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Conspiracy Theories and Theories of Conspiracy:  
A Review Essay

In the course of several centuries of rumored conspiracies, two of the most obdurate ones were religious in character and pitted Jesuits against Jansenists. The Jesuit side of the Jansenist controversy was first in the field with the publication in 1654 of Jean Filleau's *Relation juridique* that accused the first Jansenists including Cornelius Jansen and the abbé de Saint-Cyran of having plotted the destruction of Catholicism at a meeting at Chartreuse of Bourfontaine in 1621.[1] Assuming the mask of Catholics, the plotters planned to undermine Catholicism from within by means of a theology featuring a Protestant-like predestinating god combined with inaccessibly high moral demands, thereby driving the despairing faithful out of the church and into an amoral Deism. The plot died hard as the Jesuit Pierre-Louis Patouillet took the occasion of the centennial of Filleau's book in 1754 to publish a demonstration of the "reality" of the plot as evident in its realization, adding to its original aim, that of deforming the structure of the church from a monarchical hierarchy to an aristo-democratic polity.[2] At about the same time, other Jesuits espied another dimension to the plot, that of transforming the French monarchy into a de facto republic that would make kings dependent on their subjects without whose consent no monarch could do anything.[3]

It took real Jansenists until around 1730 to answer the charge of being anti-Catholic plotters with the denunciation of a Jesuit plot to destroy Catholicism fully as insidious as the one of which Jesuits had accused them. As formulated by Pavie de Fourquevaux in his *Catéchisme historique et dogmatique*, the author of the plot was the new Jesuit society's general Diego Laynez and his immediate associates. Far from putting salvation out of reach of Catholics, the Jesuit plot was on the contrary to lower the moral demands of the Gospel while putting salvation in the hands of the human free will, thereby attracting Catholics into their own churches and confessionals.[4] Needing the power of the papacy in order to foist this "new religion" on to the entire Church, the Jesuits posed as champions of the papacy and in time helped transform the pope from the bishop of Rome into an "absolute and despotic monarch in the church." [5] Like the Jesuit version of the Jansenist plot, the Jansenist version of the Jesuit one developed ever newer political dimensions, including not only the aim of transforming the French monarchy into a despotism but also of using both papacy and monarchies to found the society's own "universal monarchy." Indeed, by 1759 the editors of the *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques* had come to perceive the Jesuits' "universal political plan" to have been the mold of their "universal plan" in religion rather than the reverse, their "new" theology playing handmaiden to their drive for political power. "Behold them unmasked," exclaimed the editor, reacting to recent revelations about the society's nefarious activities around the world.[6]

Of the two perceived plots, the Jansenist version of the Jesuit plot proved the more immediately influential, playing a certain role in the series of expulsions or suppressions of the Jesuits in Europe beginning in Portugal in 1759 and culminating with the papal suppression of the society under Bourbon pressure in 1773. These events figured in turn as damning evidence in the Jesuit version of the Jansenist plot, which resurfaced as a part of counter-revolutionary theories of the conspiratorial origins of the French Revolution such as the comte Emmanuel d'Antraigues's *Dénonciation aux catholiques françois* and the sixth and last part of Nicola Spedialieri's *De' diritti dell' uomo libri VI (On the Rights of Man in Six Books)*, both published in reaction to what was perceived as the Revolution's Jansenist-inspired ecclesiastical legislation of 1790.[7] As for the Jansenist version of the Jesuit plot, it not only survived the French Revolution but, in the form of the denunciation of the mysterious Congregation, lived on to play a role in the expulsion of the Jesuits in Restoration France in 1828—indeed, to play a role in the internal unraveling of the Restoration's conservative coalition on the eve of the Revolution of 1830.[8]

In between 1788 and 1828 lay the French Revolution and the Napoleonic consulate and empire containing proofs aplenty that people could perceive conspiracies without the help of religion, and that if a secularizing Enlightenment went into the making of the French Revolution, the resultant revolutionaries could have their enlightenment and their conspiracies too. Not only did revolutionaries perceive and denounce far more conspiracies than were hatched by the most religiously motivated—and just as conspiratorially-minded—counter-revolutionaries, but they also soon began to perceive and “unmask” false “patriots” and their conspiracies among themselves, beginning with the magistrates of the Parlement of Paris in the fall of 1788 and ending with Robespierre and his “tail” of followers in July 1794. By the fall of Robespierre, the Revolution seemed of have run out of revolutionaries, very few of any prominence having escaped the charge of having conspired on behalf of the counter-revolution. That this was so and how it was so is abundantly demonstrated and illustrated in nine animated essays in *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* edited by Peter Campbell, Thomas Kaiser, and Marisa Linton. Thematically related but not tightly reined in by the editors, these essays and the sense the editors make of them succeed in being one of the most profound studies of the political culture of the French Revolution since the bi-centennial avalanche of publications around 1989.

Seeking to explain the paradox of the apparent irrationality of conspiratorial-mindedness in a revolution that brought a century of lights to a climax, this book's overall argument is that the Old Regime's combination of “closed” court politics and an “enlightened” quest for a more open politics bequeathed to the Revolution a juxtaposition that made a great deal of political activity seem conspiratorial, quite apart from the existence of real conspiracies. What the book even more effectively does, however, is to problematize all the going explanations while suggesting areas of compatibility between them and ways to advance them further. But unless the Revolution can be considered to have had no religious content and unless the Terror really succeeded in its aim of “dechristianizing” France, some attention to religion may be one of these ways. Although the lack of patriotism is a key trope of revolutionary accusations and prosecutions, that patriotic reference had a history. Patriotism was always already at stake in the reciprocal forms of unmasking in pre-revolutionary religious plot theories that would assume a similar if secular form during the French Revolution itself.[9] And while many would point out that the ever larger purview and area of activity of the early modern state was one of the agents in the demise of providential explanations of events, the advent of the confessional state after the religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also made the religious identity of the nation-state into a matter of ultimate concern.

## I. Theories of Conspiracy

Four explanations of conspiracy constitute the historiographical foil for this book: those of Gordon S. Wood, François Furet, Lynn Hunt, and Timothy Tackett. The first is a classic article by Gordon S. Wood that, although published more than twenty-five years ago, reads as freshly and pertinently as

though written today.[10] Wood's starting point was the propensity to interpret events conspiratorially so characteristic of "commonwealth-man" ideology that both he and Bernard Bailyn had helped uncover and restore, both regarding it as one of the main components in the intellectual origins of the American Revolution.[11] But Wood's article ranged farther afield and, noting the pervasive presence of the "paranoid style" of political thought throughout the Atlantic world and in the French Revolution as well as the American, asked why that should have been so. Wood's disarming answer was that, far from evidence of any collective mental disorder, the propensity to explain complex developments by means of hidden conspiracies was an example of "enlightened" thought as applied to historical explanation. In a world characterized by a receding sense of the divine on the one hand and increasing demographic, economic, and political complexity on the other, the century's "enlightened" minds undertook a search for a new explanatory order comparable to the one that Newton had discovered in the natural world. What they fastened upon was the motives and intentions of historical actors—the moral counterpart, as it were, to the "force" or "energizing principle" that Newton thought might lay behind the physical uniformities he measured. Since in the normal moral economy of human action benign causes were thought to produce like effects, a public profession of benign intentions that produced malign effects could only be explained by deceit, hypocrisy—and conspiracy: whence in part the pervasive political culture of "unmasking."

Just a few years before the appearance of Wood's article, François Furet similarly made conspiratorial explanation an integral part of his characterization of the political culture of the French Revolution.[12] But rather than regard it as the revolutionary avatar of an Atlantic-wide, early-modern and "enlightened" phenomenon, Furet saw it as something very specific to France and the French Revolution. If, for Furet, the Revolution sought to put the Old Regime behind it and "regenerate" France, it remained bedeviled by the Old Regime's long legacy of absolute monarchy and its Bodinian ideal of unity and indivisible sovereignty—an ideal that perpetuated itself in the influential form of Rousseau's "general will." When applied to the Revolution's deliberative assemblies that supposedly represented the national will, the quest for the unity of a single will ran up against the inevitable fact of disagreement while making it impossible to construe disagreement innocently. The result was a competitive criminalization of divergent wills as "particular" and, therefore, conspiratorial as well as a dynamic that drove the Revolution forward and leftward, producing its event-filled character. Writing a few years after the publication of Wood's article, Lynn Hunt further radicalized Furet's argument and made the obsession with conspiracy even more specific to the French Revolution by severing just about all the connections between the Old Regime and the Revolution, which for her created a political culture based so precariously on a mythical virtuous present that when things began to go tragically wrong, as they all too predictably did, the revolutionaries had no one to blame except themselves. The result, however, was the same as for Furet. Saddled with a political culture with no room for a past politics as usual, the revolutionaries could only construe every manifestation of self-interest as factional and the factional, in turn, as conspiratorial.[13].

These conspiratorial characterizations of eighteenth-century or revolutionary political culture did not provoke a reasoned refutation until fifteen years later when Timothy Tackett took on all comers in the pages of the *American Historical Review*.<sup>[14]</sup> Statistics typically in hand—and clearly defending the sanity of the revolutionaries against Furet—Tackett argued that with the notable exception of the hardcore noble and clerical Right and the Jacobin Left, the revolutionaries' perceptions of conspiracies closely followed the existence of real conspiracies against the Revolution. The spikes in perception of conspiracies therefore occurred after the king's dismissal of Necker and the abortive coup against the National Assembly in July through October 1789 and again in the wake of the king's equally abortive attempt to flee Paris in June 1791. In Tackett's reckoning, it was not until revolutionary France reached a state of anxiety-inducing instability and uncertainty induced by an initially unsuccessful war conducted by an untrustworthy king that conspiratorial-mindedness took on a life of its own. Rather than typical of the political culture of the eighteenth century or of the French Old Regime in particular, the paranoid political style best correlated in Tackett's calculations with the periods of revolutionary

instability across time. While in the process of at once confining conspiratorial-mindedness to the French Revolution and downplaying it there, Tackett advanced the rather arresting assertions that Protestant countries were more prone to conspiratorial-mindedness than Catholic ones and that, in pre-revolutionary France, only one Jansenist perceived ex-Jesuits as the conspirators behind Chancellor Maupeou's constitutional coup against the parlements in 1771.[15]

Among these alternatives, *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* is arguably closest to the world of Gordon Wood. The conspiratorial political culture described in this book is a climactic enlargement of Wood's picture of the century's political culture as a whole. The only area where this book partially parts company with Wood is in posing the question of whether political modernity ever put conspiratorial thinking behind it, or whether modern political culture ever benefitted from professional history's more sophisticated concepts of "development," "process," "evolution"—multiple and unintended causation, in short. Against Furet this book's bias is sharper, refusing to regard conspiratorial mindedness as confined to the revolutionary experiment in democracy. To be sure, Furet credits the legacy of the Old Regime myth of absolute sovereignty as a necessary condition for the development of the Revolution's paranoid style, but the relation posited by the editors of this book between the Revolution and the Old Regime is more direct. Not only do they trace the roots of this mode of thought into the political culture of the Old Regime itself, but they also demonstrate a measure of continuity as well as discontinuity between the two. The book's most direct target is Tackett's attempt to limit the century's conspiratorial mindedness to revolutions while making it a largely rational function of real conspiracies there. As a whole, this book therefore contends that Wood's paranoid style of political thinking characterized the French Revolution from start to finish. While the relation here between the Revolution and conspiratorial mindedness is not quite as tight as it is in the work of Furet and Hunt, it is pretty tight (see the "Introduction," pp. 1-14).

That much said, this book is not at all polemical in intent or tone, and the nine essays that comprise this book are allowed to go in various directions, whether they directly support the book's overall thrust or not.

## II. Toward the Terror

Some of the essays question the centrality of the conspiratorial-mindedness of the Revolution as a whole. Among these, the first and most prominent is that of Barry Shapiro, who defends Tackett's thesis that until the Terror the perception of conspiracies rose and fell with the existence of actual conspiracies against the Revolution. Shapiro identifies the tendency of the National Assembly's deputies to attribute conspiratorial designs to executive authority as deriving from the traumatic experience of 12-14 July 1789, when only the intervention of Paris and the storming of the Bastille saved these deputies from being the victims of a monarchical or at least ministerial coup that might have ended in their imprisonment, exile, or death. In some "corner of their minds," he writes, the deputies would have found it difficult not to "think of the king as someone who had been prepared to have them killed" (p. 51). Rather than any longer-term distrust of "ministerial despotism," Shapiro maintains, it was this punctual, trauma-induced fear of executive authority by deputies hitherto inclined to trust the king that prompted the National Assembly to block the comte de Mirabeau's entry into the royal ministry and disallow the constitutional possibility of ministerial governance with its decree of 7 November 1789. Shapiro moreover takes his argument further, tending to make the events of mid-July function as the explanation for the conspiratorial-mindedness of the rest of the Revolution.

This argument would seem to place far more weight on the events of mid-July 1789 than they can possibly be made to bear. Not the least of the problems attendant on this interpretation is the total unavailability of any evidence with which to measure the intensity or even to ascertain the existence of this putative state of trauma. Among the deputies, distrust of Mirabeau's pro-monarchical proclivities

long antedated the events of July, evident as they are in the memoirs of the deputy Adrien Duquesnoy, whom Shapiro quotes to little evidential effect.[16]

The main problem with Shapiro's argument, however, is that it assumes that Louis XVI or at least his ministers really intended to use royal troops to disperse the National Assembly and arrest its leadership after the dismissal of Necker on 12 July 1789. As it happens, the reality of that intended royal "conspiracy" is contested in the very next essay by John Hardman. Echoing a point made by Crane Brinton decades ago, Hardman argues that at the very most the existing evidence points to a defensive intention to protect the approaches to the various royal residences in anticipation of a possible march by Paris in reaction to the monarchy's attempt to re-impose the constitutional legislation of 23 June 1789.[17] While the monarchy's intention to re-impose this legislation may be conspiratorial enough, it is not tantamount to the design of arresting the National Assembly's leadership or putting Paris to fire, dungeon, and sword.

If Hardman is right—and the evidence is in his favor—then what has to be explained is not the conspiratorial mindset that followed the events of mid-July 1789 but rather that which prompted most deputies and the Parisian public alike so readily to read a coming coup against the National Assembly and Paris into the movement of troops and the dismissal of Necker. One proximate precedent in the light of which deputies might have viewed the dismissal of Necker and the activity of royal troops is the Brienne-Lamoignon ministry's "coup" against the Parlement of Paris in May 1788 when, only days after it had similarly set down the lineaments of France's putative "constitution," the parlement found itself surrounded by royal troops for thirty hours until it relinquished two of its ringleaders for arrest, at which point the ministry sent the remaining magistrates on vacation *sine die* after altering the "constitution" with a set of forcibly registered edicts on 8 May. That coup followed the pattern of Chancellor Maupeou's constitutional coup against the Parlement of Paris and other parlements some seventeen years earlier, as that one followed earlier such confrontations—1756-57, 1753-54, 1730-32—that had punctuated the entire century.

True, the victims were in this case the largely noble members of the Parlement of Paris who subsequently lost public favor by ruling in favor of the forms of 1614 for the upcoming Estates General after returning triumphant from their exile in September. It is also true that, given the anti-aristocratic tenor of the ministry's pre-revolutionary propaganda, the deputies of the Third Estate had reason to expect the king to side with them against the nobility and in favor of the vote by head versus that by orders when they came to Versailles in May 1789. But after six weeks of indecision by the monarchy followed by a thinly disguised *lit de justice* against the Third Estate cum National Assembly on 23 June, deputies of the Third Estate including even Mirabeau discovered that they shared the parliamentary magistracy's quarrel with the monarchy after all, and that if they wished to dismantle the structure of the society of orders, they would have to take on the monarchy and assert the National Assembly's claim to sovereignty as well. By 1789 a century of events and meanings had left a well established script with which to interpret the actions of the monarchy and its ministers, and this script was bound to be influential whether or not those subject to its influence had witnessed any of the events that had gone into its making.

What seems to lie behind Shapiro's determination to place the entire weight of the Revolution's subsequent anti-royal conspiratorial-mindedness on the events of July 1789 is the acceptance of the Revolution's claim to have invented itself *ex nihilo*, and to free it from any kind of indebtedness to the political culture of the Old Regime. The target is in part Furet's thesis that the long legacy of unitary absolutism doomed the revolutionaries to an attempt to create a democracy within absolutism's unitary mold and therefore also to construe disagreement conspiratorially. But the more direct target is the proponents of the thesis—principally Jeffrey Merrick and myself—that a century of usurious confrontations between the monarchy and the parlements, many of them over religious issues, had not left the reputation of the monarchy unscathed, and that in an era of growing public opinion these

conflicts contributed to the “desacralization of the monarchy.”[18] The Restoration chancellor Etienne-Denis Pasquier said nothing else in his memoirs when, recalling his experience as a debutant magistrate in the Parlement of Paris in 1788, he opined that the “quarrels about Jansenism and Molinism” had had the most “serious” consequences for the monarchy because it was “above all these that had taught resistance and accustomed minds to it during the reign of Louis XV,” leaving “the unfortunate Louis XVI to reap the deplorable heritage.”[19]

Here is not the place to pick up the gauntlet, although given the persistence of guerilla-like challenges to the thesis, the time for an open debate has perhaps come. Suffice it to say that the validity of this thesis in no sense rests on the assumption that this putative “desacralization” of the monarchy in the eighteenth century affected all Frenchmen uniformly no matter who they were or where or when they lived. It was the “middle order of society” that, according to the abbé Joseph Alphonse de Véri in June 1776, had abandoned the “veneration for royalty that our ancestors had of its divine origin” and began to regard the “sovereign merely as the agent of the nation.”[20] Nor can the refutation of it rest on taking expressions of filial affection for Louis XVI as the equivalent of what Bishop Bossuet, quoting Tertullian, called “the religion of the second majesty.”[21]

In mirrored contrast to Shapiro’s essay, John Hardman’s essay is in obvious tension with the overall thesis of the volume because it features hardly any conspiracies at all. The essay concentrates on the royal court where its central figure did not, in Hardman’s estimation, do much conspiring. Or perhaps this essay is most in line with the book’s overall thesis because most of the conspiracies against the constitution and France attributed to him by the revolutionaries would in this case have been pure products of their conspiratorial mindedness.

In defense of this portrayal of Louis XVI, Hardman takes the war into the camp of another event that has been asked to bear the weight of the Revolution’s subsequent conspiratorial-mindedness, namely Louis XVI’s and his family’s attempt to escape from the Tuileries palace during the night of 21 June 1791.[22] Hardman argues with rather compelling evidence in hand that the king’s intention was not to flee France and seek refuge in the arms of the Austrians but rather to go under the cover of the *marquis* François-Claude-Amour *de Bouillé’s* troops to Montmédy from where he hoped to renegotiate the terms of the constitution from a position of safety from Parisians along the lines laid out in the proclamation he left behind. Although conceding that the secrecy of the royal family’s flight from Paris made it conspiratorial and that the king would have had to cross the border if his attempt to renegotiate the terms of the constitution had not succeeded, Hardman nonetheless contends that the king’s attempt to negotiate changes in the constitution was no more conspiratorial than the Girondin-dominated Legislative Assembly’s more successful attempt to destroy the constitutional monarchy by leading France into a war designed to make the royal pair’s position untenable.

After similarly exculpating Louis XVI of any conspiratorial complicity with France’s enemies after the beginning of the war with Austria and Prussia in April 1792—the queen is another matter—Hardman concludes that the king’s most serious conspiracy was to have punctiliously abided by the letter of the constitution in order to demonstrate its impracticability instead of lending it the initial prestige of his royal authority in order to make it work. To which observation it might be added that what most made the constitution not only unworkable but unconscionable for Louis XVI was the part of it that reformed the Gallican Church, especially after the papacy’s condemnation of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in 1791 and the beginning of the schism between “constitutional” and “refractory” clergies that lasted until the Napoleonic concordat of 1801. The king’s bad conscience on this subject obliged him to have public recourse to the ministry of “refractory” priests and, therefore, brought him into a kind of open conspiracy against the ecclesiastical part of it, if indeed an open conspiracy is not a contradiction in terms.

Of course the divisions within Catholicism on display after the Civil Constitution only refracted and exacerbated pre-revolutionary ones that, along with other sources, perforce take the quest for the origins of the Revolution's conspiratorial-mindedness back to the Old Regime. And for those essays—the majority of them—willing to acknowledge continuities as well as discontinuities between the Old Regime and the Revolution, Peter Campbell's essay provides a magnificent exordium.

While Furet, too, recognized the Old Regime's shadow in the Revolution's attempt to create a democratic form of indivisible sovereignty, Campbell takes his research to the workaday politics of the Old Regime which, like Tocqueville, Furet tended to downplay.<sup>[23]</sup> There, Campbell finds conspiracies and rumors of conspiracies—or rather more rumors of conspiracies than conspiracies, since he acknowledges with Yves Marie Bercé that “real” conspiracies against royal authority were in decline.<sup>[24]</sup> What seems to have distinguished the age of Louis the “[less than] well loved” from that of Louis the Sun King is that, with inevitable exceptions, perceived conspiracies by the king or at least his ministers against the “nation” tended to replace noble or provincial conspiracies against the king. When, for example, Jansenists perceived a Jesuit plot behind Damiens's apparent attempt on the life of Louis XV in 1757, the motive attributed to the Jesuits was their failure to transform Louis XV into the anti-parlementary despot they hoped he would be. Even such popular perceptions of plots as the attempt to kidnap children to send to the French colonies in 1750 and to induce famine by hoarding grain for higher prices in the 1760s and 1770s got laid at the feet of the monarchy rather than that of the aristocracy.<sup>[25]</sup> Well might the monarchy have retaliated when, in 1771, it began to put pamphleteers up to accusing the magistracy of an “aristocratic” plot to undermine the monarchy. In inventing it—if plotters there were, they were not self-consciously aristocratic—the monarchy also revived the “aristocratic” plot just in time for the Revolution to take it further.

Another of Campbell's contributions is the distillation of his own research in an area where Furet pointed but did not go—to the royal court, that is, and to its political praxis and culture. Here if anywhere was the native habitat of the aristocratic plot, which after the relative domestication of the high nobility by Louis XIV and its transformation into full-time courtiers at Versailles, typically took the form of familial and factional competition for power, position, and pension. It is of course one of Campbell's signature contentions that this court society was intrinsic to royal governance, and that while the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries indeed witnessed elements of the rise of an increasingly professional, bureaucratic or “administrative monarchy,” the continuance of social position, noble clientage, and court faction made the Old Regime into a “baroque state” until the very end.<sup>[26]</sup> Since factions were always involved, and success depended on secrecy and masking intentions until the moment to act arrived, court politics were almost conspiratorial by definition. So secretive were court politics that they lacked their own literature unless it was that of the voyeuristic *vie secrète* and made do without a recognizable language or discourse unless it was that of putdown and wit.

The eighteenth century did, however, have a vocabulary to describe these politics, and while terms such as *conspiration* and *conjuración* remained for the most part pejorative, Campbell finds that others such as *brigue* and *cabale* were less pejorative and described politics as they were. What changed in the course of the eighteenth century was the evaluation of the practices so described. What passed as normal at the beginning of the century came to be perceived as ever more damaging to the state as the century went on. Campbell plausibly attributes this gradual pejoration of court politics as usual to the exposure of a growing reading public to the invidious contrast between workaday court intrigue as represented by supposedly first-hand historical memoirs, on the one hand, and the ideal of transparent and disinterested republican “virtue” as depicted in histories of ancient Republican Sparta or Ciceronian Rome and in the works of proto-republican philosophes, on the other. To this quest for “virtue” and transparency might be added the century-long Jansenist call for “Christian sincerity” or openness as opposed to the Jesuits' constant recourse to unthinking “despotic” authority in both church and state in order to erect their own “universal monarchy” at the expense of both church and state.<sup>[27]</sup>

The one thing missing from Campbell's account is the Tocquevillian emphasis on the growth of the administrative state as such. If, in the eighteenth century, the state succeeded in getting the better of the sort of aristocratic and court-based conspiracies that had still plagued it in the age of Richelieu, Mazarin, and Louis XIV as a minor, it is hard to believe that this success was without relation to the growth of the sheer power and presence of the state, however shot through it may still have been with elements of the "baroque." And if, in the eighteenth century, the conspiratorial thinking that began to replace real conspiracies perceived the state as the principal source of conspiracies, that perception is not without relation to the growth of an ever more pervasive administration in which, as memorably stated in Lamoignon de Malesherbes's classic indictment, no person without an influential patron was so obscure as to be free from the depredations of a minor clerk nor any such clerk a known enough quantity not to be able to hide behind the authority of the king in whose name he issued his orders.[28] Far from incompatible, Campbell's emphasis on the anachronistic features of court society and, say, Michel Antoine's emphasis on the growth of the administrative state are complementary.[29] As much as secretive influence, the sheer expansion of the state's activities and concomitant contact with those ever more directly affected by it invited conspiratorial thinking as way of explaining its effects, much as Gordon Wood maintained.

And in the glaring light of the Revolution's new standard of virtue, it became as important to unmask the meddlesome minister as the corrupt leftover courtier. Articulating one of the chief themes or theses of this book, the end point of Campbell's analysis leaves the Old Regime itself as the only barrier to the avalanche of virtuous denunciations that became so typical of revolutionary political culture as described by Furet and Hunt, or Marisa Linton in this volume.

If the politics of "unmasking" is the form of conspiratorial-mindedness most typical of those directly engaged in the political process and most evident in the Terror, popular fears of a famine engineered by those in a position to profit from high prices of basic commodities—the famine plot—is arguably the form of conspiratorial thinking most characteristic of the many and of the beginning of the Revolution. Trying to widen the social focus of analysis by narrowing it to Paris, David Andress in his essay uses this form of conspiratorial thinking as a point of entry into an examination of the political culture of the Revolution itself, from its immediate origins in 1789 until the September massacres and prelude to the Terror in 1792. Like the "unmasking" of false patriots, the denunciation of famine plots had roots in the Old Regime, as did the fear of paid "brigands"—another of the conspiracies prominent in Andress's analysis. During the Old Regime, however, those who perceived these plots came from different social groups, as those who rioted in reaction to famine plots found themselves denounced as brigands paid by one interested group or another. Nor even then was either group of putative plotters unconnected to high politics, as those who rioted against high prices during the "flour war" of 1775 fell prey to accusations that they acted as agents of the prince de Conti or of ex-Jesuits. Although occupying opposite sides of the political spectrum at the time, these two groups shared an interest in bringing down the reformist ministry of the "philosophic" controller general Turgot.

As Andress points out, both fears thus cross the divide between Old Regime and Revolution in that they presuppose features unique to the eighteenth century: the existence of an international market in grain and a thirty percent rise in population that left France with a population of poor too numerous for the state to handle. Both also therefore presuppose a state large and tentacular enough to be blamed for grain shortages and brigands. During the eighteenth century, the "people" often denounced the king himself as a hoarder of and profiteer in grain.

But in Andress's analysis, exclusive connections between the *menu peuple* and even these sorts of conspiratorial thinking and non-elites fare little better than such connections between conspiratorial thinking and the Revolution *tout court*. While the members of Paris's Saint-Roch electoral section may have been closer to "the people" than the deputies in the National Assembly, they nonetheless constituted a social elite. And although they tracked down evidence of the hoarding or willful

destruction of grain or bread, they also investigated putative conspiracies of all sorts, including such “elite” ones as intercepted letters addressed to the king’s brothers and the duc d’Orléans. Indeed, in Andress’s consideration, conspiratorial thinking “ricocheted up and down the social and political ladder” and defies any attempt to locate a social or political level immune to it (pp. 88-91). A similar connectedness characterizes the kinds of conspiracies perceived, as fears of grain-hoarding, the activity of hired brigands, the existence of aristocratic and clerical opposition to the Revolution, and the intentions of the royal court became acts in elaborate and competitive conspiratorial scenarios. Parisians often acted out these scenarios in advance of ex-post-facto explanation, making it all but impossible to distinguish between action and commentary. Action and reaction reached caricatural proportions well before the king’s flight from Paris when, on the single bizarre day “of daggers,” the national guardsmen saw double duty, first to prevent men from the Saint-Antoine quarter from dismantling what they took to be the municipal government’s plot to remake the chateau of Vincennes into a new Bastille, and then to protect the royal court both from members of the nobility and the “people,” both of whom suspected the other of conspiring to harm or take control of the state in the form of the king.

The last dichotomy to fall victim to Andress’s narrative is any distinction within the Revolution between before and after Varennes, at least where Paris is concerned, as the royal family’s flight from the Tuileries Palace on 21 June 1791 all too predictably fit into and took on immediate meaning from pre-existent systems of conspiratorial interpretation. Empirically the richest in the book, Andress’s chapter ends with a convincing crescendo on the subject of Paris’s prison massacres of 2-6 September 1792, which he interprets as the long sought reckoning with the “brigands” in conspiratorial league with aristocrats and non-juring priests, all of whom—those imprisoned for criminal offenses in the role of brigands—found themselves selected from among others for the administration of impromptu street justice.

What is most new for Andress about conspiratorial-mindedness in the Revolution as distinct from the Old Regime seems to be the possibility for acting out conspiratorial scripts by groups heretofore excluded from a public sphere that, given the volatility of a free press and the proximity or accessibility of the legislators, circulated political rumor as well as fact at a far greater speed than had been the case under the Old Regime. What one might most obviously add to this cursory diagnosis is that, in contrast to the Old Regime, the shape of the new state was daily at stake along with the place of Catholicism in it. Although Andress does not underline it, nothing is more salient in the evidence in his chapter than the leap in conspiratorial thinking after the Revolution added about fifty thousand Frenchmen to the number of its enemies by ending the church as a separate corps with the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and by requiring all would-be holders of benefices to swear an oath of loyalty to it. In Paris, the active search for brigands in boarding houses seems to have begun as an attempt to prevent paid ruffians from deterring Paris parish clergy from taking the ill-fated oath. And a full month before the king attempted to flee the Tuileries palace Parisians already perceived a royal conspiracy in the king’s decision to take communion from a non-juring priest on Palm Sunday, whereupon crowds prevented the royal couple from leaving the Tuileries Palace for Saint Cloud—the real origin of the king’s decision to risk his kingship in an attempt at flight about two months later.[30]

As it happens, the defection of a large percentage of the French clergy from the cause of the Revolution was also decisive for the extension of governmental searches for conspiracies from the cities into the countryside and from urban to rural populations. While peasants had long suspected governmental authorities as well as “aristocrats” of plotting to profit from high prices of grain at their expense, the Revolution’s drastic reform of the French Catholic Church added peasants along with their priests to the list of possible conspirators against the state. Included in the revolutionized state as “passive citizens” but often attached to the previous parish structures as well as their priests, some peasants followed priests who refused to take the oath to the civil constitution into active opposition to the new state when it replaced these priests with oath-taking “intruders” from elsewhere. This much was true

even in the relatively peaceful southwestern corner of France studied in Jill Maciak Walshaw's essay. What was new to the revolutionary mix was the possibility of peasants being misled by conspiratorial priests in contrast to peasants being misled by conspiratorial nobles—a combination common enough during the entire Old Regime. If and when peasants “conspired” for religious reasons during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, they followed Protestant pastors and nobles and not priests, while in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century the peasantry stayed largely clear of Jansenist forms of religious protest.

Most salient in Walshaw's chapter on the Revolution in the countryside is the old rather than the new. As did the Old Regime monarchy, the various revolutionary regimes construed “seditious discourse” as a form of conspiracy against the state, the only differences being that the crime was now one of *lèse nation* rather than of *lèse majesté* and it came to include more peasants than it had in the past. Although the Old Regime's concerted search for *mauvais discours* or seditious propos in the wake of Robert-Francois Damiens's stabbing of Louis XV in 1757 and the years that followed occasionally reached day laborers or inebriated soldiers in countryside cabarets, it did so only rarely.[31] And if, in Walshaw's account, peasants guilty of seditious propos against the Revolution tended to get the benefit of doubt when the push of denunciation came to the shove of any actual trial, it was for reasons similarly rooted in the social prejudices of the Old Regime. The regnant assumption in both regimes was that no one from such a lowly social station could have possibly given birth to reasons for political opposition to the government by means of his or her native intellectual resources and, therefore, had to have been put up to the seditious talk by someone higher up on the social ladder. The real target of a judicial enquiry was the conspiring priest or noble, not the peasant pawn. The main difference introduced by the Revolution was to give those so accused a trial and a sentence of one kind or another instead of putting them into the Bastille or its provincial counterparts, where they might languish for years on end, sometimes lost from view for life. Some of these were beggars, peddlers, and deserters—the social stuff that went into the making of the “brigands” of the revolutionary period. Whether under the Old Regime or during the Revolution—another continuity—only “brigands” apparently thought that the brigands were not conspiring.

Although afraid of conspiring brigands, property-owning peasants also stood opposed to urban sans-culottes whose demands for lower food prices, more terror against hoarders, and efforts to stamp out priestly “superstition” ran directly counter to the interests of peasants who needed decent prices for the crops they grew and remained attached to their parishes and priests. While needing to retain the peasantry within the revolutionary coalition, the revolutionary leadership just as obviously needed the support of the urban sans culottes, especially after the onset of war in 1792 made it more than ever dependent on the only social constituency consistently enthusiastic about that war. The stresses and strains endured by the revolutionary leadership in the course of performing that social balancing act is of course one of the factors going into the creation of a policy of Terror that, demanded by the sans-culottes, also terrorized the leadership into perceiving conspiracies within the revolutionary coalition itself. And unlike peasants, those at the helm of the Revolution in Paris did not enjoy the benefit of the presumption of innocent ignorance for the political opinions they professed, the political positions they took, or the company they kept. If conspiracies they perceived, there was, as Lynn Hunt has observed, no one to blame but themselves.

### III. Beyond the Terror

Blame each other the leaders did, and with lethal effect. The subject of “conspiracies real and imagined” within the leadership of the Revolution takes us to Marisa Linton's essay on that subject—and into the heart of the conspiratorial darkness. To be sure, the deadly process whereby the revolutionary leadership “devoured its own children”—Monarchiens, Feuillants, Girondins, Hébertist Ultras, Dantonist Citras, and finally Robespierre and Saint-Just themselves—arguably began as early as late 1788. But Linton is probably wise to limit the scope of her essay to the Jacobin-dominated culmination

of the process in 1793-94. What is unique to this period—and this is Linton’s main point—is the total absorption of private life into the public sphere and the concomitant politicization of everything and the everyday, with the result that the literally indifferent itself became suspect and subject to the accusation of being conspiratorial. While conspiratorial thinking arguably played a role in the making of the circumstances used by Jacobins to justify this state of affairs, it is on the circumstances themselves—the foreign war, the Vendéen and federalist revolts, the demands of the Parisian sans-culottes—that Linton tends to place the emphasis. Anxiety, fear, pragmatism and political rivalry in an ever more circumscribed arena—these are the factors in Linton’s account that, as much as if not more than ideology in isolation, sharpened and hardened the Jacobin capacity to perceive conspiracies, some of which may have really existed. So in the classic standoff between the roles of ideology and circumstance as the key to the Terror, Linton inclines toward the side of circumstance, although in Robespierre’s case she has to grant the preeminence of ideology.

These choices probably situate Linton’s account closest to Tackett’s take on the conspiratorial phenomenon, but she is otherwise wise to keep her options relatively open. Depending on exactly what aspect of the process is singled out for analysis, a plausible case can be made for each. Was the Terror a time of extraordinary stress and strain, engendering weak self-identities and an exaggerated sense of the conspiratorial power of others? Nothing can be more certain than the unstable sense of collective identity on the part of the leaders trying to govern a fledgling republic based on a fragile coalition in the wake of the fall of a thousand-year-old monarchy and amidst war with the rest of Europe and, after June 1793, much of France itself. All of this is grist for Tackett’s interpretation, as is the existence of some real counter-revolutionary conspiracies. Was the Terror a period of bewildering complexity, tempting those charged with controlling it to understand it by means of explanations on a human scale? Nothing is less doubtful than the unprecedented complexity of the Convention’s task of reining in the aberrant departmental and municipal administrations while provisioning a million-man army with armaments and horses as well as the cities with food. Already good for the eighteenth century world as a whole, Wood’s theory of an enlightened century’s attempt to explain complexity in secular terms would seem to hold a fortiori for the terroristic period, all the more so in the divine void left by the Terror’s campaign to “de-Christianize” France. Was the Terror not a war against a European coalition and revolt at home that required a national will as single as the monarchy’s had been, tempting those in control to construe all pursuit of private interest as faction and the fact of disagreement as conspiratorial? Here Linton’s emphasis is close to that of Furet, whose thesis of the quest for absolutist indivisibility in democratic form never seems more compelling than when applied to Terror’s immolation of the revolutionary leadership via the progressive “unmasking” of supposedly self-interested traitors. Was the Terror not also the culmination of the revolutionary project of substituting a regenerated citizenry for any political know-how inherited from the monarchical past, leaving this project dependent on an ideology of a mythic present? Never does the need for equally mythic enemies seem more compelling than during the terroristic culmination of the revolutionary refusal to legitimize “parties” redolent of past politics, as Lynn Hunt’s theory would stress.

In line with the argument being developed here, Linton’s account of the Revolution’s holocaust of conspiratorial denunciation of the year II seems susceptible to two additional observations. The first concerns the obvious but unstated importance of the state. Although this phase of the Revolution certainly witnessed a struggle among groups and individuals for control over the state, the goal of controlling the state in the name of the people never prevented them from seeing the state as itself the source of conspiracies. Nothing is more telling in this respect than the Committee of Public Safety’s report to the Convention of 10 October 1793 that, in the very act of requesting the Convention to declare the government “revolutionary until the peace,” did not hesitate to denounce the government as “a perpetual conspiracy against the present [revolutionary] order of things.”[32] By the “government” here the committee’s well-known reporter Louis-Antoine-Léon de Saint-Just meant the sprawling bureaucracy vulnerable to being colonized by the “enemies of the people” against whom he hoped to pit

the Convention's purified committees. But as events were to show, it was no easier to maintain the purity of these committees than of the outworks of the "government" in the departments.

Second, the form of the conspiracies denounced began increasingly to resemble the religious conspiracies perceived during the Old Regime. Like the Jansenist "party" and Jesuit society in each other's conspiratorial "*imaginaire*," the Brissot and the Brissotins denounced by the Camille Desmoulins and the Jacobins or Hébert and the Ultras denounced by Robespierre and the committees had conspired from the very beginning of the group as faction, the faction having never had any other purpose than to conspire. And just as Jansenists and Jesuits regarded each other as all the more dangerous because both disguised themselves as Catholics all the better to destroy Catholicism from within, so had Girondins and Ultras and Citras effectively masked themselves as true patriots and partisans of "the" Revolution the better to corrode revolutionary regeneration from within—to perpetrate counter-revolution, in fact. And although religious truth occupied the foreground of the Jansenist and Jesuit conspiracies while political power was at the center of the revolutionary ones, the two seriously overlapped, as Jansenists and Jesuits also accused each other of conspiring in view of universal empire or of a republicanized state respectively and the revolutionary "parties" accused each other of conspiring against the "Truth" of the Revolution. A certain Rousseavian religiosity accompanied the culmination of the Revolution's self-immolation of conspiratorial accusation, ending in Robespierre's campaign against "aristocratic" atheism and in favor the cult of the Supreme Being.

Altered to fit the new circumstances of 1789, the anti-Jansenist variant of the religious plot went into the making of counter-revolutionary theories about the origins of the Revolution almost as soon as the Revolution began—or even before, as Darrin McMahan demonstrates in his book on the counter-Enlightenment.[33] Long at work for all who observed it, the Protestant, Jansenist, and encyclopedic plot remained alive in head and members in the form of the cooperation between Antoine Barnave, Armand-Gaston Camus, and the comte de Mirabeau in the National Assembly; while the same plot assumed a more abstract form for Augustin Barruel whose *Question nationale* traced the pedigree of the notion of national sovereignty from the conciliarists to Protestants to Jansenists and finally to philosophes. Barruel would go on to give definitive form to the Counter-Revolution's conspiratorial account of the origins of the Revolution in his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme* published in 1797, by which time freemasons and philosophes had all but taken the place of the original religious plotters.[34]

The comte d'Antraigues also figures in Simon Burrows's essay on the *émigrés*, although as a real counter-revolutionary plotter and planner in 1797 rather than the conspiracy theorist reacting to the Revolution's ecclesiastical legislation in 1791. In some respects it is unfortunate that *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* does not contain an essay devoted exclusively to counter-revolutionary conspiratorial theory because counter-revolutionaries were far more influential and successful as theorists than as practitioners. Yet Burrows's decision to concentrate on *émigré* conspiratorial activity rather than thought makes sense in that it was the threat of conspiratorial activity rather than theory that spooked the revolutionaries, scaring them into preemptive conspiratorial activity of their own. So after noting conspiratorial theory's ideological function in assuring counter-revolutionaries that the Revolution was thinly rooted and therefore reversible, Simon Burrows's chapter bears down on the counter-revolutionary conspiratorial plots and plans such as those undertaken or underwritten by the king's brother, the comte d'Artois, and the former minister of Paris and of the king's household, Louis-Auguste Le Tonnelier, the baron de Breteuil. Paultry at best, the evidence that counter-revolutionary plots within France ever posed a serious threat to the success of the Revolution provides scant succor to the theory that the Revolution's parabola of paranoia followed that of real conspiracies, although Tackett allows that after the failed flight of the king and then the onset of war, the Revolution's conspiratorial-mindedness took on a life of its own. To be sure, Burrows contends that the revolutionaries' belief in the "reality" of the counter-revolutionary conspiratorial threat was "far more than a result of [their]

own fantasies.” (p. 151). But after all the evidence has been sifted and weighed, and even allowing for the loss of some of it, the “result” does not seem to weigh very impressively in the evidential scales.

In Burrows’s telling, the real danger consisted of connections between the states at war with France and effectively disguised agents within revolutionary France. Whatever real danger these in turn posed seems to have peaked, not during the Terror, but toward the very end of the Directorial Republic circa 1797 and during the Napoleonic consulate, when counter-revolutionary efforts and money managed to win over the general Jean-Charles Pichegru and may even have tempted the Director Jean-Paul Barras and Napoleon’s minister of police Joseph Fouché. In contrast, the only real agents of *émigrés* or foreign powers that figured in the “foreign plot” that preoccupied Robespierre at the height of the Terror seem to be the murky baron de Batz, who acted in concert with the *émigré* Bretueil, and Pierre-Jean Berthold, comte de Proli, an Austrian agent. The chief mischief perpetrated by these rare real conspirators was perhaps to have used means of financial corruption to discredit deputies from the Dantonist and Hébertist sides alike as well as to have lent a certain substance to the belief in the reality of a “foreign plot” by virtue of their existence alone. But since, in the mind of Robespierre and his closest associates, the fact of financial corruption alone was evidence of a preference for factional self-interest over virtue and this in turn of conspiracy against the republic of virtue, the main achievement of these conspirators may have been to help the remaining revolutionary leaders perceive enough conspiracies and conspirators among themselves to eliminate themselves as well as real enemies of the Revolution from the scene.

However dangerous they may or may not have been, the agents of *émigrés* or of foreign powers on whose activities Burrows’s chapter throws light have the distinction of being the main “real” conspirators against the institutions of the Revolution until after the Terror. In contrast to their incompetence, *sans-culottes* and their allies conspired far more successfully. Planned in secretive central committees of delegates of Parisian sections, units of the National Guard and revolutionary clubs, the famous *journées* of 10 August 1792 directed against the Tuileries Palace and of 31 May-2 June 1793 against the Girondin presence in the Convention both bear the earmarks of successful conspiracies. But if, as seems certain, the *sans-culottes* did not consider themselves to be conspirators, they nonetheless shared that conviction with their less successful *émigré* compatriots. For in the counter-revolutionary mind lurked the conviction that, since the Revolution was itself a product of a conspiracy, opposition to it in the interests of the “real” France could not really be conspiratorial. Conspiracy thus shared the fate of “faction” that, in France, never achieved the status of a theoretical legitimization such as that in James Madison’s tenth Federalist letter.

Such was the case at least until 1796 when Gracchus Babeuf hatched an unsuccessful conspiracy against the Directorial government from the side of the post-Thermidorean Jacobin Left that, bypassing the notion of faction, made a clear case for the legitimacy of conspiracy in the interests of republican government and the “general good.” It is the genius of Laura Mason’s essay on Gracchus Babeuf to recognize this aspect of the originality of Babeuf and his associate Filippo Buonarroti’s famous “conspiracy of equals,” an aspect heretofore obscured by Babeuf’s more famous commitment to the communistic ideal of public or state ownership of property. Rather than the immediate implementation of any such state of affairs, it was really the restoration of the republic as envisioned by the democratic but stillborn constitution of 1793 that Babeuf and his associates aimed at by means of what, in their trial, they freely acknowledged was a “conspiracy” in 1796. That the American Revolution ended by legitimizing “faction” while the French Revolution wound up legitimizing “conspiracy” may say much about the difference in political culture between these two sister republics. While the Directory had recourse to extra-legal means to quash even electoral challenges from the neo-Jacobin Left and the royalist Right as “factions,” Babeuf and Buonarroti gave rise to a principled republican conspiratorial tradition that largely took the place of the counter-revolutionary one until after the solidification of the Third Republic in 1877.

In addition to the discovery of a conspiratorial republican as well as a proto-communistic Babeuf, Mason calls renewed attention to the classical republican as well as to the “utopian” communistic Mably. Recently rescued from oblivion by the work of J. Kent Wright and Keith Michael Baker, the classical republicanism of Gabriel Bonnot de Mably was as much of an inspiration to Babeuf as was the communistic aspect of abbé’s thought.[35] With Mably and the republican Machiavelli too, Babeuf’s commitment to republican government went hand-in-hand with a deep neo-Augustinian pessimism about human nature and the consequent need for “will” to take advantage of fleeting circumstances and, in the direst of these, to seize power in the interests of the public good. Mason’s analysis—if not Mason herself—therefore situates Babeuf as far closer to the Enlightenment’s civic humanist strain as described by John Pocock—and Wood—than to the celebration of commerce, civility, and inevitable “progress” as represented in France by Condorcet and recently defined as the Enlightenment in a Scottish and Neapolitan setting by John Robertson and others.[36] For Mably and Babeuf, as for Augustine, the all too human *libido dominandi* or “will do dominate” made each and every sort of government all too vulnerable to a “fall” into despotism.[37]

These two varieties of enlightenment form the starting point for Thomas Kaiser’s essay, the last in the volume, on the course of the related concepts of conspiracy and revolution in the Revolution’s changing conception of its place in history from its beginnings in 1789 until the Napoleonic consulate of 1799-1804—less a conclusion, in fact, than a brilliant cadenza. If, in Kaiser’s telling, the Revolution replaced the Old Regime’s multiple “revolutions” with the singular “Revolution” that aimed, among other things, at replacing despotism with political liberty, it inherited very different scenarios from the political thought of the Old Regime. In that of Turgot, Condorcet, and the encyclopedic French Enlightenment, the inevitable advance of knowledge and retreat of ignorance would spill over into the moral and political realms, banishing “despotism” along with the ignorance that sustained it. In the other scenario, the far more pessimistic one of the humanist or classical republican strain in the Enlightenment, political liberty was always a fragile and precarious acquisition, ever subject to human inattention, the force of *libido dominandi* and the wiles of despotic conspiracy. The revolutionary project represented a very imperfect synthesis of these two. The goal of political liberty was really a latecomer to the agenda of the scientific and civil enlightenment, while the civic humanistic strain—Rousseau’s is the most flagrant case—had been short on enthusiasm for the arts and sciences.

In his account of the ensuing tension and competition between these two enlightenments among those committed to the Revolution, Kaiser gives due weight to the role of “external” circumstances such as the resistance of the nobility to the Third Estate’s initial demands, the existence of real counter-revolutionary conspiratorial activity within the royal court, and the king’s attempted flight from the Tuileries. It goes without saying that these circumstances also included the threat of invasion from without and defeat from within after France went to war with just about all of Europe at the same time that the Vendée and numbers of cities rose in revolt in 1793. What is most original in Kaiser’s rendition of these circumstances is the emphasis on the weakness of France’s alliance system as the country went into the Revolution and the extent to which its alliance with Austria had soured well before the Revolution, with very adverse consequences for the reputation of Marie-Antoinette. Kaiser’s cadenza also concedes to Shapiro and Tackett the immediate impacts on the incidence of conspiratorial thinking of Paris’s foiling of the putative ministerial coup on 12-14 July and the king’s attempted flight from Paris on 21 June 1791.

But in the end, ideology prevails, and the perception of conspiracy becomes a reality more destructive than the thing itself. Despite being enshrined in the Revolution’s festivals, its new calendar, and its post-Thermidorean sponsorship of Condorcet’s sketch of the progress of the human mind, the Revolution conceived as the perennial if episodic crisis of liberty got the better of the conception of it as the inevitable triumph of liberty, as the revolutionaries perceived and pursued so many conspirators and conspiracies within their very own ranks that the concept of the Revolution itself became contaminated

with the notion of conspiracy, much as the counter-revolutionaries had always seen it. Faced with the task of ending the Terror and distinguishing the Revolution from conspiracy, the Thermidorean Convention and the Directory squandered the opportunity to end the Revolution as constant crisis when it exaggerated the conspiratorial threat from the Babeuvian Left and later and repeatedly conspired against both the royalist Right and neo-Jacobin Left in pursuit of the inglorious goal of staying in power. Nor did the Napoleonic consulate really turn a new page when, itself the product of a conspiracy, it knowingly misused the evidence of a real royalist plot in order to invent a Jacobin conspiracy and to ship more than a hundred innocent bystanders off to the “dry guillotine” in French Guinea.

#### IV. Theories of Conspiracy Revisited and Revised

But Kaiser’s essay is not exactly a conclusion and, apart from the point about the Revolution’s criminalization of politics as usual, the editors offer no formulaic hypothesis to compete with Furet’s theory of conspiratorial mindedness as the legacy of the Old Regime in the Revolution, Hunt’s as the necessary corollary of the French Revolution’s opposition to the secrecy of the Old Regime, or Tackett’s as symptomatic of the most stressful periods of revolutions anywhere and everywhere. Anchored as they are in a combination of rich research and close analysis, these essays tend to undermine each of these theories in one way or another. Among them, however, Wood’s as secularized causal thinking as applied to the early-modern world of human events may emerge the least worse for the wear, if only because it is the most general and least vulnerable in a book devoted to conspiracy in the French Revolution in particular. Yet it is too specific in the estimation of the editors who, noting that ninety percent of the titles containing the words *complot*, *conjuraton*, and *conspiration* in the British Library and Bibliothèque nationale date from after the French Revolution, suggest that the “paranoid style of politics” is characteristic of the political culture of modernity as a whole (p. 12).

Something quite persuasive nonetheless clings to Wood’s combination of generality and specificity. The phenomenon of conspiratorial thinking seems far too general to confine to the American and French revolutions. At the same time, it seems too specific to make it applicable to all of political modernity or to all revolutions generally. Something “foreign,” not quite modern, also rings in the ears of the twenty-first-century reader when confronted with conspiratorial political thinking in early modern texts. Whatever its nature, this alien quality inhabits texts well before as well as immediately after the American and French revolutions. While it is not clear when it gives way to the “modern,” it clearly extends in the reverse chronological direction back through the seventeenth century, perhaps to Machiavelli and the “new monarchies.”[38]

Is this foreign quality due to the fear for liberty’s fragility so typical of the civic humanist or proto-republican tradition of political thought? While this mode of political thought was far more widespread than Wood or Pocock may once have thought, its ubiquity does not account for the equal if opposite conspiracies of those committed to the defense of “legitimate” authority in state and church. The source of this foreign quality more probably resides in the relative weakness of any counter-conspiratorial discourse that, today, tends to prevail in high journalistic commentary on events. While, as Wood himself concedes, the eighteenth century’s new science of political economy could account very well for the wide discrepancy between individual intentions and collective outcomes, that science did not yet pack much punch in the give-and-take of the century’s public sphere. And all but missing from the century of lights is anything resembling the individual and social psychology that would later make room for motivations other than conscious and intentional ones.[39] Little if anything cushioned the clash of one set of intentions against others. When in 1757—to exploit his example one last time—Damiens thrust the blade of a penknife between the fourth and fifth ribs of the King of France, virtually nobody thought that he could have acted without the instigation of those socially qualified to have political intentions. Where crowds and their actions were concerned, regnant explanations tended either to glorify them as the “people” in action or to decompose them into individuals paid to do the

bidding of conspiratorial others. By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, a psychology of the isolated and eccentrically politicized “rational imbecile” was available as an explanation for lone assassins, as was a fledgling if rather crude crowd theory for the inchoately motivated behavior of groups. Conspiratorial explanations no more disappeared than did the providential ones they supposedly replaced, but they ceased to occupy the discursive field uncontested.

If, however, the applicability of Wood’s theory to both revolutionary and calm times can be salvaged, and the explanatory economy of its combination of conspiratorial thinking with “enlightenment” retained—the theory’s two chief virtues—then the essays in this book suggest that it needs updating in certain ways. Among these ways, first of all, is perhaps its definition of “enlightenment,” which needs to be explicitly modified to include the enlargement of the “public space” opened up by the expansion of print media and a reading public that, while culminating in the century of lights, also characterizes the early modern period from Machiavelli to Maistre. Although the fear of a famine pact and “brigands” to enforce it may have been able to travel as rumor by word of mouth, it was only by means of print that the elaborate and lengthily premeditated plots perceived by revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries against church and state could travel from place to place and perpetuate themselves over time. At the same time, the new pervasiveness of print was bound to heighten the suspicion of oral culture, as conspiratorial intentions were bound to hide themselves there. It was behind doors, and by word of mouth, that Jansenists and Jesuits imagined each other plotting the subversion of religion, church and state, even if print and print alone enabled a Jesuit to commemorate the centennial of one denunciation of a Jansenist plot by demonstrating how it had unfolded in the course of the entire century past. And it was similarly over dinner that Jacques-Pierre Brissot’s “cabal” supposedly plotted its unpatriotic policies, at least according to Camille Desmoulins’s printed *Brissot démasqué*. In a word, Wood’s enlightenment bears updating with the help of Eisenstein’s as modified in turn by that of Jürgen Habermas and his many disciples—and as amended, finally, by Habermas’s equally numerous critics.[40]

Second, although already stressing the rise in population, Wood’s model might also explicitly incorporate the related expansion of national and international markets and the threats both posed to local access to grain and flour in times of bad harvest or what was called *cherté* in France. For the popular panics associated with grain shortages produced the early modern period’s stock-in-trade kind of conspiratorial thinking—the famine pact plot—that attributed the periodical rise in prices to producers who hoarded grain in order to drive up and profit from these prices. Coinciding with the heyday of early-modern conspiratorial thinking from the late sixteenth to the early nineteenth century, the famine plot peaked with the state’s experimentation with liberalizing the grain trade in the eighteenth century, most especially in France where the monarchy’s fiscal record did not inspire the sort of confidence enjoyed by the King-in-Parliament across the English Channel. More or less confined to the “people,” the famine-plot nonetheless drifted socially upwards and combined with other forms of conspiratorial thinking in times of political crisis—in 1770 and 1776, for example, or during the French Revolution as described by Andress in this volume. If the French Revolution is to stand out from the general early modern backdrop in this respect, that salience must consist in the fusion of popular with more elite forms of conspiratorial thinking in the elaborate plot theories that play so prominent a role in the essays in this book.

Similarly coinciding with the heyday of conspiratorial thinking is that of the would-be “absolute” state that, from the “new” Renaissance monarchies until after the French Revolution, also intervened in the markets before it just as controversially tried *laissez faire*. Although this enlarged state figures as a feature in Wood’s picture of early modern complexity, it needs greater prominence near the theoretical prow of Wood’s model if it is to remain entirely seaworthy in revolutionary and calm waters alike. So long as this state was largely “patrimonial,” its politics centered in a court, and the extension of its administrative reach remained both limited and contested, the control of the state became the object of the conspiracies real and perceived. But when, by the eighteenth century, Campbell’s baroque monarchy

shared space with an increasingly intrusive administrative monarchy and, as in Tocqueville's classic portrait, no church roof could be repaired without the involvement of the state, the state and its agents themselves took their places as perceived perpetrators of plots and conspiracies as well as being the object of them, even of famine plots.<sup>[41]</sup> Both sets of conspirators became subject to unmasking, the faceless *commis* who hid behind the authority of an unknowing king as well as the courtiers and other sorts of factions who sought to expropriate the state and its resources.

It goes without saying that the perception of conspiracy reached its apogee during periods of political crisis—the most critical such period being that of the French Revolution—when not only the control over but the shape of the state was at stake. Provided that this apogee is regarded as the top point in an orbit that encompasses the whole century of lights, and that the Revolution's continuity as well as discontinuity vis-à-vis the eighteenth century as described by Wood is respected, the Revolution may be regarded the special case that Furet, Hunt, and Tackett might variously wish it to be.

Although, last but not least, Wood's argument about the replacement of divine with human intentional causes to explain change in the human affairs remains essential to any theory about the prevalence of conspiratorial thinking in the early modern period, religion had anything but disappeared during the early modern period, even the eighteenth century. In combination with both the state and enlightened culture, religion's continuing presence should be regarded as just as essential as any "enlightenment" to such a theory. If, as Carl Becker once insisted, even the eighteenth-century French philosophes were far more Christian than they knew, Becker's student Robert R. Palmer made just as valid an observation when he insisted that the eighteenth-century French defenders of Catholic Christianity were more "enlightened" than they knew.<sup>[42]</sup> Commencing in different kinds of Catholic "mystique," the plots that Jesuits and Jansenist alike attributed to each other culminated in the eighteenth century in "politique"—in plots to seize political power and shape the state. And while their Augustinian denial of free will and insistence on sin made Jansenists the least "enlightened" Catholics in Palmer's estimation, their plot theory accorded the Jesuits a will as free and efficacious in human affairs as the one they denounced as heretical when they detected it in Jesuit theology.

From the reformations of the sixteenth century until after the French Revolution, the early modern era was also that of the different religious establishments that went into the making of the era's "confessional state." While the degree of state control undoubtedly played a role in secularizing religion, the confessional or religious dimension of the identity of these states and the nations they increasingly embodied raised the stakes in the competition for deciding the character and control of these nation-states. Those who controlled the levers of power therefore controlled the elements of the national identity, chief of which remained the religious identity, thereby making the matter into one of temporal if not eternal destiny. Even in Gordon Wood's Anglo-American world, some of the century's most spectacular conspiracy theories remained conspicuously connected to religion, including the popish plot against Charles II denounced by Titus Oates in late Stuart England and another one detected by Lord George Gordon and American colonists alike a century later, this one to subvert the English throne and to surround New England with a Catholic establishment. Productive of the Gordon Riots in London in 1780 and a factor in the American Revolution in the colonies, this plot alone is eloquent testimony to the ongoing religious form and complexion of political plots in the century before the American and French revolutions.<sup>[43]</sup>

So too of course is the conspiratorial reaction to the French Revolution's threat to the Catholic confessional identity of France beginning with the National Assembly's refusal to declare Catholicism the official religion of the regenerated state in 1790 and ending with the break with the papacy over the Civil Constitution of the Clergy in the spring of 1791. Too weak to christen revolutionary France in anything like the fashion in which Parisian curés blessed the revolt of the League, the religious issue remained strong and explosive enough to derail the French Revolution into a holocaust of counter-

conspiratorial perception and denunciation after 1791. Here too the French Revolution may be regarded as an exceptional case confirming a general early modern rule.

No more than conspiracy, however, did religion disappear from the modern scene. Nor for that matter did religious explanation then take either Bossuet's parochially providential or Barruel's simplistic conspiratorial form. On the ultramontanist and pro-Jesuit side of the spectrum, the counter-revolutionary Savoyard diplomat Joseph de Maistre contrived a sophisticated form of providential explanation while observing the Directorial phase of the Revolution from the relative safety of Lausanne. While blaming the philosophes and their misuse of reason for what was "satanic" in the Terror, he assigned human free will and its repeated misuse independent roles to play in a history whereby divine cunning used repeated "falls" such as the Revolution and further self-sacrifice to effect humanity's progress toward perfection.[44] At the same time, but on the Jansenist and Gallican side of the conflict, the constitutional bishop of Blois Henri Grégoire elaborated a similarly providential explanation of the Revolution while still trying to christen its course in a still pretty terrifying Paris. Attributing the Terror to the anti-Christian reaction to Maistrian-minded counter-revolutionary refractory priests, he similarly accorded human imperfection a role to play in a divine design to realize the values of liberty, equality and fraternity under Catholic auspices in history. As a way of endowing the theological virtue of "hope" with a temporal historical dimension, modernity has done little better.

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## NOTES

[1] Jean Filleau, *Relation juridique de ce qui s'est passé à Poitiers touchant la morale des jansénistes* (Poitiers, 1654).

[2] [Pierre-Louis Patouillet] under the name of Henri-Michel Sauvage, *La réalite de projet de Bourgfontaine, démontrée par l'exécution*, 2 vols. (Paris: chez la veuve Dupuy, 1755). An anonymous editor's preface to the 1787 edition makes it clear that he has the situation in the Austrian Netherlands in mind.

[3] Pierre-François Lafiteau, *Entrétien d'Anselm et d'Isidore sur les affaires du temps* (en France, 1756), p.190. Although the Bishop of Sisteron at the time, Lafiteau had been a Jesuit and remained oriented to the order.

[4] Jean-Baptiste Raymond Becarrie de Pavie de Fourquevaux, *Catéchisme historique et dogmatique sur les contestations qui divisent maintenant l'église*, 2 vols. (La Haye: aux dépens de la société, 1729-30).

[5] *Ibid.*, 1:31; 2:77.

[6] *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques*, 2 January 1759, pp. 2, 6.

[7] Emmanuel-Louis-Henri de Launay, comte d'Antraigues, *Dénonciation aux François catholiques, des moyens employés par l'Assemblée nationale, pour détruire en France, la religion catholique* (London, 1791). See also Augustin Barruel, *Question nationale sur l'autorité et sur les droits du peuple dans le gouvernement, par M. l'abbé Barruel* (Paris, 1791); and Nicola Spedalieri, *De' diritti dell' uomo libri VI, ne' quali si dimostra, che la più custode de' medisimi nella società civile è la religione cristiana; e che però l'unico progetto utile alle presenti circostanze è di far riformare essa religione* (Assisi, 1791).

[8] Stanley Mellon, *The Political Uses of History: A Study of Historians in the French Restoration* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1958).

[9] For a development of this argument, see Dale K. Van Kley, "Religion and the Age of 'Patriot' Reform," *The Journal of Modern History* 80 (June 2008): 252-95.

[10] Gordon Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series, 39:3 (July 1982): 401-41, esp. pp. 415-16.

[11] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); and Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1969).

[12] François Furet, "La Révolution française est terminée," in *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

[13] Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 38-49.

[14] For an example chosen at random, see the "philosophical" Pidansat de Mairobert's very respectful review of several Jansenist pamphlets accusing the Jesuits of being the real authors of Chancellor

Maupeou's anti-parliamentary coup in Mathieu-François Pidansat de Mairobert, *Journal historique de la révolution opérée dans la monarchie française, par M. de Maupeou, chancelier de France*, 7 vols. London, 1774-76), 20, 24, and 28 avril and 13 décembre, 3:79-80, 88-91, 391-92.

[15] Timothy Tackett, "Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792," *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 691-713.

[16] See Dale K. Van Kley, "From the Lessons of French History to Truths for All Times and for All Peoples," in *The French Idea of Freedom: The Old Regime and the Declaration of Rights of 1789*, ed. Dale K. Van Kley (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 101-02.

[17] Crane Brinton, *A Decade of Revolution, 1789-1799* (New York: Evanston and London, 1934), pp. 33-34.

[18] Jeffrey Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); and Dale K. Van Kley, *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Old Regime, 1750-1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 163-65; and *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, 1560-1791* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 180-90.

[19] Etienne-Denis Pasquier, *Mémoires du chancelier Pasquier*, p. 27.

[20] *Journal de l'abbé Véri*, ed. Baron de Witte, 2 vols. (Paris, 1928-30), 2:8.; and cited in Cynthia A. Bouton, *The Flour War: Gender, Class, and Community in Late Ancien French Régime Society* (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania University Press, 1993), pp. 168-69.

[21] Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, *Politics Derived from the Words of Holy Scriptures*, in Keith Michael Baker, ed., *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 34.

[22] Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[23] See Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 12-27.

[24] Yves-Marie Bercé, ed., *Complots et conjurations dans l'Europe moderne: actes du colloque international, Rome, 30 Septembre* (Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 1996).

[25] Arlette Farge and Jacques Revel, *The Rules of Rebellion: Child Abductions in Paris in 1750*, trans. Claudia Miéville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[26] Peter Campbell, *Power and Politics in Old Regime France, 1720-1745* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[27] For an example chosen at random, Nicolas Petitpied, *De la sincérité chrétienne à l'égard de la signature du formulaire* (N.p., 1727).

[28] This is the upshot of Lamoignon de Malesherbes's indictment of "ministerial despotism" in the Cour des Aides's celebrated remonstrances of 6 May 1775 in Elisabeth Badinter in *Les 'remonstrances' de Malesherbes, 1771-1775* (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), pp. 169-275; and as summarized in Pierre Grosclaude, *Témoin et interprète de son temps* (Paris: Fischbacher, n.d.), pp. 312-16.

[29] Michel Antoine, *Le conseil du roi sous le règne de Louis XV* (Geneva: Droz, 1970).

[30] The most fulsome account of the Saint-Cloud incident is in Dom Henri Leclercq, *L'église constitutionnelle (juillet 1790-avril 1791)* (Paris: Letouzey et Ainé, 1934), 564-98.

[31] Dale K. Van Kley, *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Old Regime, 1750-1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 226-65.

[32] Saint-Just, "Report to the Convention on Behalf of the Committee of Public Safety (10 October 1793), in Keith Michael Baker, ed., *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*.

[33] Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[34] Augustin Barruel, *Question nationale sur l'autorité et sur les droits du peuple dans le gouvernement, par M. l'abbé Barruel* (Paris, 1791); and *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire du jacobinisme, par M. l'abbé Barruel*, 4 vols. (Hamburg: P. Fauche, 1798).

[35] J. Kent Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997); and Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 86-106.

[36] John Robertson, *The Case for Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples, 1680-1760* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and John G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

[37] For the phrase, "will do dominate" in Mably, see Mason's quotation from Babeuf including this phrase in *Ibid.*, p. 174. For the phrase in Augustine, see *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 1, here translated as the "lust of rule."

[38] That preoccupation with conspiracies is an essentially early modern European phenomenon is also the implicit (if not explicit) conclusion of Barry Coward and Julian Swann's edited collection *Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theory in Early Modern Europe* (Ashgate: Bodmin, Cornwall, 2004).

[39] A very subtle and sophisticated psychology of sorts arguably existed in religious form, on the "devout humanist" side in the literature of moral casuistry and on the Oratorian and Jansenist side in the French school of spirituality's literature of spiritual direction. But it would take a long while for this thinking to break out of the privacy of the confessional and, secularized, become available as a means of interpreting public events. This "psychology" may be regarded as comparable to the seventeenth-century Augustinian moral thought that lay behind the "discovery" that the pursuit of amour proper could have publicly beneficial results—behind, that is, the invention of political economy.

[40] Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); and Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992).

[41] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, 2 vols. trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1:131.

[42] Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932); and Robert R. Palmer, *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939).

[43] On the Titus Oates affair, see Sarah Wegener, "Popery, Publics, and Plots: Public Use of Reason and History in the Controversy over the 'Popish Plot' in Late Seventeenth-Century England" (MA Thesis: Ohio State University, 2005); and on the Gordon Riots, see Colin Haydn, "Popery at St. James's: The Conspiracy Theses of William Payne, Thomas Hollis, and Lord George Gordon," in Coward and Swann, eds. *Conspiracy and Conspiracy Theory*, pp. 173-95. .

[44] On this aspect of Joseph de Maistre's thought, see Carolina Armenteros, "Revolutionary Violence and the End of History: The Divided Self in Francophone Thought, 1762-1914," in *Historicising the French Revolution*, ed. Carolina Armenteros, Tim Blanning, Isabel DiVanna and Dawn Dodds (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. 2-38; as well as Jack Lively, "Introduction," *The Works of Joseph de Maistre*, ed. Jack Lively (London and New York: Macmillan and Collier-Macmillan, 1965), pp. 1-45. For the sense of the millenarian or perhaps the post-millenarian aspect of Grégoire's thought, it is necessary to combine Catherine Maire, *De la cause de Dieu à la cause de la nation: le jansénisme au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), pp. 592-99, with Alyssa Sepinwall's *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution*, pp. 167-216. See also Dale K. Van Kley, "The abbé Grégoire and the Quest for a Catholic Republic," in *The Abbé Grégoire and his Worlds*, eds. Jeremy D. and Richard H. Popkin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), pp. 71-107.

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