

Kaiser  
Van Kley

*From Deficit to Deluge*

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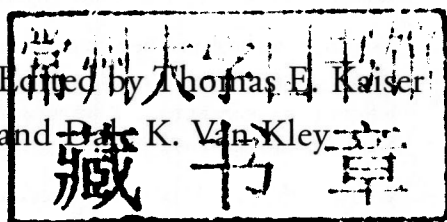


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# FROM DEFICIT TO DELUGE

## *The Origins of the French Revolution*

Edited by Thomas E. Kaiser  
and Paul K. Van Kley



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## FROM DEFICIT TO DELUGE

*For Sandy K. Van Kley and Helen Beneš Kaiser*

*Wives who have patiently listened  
to more than one unsolicited lecture  
on the French Revolution*

## *Acknowledgments*

Even twenty or more years after the event, any set of acknowledgments for a book about the origins of the French Revolution must begin with the series of bicentennial conferences entitled “The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture,” especially the first one at the University of Chicago in 1987 on the subject of the political culture of the Old Regime. Organized, as were the others, by Keith Michael Baker, Colin Lucas, the late François Furet, and Mona Ozouf, it was that conference in particular and the volume of its proceedings published in its wake that brought three decades of “revisionist” thought to a climax and made the origins of the great Revolution the “problem” that it remains today. In the case of this volume, the debt is quite concrete. Besides Keith Baker and the co-editors of this volume, two other contributors—Gail Bossenga and Jeremy Popkin—are also veterans of that seminal conference.

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*Dale K. Van Kley, Ohio State University*

*Thomas E. Kaiser, University of Arkansas at Little Rock*



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## Introduction

*Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley*

### I. Theses and Themes

That the French Revolution was the immediate result of the insolvency of the Bourbon state at the end of the 1780s is one of the few certainties shared by all historians of this great event. Less clear is why the Old Regime monarchy, which had encountered and surmounted many other fiscal crises by “normal” political means over its long history, not only failed to resolve this one, but also allowed it to escalate into a full-blown revolution by 1789. Was it something in the nature of the fiscal crisis itself that made it so explosive? Or had the Old Regime as a whole changed so radically by this time that it could no longer cope with the kinds of problems it had mastered more or less routinely in the past? Or was it some combination of both?

In lieu of the once dominant socio-economic explanation for the coming of the French Revolution, the various branches of post-Marxist “revisionist” historiography have sought answers in the various political dysfunctions that eventually crippled the Old Regime. Beginning with a concept of the “political” as the self-interested quest for power and position within the Old Regime’s institutional apparatus, one such branch has attributed the fiscal crisis largely to the increasing incoherence of the royal decision-making process and the monarchy’s loss of control over

Versailles's rival factions.<sup>1</sup> As is appropriate in accounts emphasizing the politics of faction, ideology typically counts for very little, while contingency plays a very large role. A second variant of the "revisionist" political explanation—one best represented by François Furet—follows Alexis de Tocqueville in demonstrating how the absolute monarchy so preempted all traditional political activity generated by the Old Regime's society of orders that it collapsed of its own dead weight.<sup>2</sup> Emphasizing inevitability, and tying, as did Tocqueville, the nature of the new politics closely to ideology, this version postpones the role of political conflict until after revolutionary ideology took form in the vacuum created by the inevitable collapse of the Old Regime. Still other variants of revisionism somehow contrive to combine these theses. In the most authoritative account of the origins of the French Revolution of the past two generations, for example, William Doyle regards the fall of the Old Regime as "inevitable" due to its "internal contradictions." Yet the thesis of structural inevitability coexists uneasily with the contention that until the spring of 1789 the "forces pushing toward the Revolution were almost entirely political"—forces, that is, that would seem to have to do with the contingencies of human agency and volition.<sup>3</sup>

Although similarly prioritizing the political, the thesis implicitly governing the selection of essays in this volume is that the French Revolution had origins other than purely political, including fiscal, economic, and social origins, but that these origins entered into the making of the French Revolution by becoming objects of political conflict within a system the rules of which were rapidly changing. However many or intractable its internal or structural contradictions—and there were certainly very many of them—the Revolution arose from the Old Regime through a process of politicization that mobilized not only the opponents of "absolute," monarchy but would-be defenders as well. That an important part of the conflict involved making pejoratives of adjectives as essential to the Old Regime as "absolute" and "aristocratic" suggests that any satisfactory account of the Revolution's political origins must give due weight to the semantically conditioned goals and purposes of political action. While not reducing the objects of political conflict to the discursive, the "political," as understood in this volume, is sympathetic to Keith Baker's capacious definition as the changing field of meanings within which "individuals

and groups create, maintain, and change their positions within it . . . [by making claims] for themselves and on others.”<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, political interests and institutional constraints exerted their own lines of force on the revolutionary crisis. They unquestionably helped to determine, according to their own inner logic, the circumstances confronted by key actors in this drama. Likewise, no one “intended” 1789 as it in fact occurred. At the same time, it seems implausible that the bold, collective decision to abandon the Old Regime and its precedents in the name of national “regeneration”—to embark on a revolutionary project—was dictated by the fiscal crisis and other immediate “circumstances” alone. For two generations prior to 1789, the public had been witness to and had more or less actively participated in a vigorous debate on the Old Regime and its possible alterations. Decoding what players in the Revolution thought they were doing—what meanings they assigned to circumstances and the actions they took when they felt the political ground shifting beneath them—is critical to understanding not only their decisions but also the collective outcome of those decisions, the resulting intersection of political visions and strategies, and the institutional *bricolage* practiced by the revolutionary parties in the wake of the Old Regime’s collapse. To invert Marx’s famous dictum in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, even if they do not make it as they please, men do make their own history.<sup>5</sup> In short, *both* the institutional “context” of the late Old Regime crisis and the “texts” used to make sense of it need to be kept firmly in view.

What is perhaps most striking about their interaction on this occasion was the unprecedented and rapid way in which the debate on fiscal issues transformed the very procedures traditionally used to resolve them into objects of intense controversy. It was the “absolute” monarchy itself that initiated this process. In light of later, more dramatic developments, it is easy to overlook the boldness of and risks inherent in the crown’s decision to submit its far-reaching plan of fiscal reform in February 1787 to an Assembly of Notables, which had not met for almost as long as the Estates-General. That this Assembly not only failed to approve the heart of the plan, but also assaulted the monarchy with allegations of “despotism” while eliciting calls for the convocation of the Estates-General indicates the extent to which the monarchy began to lose the political initiative

almost from the start. When, having failed to bring the *parlements* to heel in November, 1787 notwithstanding the king's effort to register loans in a ceremony called a *lit de justice*, the monarchy boldly dissolved and replaced them in May 1788, the intent may have been to achieve the kind of chastening of challengers that had followed a similar effort during Chancellor René-Nicolas-Augustin de Maupeou's anti-parlementary coup of 1771–74. But far from jerking political contestation back onto the rails of accustomed procedures and rituals, the effect was to unleash a public protest so wide and deep that only a few months later, in the face of imminent bankruptcy, the monarchy bowed to the judgment of the "nation" by taking further desperate measures, the convocation of the long defunct Estates-General in May 1789 and the recall of the popular finance minister, Jacques Necker. By so yielding, the monarchy did win itself some political cover and a temporary respite. Yet it botched its last opportunity to reclaim the initiative by failing to fashion a strategy that could turn its financial and political fortunes around, and from June 1789 forward, it fell further and further behind where public opinion was leading, namely to revolution.<sup>6</sup>

There can be little doubt that, without the fiscal crisis and the bold, if often self-defeating measures taken by the monarchy to solve it, this "derailing" of Old Regime politics would not have occurred in the way and time that it did. But once the crisis deepened and widened, it provided fuel for a new, more activist form of politics "invented" by the monarchy's challengers. To be sure, under the Old Regime the French had hardly been inert bystanders to the deliberations and actions of their supposedly "absolute" government. Even during relatively relaxed periods, they had submitted petitions, initiated lawsuits, humbly remonstrated, and worked the ties of kinship and patronage. In moments of high tension, they had circulated subversive pamphlets, chanted insulting songs, hoisted defamatory placards, and staged destructive riots. Nevertheless, the run-up to 1789 witnessed a kind and degree of politicization the nation had never seen before. As the relatively sedate debates of the Assembly of Notables gave way to the more contentious interactions of the crown with the Parlement of Paris, as the stormy protests of the summer of 1788 gave way to the intense electioneering for the Estates-General of 1789, the French participated in and voted in elections, convened meetings, mounted tribunes, debated legislation, harangued deputies, published newspapers, took up

arms, and staged *journées*. By thus multiplying the venues of political participation, Lynn Hunt has acutely observed, “the Revolution enormously increased the points from which power could be exercised and multiplied the tactics and strategies for wielding that power.”<sup>7</sup> In the course of this transformation, the kinds of “claims” made by political actors on one another began to change as well. Once sovereignty was relocated in the nation, older forms of legitimation—appeals to custom and divine right as arbitrated by the king—were superseded by others in which legitimacy derived from the national will articulated by elected deputies in a newly convened National Assembly.

This more or less familiar political narrative—embracing not only the breakdown of the monarchy, but also the transformation of politics before the Revolution itself—clearly lies at the heart of “what happened” to the Old Regime. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any account of the origins of the French Revolution that omits it. But does this political narrative satisfactorily answer the question posed at the outset—namely, why did an apparently traditional fiscal crisis engender the massive transformation of an entire social order? Were “the forces pushing toward Revolution” until the spring of 1789 “almost entirely political” in nature?

Most recently, historians have been inclined not to think so.<sup>8</sup> Missing from the standard narrative are dimensions of the revolutionary crisis—both “origins” in themselves and their concomitant “circumstances”—that may not fall within customary definitions of the “political,” but over the course of the crisis came to be politicized, thereby inflecting its “context” and/or its “text.”<sup>9</sup> For example, the notion that the French Revolution had important social origins went out of fashion a generation ago with the blistering attack of “revisionist” historians on the Marxist model. But more recent scholarship has persuasively demonstrated that the Second and Third Estates’ sharply conflicting social experiences, perceptions, and aspirations underlay the bitter debates over voting procedures at the Estates-General, thereby sinking prospects for a “union of orders” in the face of monarchical “despotism.” Economic factors adversely affecting the most populous classes of the nation may not have generated the revolutionary crisis on their own. But surely they came to weigh heavily in the calculations of established authorities once hungry crowds in search of bread began to surge through the capital and

countryside early in 1789, thereby posing increasingly ominous threats to public order. Even economic developments originating in factors exogenous to the fiscal crisis—the unemployment of textile workers caused by France’s commercial treaty with England, for example, or the famine resulting from the catastrophic harvest of 1788—bore directly on the fiscal crisis since they cut into the precious flow of tax revenues. Another factor resulting from and bearing on the crisis of the Old Regime that has been rarely or only cursorily mentioned in most “political” narratives was the decline in French security. Lacking the resources to lend effective support to its allies in their hour of need, France stood helplessly by in 1787 as the Netherlands and Turkey faced invasion by their avaricious neighbors, thereby ratcheting up—during a time of acute internal crisis—fears of a “general war” into which an effectively isolated and nearly bankrupt France might be sucked. Intellectual origins also played an essential role in transforming a fiscal crisis into a revolution. Long before the convocation of the Estates-General—indeed, from 1787 onward—the growing crisis provoked reflection about the “constitution” of the realm or “nation” in the form of a flood of pamphlets culminating in the transformation of the Estates-General into a “National Assembly” and that assembly’s writing of a declaration of rights and a constitution. And if, finally, religious controversy remained at most a minor motif in the pre-revolutionary crisis, the pamphleteering and constitution writing drew on concepts—the “nation” and its “sovereignty” for starters—that had gained purchase in the course of religious controversies dominating the political stage during the century’s beginning and middle decades.

The same holds a fortiori for the less obvious “origins” explored in this volume. The Old Regime’s male gendered or patriarchic conception of the family would never have become an issue, and in some sense an origin of the Revolution, had it not become analogically entangled in a mutually reinforcing relation with the notions of the king as a “father” and his subjects as his “children.” The Revolution was unable to redefine kingship without eventually redefining the family. And if the Revolution did not exactly originate in the French Caribbean colonies, the affairs of these colonies became an originating factor as well. Not only did the wealth generated by the colonial trade contribute to the unequal expansion of the metropolitan market and rising social antagonisms; in addi-

tion, the slave-owning colonial planters demanded representation in the Estates-General and then the National Assembly, thereby inflecting and complicating the process of distilling a unitary general will from a cacophony of political voices.

The Revolution, therefore, has many origins. But none of these or other origins would have become origins of *the* French Revolution had they not intersected with “the political”—had they not, that is, become central sites of contestation within the new participatory politics, which over time called into question more and more aspects of the Old Regime. “The crisis itself, as a process,” Peter Campbell has aptly observed, generated “demands that were new and . . . increasingly incompatible with the continued existence of the Old Regime.”<sup>10</sup> It was, in other words, the vital, dialectical interaction between the broadening of a “normal” fiscal crisis and the unprecedented widening of the political process that engendered the transformation of the Old Regime into the French Revolution.

It is this perspective that has guided the organization of essays in this volume. Each author, while focusing on only one “origin” of the French Revolution, provides insight into the entire revolutionary conflagration by tracing the ways in which the particular origin in question added combustible material to it. Although all these origins were on display in the period 1787–89, some date from as far back as the sixteenth-century wars of religion. In contrast, therefore, to the Tocquevillian distinction between long-term and mid-term causes and short-term precipitants adopted by Peter Campbell in his recent and similarly titled book on the origins of the French Revolution,<sup>11</sup> the classification of “origins” adopted by this volume corresponds to the various aspects or dimensions of experience—social, fiscal, religious, diplomatic, intellectual—as they acted simultaneously, sometimes over long periods of time. As the essays demonstrate, while all these origins helped change the nature and subject matter of political contestation, they surely did not remain within these reified categories, but on the contrary, interacted with each other along the road to 1789. If, therefore, this book’s principal thesis is that the Revolution arose out of the politicization of multiple origins, one of its major subthemes is the reciprocal permeability of these origins.

In contrast to the distinction between the causes of the collapse of the Old Regime and those that shaped the French Revolution governing



the organization of Peter Campbell's volume, at least some of the "origins" figuring in these essays will range across the revolutionary divide of 1789. The point is to show not only that the revolutionary rupture was not "uncaused," but also that some of the causes figuring in the collapse of the Old Regime operated differently in the altered conditions brought about by the revolutionary rupture itself. Thus, for example, if the monarchy's insolvency made the Revolution possible, the same ongoing state fiscal crisis prompted the National Assembly to help itself to the French Catholic Church's property and then to reform the penniless church, thereby causing a religious schism that turned opposition to the Revolution into a holy cause. Or if, to take another example, off-stage factional court rivalries figure among the political causes of the demise of the Old Regime, recognizably related factional rivalries continued to operate with literally deadlier effect in the more open and openly ideological political stage ushered in by the revolutionary rupture of 1789. Causal continuity as well as revolutionary rupture therefore joins the diversity and reciprocal permeability of the Revolution's causes as a second subtheme of this volume.

## II. Marxism, Revisionism, and Post-Revisionism

If this volume argues on behalf of multiple, overlapping origins of the French Revolution, it does so in opposition to the single socio-economic origin once attributed to it in Marxist interpretation, as well as to a broad, loose "revisionism" that gradually replaced the once dominant Marxist school over the past forty years.

The Marxist theory envisioned the French Revolution as a seizure of political power by a capitalist bourgeoisie from a moribund landed nobility headed by a king.<sup>12</sup> As the bourgeoisie's newfound political clout derived from its possession of industrial and mercantile capital, which had replaced land as the chief source of wealth since the Middle Ages, this origin was economic as well as social. The French Revolution could thus be represented as the culmination of a conflict between two classes: the hitherto dominant nobility whose economic power had derived from the exploitation of peasant labor in a primarily subsistence agricultural economy, and the up-and-coming bourgeoisie already in the process of transforming agriculture itself into a capitalistic and market-oriented en-