberty.[7] So, too, the Russians after 1917 experienced waves of conspiracy fears at various moments, from the Bolshevik seizure of power through the Stalinist dictatorship. After the attempted assassination of V. I. Lenin in August 1918, Soviet newspapers and government proclamations abounded in revelations of "endless plots perpetrated by counterrevolutionaries and Right Socialist revolutionaries," and of the "huge conspiracy" of the Allied powers and a continually shifting cohort of political and class enemies.[8] During the Stalinist

[3] See, for example, the letters of Antoine Rabusson-Lamothe, "Lettres sur l'Assemblée législative," Francisque Mège, ed., *Mémoires de l'Académie des sciences, belles-lettres et arts de Clermont-Ferrand* 11 (1869): 346–47, 349–50; of Sylvain Codet: Archives départementales de l'Ille-et-Vilaine, L 294 (2), May 30 (written "April 30" by error); of Georges Couthon, *Correspondance de Georges Couthon*, Francisque Mège, ed. (Paris, 1872), 143, 146–47; and of Blaise Cavellier and Romain-Nicolas Malassis: Archives Communales de Brest, Series D, uncatalogued, May 26.

[4] *AP*, 44: 189–96, 274.

[5] Donald Greer, *The Incidence of the Terror during the French Revolution: A Statistical Interpretation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935), 81. Compare Mona Ozouf, "'Jacobins': Fortune et infortune d'un mot," in *L'école de la France: Essais sur la Révolution, l'utopie et l'enseignement* (Paris, 1984), 82.

[6] *Thucydides*, Benjamin Jowett, trans., 2d edn., 2 vols. (Oxford, 1900), 1: 242.

[7] Bernard A. Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), chaps. 3–4.

[8] William Henry Chamberlin, *The Russian Revolution, 1917–1921*, 2 vols. (New York, 1935), 2:

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purges, plot theories were invoked both by those ordering arrests and by those who were arrested and who struggled to understand the reason for such unjust accusations.[9] The Cultural Revolution in China seems also to have arisen in part from Mao Zedong's suspicions of threats to his power, and the movement soon engendered widespread fears of insidious "bourgeois reactionaries" and foreign enemies plotting to sabotage the revolution and perhaps to launch a white terror. As the Cultural Revolution waned, all the evils of that chaotic episode were attributed to the nefarious Gang of Four conspiring for their own hold on power.[10]

A comparative study of conspiracy obsessions in these various revolutions would be extremely difficult in the present state of our knowledge. It would require a thorough examination of the nature and extent of conspiracy beliefs in the vastly different cultural and political contexts of the countries involved. It would also require an evaluation of the presence or absence of real conspiracies and of the possible promotion of such fears by manipulative leaders. But it seems clear that in a time of revolution substantial numbers of people commonly come to believe in the reality of great webs of secret concerted action perpetrated by small groups of conspirators, threatening their lives and their political goals. It also seems clear that in the French, Russian, and Chinese revolutions, obsessive fears of this kind led directly to the deaths of many thousands of people. It would thus seem appropriate to explore more carefully the themes and variations of conspiracy obsessions in one of those revolutions.

In most of the older historical treatments of the French Revolution, the preoccupation with plots was little emphasized and was often ignored altogether. If mentioned at all, it was usually attributed to the panic fears of the Parisian masses, to the activities of real enemy agents, and above all to the war that pitted France against most of Europe in a life or death struggle to preserve the ideals of 1789.[11] But the recent interest in the language of the revolution has brought the whole issue to the fore. Several authors have argued that this peculiar habit of thought was

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66–69, 77–78, 344; also Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* (London, 1996), 629, 642.

[9] F. Beck and W. Godin, *The Russian Purge and the Extraction of Confession* (New York, 1951), esp. 221–25; also Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times; Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, 1999), 190–217. Reiterated accusations of foreign conspiracy were also voiced in the Soviet Union during the great war scare of 1927: Jon Jacobson, *When the Soviet Union Entered World Politics* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994), 216–24, 264–67.

[10] Tai Sung An, *Mao Tse-Tung's Cultural Revolution* (Indianapolis, 1972), 1–4; Thomas W. Robinson, ed., *The Cultural Revolution in China* (Berkeley, Calif., 1971), esp. 51, 95–96. It may be, however, that in the Chinese Cultural Revolution opposition was perceived to arise less from plots and conspiracies than from class and the class struggle in general: see, for example, Hong Yung Lee, *Politics of the Chinese Cultural Revolution: A Case Study* (Berkeley, 1978), 41–63.

[11] For example, Alphonse Aulard, *Histoire politique de la Révolution française*, 5th edn. (Paris, 1913), esp. 357–66; Albert Mathiez, *La Révolution française*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1922), 3: chap. 8; Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York, 1962–64), 2: 64–76. Crane Brinton never mentions the issue in either *The Jacobins* (New York, 1930) or *The Anatomy of Revolution*, rev. edn. (New York, 1952). Robert R. Palmer is more probing, but he devotes only a paragraph to the question: *Twelve Who Ruled* (Princeton, N.J., 1941), 64. Among nineteenth-century historians, see especially Edgar Quinet, *La révolution*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1865), 1: 187–89. The only book I have found entirely devoted to the issue is Jacques Duhamel, *Essai du rôle des éléments paranoïaques dans la génèse des idées révolutionnaires* (Paris, 1929), but it is poorly documented and disappointing. On the related question of denunciations, see Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, eds., *Accusatory Practices: Denunciation in Modern European History, 1789–1989* (Chicago, 1996).

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fundamental not only to the uneducated masses but to the revolutionary elites as well, and that it characterized the mentality and discourse of the leadership from the onset of events. In a particularly influential book, François Furet argued that "the idea of plot in revolutionary ideology . . . was truly a central and polymorphous notion that served as a reference point for organizing and interpreting action. It was the notion that mobilized men's convictions and beliefs, and made it possible at every point to elaborate an interpretation and justification of what had happened."[12] Lynn Hunt has asserted much the same position: "the obsession with conspiracy became the central organizing principle of French revolutionary rhetoric. The narrative of Revolution was dominated by plots."[13]

Moreover, for both of these historians, the conspiratorial mode of explanation was linked to the political culture of the French elites on the eve of the revolution. Furet laid particular stress on the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of popular sovereignty as elucidated in *The Social Contract* (1762). It was the revolutionaries' belief in a single, indivisible "general will" that led them to conclude that all opposition or dissent was criminal and "counterrevolutionary," and that brought them to stipulate the existence of conspiracy—for what other explanation could there be for popular opposition to the "general will"? In this sense, the revolutionaries were following a kind of "Hegelian dialectic"; they "invented a single, indivisible, pervasive enemy and imagined a death struggle with this opposite, whose supposed power and coherence vastly exaggerated the tangible evidence."[14] For in Furet's view, the plots were largely illusory, "the figment of a frenzied preoccupation with power."[15] Hunt's interpretation was more complex. Comparing the French situation to that in eighteenth-century England and the nascent United States, she stressed a French lack of familiarity with "politics" before the revolution, as well as the absence of "sacred texts"—like the American Constitution—on which to rely. But she also placed a considerable emphasis on the force of ideas: on a Rousseauist preoccupation with the general will and with transparency and authenticity, all of which seemed to make any kind of factional politics "synonymous with conspiracy."[16]

The suggestions of Furet and Hunt are intriguing and provocative. They are also self-consciously speculative and subsidiary to the broader interpretations of revolutionary culture developed by these authors. But when in fact did this peculiar obsession begin, how did it evolve over time, and how important to its inception was the dialectic of ideas? Can the revolutionaries themselves give us any indication of

[12] François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1981), 53. See also Furet's article "The Terror," in Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), esp. 137–38.

[13] Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Calif., 1984), 39.

[14] Colin Lucas, "The Theory and Practice of Denunciation in the French Revolution," in Fitzpatrick and Gellately, *Accusatory Practices*, 23. Lucas characterizes Furet's point of view, without subscribing to it himself.

[15] Furet, *Interpreting the Revolution*, 54.

[16] Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class*, 39–44. Among other historians supporting positions similar to those of Furet and Hunt, see Ozouf, "'Jacobin,'" 82; Norman Hampson, *Prelude to Terror: The Constituent Assembly and the Failure of Consensus* (Oxford, 1988), 61–62; G. T. Cubitt, "Denouncing Conspiracy in the French Revolution," *Renaissance and Modern Studies* 33 (1989): 145–46; Lucien Jaume, *Le discours Jacobin et la démocratie* (Paris, 1989), esp. part 2, chap. 2; and Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 241–47.

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the birth of this particular turn of mind? The present essay seeks to explore empirically the origins and development of the conspiracy obsession during the early years of the French Revolution and thus to offer possible points of reference for future comparative studies of other revolutions. It will focus, in particular, on the psychology of conspiratorial fears among the French revolutionary elites, as a complement to the better known history of such fears among the popular classes.[17] After a rapid overview of conspiracy beliefs before 1789, it will examine the inception and evolution of such beliefs through the "First Terror" of the summer of 1792 for a key leadership group: the deputies of the Constituent and the Legislative Assemblies.[18]

WE NOW KNOW THAT in the early modern era conspiratorial beliefs were by no means confined to revolutionary periods alone. In a remarkable article written in 1982, Gordon Wood applied the concept of a "paranoid style of politics"—first developed by Richard Hofstadter for nineteenth and twentieth-century America—to the general "Anglo-American world" during much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[19] Throughout this region, according to Wood, "conspiratorial interpretations . . . became a major means by which educated men in the early modern period ordered and gave meaning to their political world." "Everywhere people sensed designs within designs, cabals within cabals," assuming the existence of "a world of autonomous, freely acting individuals who were capable of directly and deliberately bringing about events through their decisions and actions." Indeed, "there was scarcely a major figure who did not tend to explain political events in these terms."[20]

Wood made very little attempt to apply his interpretation to the European continent. But a preliminary investigation of the French case would suggest that in the eighteenth century there were both similarities and differences. Among the masses of the common people in France, historians have found ample evidence of a susceptibility to conspiracy interpretations. Steven Kaplan has documented a pervasive popular belief in "famine plots," which "was built into the structure of the collective mentality" and in which a wide assortment of villains—depending on circumstances—were thought to conspire to starve the population.[21] Arlette Farge

[17] See esp. Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France*, Joan White, trans. (New York, 1973); George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1959); and Albert Soboul, *The Sans-Culottes*, Remy Inglis Hall, trans. (Garden City, N.Y., 1972).

[18] For an overview of the "First Terror," which includes the August 10 storming of the Tuileries Palace and the September Massacres, see Georges Lefebvre: *La Révolution française: La première terreur* (Paris, 1952).

[19] Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 39 (1982): 401–41; Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* (New York, 1965), 3–40. See also Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, chaps. 3–4; and David Brion Davis, ed., *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971).

[20] Wood, "Conspiracy," 407, 409, 411. Wood also links the "paranoid style" to the wide assumption among Anglo-American elites of deceit and dissembling within political circles.

[21] Steven L. Kaplan, *The Famine Plot Persuasion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia, 1982), 1–2, 62. Kaplan argues that certain elements of the educated elites might also adhere to the "famine plot persuasion."

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and Jacques Revel have revealed the vulnerability of the Parisian popular classes to plot explanations in the mid-eighteenth century, when thousands could accept rumors that royal officials were abducting local children. The power of popular conspiratorial fears on the eve of the revolution has been explored by Georges Lefebvre in his pioneering study of the Great Fear.[22] In a world where the undisclosed actions of royal, seigneurial, and ecclesiastical authorities so dominated the lives of the common people, such fears were not necessarily irrational. In fact, throughout much of history, the pervasive explanatory model for understanding events assumed the willed interventions of individual beings, sometimes human, more commonly supernatural—whether gods, saints, demons, or the diverse supernatural beings of popular folklore. The only viable alternative model, one based on chaos or blind chance, probably struck most people as singularly frightening and unacceptable. At other times and in other situations, Jews and Protestants and witches in league with the devil have been invoked to explain various kinds of evil done to individuals, their families, and their communities.[23]

In certain situations, some members of the French educated elites might also subscribe to plot interpretations. A search for the word "conspiracy" in a broad sample of works published between 1700 and 1789—and available for analysis through the ARTFL database[24]—reveals a handful of writers who believed in the existence of various contemporary conspiracies.[25] In the early and mid-eighteenth century, the most important accusations of this kind were leveled at the Society of Jesus. Voltaire, in particular, long portrayed the Jesuits as the embodiment of the power-grubbing clergy who were such an anathema to the writers of the Enlightenment—an image eagerly reinforced by certain Jansenist authors.[26] But with the suppression of the Jesuits in France in the mid-1760s, such accusations abruptly disappeared. At the end of the Old Regime, the most vigorous conspiratorial allegations were registered by the ex-Jesuit abbé Augustin Barruel in a work implicitly linking the demise of his former order to a plot of the philosophes.[27] Barruel joined forces with the journalist Elie Fréron and the abbé Thomas-Marie Royou in the *Année littéraire*, a review that relentlessly indicted the philosophes, the Freemasons, and the Protestants for secretly plotting the destruction of both

[22] Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *The Vanishing Children of Paris*, Claudia Mieville, trans. (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), esp. chap. 4; Lefebvre, *Great Fear*, esp. part 2.

[23] See, for example, Jean Delumeau, *La peur en Occident, XIVe–XVIIIe siècles: Une cité assiégée* (Paris, 1978); and René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, Yvonne Freccero, trans. (Baltimore, 1986).

[24] "American and French Research on the Treasury of the French Language" (ARTFL), a database housed at the University of Chicago and accessible through the World Wide Web: http://humanities.uchicago.edu/ARTFL/. The sample contained 434 works published during this period. The analysis is based on the occurrence of the word *conspiration* (singular or plural). The word appeared 258 times, in about one in seven (62) of the sample works, written by 37 different authors.

[25] Thirteen of the 258 occurrences appeared to entail a belief in the existence of contemporary conspiracies. These were used in the texts of five different authors. One of the latter was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who expressed his conviction that there was a general conspiracy of philosophes aligned against him personally.

[26] Voltaire, *Essai sur l'histoire générale* (Geneva, 1756), 143, 337; E. J. F. Barbier, *Chronique de la Régence, Tome 7* (1761; Paris, 1866), 410. In 1757, the Jansenist and Gallican press even insinuated that the Jesuits had supported Robert-François Damiens' assassination attempt against Louis XV: Dale Van Kley, *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Ancien Régime, 1750–1770* (Princeton, N.J., 1984), 65–80. See also Geoffrey Cubitt, *The Jesuit Myth: Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1993).

[27] Augustin Barruel, *Les Helviennes, ou Lettres provinciales philosophiques* (Amsterdam, 1781).

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religion and the monarchy. Such writings directly prefigured the conservative interpretation of the revolution developed in Royou's newspaper *L'ami du roi* and in Barruel's later conspiratorial "history" of Jacobinism.[28]

Yet beliefs of this kind would seem to have been the exception among eighteenth-century French writers. The vast majority of authors searched in the ARTFL database never used the word "conspiracy" at all, and those who did referred primarily to events in the historical past.[29] There were accounts of plots and intrigues from Greek and Roman history—with the inevitable stories of the Roman politicians Catiline and Brutus—as well as from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Wars of Religion. Episodes specific to French history were also mentioned: the Conspiracy of Amboise in 1560, the Saint-Bartholomew's Day massacre of Huguenots in 1572, and the marquis de Cinq-Mars' conspiracy against Cardinal Richelieu in 1642 were among the most common. Clearly, the fact of past conspiracies persisted in the collective memory of French educated elites.[30] Yet very few imagined—or at least wrote about—such machinations in their own day and age. Montesquieu even specifically announced that conspiracies were far more unlikely in his contemporary world than in Greek and Roman times, a reality he attributed to the wide distribution of information through newspapers, journals, and the public mail system.[31]

Indeed, by the later eighteenth century, new explanatory models for the analysis of political and economic events were becoming available to the educated classes, models that did not require the willed maneuvering of individuals. Mechanistic explanations of the world, born of Cartesian rationalism and the new astronomical interpretations based on scientific laws and natural causes—as popularized by Voltaire and others—had a profound impact not only on the elites' religious views but on their general understanding of causation as well. Applying such perspectives to human affairs, eighteenth-century French thinkers made important advances in identifying more abstract political and economic processes at work in the world. Such was the case with Montesquieu's analysis of political processes in the "spirit of the laws," for example, or with the physiocrats' examination of the general circulation of wealth and the laws of market forces—anticipating Adam Smith's "hidden hand." Such also, in a sense, was Rousseau's concept of the "general will," predicated on the existence of a collective community of interest active in society.[32]

[28] Amos Hofman, "The Origins of the Theory of the Philosophe Conspiracy," *French History* 2 (1988): 152–72. See also J. M. Roberts, *The Mythology of the Secret Societies* (London, 1972), 140–41; Darrin M. McMahon, "The Counter-Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France," *Past and Present* 159 (May 1998): 77–112; and Barruel's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, 4 vols. (London, 1797–98).

[29] A total of 182 (71 percent) of the 258 occurrences referred to the historical past. In most of the remaining cases, the word was used metaphorically or in a literary context—as in the plots of plays or novels. See, for example, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Du théâtre* (Paris, 1773), 49.

[30] See also Yves-Marie Bercé and Elena Fasano Guarini, eds., *Complots et conjurations dans l'Europe moderne* (Rome, 1996), 1–5 (Bercé's introduction). Compare John D. Woodbridge, *Revolt in Prerevolutionary France: The Prince de Conti's Conspiracy against Louis XV, 1755–1757* (Princeton, N.J., 1995).

[31] *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence*, Gonzague Truc, ed. (1748; Paris, 1967), 122–23.

[32] Gordon Wood identifies similar trends in the Anglo-American world, linking them above all to writers of the Scottish Enlightenment. But he feels that they had a broad effect on the population only after the outbreak of the French Revolution: Wood, "Conspiracy," 430–32.

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If a few eighteenth-century French elites continued to subscribe to conspiracy interpretations of the political events of their day, such beliefs were not widespread, and were probably far less central to the thinking of the educated classes than they were in the Anglo-American world. The writings produced during two major political events at the end of the Old Regime, the Maupeou crisis of the early 1770s and the "pre-revolution" of 1787–1789, further substantiate this conclusion. In the long struggle between Chancellor René-Nicolas de Maupeou on the one hand and the Parlement of Paris and its liberal "patriot party" supporters on the other, the latter seem almost never to have resorted to plot theories to explain events. Although one Jansenist jurist tried to persuade his colleagues that the affair had been engineered by the Jesuits and that Maupeou was merely their pawn, virtually no one accepted the idea.[33] A rapid reading of the patriot brochure literature of the period reveals no mention of the words "plot" or "conspiracy." If the chancellor's motives were alluded to at all, he was usually portrayed as acting alone, moved primarily by personal ambition. Most commentators viewed the affair in more abstract institutional terms, as a "constitutional" struggle in which "tyranny" and "despotism" were opposed by those defending liberty, a government of laws, and the "constitution" of the "nation."[34]

Throughout the prerevolutionary period, from the winter of 1787 to the spring of 1789, conspiratorial fears again remained remarkably rare, virtually nonexistent among proto-liberal patriots—in sharp contrast to the position of the proto-conservatives in the Fréron-Barruel group. In the pamphlet literature written during this period by thirty-two future Third Estate deputies, only one individual, the future Jacobin leader Maximilien Robespierre, gave any indication of a paranoid style. All the other writings were marked, rather, by a tone of optimism and good will. Most revealed an almost boundless praise for the king. And while they were highly critical of the nobility, many claimed to be confident that the nobles could overcome their "prejudices" and be won over to the patriot cause through reason and persuasion.[35] Much the same tone was to be found in the "general" *cahiers de doléances* drawn up by the urban elites in early 1789. While there were numerous demands for ministerial accountability and public knowledge of government finances, conspiratorial notions and language were largely absent.[36]

The reasons for the relative absence of conspiracy fears in French political

[33] The Jansenist Robert de Saint-Vincent: Durand Echeverria, *The Maupeou Revolution, A Study in the History of Libertarianism: France, 1770–1774* (Baton Rouge, La., 1985), 45.

[34] See, for example, Guy-Jean-Baptiste Target, *Lettres d'un homme à un autre homme sur les affaires du temps* (n.p., [1771]). I have examined the pamphlets preserved in series Lb38 and Lb39 of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, as listed in the *Catalogue de l'histoire de France*. See also Shanti Singham, "'A Conspiracy of Twenty Million Frenchmen': Public Opinion, Patriotism, and the Assault on Absolutism during the Maupeou Years, 1770–1775" (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 1991), 21–23, 99–100; and "The *Correspondance secrète*: Forging Patriotic Public Opinion during the Maupeou Years," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 18, no. 2 (1992): 65–100; and Dale Van Kley, "The Religious Origins of the Patriot and Ministerial Parties in Pre-Revolutionary France: Controversy over the Chancellor's Constitutional Coup, 1771–1775," *Historical Reflections*, same issue, 17–63.

[35] On this sample of pamphlet literature, see Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789–1790)* (Princeton, N.J., 1996), 101. Robespierre warned of the insidious "plotting of the enemies of the people" in the Estates of Artois: *A la nation artésienne, sur la nécessité de réformer les Etats d'Artois* (n.p., 1788), 4, 83. See also Maximilien Robespierre, *Les ennemis de la patrie démasqués* (Arras, 1789).

[36] Conclusion based on an extensive reading of the "general cahiers," those drawn up at the final

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culture, by comparison with the English-speaking world, are undoubtedly complex and cannot be developed here. Perhaps one might look to the impact of Protestantism in the Anglo-American sphere—with its emphasis on the pervasiveness of evil and the deceptive wiles of Satan—and to the general weakness of such a tradition in France. One might also emphasize the very different political traditions in France and Anglo-America. Gordon Wood stressed the increasing complexity and impersonal character of politics in the Augustan Age, where a far greater number of people were involved in decision making than ever before: "The more people became strangers to one another and the less they knew of one another's hearts, the more suspicious and mistrustful they became, ready as never before in Western history to see deceit and deception at work."[37] Compared to the more diffuse nature of political authority and decision making in Britain and America—through the presence of representative bodies and the strength of regional power—the lines of authority in the French polity became increasingly centralized and clarified with the growth of absolutism and a strong bureaucracy. Indeed, Yves-Marie Bercé would specifically associate the decline of a conspiratorial culture in France in the seventeenth century to the consolidation of the monarchy.[38] But in any case, and whatever the reason, a paranoid style was little in evidence among the future patriot leadership class on the eve of the French Revolution.

A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS of the conspiracy obsession among the elites during the revolutionary period itself would need to be based on a wide diversity of documents, including newspapers, brochures, and speeches within the various clubs and assemblies, both in Paris and the provinces. Here, in the manner of a first approach, I will concentrate on records left by the deputies to the first two revolutionary assemblies, from the early days of the revolution through the period of the First Terror. In this, I will make use of three sets of sources: a compilation of the proceedings of the assemblies,[39] the published records of the Paris Jacobin Club,[40] and the published or manuscript letters of a sample of fourteen deputies or delegations of deputies for whom more or less continuous series of correspondence are preserved.[41] Even though the number of deputies represented in the latter

stage of the electoral process for the Estates General and intended to be sent with the deputies directly to Versailles.

[37] Wood, "Conspiracy," 410. Wood also linked these trends with the peculiar forms of moral philosophy that arose in the Anglo-American Enlightenment and that sought to find a place for free will in a mechanistic causal universe by identifying "causes in human affairs with the motives, mind, or will of individuals"; p. 416. It is difficult to discern equivalent trends in the French Enlightenment.

[38] Bercé and Guarini, *Complots et conjurations*, 4–5.

[39] As based on the *AP*. I examined selected debates on topics that seemed most likely to lend themselves to conspiratorial interpretations, such as those dealing with popular unrest, emigrants, refractory clergy, international threats, and war. These were identified, first, from the observations of the deputies in their correspondence: see below note 41; and, second, from the cumulative indexes to the *AP*: vol. 34 (the Constituent Assembly) and vol. 51 (the Legislative Assembly).

[40] F.-A. Aulard, ed., *La Société des Jacobins: Recueil de documents pour l'histoire du club des Jacobins de Paris*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1889–97). Unfortunately, Aulard found only sketchy records for the first months of the club's existence. Initially, the Jacobins consisted exclusively of National Assembly deputies. Over time, increasing numbers of non-deputies were admitted.

[41] I have examined a total of 1,460 letters for seven deputies written during the Constituent Assembly

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sample is small, their correspondence totals close to two thousand letters, dating from May 1789 through September 1792. The sample includes a wide variation of age groups, occupations, and geographic origins, and a full range of political affiliations.[42] The letters from these deputies allow a systematic enumeration of specific indications of conspiracy belief in the reflections individuals shared with their families and friends back home.[43]

On the basis of these letters and the published debates, it would seem clear that the paucity of a rhetoric of conspiracy among the patriot elites—observed for the prerevolutionary period—persisted through the first weeks of the Estates General

(about 50 per month for the twenty-nine-month duration) and 443 for seven deputies or delegations of deputies written during the first ten months of the Legislative Assembly (about 44 per month for ten months). These specific sets of correspondence were chosen as being among the most continuous and complete series available for the respective bodies. Unfortunately, relatively few letters seem to be preserved for August and September 1792, presumably because of the general chaos of the period. Sources for the Constituent Assembly: François-René-Pierre Ménard de La Groye, *Correspondance (1789–1791)*, Florence Mirouse, ed. (Le Mans, 1989); Pierre-François and Marie-Angélique Lepoutre, *Député-paysan et fermière de Flandre en 1789: La correspondance des Lepoutre*, Jean-Pierre Jessenne and Edna Hindie Lemay, eds. (Lille, 1998); Claude Gantheret, ms. letters to Pierre Leflaive: private collection of Françoise Misserey, Dijon; Antoine Durand, ms. journal: Archives Episcopales de Cahors, carton 5–56, and ms. letters to the municipality of Cahors: Archives Municipales de Cahors, uncatalogued box; Michel-René Maupetit, "Lettres (1789–91)," Quéruau-Lamérie, ed., *Bulletin de la Commission historique et archéologique de la Mayenne*, 2ème sér., vols. 17–23 (1901–07); Jean-François Gaultier de Biauzat, *Gaultier de Biauzat, député du Tiers état aux Etats généraux de 1789: Sa vie et sa correspondance*, Francisque Mège, ed., 2 vols. (Clermont-Ferrand, 1890), and Bibliothèque Municipale de Clermont-Ferrand, mss. 788–89; and Jean-André Périsse Du Luc, ms. letters to Jean-Baptiste Willermoz: Bibliothèque Municipale de Lyon, ms. F.G. 5430. Sources for the Legislative Assembly: Rabusson-Lamothe, "Lettres"; François-Yves Roubaud, "Lettres de François-Yves Roubaud," Edmond Poupé, ed., *Bulletin de la Société d'études scientifiques et archéologiques de Draguignan* 36 (1926–27): 3–218; Couthon, *Correspondance*; Pierre Dubreuil-Chambardel, *Lettres parisiennes d'un révolutionnaire poitevin*, Marie-Luce Llorca, ed. (Tours, 1994); Jean-Baptiste-Annibal Aubert-Dubayet, "Aubert-Dubayet, législateur (1791–1792)," F. Vermale, ed., *Bulletin de l'Académie delphinale*, 6e série, 9–10 (1938–39): 115–41; D. Tempier, ed., "Correspondance des députés des Côtes-du-Nord à l'Assemblée législative" (written by five different deputies, although half were penned by Jean-Louis Bagot), *Société d'émulation des Côtes-du-Nord, Bulletins et mémoires* 28 (1890): 61–169; and ms. letters of the Legislative deputies of Ille-et-Vilaine (six different deputies, although two—Sylvain Codet and François-Alexandre Tardiveau—wrote well over half of them): Archives Départementales de l'Ille-et-Vilaine, L 294. On the use of deputy letters as a source, see Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 8–13.

[42] The sample of Constituent deputies averaged 49.7 years of age in 1789, compared to 46.4 for the body as a whole; while the Legislative deputies averaged 38.6 compared to 38.4 for the whole. There were four lawyers, three judges, three wealthy farmers, two doctors, a bookseller, and a former military officer. Seven came from north of the Loire, seven from south of the Loire, residing in communities that included large towns (Lyons), medium-sized towns (Le Mans, Clermont-Ferrand [three], Grenoble, Rennes, Saint-Brieuc, Mayenne, and Grasse), and small towns or villages (Gourdon, Linselle, Bourgignon, and Avon). A total of five are known to have been Jacobins, four were probably Feuillants, and five were apparently nonaligned. Two of the deputies (the Constituent deputy Gaultier and the Legislative deputy Couthon) were major players in their assemblies, while most of the others were minor players or back-benchers. Note that for the purpose of these statistics I have used only the deputies from Ille-et-Vilaine and Côtes-du-Nord who largely dominated their delegation's correspondence: respectively, Codet and Bagot.

[43] I have enumerated all occurrences of a stated belief in the existence of plots or conspiracies (*conspirations, complots, intrigues, conjurations, manoeuvres, cabales, trames, brigues*, etc.). Overall, such references occurred in 4 percent of the Constituent deputies' letters and 14 percent of the Legislative deputies' letters. I have excluded those deputy reports of conspiracy beliefs held by others that are rejected as unsubstantiated or of dubious authenticity. An earlier overview of conspiracy interpretations in deputy correspondence was based on an impressionistic assessment of selected letters of the Constituent deputies only: see Timothy Tackett, "The Constituent Assembly and the Terror," in Keith Baker, ed., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, Vol. 4, *The Terror* (Oxford, 1994), 46–49.

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and the National Assembly. There is virtually no such language in deputy correspondence during the major revolutionary developments from early May through late June 1789. In their letters as in their speeches, most of the Third Estate deputies maintained a remarkably upbeat tone and conveyed their continued optimism that they could rely on the support of the king. Significantly, in the debates over the problem of grain shortages, debates that began on June 19 immediately after the creation of the National Assembly, the vast majority of the speakers gave no credence to the "famine plot persuasion." While they recognized the existence of such fears among the popular classes, they took care to distinguish their own enlightened position from the beliefs of "the multitude." The unidentified speaker from Bordeaux who moved for the creation of a Subsistence Committee carefully specified that the shortage came from natural causes, not from the decisions and actions of individuals: "It would be senseless," he announced, "to attribute [the food shortage] to fraudulent hoarding by individuals." "The hail storms and the miserable harvest [of 1788] are the sole causes."[44] Indeed, the only substantial evidence of a paranoid style in the early Estates General was among certain members of the clergy and nobility. Partly as a tactic for winning over moderate parish priests and noblemen to their position, bishops and conservative aristocrats accused the Third Estate of secretly intriguing to destroy both religion and the nobility. The conservative clergy, in particular, relied on some of the themes developed by the Fréron-Barruel group before the revolution.[45] Yet, if a "Hegelian dialectic" of ideas ever existed among the Third Estate deputies, pushing them toward an obsession with conspiracy, there is no evidence of its presence during the first weeks of the revolution.

When a language of conspiracy did appear in the speeches and letters of the patriot deputies, it arose not as "the figment of a frenzied preoccupation with power"—as Furet has proposed—but from fears engendered by the very real plots hatched among elements of the royal government in late June and early July. The massing of mercenary troops around Paris and Versailles and the dismissal of the liberal minister Jacques Necker were part of an initially secret plan improvised by the king's conservative advisers to disband or seize control of the National Assembly by force.[46] François-René-Pierre Ménard de La Groye first mentioned rumors of troop concentrations and "odious plots" on the last day of June, and Comte Honoré-Gabriel de Mirabeau made a dramatic warning to the Assembly one week later.[47] But in most cases, it was only after the fall of the Bastille and in direct reference to a royalist plan whose full extent could only be surmised—and easily exaggerated—that the fear of conspiracy penetrated the correspondence of the deputies. Looking back on the previous days, Jean-François Gaultier de Biauzat believed there had been an aristocratic plot for "the horrible assassination" of the deputies; and the Burgundy wine merchant Claude Gantheret reported the widely held conviction that the king's emigrant brother Charles, Comte d'Artois, was

[44] *AP*, 8: 135–37. See also the report by Necker on July 4 and the bureau reports on July 6, 1789: *AP*, 8: 183, 194–98. Compare, however, the speech by Barère: *AP*, 8: 137.

[45] Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 131–32, 135–36.

[46] Pierre Caron, "La tentative de contrerévolution de juin-juillet 1789," *Revue d'histoire moderne* 7 (1906–07): 5–34, 649–78.

[47] Ménard, *Correspondance*, 55. Mirabeau's speech was on July 8.

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organizing a general invasion of the country and a new Saint-Bartholomew's Day Massacre.[48] Plot theories continued rampant during the rural panic of the Great Fear in the summer of 1789. It was in the midst of the alarms at the end of July that the deputies created the revolution's first surveillance committee, the Committee on Research. None of the speakers in the debate surrounding this creation doubted the existence of a counterrevolutionary plot earlier in the month. Terrified by an apparently simultaneous outbreak of rural violence everywhere in the country—violence that would be confirmed by Georges Lefebvre as a series of chain-reaction panics only in the twentieth century[49]—many came to the conclusion that a giant conspiracy must have created the Great Fear as well. "There can be no doubt," announced Adrien Duport to the Assembly, "that plots are being organized against the state." Even speakers on the moderate Monarchien right did not question the reality of conspiracy, although they would have preferred to use regular judicial procedures to carry out an investigation.[50]

Over the next two years, the fear of conspiracy never entirely disappeared from the Assembly. (See graph.) But, as attested by the deputies' speeches and correspondence, there were numerous ups and downs in the incidence of such fears, often evolving in response to real and proven instances of counterrevolutionary conspiracies—such as the counterrevolutionary gathering of Catholic national guardsmen at Jalès in August 1790 or the conspiracy of Lyons in December of that year. Heightened suspicions were also generated by the major political and economic protest demonstration by women marching on Versailles in October 1789, which most deputies were at a loss to explain by anything other than a plot; and by a confrontation between England and Spain that raised the possibility of French involvement in a war—a war for which the deputies felt desperately unprepared, both militarily and psychologically. Other conspiracy accusations appeared at intervals through the winter and spring of 1790–1791—linked in part to the growing barrage of threats from the emigrant leaders, whose real power and influence was difficult to assess, and, above all, to the growing popular unrest toward the revolutionary transformation of the Catholic Church in the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. All such apprehensions were invariably intensified by the existence in the Assembly itself of a solid phalanx of reactionary deputies from the First and Second Estates, overtly opposed to the revolution and on occasion secretly militating to arouse the opposition of their constituencies.[51]

Nevertheless, most deputies at the center and the moderate left of the Assembly were by no means continuously obsessed with conspiracies and were frequently quite critical of the paranoid style—especially after the panic atmosphere of the summer of 1789 had dissipated. Thus the debates on the massive peasant uprisings in Quercy and Limousin during the winter of 1789–1790 were generally calm and

[48] Gaultier, *Correspondance*, 2: 175; Gantheret, private collection, July 26. Georges Lefebvre cites a report in early June of fears among the popular classes of a conspiracy of the clergy and the nobility. But widespread fears of an "aristocratic plot" seem to have arisen only in early July and, above all, after the fall of the Bastille: Lefebvre, *Great Fear*, 59–61. Compare the explosion of plot accusations beginning in July in newspapers and brochures: Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France*, Charlotte Mandell, trans. (Stanford, Calif., 1997), 217–33.

[49] Lefebvre, *Great Fear*, pt. 3.

[50] *AP*, 8: 293–95.

[51] Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 271.

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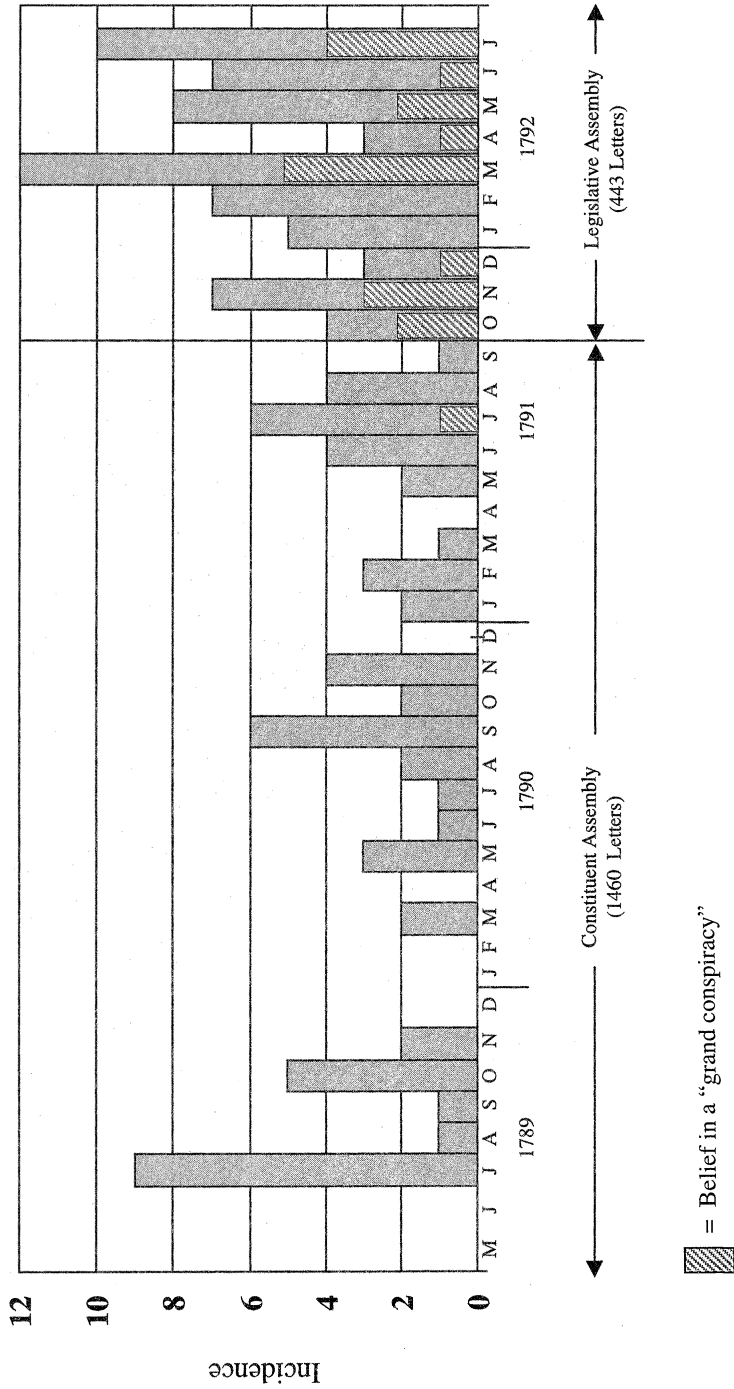
Letters Indicating a Belief in Conspiracies Written by a Sample of 14 Constituent and Legislative Deputies or Delegation of Deputies (May 1789 - July 1792)



Source: see text, note 41.

Chart prepared by M. Kanda

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analytical. No references were made in the printed debates to plots by aristocrats or foreign powers.[52] Most of the Constituent Assembly deputies whose correspondence I have examined were generally cautious in their reaction to conspiracy theories. Many were lawyers or magistrates by profession, well trained in the use of evidence and wary of accusations without proof. They took pains in their account of events to distinguish rumors of plots based on unverifiable hearsay from plots for which they believed irrefutable confirmation existed. In the summer of 1791, for instance, the Brest magistrate Laurent-François Legendre was careful to assess the real threat from the presence of foreigners in Paris, concluding that they were too few in number to represent any genuine danger, despite the contentions of certain journalists.[53] Individual deputies could be exceptionally lucid about the very idea of conspiracies. In late 1790, Gaultier reflected on the recent predictions of conspiratorial insurrections that had never materialized: "I have never really placed any credence in them, and you have seen that [such beliefs] were totally unfounded . . . Nothing can more surely arouse fears among the common people than announcements that they are in danger."[54] "Such are the anxieties of nascent liberty," wrote Antoine Durand, "that we conceive enemies everywhere plotting against us, that we give ourselves over to imagination, whether to gratify our hopes or feed our fears."[55] In the winter of 1790, those deputies who continued to be obsessed with conspiracies—a relatively small number—were viewed by their colleagues as distinctly marginal to the mainstream of Constituent Assembly thought. Such was the opinion of Adrien Duquesnoy toward Robespierre, for example, whose oratorical style—with its persistent denunciation of hidden conspirators and plots—was portrayed as demagogic and a bit ridiculous.[56]

IF FOR MOST OF THE CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY, conspiracy fears seem to have been only episodic, there was one faction that became much more closely linked to a paranoid style: the radical Jacobins, those 200 or so deputies who remained in the club in the spring of 1790 after a schism with the Society of 1789. The process by which this group came to embrace conspiracy fears is not entirely clear. The Jacobins' initial manifesto, written in February 1790 by the young radical from Dauphiné, Antoine Barnave, spoke of the members' duty of defending the constitution, but there was no specific mention of plots and conspiracies.[57] While conspiratorial concerns appear occasionally in the fragmented early records of the club, they do not seem to have become a dominant feature until late in the summer of 1790. A turning point may well have occurred in August–September 1790, in reaction to the bloody repression of soldiers in Nancy who had mutinied against their aristocratic officers, a repression led by the reactionary royalist general, François-Claude-Amour, the

[52] *AP*, 11: 652–58, 665–73, 676–82.

[53] Laurent-François Legendre, August 31, 1791, Archives Municipales de Brest, series D, uncatalogued.

[54] Gaultier de Biauzat, Bibliothèque Municipale de Clermont-Ferrand, ms. 788, December 23, 1790.

[55] Durand to his cousin, May 23, 1790, Archives Municipales de Cahors.

[56] Adrien-Cyprien Duquesnoy, *Journal d'Adrien Duquesnoy*, Robert de Crèvecoeur, ed., 2 vols. (Paris, 1894), 1: 458–59; 2: 290, 301.

[57] See Aulard, *Société des Jacobins*, especially 1: xxviii–xxxiii (*Règlement* of the Jacobins).

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marquis de Bouillé. The Nancy Affair aroused strong suspicions among both the Jacobins and lower-class Parisians that the marquis de Lafayette, who was Bouillé's brother-in-law and who had vigorously urged the Constituent Assembly to support the repression in the name of military subordination, was duplicitous and not to be trusted.[58] Fears of conspiracy among high officials continued in evidence through the fall, notably when the loyalty of several royal ministers came into question and when an emigrant plot to launch a major insurrection in the southeast was uncovered—and then detailed for the members in a report from the Jacobins' affiliate in Lyons. The intensity of the anxiety was revealed in late December, when many Jacobins came to believe that someone had planted a bomb in the basement of their building and that the newly created Club Monarchique was plotting to kill them all as part of a generalized massacre.[59]

To some extent, the radical left's obsession with conspiracies arose from a deeply held sentiment that their version of democratic egalitarianism was profoundly true and right—an ideological commitment that contrasted sharply with the pragmatism of the majority of the patriot deputies. It was only one step further to the assumption that all who disagreed with the Jacobins' positions must of necessity be fools, dupes, or conspirators. In this sense, the Jacobins' paranoid style was linked to the intensity of their convictions and not specifically to the tenets of Rousseau's philosophy. But, in part, the conspiracy obsession was tied to the radical Jacobins' identification with the common people. Already, by the autumn of 1789—at a time when most deputies were reacting in horror and outrage to the violence of the Parisians—many Jacobins were coming to idealize and glorify the urban masses as representing the true soul of the revolution and the embodiment of the democratic values for which they had become the principal spokesmen. Had the Parisians not already come to the Assembly's rescue on two separate occasions, through their insurrections of July and October? The image of "the good people" rapidly became a leitmotif in the writings of many radicals. "Ah, the good people, the good French people," wrote Ménard to his wife. "How much they have been slandered by those who said that liberty would never suit them."[60]

In their self-conscious identification with the lower classes, the radical Jacobins were all the more susceptible to the influence of urban popular culture and to the longstanding Parisian obsession with conspiracy. Such an influence could only have been intensified by the influx of non-deputies into the Jacobin Club, including significant contingents from the more popular Parisian "fraternal societies" and the Cordelier Club. The Cordeliers, in particular, were dominated by a group of journalists—such as Jean-Paul Marat, Camille Desmoulins, François Robert, and Jacques-René Hébert—who specialized in newspapers addressed to the masses and who had rapidly assumed the perspectives and voice of their audience.[61] In any case,

[58] Aulard, *Société des Jacobins*, for example, 1: 283–86, 294. Some 40,000 Parisians were said to have demonstrated near the Assembly during the debates on the Nancy Affair; Legendre, letter of September 3, 1790.

[59] Aulard, *Société des Jacobins*, 1: 324, 390, 422, 431, 437, 448.

[60] Ménard, *Correspondance*, 246. See also Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 254–55.

[61] Gérard Walter, *Histoire des Jacobins* (Paris, 1946), 53–55; Albert Mathiez, *Le Club des Cordeliers pendant la crise de Varennes* (Paris, 1910), 8–9; Isabelle Bourdin, *Les sociétés populaires à Paris pendant la Révolution* (Paris, 1937), 53, 58, 155–57, 175–76, 199.

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by 1791, the pursuit and denunciation of conspiracy had become part and parcel of the Jacobins' political culture and rhetoric, a common characteristic in the speeches and brochures emanating from members of the group. The first denunciations of the "Austrian Committee" seem to have appeared in the radical press in early 1791.[62] At almost the same time, the Jacobins adopted a formal oath to be taken by the entire membership—and by all new members as they were admitted—"to denounce, even at the risk of our lives and our fortunes, all traitors of the fatherland."[63]

For the Constituent Assembly as a whole, the single most important event in intensifying convictions of conspiracy was the king's attempted escape from Paris and his capture in the small town of Varennes in June 1791. All the deputies, indeed all the political elites throughout the country, were profoundly shocked and shaken by the experience. Once the deputies had found the monarch's handwritten statement formally denouncing most of the revolutionary transformations and affirming that his previous cooperation had been coerced and insincere, there could be no doubt that he had left of his own accord.[64] As the Assembly's various investigative committees delved into the affair, interviewing dozens of witnesses and reading confiscated documents in the royal household, it became patently clear that a comprehensive plot had been afoot for months, involving numerous participants in Paris, in the army, and among the emigrants in Germany; entailing, as well, a pattern of boldfaced deception and perjury on the part of the king—who had sworn a solemn oath to uphold the constitution in July 1790 and vowed only a few weeks earlier that he backed the revolution and would do everything in his power to promote it. In the revolutionary ethos, imbued with the ideals of transparency and authenticity, there was perhaps no greater sin than deceitfully to swear false oaths, and this is precisely what Louis had done.[65] Even though a handful of political journalists, such as Marat and Hébert, had been prophesying such a flight, the Constituent Assembly leadership had dismissed it as irresponsible ranting.[66] But now, all of these seemingly paranoid predictions had come true. Never, since the revolution began, had there been more extensive and conclusive proof of the reality of grand and coordinated conspiracy at the highest levels.

In the end, the majority of the Constituent Assembly agreed to reinstate the king—despite the bitter opposition of the radical Jacobins—and maintain the constitution, which the deputies had been drafting for over two years. Partly, it was

[62] Jack Richard Censer, *Prelude to Power: The Parisian Radical Press, 1789–1791* (Baltimore, 1976), 96–97.

[63] Walter, *Histoire des Jacobins*, 97–99; Aulard, *Société des Jacobins*, 2: 468. This oath is not mentioned in the *Règlement* of February 1790.

[64] See, for example, the letters by Lepoutre, *Correspondance*, 487; and Gantheret, private collection, June 24, 1791. See also Jean Dreyfus, "Le manifeste royal du 20 juin 1791," *La Révolution française* 54 (1908): 5–22.

[65] The conclusions here are based on an extensive reading of documents in the Archives Nationales, D XXIX bis 35–38; and C 124–31. The king and queen had been discussing the possibility of flight since the fall of 1790. On the king's self-conscious efforts to mislead and lull the revolutionaries into thinking he supported their cause, see, for example, Axel Von Fersen to Baron de Breteuil, April 2, 1791, R. M. de Klinckowström, ed., *Le comte de Fersen et la cour de France*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1877), 1: 97–98.

[66] See, for example, Marc-Alexis Vadier—a radical Jacobin and future member of the Committee of General Security—to his constituency in the *département* of Ariège, early June, Gaston Arnaud, *Histoire de la Révolution dans le département de l'Ariège, 1789–1795* (Toulouse, 1904), 241.

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a question of apprehension of the unknown and of the anarchy the patriot majority feared would result if they were to launch the nation at this late date into a regency or a republican government; partly, it was a question of inertia and of the emotional difficulty in renouncing the time and effort they had already devoted to forging a new constitution. But the fear of conspiracy and distrust of the king would hang like a shadow over that constitution and over the new Legislative Assembly it created.

UNFORTUNATELY, THE INTERNAL HISTORY of the second revolutionary assembly, the "Legislative," is less well known than that of the first.[67] Yet the evidence of the deputy correspondence suggests an inflationary expansion of the paranoid style among its members from the earliest meetings of that body. The sampled letter writers referred to belief in plots and conspiracies nearly three times more frequently under the Legislative than under the Constituent Assembly.[68] (See graph.) For the majority of the Constituent deputies—the Jacobins being the principal exception—such fears had been largely episodic, linked for the most part to the explanation of specific events. Now the existence of plots became a true obsession, and not only for radical Jacobins like Georges Couthon but for moderates like Antoine Rabusson-Lamothe and for the spectrum of deputies with diverse political positions from the *département* of Côtes-du-Nord.

Not only were there more mentions of conspiracy during the Legislative, but the very nature of the acts envisioned seemed to evolve. Under the Constituent, virtually all references in the correspondence had been to single plots or to a multiplicity of plots instigated by diffuse categories of perpetrators. Now the deputies were increasingly preoccupied with the "grand conspiracy," wherein all threats were viewed as part of a monolithic master plan, directed from a single source—which, depending on the version, might be the emigrant princes, a particular foreign government, or French "executive authority" itself. While there had been only one such reference in the correspondence of the sampled deputies during the twenty-nine months of the Constituent, there were close to twenty during the first ten months of the Legislative.

The new character of the obsession was clearly in evidence in the Legislative motion of November 1791 creating a Surveillance Committee—heir to the Constituent's Committee on Research. While the corresponding motion in 1789 had referred to a plurality of conspiracies, the Legislative evoked the word in the singular. "We are surrounded by conspiracy," proclaimed the deputy Claude Basire. "Everywhere plots are being hatched, and we are brought continual denunciations of specific incidents which can only be linked to the grand conspiracy whose existence no one here can doubt."[69] Indeed, it was probably only in the third year of the revolution—not at the beginning—that a "frenzied" and to some extent

[67] The best study is Charles J. Mitchell, *The French Legislative Assembly of 1791* (Leiden, 1988).

[68] There were 2.2 references per month in the letters of the Constituent deputies and 6.0 per month in those of the Legislative deputies.

[69] *AP*, 35: 361. Compare Lucas, "Denunciation," 24. The new Surveillance Committee was formally created on November 25, with ten of the first twelve members chosen from the left: *AP*, 35: 370.

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irrational obsession with "grand conspiracy" took hold of substantial numbers of the political elite.

The idea of a general conspiracy appeared frequently in the language of the Legislative during its two most important debates in the fall of 1791: on the problems of the emigrant nobles and of the refractory clergy. The paranoid style had been virtually absent eight months earlier, when the Constituent had taken up the question of emigrants.[70] But now Pierre-Victurnien Vergniaud announced that "a wall of conspiracy has been formed around [the fatherland]," that this was closely linked to "the internal uprisings which are tearing the *départements* apart," and that all was directed by a faction close to the king himself. Several days later, Maximin Isnard proclaimed, "I fear that a volcano of conspiracy is about to explode and that we are being lulled to sleep [*endormis*] with a false sense of security." Indeed, the metaphor of the "endormeurs," those seeking to hide their nefarious plans through the pretense of patriotism, became a recurring theme in the rhetoric of the left. The final decree formally declared that all emigrants were "under suspicion of conspiracy against the fatherland."[71] Similar language was mobilized by certain deputies in the debates on the refractory clergy. Thus, for the deputy Louis François, all the unrest emerging in the countryside "results from plots hatched secretly, and sometimes even openly, by the greatest enemy of our Revolution, the non-juring priests."[72]

The "grand conspiracy" was also a major theme in the great debates that unrolled in the Legislative Assembly between January and March 1792 over whether the nation should go to war. Increasingly, fears were focused on the royal government itself, viewed by the left as the mastermind of all the threats facing France at home and abroad. Elie Guadet thundered against "this abominable plot" hatched by a league of enemies both inside and outside the country. Jacques Thuriot accused members of the central government of simultaneously launching peasant insurrections, weakening the army, encouraging the export of gold, and inciting the intervention of foreign powers: "We are betrayed by everyone!" And it was in this context that Brissot first launched his accusations against the "Austrian Committee."[73]

While not all deputies agreed with Brissot's analysis, the correspondence suggests that such views were increasingly accepted by a great many moderates as well as by the left. Indeed, March 1792, on the eve of the war, saw a greater intensity of conspiracy fears than any other month during the first three years of the revolution. (See graph.) Clearly, a paranoid style was coming to dominate much of the Assembly's rhetoric even before the actual declaration of war on April 20, at a time when most deputies seemed optimistic that France could easily defeat any foreign armies. The failures in the initial war effort and the eventual Prussian invasion would enormously intensify the conspiracy obsession, but the roots of that obsession were already in place before the fighting had begun.

[70] *AP*, 23: 566–75. Only the radical Jacobin Prieur [de la Marne] had alluded to the conspiracy theme: *AP*, 23: 569.

[71] *AP*, 34: 402–03, 541, 711–12. The bill was vetoed by Louis XVI.

[72] *AP*, 35: 145.

[73] *AP*, 37: 412–13; and 39: 427. Brissot had suggested the existence of an "Austrian Committee" in January: see his newspaper, *Patriote français*, January 29, 1792.

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The explanation of this phase change in the nature and intensity of the paranoid style under the Legislative Assembly may be related in part to the composition of that body. The Constituent's self-exclusionary rule, adopted in the spring of 1791, had created an entirely new legislative corps devoid of direct continuity with its predecessor. The deputies of the second assembly of the revolution were not only a half generation younger than the Constituent deputies, but in far greater numbers they came from small towns and rural areas and from distinctly lower levels in the occupational hierarchy of the middle class.[74] It is at least plausible that some of the Legislative deputies, arriving from more mediocre social positions and from smaller communities, felt less social distance from the popular classes than had their predecessors. Possibly, for that very reason, they were in closer contact with a popular culture permeated with fears of plots and conspiracies and less touched by the rational skepticism of the Enlightenment.

It also seems clear that a substantially greater proportion of the new deputies self-consciously supported the radical left—the faction that, as we have seen, was the most susceptible to the paranoid style. Based on erroneous figures—figures repeated by several generations of historians—it is usually argued that deputies supporting the position of the more moderate Feuillant Club held a decisive majority at the beginning of the Legislative. But recent research suggests that the balance between the two factions was close to parity. In October 1791, approximately 150 (20 percent) of the 767 deputies adhered to the Jacobins, while about 170 (22 percent) threw in their lot with the Feuillants.[75] At the end of the Constituent, by contrast, only about 80 (7 percent) of the approximately 1,100 deputies still sitting had linked themselves to the Jacobin fold, while 290 (26 percent) had adhered to the Feuillants.[76] As for their occupational backgrounds, the salient fact is that nearly 80 percent of the Legislative deputies had already held elective administrative or judicial positions before 1791.[77] For over a year, they had been on the front lines, as it were, in the frustrating efforts to implement the Constituent's policies toward refractory priests and emigrants in the provinces. Many had exerted strong pressure on the Constituent—to little avail—for a harsher course of action on the emigrants, and they had often bitterly opposed the edict of May 1791, which instituted a policy of toleration toward the refractory clergy.[78] In

[74] See Timothy Tackett, "Les députés de l'Assemblée législative, 1791–1792," in *Pour la Révolution française: En hommage à Claude Mazauric* (Rouen, 1998), 139–44.

[75] Tackett, "Les députés de l'Assemblée législative," 142–43. According to Gensonné, some 200 deputies were attending the Jacobin Club by October 15: Goetz-Bernstein, *La diplomatie*, 46. Several generations of historians have mistakenly credited the Feuillants with 264 deputies. On the early de facto polarization of the Legislative Assembly, see Charles J. Mitchell, "Political Divisions within the Legislative Assembly of 1791," *French Historical Studies* 13 (1983–84): 356–89. See also the suggestions in François Furet, "Les Girondins et la guerre: Les débuts de l'Assemblée législative," in Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *La Gironde et les Girondins* (Paris, 1991), 191.

[76] Figures based on an analysis of the newspaper *Journal des débats de la Société des amis de la Constitution séante aux Jacobins de Paris*, July 17–September 30, 1791; and, for the Feuillants, on Augustin Challamel, *Les clubs contre-révolutionnaires* (Paris, 1895), 286–93. Since a large number of conservatives ceased attending the sessions in the last months of the Constitutent, the proportion of Feuillant deputies among those actually participating was even greater, probably a majority.

[77] Some 60 percent had been administrators and another 18 percent magistrates of various sorts: Tackett, "Les députés de l'Assemblée législative," 141.

[78] On the attitudes of administrators toward Constituent policies on emigrants, see the speech by the Jacobin Vernier in February 1791: *AP*, 23: 573. On the refractories, see Timothy Tackett, *Religion,*

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this process, a great many had grown impatient and suspicious and were perhaps all the more tempted to see the opposition, which they were forced to confront daily, in conspiratorial terms.

But it would also be difficult to overestimate the impact of Louis XVI's Flight to Varennes on the attitudes of the elites both inside and outside the revolutionary assemblies. Much has been written in recent years on the purported "desacralization" of the French kingship at the end of the Old Regime.[79] That sometime between the high Middle Ages and the end of the eighteenth century the religious aura of the kingship had faded in intensity is not to be questioned. Yet the chronology of that transformation is far from clear, and much of the change may well have transpired even before the eighteenth century. Based on an analysis of the *cahiers de doléances* of 1789, John Markoff has shown that few educated French on the eve of the revolution still thought the monarch had a divine right to absolute rule. But those same *cahiers* also give evidence of a deep, emotive attachment to the king by much of the population.[80] Indeed, the myth of the kingship—as opposed to the reputation of individual kings—was multivalent. For some among the popular classes, that myth may have remained partly "religious"—and thus "sacral"—in nature. But it was also built on an array of secular legends and folklore, and classical and feudal traditions, as well as on the images of grandeur cultivated by the seventeenth and eighteenth-century monarchs through their military prowess and the splendor of their palaces and court life.

Throughout the first two years of the revolution, most French inhabitants had persisted in viewing the king with enormous affection and respect, whatever the ambiguities of the king's constitutional status in the nation, whatever their doubts about the ministerial government surrounding him or the aristocratic social structure of which he was a part. Even in the midst of the turmoil and uncertainty caused by popular uprisings, religious schism, and threats of foreign intervention, the great majority continued to rely on the monarch as an anchor of security, a vital center of social and emotional stability. As recently as March of 1791, a minor illness of Louis XVI's had engendered a great outpouring of affection and concern for the monarch in letters addressed to the Constituent Assembly.[81]

In circumstances such as these, the king's perceived betrayal in June had a profoundly destabilizing effect on the whole regime and was a powerful factor in

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Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791 (Princeton, N.J., 1986), 275–82.

[79] See, for example, Jeffrey W. Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge, La., 1990); and Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, Lydia Cochrane, trans. (Durham, N.C., 1991), chap. 6.

[80] John Markoff, "Images of the King at the Beginning of the Revolution," in Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the Cahiers de Doléances of 1789* (Stanford, Calif., 1997), 369–76.

[81] Spontaneous *Te Deum* services were held throughout the kingdom to give thanks for the king's recovery: see, for example, Archives Nationales, C 124–31; Marie de Roux, *La révolution à Poitiers et dans la Vienne* (Paris, 1910), 442–43; Eugène Dubois, *Histoire de la Révolution dans l'Ain: Tome I, La Constituante (1789–1791)* (Bourg-en-Bresse, 1931), 330; Marcel Bruneau, *Les débuts de la Révolution dans les départements du Cher et de l'Indre* (Paris, 1902), 164; Arnaud, *Histoire de la Révolution dans le département de l'Ariège*, 241. Even the principal radical newspapers had continued a positive—or at least noncommittal—treatment of the king, through the early months of 1791: Censer, *Prelude to Power*, 112–15.

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promoting fears of conspiracy emanating from the "executive authority" in the spring and summer of 1792.[82] This core of mistrust was visible even among many moderates of the Legislative as they took their seats in October 1791. In letters to his constituents, Rabusson-Lamothe announced his hope that Louis had resigned himself to follow the constitution and that the king's self-interest would triumph over the "prejudices of his birth and education." But he also understood that many of his colleagues in the Assembly displayed "a defiance [toward the king], justified by the example of the past."[83] More than any other single event, the Flight to Varennes had shaken the French to the roots of their being and produced a loss of trust, a loss that rendered the various conspiracy theories altogether possible and believable.

IN CONCLUSION, an understanding of the conspiracy obsession among revolutionary elites entails several layers of explanation. It is likely that in any given population a certain number of individuals are prone to view the world in conspiratorial terms, and this was true of some of the deputies as they arrived to take their posts in Versailles or Paris. Yet at the end of the Old Regime, the "paranoid style" was probably much less in evidence among the educated classes in France than in England and North America. Despite the contention of several recent historians, the great majority of the deputies almost certainly did not share such an outlook during the early weeks of the French Revolution. On the other hand, the evidence is conclusive that conspiracy fears had become widespread among the political elites by the fall of 1791, well before the coming of the war and the threats of invasion, thus invalidating the explanation proposed by an older generation of historians.

It is the contention here that the evolution toward an obsession with plots developed among the elites in the course of the revolution itself. In this process, the logic of ideas cannot be entirely excluded. There can be no doubt that the language of the philosophes was more in evidence in the deputies' discourse in 1791 and 1792 than it had been in 1789. But if anything, these transformations in ideas and language came after the fact, as it were, through a growing awareness of the relevance and applicability of such ideas to the transforming political situation.[84] Of far greater significance was the deputies' confrontation with a series of very real conspiracies and threatened conspiracies, from the attempted ministerial and military counterrevolution of July 1789 through the elaborate attempt to separate the king from the revolution in the summer of 1791. The fears engendered by these experiences were further intensified, as we have seen, through the influence of the more pervasive paranoid perspectives of the lower classes. It was probably the radical Jacobins who first came self-consciously to link themselves to the Parisian masses, but this influence gradually spread to the moderate deputies as well,

[82] On the psychological impact of Varennes, see notably Paolo Viola, *Il trono vuoto: La transizione della sovranità nella rivoluzione francese* (Turin, 1989).
[83] Rabusson-Lamothe, "Lettres," 231, 264.
[84] Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 64–65, 110–13, 182, 190, 308–09.

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perhaps particularly to those of more modest rural and small-town origins who sat in the Legislative Assembly.

The impact of real instances of plots and the influence of popular fears—mediated through the particular political culture of the Jacobins—go far to explain the conspiratorial fears of the political elites in the early years of the revolution. But can such factors alone explain the inflationary expansion of the paranoid style, the quasi-irrational obsession with the grand, omnipotent conspiracy so prevalent after the summer of 1791? Here, one might suggest, another level of analysis needs to be considered, an analysis that may also help us go beyond the contingent events of one revolution and explore the revolutionary process in a broader perspective. One of the most pervasive themes in the letters and diaries and in many contemporary accounts was the general breakdown of order and certainty. The rapidly spreading anarchy, the unpredictability of events, more impressive than anything previously encountered in the lifetime of those experiencing the revolution, seemed quite to defy explanation through the Enlightened analytical apparatus at the revolutionaries' disposal.

In this respect, it is interesting to note—if only in the guise of a heuristic approach—the curious parallels between clinical descriptions of paranoia in individuals and the collective paranoid style increasingly visible in a time of revolution. As some psychologists would describe it, individual paranoia is often characterized not only by a deep mistrust of others but by a mistrust of oneself: a weak and unstable sense of autonomy and an exceptionally frail sense of identity.[85] One might speculate that all revolutionary processes, by their very nature, tend to intensify similar sentiments within society as a whole. There can be no doubt that the most sweeping revolutions—the English, the Russian, the Chinese, as well as the French—commonly set in motion a progressive reexamination of all values, putting into question society's sense of collective identity.

This effort to follow the development of revolutionary psychology in France suggests that, for many elites, the transformation was not a sudden paradigmatic shift, where one worldview or ideology was abruptly replaced by another, but was a slow, halting, and painful process.[86] It was a liminal experience, par excellence, enormously unsettling and destabilizing, which left many individuals—to paraphrase Matthew Arnold—wandering between two worlds, the one dying, the other struggling to be born. Even the rigid, swaggering self-confidence, projected in the

[85] See, notably, Eli Sagan, *The Honey and the Hemlock: Democracy and Paranoia in Ancient Athens and Modern America* (New York, 1991), 4–23; and David Shapiro, *Neurotic Styles* (New York, 1965), 55–88. For more traditional Freudian approaches—which I have found little useful for the present study—see Yehuda Fried and Joseph Agassi, *Paranoia: A Study in Diagnosis* (Boston, 1976); and John Farrell, *Freud's Paranoid Quest: Psychoanalysis and Modern Suspicion* (New York, 1996). For social psychological approaches to conspiracy interpretations, see Carl F. Graumann and Serge Moscovici, eds., *Changing Conceptions of Conspiracy* (New York, 1987).

[86] Compare Chalmers Johnson, *Revolutionary Change*, 2d edn. (Stanford, Calif., 1982). Much of the recent theorizing about revolutions has focused on the initial breakdown—particularly in structural terms—of the various "Old Regimes" and has had little to say about the process of those revolutions once they had begun. See, for example, Nikki Keddie, ed., *Debating Revolutions* (New York, 1995); and John Foran, ed., *Theorizing Revolutions* (London, 1996). The comparative study of the revolutionary process by Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), appeared too late to be integrated into this article. Among other themes, Mayer stresses the dialectical interaction between revolution and counterrevolution in the emergence of revolutionary violence and conspiracy fears.

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public pronouncements of many revolutionaries, was often as much bluff and pose as true self-assurance. The personal correspondence of many such individuals was pervaded by "the anxieties of nascent liberty," as Durand had described it, with an oscillation of moods between hope and fear, with a sentiment of being swept along by circumstances over which one had little or no control.

It was precisely in the context of sentiments such as these that the king's desertion and betrayal in 1791 had such a traumatic effect, leaving many with the feeling of being cast adrift. With all the bonds of Old Regime society and culture progressively overthrown, there was an increasing fluidity of identity, a growing uncertainty as to who one was, what one could rely on, and whom one could trust. The ambiguity of one's own collective identity reverberated in uncertainty and mistrust of others—especially those others perceived as outsiders or potential outsiders to the revolutionary community.

Only a carefully conceived comparative study could adequately test the validity for other revolutions of the final hypothesis proposed above. But it seems clear, in the case of the French experience, that the phase change in late 1791 to a quasi-permanent obsession with grand conspiracy exerted a profound effect on the origins of a Terror mentality among political elites in the spring and summer of 1792. Indeed, by corollary, one might argue that the very term "Terror" should be ascribed a more complex meaning than that usually given it by historians. It should signify not only the judicial apparatus assembled to intimidate and punish the perceived enemies of the revolution but also the near panic state of fear and suspicion experienced during the period by the revolutionaries themselves.

Timothy Tackett is a professor of history at the University of California, Irvine. Among his previous publications are *Priest and Parish in Eighteenth-Century France* (1977), *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (1986, and in French translation), and *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture* (1996, and in French and Italian translations). His books and articles have been the recipients of five national prizes, including the Leo Gershoy Award from the AHA in 1998 (for *Becoming a Revolutionary*). He is currently working on two projects: a book about Louis XVI's attempted flight from Paris in 1791 and its impact on the French, and a larger study of the origins of a political culture of violence among the elites during the French Revolution.

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