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Revolutionary Gifts: Sacrifice and the Challenge of Community during the French Revolution*

Joseph Zizek

University of Auckland

On the evening of January 30, 1792, the members of the Paris Jacobin Club engaged in a tumultuous act of public patriotism. At the urging of Pierre Manuel, officer of the Paris Commune, and Jean-Baptiste Louvet, radical journalist and orator, the assembled Jacobins responded to the soaring price of colonial foodstuffs by solemnly committing themselves to a “civic sacrifice.” They vowed to renounce sugar. Then, at Manuel’s insistence and to thunderous applause, the Jacobins offered the nation a “total sacrifice” by vowing also to give up coffee. According to one contemporary account, these interventions were greeted with heated acclamations of “Vive la France” and rapturously sealed with an oath, in which even the spectators in the club’s public galleries joined, crying, “Yes, yes! We swear it!” But sleep-deprived revolutionaries, too, had a champion. Jean-Marie Collot d’Herbois, the propagandist and playwright, sensibly protested that a lack of coffee would hinder the patriotic journalists who bravely worked through the night to alert the people to danger. For his part, Collot gallantly offered to imbibe his beverages unsweetened, while the club with good humor dispensed him and other patriotic writers from having to make such a sacrifice.¹

* Comments and questions from Carla Hesse, Keith M. Baker, and Katharine H. Norris repeatedly reshaped my thinking on this topic, and I am grateful to the participants of the 2005 Stanford-Berkeley French Culture Workshop (particularly William Reddy and Jessica Riskin) for their encouragement on an earlier version of this work. My thanks to the three anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Modern History*, whose constructive criticism did much to hone the argument. Finally, I would like to thank the University of Auckland for its financial support of this research and salute the professionals of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and the Library of Congress (Washington, DC), who on several occasions gracefully assisted a time-pressed visitor from the Antipodes.

¹ A comprehensive rendition of the Jacobin session of January 30 is offered in F.-A. Aulard, ed., *La Société des Jacobins: Recueil des documents pour l’histoire du Club des Jacobins de Paris*, 6 vols. (Paris, 1889–97), 3:348–52. By contrast, a polemical recital is offered in Albert Mathiez, *La Vie chère et le mouvement social sous la Terreur* (Paris, 1927), 30–34; and a partial English translation is provided in Darline Levy et al., *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–1795* (Urbana, IL, 1980), 112–14. By early 1792, French consumers were reeling under the cumulative effect of mediocre harvests, currency inflation, and rebellion in Saint-Domingue. Dramatic increases in the price of sugar led to

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To the assembled members of the Jacobin Club it was clearly a vital moment. Their oath interrupted a bitter debate, which would lastingly fracture Jacobin unity, over whether the Revolution's survival demanded preemptive war against Europe. In this heated climate, Louvet insisted that the Jacobins faced "a kind of test." By disavowing familiar but now costly commodities, the club could express sympathy with hard-pressed Parisian households, frustrate the shadowy profiteers who sought to foment unrest, and attack "the most fearsome enemies of a people that wants to be free—soft and effeminate habits." Alluding to America's similarly heroic struggle, Louvet suggested that the New World's heroes might proudly say, "the French are beginning, as we did, to win triumphs over themselves; like us, they will finish by winning, in more serious struggles, the most extraordinary victories."²

Historians, like revolutionaries, love to expose the rich linkages between small deeds and great meanings, and the interpretation of such revolutionary rituals around commodity culture has long been open-ended. Proponents of the classic "social interpretation" of the French Revolution might regard similar events as evidence for the politicization of ordinary people around subsistence questions and the emergence of consequent cleavages within revolutionary elites.³ By contrast, champions of the "cultural turn" might read such episodes to uncover the political rather than social logic of subsistence or to expose the gender politics inherent in the masculine language of French republicanism.⁴ Practitioners of a postrevisionist "return of the social" might argue that such episodes reveal the need to go beyond discourse and treat the complex interplay between material

several weeks of unrest, in which Parisian merchants were besieged by crowds demanding redistribution at a "just" price, and the Jacobin Club may have been inspired by the Section de la Croix-Rouge, which had recently pledged to renounce colonial goods in a celebrated petition to the National Assembly. On this petition, see M. J. Mavidal and M. E. Laurent, eds., *Archives parlementaires de 1787 à 1860: Recueil complet des débats législatifs et politiques des Chambres françaises, Première série, 1787 à 1799*, 82 vols. (Paris, 1885–1913), 38:4. On the Jacobins' melodramatic sentimentality, see David Andress, "Jacobinism as Heroic Narrative: Understanding the Terror as the Experience of Melodrama," *French History and Civilization* 5 (2014): 6–23; on humor, Antoine de Baecque, *Les Eclats du rire: La Culture des rieurs au xviii^e siècle* (Paris, 2000).

² Louvet also asked, "Would you reduce your enemies' resources? Devote yourself to diminishing your own needs." Jean-Baptiste Louvet, *Procès-verbal de la séance du lundi 30 janvier 1792*; cited in Aulard, *La Société des Jacobins*, 3:350–51.

³ George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1958), 96–97, 114–19. Mathiez used this episode to highlight the insincerity of "bourgeois" Jacobins; see Mathiez, *La Vie chère*, 48–49.

⁴ William Sewell Jr., "The *Sans-Culotte* Rhetoric of Subsistence," in *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 4, *The Terror*, ed. Keith M. Baker (Oxford, 1994), 249–70.

culture and commercial practices.⁵ Finally, for scholars of early modern “globalization,” such contemporary contestation might serve as a reminder of the unanticipated ways that French life was inflected by commercial and political relationships with the wider world, not least the connections between eighteenth-century France and its far-flung colonies.⁶ Such episodes, in other words, have already unlocked rich interpretations of social identity, commodity cultures, and revolutionary contestation.

I would like to focus on something different: the fascinating phenomenon of “civic sacrifice” at the heart of this Jacobin episode and the ways in which such sacrifice could be understood by contemporaries. Similar acts of renunciation were widespread during the French Revolution, and people at the time employed the language of sacrifice colloquially as well as casually; revolutionaries used the term not only to commemorate heroic acts of suffering or self-abnegation but also to describe an array of humble practices ranging from individual generosity and collective *bienfaisance*, to voluntary offerings to the nation (“patriotic gifts” [*dons patriotiques*]), to manifold expressions of self-effacement and self-denial. Looking back on such deeds, the great nineteenth-century Romantic historian Jules Michelet celebrated what he called the “power of sacrifice” (*puissance du sacrifice*) during the Revolution.⁷

Since Michelet’s ode to the Revolution, modern scholars have developed more sophisticated interdisciplinary interpretations of sacrifice, and the revolutionary experience has itself been construed as a crucial part of the genealogy of ritual theory.⁸ Yet there is a sense in which these interpretive gains have

⁵ Colin Jones and Rebecca Spang, “Sans-culottes, *sans café, sans tabac*: Shifting Realms of Necessity and Luxury in Eighteenth-Century France,” in *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650–1850*, ed. Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford (Manchester, 1999), 37–62. A comparative analysis of revolutionary material culture emphasizing “aesthetics of everyday life” is Leora Auslander, *Cultural Revolutions: The Politics of Everyday Life in Britain, North America and France* (Berkeley, 2009).

⁶ For global connections, see Paul Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson, eds., *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca, NY, 2013); and esp. Michael Kwass, *Contraband: Louis Mandrin and the Making of a Global Underground* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

⁷ Jules Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, ed. Gérard Walter, 2 vols. (Paris, 1952), 1:228–29.

⁸ On the Revolution’s place in theories of ritual, see Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton, NJ, 2001), 203ff. Ivan Strenski argues for the specifically French genesis of sacrificial theories; see Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism, and Social Thought in France* (Chicago, 2002). For an insightful exposition of the complexity of early modern thinking about sacrifice—one that also challenges the modern narrative of secularization—see Jonathan Sheehan, “Sacrifice before the Secular,” *Representations* 105 (Winter 2009): 12–26.

further alienated us from contemporary perceptions. Some of the most influential scholarship on revolutionary sacrifice has used sociological and anthropological theories, pioneered by Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and René Girard, to show the functional role or cultural impact of specific ritual practices. Formal theories of sacrifice, for example, have underpinned influential interpretations of the revolutionary “transfer of the sacred” from monarch to nation, sketched the foundational role of sacrificial or expiatory violence (particularly that directed against elites), and illustrated processes of social inclusion and exclusion via mechanisms such as scapegoating.⁹ By contrast, other scholars have shied away from using the theory or nomenclature of sacrifice when it comes to the examination of practices such as gift giving, charity, and benevolence. We now have impressive social and cultural histories of the revolutionary secularization of altruism and benevolence, contemporaries’ aspirations to practical egalitarianism, and practices of economic and social reciprocity via gift giving.¹⁰ Either explicitly or implicitly, modern scholarship has effectively differentiated the study of sacrifice from that of gift exchange,

⁹ On “transfer of the sacred,” see Mona Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire* (Paris, 1976), 337ff. Sacrificial or expiatory violence is a common theme—albeit treated in different ways—in Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1992); Marie-Hélène Huét, *Mourning Glory: The Will of the French Revolution* (Philadelphia, 1997); Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York, 1989); Sophie Wahnich, *La Liberté ou la mort: Essai sur la Terreur et le terrorisme* (Paris, 2003); and Susan Dunn, *The Deaths of Louis XVI: Regicide and the French Political Imagination* (Princeton, NJ, 1994). The long-term intellectual and political implications of a sacrificial “founding violence” are explored in Jesse Goldhammer, *The Headless Republic: Sacrificial Violence in Modern French Thought* (Ithaca, NY, 2005). Note also that a powerful thread of sacrificial thought can be traced back to the antirevolutionary exile Joseph de Maistre, who explained the Revolution as an extended spectacle of martyrs undergoing sacrificial violence, ultimately in the service of a providential history; see Carolina Armenteros, *The French Idea of History: Joseph de Maistre and His Heirs, 1794–1854* (Ithaca, NY, 2011).

¹⁰ On practices of charity and altruism, see Catherine Duprat, “*Pour l’amour de l’humanité*” *Le temps des philanthropes: La philanthropie parisienne des Lumières à la monarchie de Juillet*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1993); and Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All: Jacobin Egalitarianism in Practice* (New York, 1997). A perceptive examination of the political discourse of sacrificial altruism is Barry M. Shapiro, “Self-Sacrifice, Self-Interest, or Self-Defense? The Constituent Assembly and the ‘Self-Denying Ordinance’ of May 1791,” *French Historical Studies* 25 (Fall 2002): 625–56. There are a handful of studies of the practice of patriotic giving during the Revolution, most of which stress the complex interplay of ideological legacies, social pressures, and economic sensibilities; see Catherine Duprat, “Don et citoyenneté en l’an II: Les vertus du peuple français,” in *Révolution et République: L’exception française* (Paris, 1994), 263–81; Nathalie Alzas, “Don, patriotisme et sociétés populaires en l’an II: ‘Le sans-culotte de l’Hérault,’” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 329 (2002): 41–65; and Charles Walton, “Between Trust and Terror: Patriotic Giving in Revolutionary France,” in *Experiencing the French Revolution*, ed. David Andress (Oxford, 2013), 47–67.

each of which is seen to have distinct forms, social mechanisms, and intellectual frameworks.¹¹

Yet separating sacrifice from gift giving or generosity is precisely what contemporaries did not do: they constantly blurred the distinctions that modern scholarship has made central to its analyses. Revolutionaries applied the term sacrifice to an exceptionally broad array of practices that were considered to express patriotism, self-effacement, generosity, and associated values; what counted to contemporaries was not the specific forms taken by any given ritual but the shared (and ever-changing) universe of meanings summoned through sacrificial practices. My goal is to recapture this revolutionary understanding of sacrifice by focusing on contemporaries' own "implicit anthropology"—that is to say, by focusing on the self-aware reflections of historical actors themselves, as they disputed the meaning and purpose of what they considered to be sacrificial acts.¹² This approach, which emphasizes contemporary self-reflexivity, is an attempt to marry the linguistic awareness of "revisionist" scholarship with the "postrevisionist" aspiration to restore social practices and interpersonal relations to revolutionary history. Sacrifice is a superb site for this type of synthesis, precisely because revolutionaries viewed it as contestable and contingent; they were cognizant of the dynamic, ceaseless interplay between what we might call sacrificial language and practice. Contemporaries constantly spoke of, enacted, and reenacted sacrifice and ceaselessly interrogated, examined, and reinvented the practices that made it visible.

We can see this process of reinvention if we return briefly to the Jacobins' self-congratulatory renunciation of sugar and coffee, around which contemporaries

¹¹ In the influential work of Marcel Mauss, e.g., gift giving and sacrifice were connected both ritually and etymologically. Some forms of sacrifice were, indeed, traceable to the gift relationship, and it was common to see the subject people of anthropological investigation confuse these forms of ritual. But Mauss's key objective was precisely to differentiate and isolate gift relationships (which, unlike sacrifice, always involved recipients) from the "total" societal matrix in which they were embedded; see Mauss, "Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques," *L'Année sociologique*, n.s., 1923–24, 30–186, esp. 33. A provocative recent differentiation of sacrifice from gift, which also begins from the recognition of their basic commonality, is Moshe Halbertal, *On Sacrifice* (Princeton, NJ, 2012), esp. 3–13. The point for the historian is that using concepts drawn from formal theory (whether or not one's work is grounded in it) risks overwriting the meanings that contemporaries attached to sacrificial practices. Lynn Hunt is cognizant of this problem but perceptively suggests that the insights to be gained from theory—in her case, Freudian or Girardian interpretations of sacrifice—are worth it; see Hunt, *Family Romance*, 7–16.

¹² I have borrowed the notion of "implicit anthropology" from Buc, *Dangers of Ritual*, 5. Rather than construct an interpretation of revolutionary culture out of "modern" ritual theory (anachronistically privileging methodologies that purport to explain the deeper meaning of contemporary practices), I have tried to use the understandings provided by theory to explore contemporary perceptions from within.

immediately constructed divergent interpretations. Within days, propagandists on the right were mocking the Jacobins' oath as absurd; at the end of January 1792, the journalists of the royalist *Ami du Roi* sardonically observed (presumably from their coffee-stoked bureau) that the club members would logically have to respond to increases in the price of leather by vowing to go barefoot, while other conservatives suggested that the Jacobins might as well renounce wine, "since the water of the Seine is so beneficial [to drink]."¹³ Militants on the left could be equally hostile for completely different reasons. By early February 1792, the radical newspaper *Révolutions de Paris* was criticizing the Jacobins' sacrifice as something that demeaned rather than elevated the nation: "Citizens! . . . You are not far along the path of civic virtue! . . . Waste not your courage and steadfastness on little things. Be men, and ensure that none can say of you: 'The French are but children, who cannot dispense with sugar except at great effort; for them it is so marked a sacrifice that they must swear an oath to hold to it.'"¹⁴ Still other revolutionary observers regarded the Jacobins' sacrifice as incomplete and perhaps even irrelevant, since the club neglected to consider the moral status of goods such as sugar and coffee that were the product of slave labor.¹⁵ The gamut of contemporary reactions thus ran from heroic exemplarity to disdainful ridicule; what this means is that once contemporaries thought a sacrificial deed had been performed, they were acutely aware of—and ready to dispute—its ambiguities and mediations as well as its presumed motivations and political efficacy. The process of interpreting sacrificial deeds and assigning meanings to them was intersubjective, contingent, and inherently unpredictable.

For revolutionaries, sacrifice became a crucial means to reveal personal identity and to imagine the possibilities of patriotic community. After 1789, the contexts in which contemporaries adjudged sacrificial practices shifted from inherited hierarchical frameworks, defined by absolutist languages of dispensation and generosity, to new models in which civic generosity and self-abnegation were valorized between rights-bearing individuals, who fabricated reciprocal attachments to one another as well as to the abstract entity of the nation. Obviously, the transition away from hierarchical toward egalitarian relations has been retraced

¹³ See *Ami du Roi* 30 (January 30, 1791), 118; the Seine advice was contained in the single-page broadsheet, *Supplément à l'avis sur le sucre et le café* [Paris, 1792]. The street-poster form of this parody makes it clear that opponents thought it worthwhile publicly to attack the Jacobin Club's renunciation.

¹⁴ As the acerbic journalist noted, an observer, seeing arms extended and voices solemnly intoning "I swear," would be startled to discover "it was only a matter of sugar!" *Révolutions de Paris* 134 (January 28–February 4, 1792), 227–28.

¹⁵ *Les Préjugés détruits, par J.M. Lequinio, membre de la Convention Nationale de France, et citoyen du globe* (Paris, 1792), 151. British abolitionists explicitly connected the production of sugar to suffering slave bodies; Charlotte Sussman, "Women and the Politics of Sugar, 1792," *Representations* 48 (Autumn 1994): 48–69.

many times by scholars.¹⁶ But we have overlooked precisely how and why contemporary sacrificial practices made this transition unexpectedly fraught and difficult. As revolutionaries marveled at the civic enthusiasm and patriotic generosity they saw before them, they also discovered the worrisome interstices of sacrifice. By examining and reexamining exemplary acts of sacrifice, contemporaries discovered how difficult it was to understand individual and collective renunciation and how many vexing questions it raised about trust, obligation, and emulation.

Ultimately, sacrificial practices vividly exposed a tension between two momentous forms of revolutionary selfhood: the rights-bearing individual as a functional yet voluntary part of a social machine and the political individual as a creature devoted to and sublimated within the *patrie*. Since Benjamin Constant, historians have been able to juxtapose these alternative visions of civic identity as the contrast between “classical” and “modern” republicanism, and much has been made of the archaism of revolutionary Jacobinism and the difficult post-thermidorean transition to commercial forms of republicanism.¹⁷ Yet contemporaries’ fascination with sacrifice exposes the emergence of a hybrid zone between these competing visions of political life. To revolutionaries, sacrifice,

¹⁶ Frameworks suggesting a transition from hierarchical to egalitarian practices have been adopted by Gross, *Fair Shares for All*; Walton, “Between Trust and Terror,” and “Reciprocity in the French Revolution,” in “New Perspectives on the French Revolution,” ed. A. Fairfax-Cholmeley and C. Jones, *e-France* 4 (2013): 25–30. I differ from Walton in emphasizing the difficulty that contemporaries experienced in stabilizing the meanings of sacrifice; he ascribes such difficulties primarily to the challenge of building economic and political institutions, whereas I argue that it was an integral aspect of contemporaries’ contingent and highly dynamic process of understanding sacrifice.

¹⁷ Benjamin Constant, “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with That of the Moderns,” in *Constant: Political Writings*, ed. Biancamaria Fontana (Cambridge, 1988), 308–28. The fundamental work for the European context remains J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ, 1975). For eighteenth-century France, Keith Baker has been instrumental in reviving our understanding of the vitality of the classical republican tradition, arguing that it was largely revived by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, carried into battle against the reforming monarchy by figures such as Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, and transformed during the Revolution by radical Jacobins such as Jean-Paul Marat and Maximilien Robespierre. See Keith Michael Baker, “Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Journal of Modern History* 73 (2001): 32–53; Johnson Kent Wright, *A Classical Republican in Eighteenth-Century France: The Political Thought of Mably* (Stanford, CA, 1997). On the transition to commercial republicanism, the two essential works are James Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 2001); and Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca, NY, 2008). For a different reappraisal of eighteenth-century selfhood that emphasizes the tension between ascetic dispossession and individual self-possession, see Charly Coleman, *The Virtues of Abandon: An Anti-individualist History of the French Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA, 2014).

generosity, and self-abnegation would become crucial markers of participation in a new political collectivity, but they would simultaneously expose troubling contradictions between the universe of rights and the world of wills and hint at the daunting challenges facing the attempt to build a community of citizens. Sacrifice exposed revolutionaries to the reflexive, dynamic challenge of interpreting fellow citizens' deeds and sentiments, and that challenge led them in very unanticipated directions.

SACRIFICE AS HONOR: FROM OLD REGIME TO PREREVOLUTION

Deciphering the significance of sacrifice in early modern France is a formidable challenge, not least because of the sheer diversity of ways in which contemporaries understood the concept. Most familiarly, of course, "sacrifice" was understood in the specific religious sense of "making sacred," closely associated with the world of Catholic theology and ritual wherein the Eucharist itself was the defining model of sacrificial remembrance. Beyond this sacred understanding, however, religious and monarchical culture seems to have been saturated by high as well as low understandings of sacrifice. On the high side, contemporaries frequently construed royal largesse as buttressing monarchical authority, while forms of asceticism (whether or not specifically modeled on theological exemplars) could be seen as affirming religious authenticity.¹⁸ On the low side, there is substantial evidence that contemporaries across the eighteenth century casually used the term "sacrifice" to denote humbler forms of self-denial or sentiments of generosity, often linked to patriotic sensibilities diffused across popular as well as elite audiences. When contemporaries pledged allegiance to patrons, offered ships to the king's navy, claimed the right to be naturalized as French, or celebrated a lineage of martial heroism, they often framed such actions as "sacrifices" or "gifts" of love, service, goods, or money.¹⁹

¹⁸ Jean Starobinski, *Largesse*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago, 1997). For a rich analysis of the role of religious asceticism and dispossession and the challenge of interpreting the eighteenth century's "opposing cultures of personhood," see Coleman, *Virtues of Abandon*, esp. 14–16.

¹⁹ This should come as no surprise, since scholars have by now convincingly established the centrality of gift-giving practices to early modern familial and patronage networks across Europe. The literature is substantial (and still growing), but signposts on the French side are Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth-Century France* (Madison, WI, 2000); Sharon Kettering, "Gift-Giving and Patronage in Early-Modern France," *French History* 2 (1988): 131–51; Peter Sahlins, *Unnaturally French: Foreign Citizens in the Old Regime and After* (Ithaca, NY, 2004), 114–15; David Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 89. These works suggest that whether contemporaries were speaking of the traditional "realm" or the newly emergent "society," they readily invoked the qualities of reciprocal exchange—sometimes

From the mid-1750s onward, sacrifice and ancillary notions of selfless generosity had become literary and artistic stereotypes for “virtue” and virtuous behavior.²⁰ Individuals and groups regularly constructed tenuous as well as durable connections between acts of personal or collective sacrifice—running the gamut from heroic self-immolation in war to modest financial contribution in peace—and the identities and privileges that those acts underwrote. To this extent, sacrifice and its manifestations occupied a significant place within the storehouse of eighteenth-century political idioms and expressions of the “social imaginary.”²¹ The point here is not to resolve or disaggregate the various filiations of sacrifice and gift giving; it is, instead, to recognize that the idioms and practices associated with it constituted a hierarchically structured (yet surprisingly flexible) repertoire for political action and social practice. Not only was this repertoire deeply familiar to eighteenth-century contemporaries; it also frequently commingled sacrifice with emotive conceptions of generosity, tapping deeply into powerful eighteenth-century currents of sensibility.²²

The power of gift giving and sacrifice helps explain why such concepts were often invoked throughout the crises of 1788 and 1789, when disputes within France’s own elite revealed the impossibility of resolving fiscal and constitutional problems within the framework of absolutist politics.²³ Ever since Tocqueville,

asymmetric (as in the case of personal obedience, direct fidelity, or religious devotion), sometimes symmetric (as in the case of nascent political economy or natural sociability)—as a way of making sense of their social world.

²⁰ For the omnipresence of an “aesthetics of sacrifice” in the work of Diderot, see Jay Caplan, *Framed Narratives: Diderot’s Genealogy of the Beholder* (Minneapolis, 1985).

²¹ Sara Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 6–11.

²² Maza notes the importance of “sentimental benevolence” in the eighteenth century; see *ibid.*, 60–66. David Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760–1820* (Cambridge, 1994), pioneered the notion that “sentimental narratives” might have universalizing and protodemocratic potential. Denby and Maza agreed that sentimentality could work to transcend contemporary social hierarchies in the name of shared human feeling. William Reddy alternatively modeled sentimentalism as a form of “emotional refuge” from the strictures of absolutist culture, with the Revolution marking the terminus of an emotionalism that was erased after the Terror (and thus obscured from historical view); see Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001), esp. 144–61. I find these interpretations compelling, yet they do not map easily onto contemporary attitudes toward sacrifice, which could be assessed via multiple registers of sentiment, sometimes according to traits (honor, virtue, courage) persistently linked to social hierarchy or specific group identity and sometimes according to traits regarded as natural (sympathy, benevolence) and thought to be quasi-universal.

²³ Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990), 83–84. The classic account of the crisis is Jean Egret, *The French Pre-revolution, 1787–1788*, trans. Wesley D. Camp (Chicago, 1977).

historians have readily explained the royal government's "public" invitation for research on the Estates-General (July 5, 1788) as a sign of powerlessness, ineptitude, or effective capitulation to aristocratic obstruction. While eighteenth-century voices can be heard in such tonalities, it is surely significant that many contemporaries instead ascribed the king's actions to grandeur rather than weakness; it was Louis XVI's generosity, they argued, that led him to make the unusual sacrifice of convoking the Estates-General, an action that bespoke the monarch's devotion to his people as well as his elevated personal sentiment.²⁴

The themes of reciprocal sacrifice and generosity were omnipresent within the debate of unprecedented scale that exploded into public view through pamphlets, illicit journals, clubs and associations, and explicit electioneering in late 1788 and early 1789. The closest thing to a consensus across what Vivian Gruder has recently dubbed the prerevolutionary "political schooling of the French" was the insistence across much of the political spectrum that patriotic unity was necessary to regenerate France's institutions and to combat the abuses of a nebulously defined despotism.²⁵ Reform proposals mooted by enthusiastic pamphleteers—typically published in violation of the government's haphazard attempts to maintain censorship—were frequently offered to the public using the rhetoric of a personal gift (*don*) presented with gratitude to the king and the *patrie*.²⁶ Many observers of political events voiced admiration for (or sometimes concern over) what was perceived to be Louis XVI's extraordinary goodwill and delighted in (or fretted about) the apparent revival of the tradition of royal consultation. Propagandists sponsored by the royal government played upon such understandings to stress the king's unparalleled magnanimity; an anonymous pamphlet in late 1788 suggested that the monarch's selflessness should inspire "an eternal gratitude; for there is no example in the history of the French monarchy, nor that of any other, of a King possessing the *de facto* power to establish taxation, who voluntarily gives up that power out of love for his subjects, and out of limitless confidence in their

²⁴ This theme of inventing unity is crucial to Bell, *Cult of the Nation*. Pioneering examinations of regeneration include Mona Ozouf, "La Formation de l'homme nouveau," in *L'Homme régénéré: Essais sur la Révolution française* (Paris, 1989), 117–20; Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770–1800*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (Stanford, CA, 1997), 131–56; and Alyssa Sepinwall, *The Abbé Grégoire and the French Revolution: The Making of Modern Universalism* (Berkeley, 2005).

²⁵ Vivian R. Gruder, *The Notables and the Nation: The Political Schooling of the French, 1787–1788* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 85, 101.

²⁶ Two prominent examples of this enabling rhetoric, one celebratory and once critical, are Olympe de Gouges, *Mes vœux sont remplis, ou le don patriotique* (Paris, 1789); and Jean-Paul Marat, *Offrande à la patrie, ou Discours au tiers état de France* ([Paris], 1789). For brevity, I will confine myself to citing only one or two examples from the copious pamphlet literature as evidence for any particular claim; I have tried to avoid making substantive points on the basis of pamphlets that seem idiosyncratic.

zeal and loyalty. This great example has been reserved to the just and sensitive soul of our King.”²⁷ Even observers who were skeptical of the court’s motivation celebrated the decision to summon the Estates, precisely because of its rarity in France’s checkered history of lost liberties.²⁸ Whether championing the nobility or the Third Estate, whether celebrating a mythical past or looking to a new world of rights, contemporaries in 1788 and early 1789 linked together tropes of generosity and mutual sacrifice to express the unity they imagined for the upcoming Estates-General.²⁹

Yet as the debate over the Estates-General raged, this language of sacrifice and generosity was initially expressed in hierarchical terms, according to which it could be assertively framed as reciprocal but unequal obligation. When they recognized the king’s generosity, champions of the First and Second Estates often responded by citing their own constitutional probity and their patriotic willingness to contribute to the collective good. At the closure of the second Assembly of Notables in December 1788, leading members of the First and Second Estates had accepted in principle the shedding of some fiscal privileges and the willingness to pay new impositions, but some aristocratic defenders of the monarchy used this to criticize what they viewed as insufficient regard for aristocratic prerogatives and excessive concessions to the Third Estate. The most controversial public expression of this view came in early December 1788, in the *Mémoire des Princes*, where several of Louis XVI’s aristocratic peers (including his younger brother) decried a “fermentation of spirits” that they saw threatening the monarchy. The princes insisted that the king had restored ancient rights fallen into desuetude, thereby making “concessions that his subjects had never requested . . . this great act of justice imposes great obligations on the nation: it cannot refuse to deliver

²⁷ Mignonneau [attrib. Barbier], *Considérations intéressantes sur les affaires présentes. Par M. . .* (Paris, 1788), 163, 207. See also the anonymous *Remontrances, plaintes et doléances des dames françoises, à l’occasion de l’assemblée des États-Généraux. Par M.L.P.P.D. St. L.* [Paris, 1789], 1. The classic account by Mitchell B. Garrett, *The Estates General of 1789: The Problems of Composition and Organization* (New York, 1935), remains useful on the tempo and cadence of pamphleteering across late 1788 and early 1789.

²⁸ Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, *Les Droits et devoirs du citoyen* (Paris, [1789]).

²⁹ See Kenneth Margerison, *Pamphlets and Public Opinion: The Campaign for a Union of Orders in the Early French Revolution* (West Lafayette, IN, 1998), 8–9. The monarch was frequently (and traditionally) portrayed as the focus of such unity; Pierre-Louis-Claude Gin, ministerial propagandist and renowned Paris barrister, could thus insist that “the Sovereign is the fulcrum who directs the interests and passions of men towards the common center of the public interest.” See Gin, *Nouvelle lettre d’un patriote à un magistrat: Sur les questions agitées à l’occasion de la prochaine tenue des États-Généraux, servant de supplément au Livre intitulé des vrais Principes du Gouvernement* (Paris, 1788), 1:3. Historians have reappraised the role of honor in defining the nobility as a transition from the sovereign’s gaze to public recognition; see Jay Smith, *The Culture of Merit: Nobility, Royal Service, and the Making of Absolute Monarchy in France, 1600–1789* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1996).

itself to a king that has delivered himself to it.” Following the example of the king’s magnanimity, the princes declared themselves likewise willing to make all necessary “sacrifices that may contribute to the good of the State, and cement the union of the orders composing it” but conditioned their generosity by insisting that the Third Estate, in exchange, give up its demands for greater representation.³⁰ From such a perspective, self-dispossession invited—nay, demanded—gratitude and obedience from the monarch’s other subjects.

The so-called *Mémoire des Princes* was greeted with a storm of criticism from patriotic pamphleteers, but its arguments were hardly idiosyncratic.³¹ Throughout the electoral process and the drawing up of *cahiers de doléances* in late 1788 and early 1789, several privileged bodies hit upon the strategy of demanding concessions from the Third Estate in exchange for their willingness to accept a modification of the privileges that were theirs by tradition.³² Defenders of noble prerogatives associated selflessness and patriotism with the grandeur of spirit found only in an elite sanctified by time, merit, and service—an elite that was sometimes even regarded as biologically different.³³ This rhetoric of exceptionalism was replicated, if reluctantly, even by pamphleteers who attacked the pretensions of *parlementaires*, nobles, and churchmen. During much of 1788, for example, the dramatic popularity of the Parlement of Paris was associated with its advocacy on behalf of the Estates-General, which even suspicious observers, such as Condorcet, portrayed as elevated sacrifice in the name of the

³⁰ *Mémoire des princes, présenté au Roi* (n.p., [1788]), 2, 12–13, 10; see, alternatively, Mavidal and Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 1:488–89.

³¹ Responses ranged from serious disquisitions to mocking satires; for respective examples, see *Ultimatum d’un citoyen du tiers état, au Mémoire des princes, présenté au Roi* (n.p., 1789), and *Etrennes aux public, Mémoire des princes présenté au Roi, accompagné de sa parodie, ou Mémoire du tiers-état, à présenter au Roi* (n.p., 1789).

³² As they renounced their own privileges, many noble deputies demanded (and received) the voluntary renunciation of privileges held by municipalities, as well as the disavowal of fiscal privileges of offices held by nonnobles. This expected mutuality had earlier been announced by some noble *cahiers des doléances*, which insisted that sacrifices “not shared by all classes of citizens . . . will cease to be a duty.” March 26, 1789, mandate for the representatives of the Nobility of Chaumont-en-Bassigny, AN Ba32/63/4/7, p. 5; the *cahiers* are reproduced in Mavidal and Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 2:725. On the combination of patriotic enthusiasm and pragmatic calculation that lay behind renunciations of privilege, see Michael Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France: Liberté, Egalité, Fiscalité* (Cambridge, 2000), 292–96.

³³ On the importance of concepts such as fidelity, magnanimity, and courage to early modern noble identity, see Smith, *Culture of Merit*, 46–50. It was not unusual for eighteenth-century medicine to embed such distinctions in biological differences; see Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution* (New Haven, CT, 1989), 44–52. Nor was such biological embedding uniquely a French phenomenon, as is shown by Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1991), 27.

nation.³⁴ The Parlement's dramatic collapse in popularity after September 1788, when it declared for the traditional forms of 1614, was perceived as a just reaction to the selfish defense of privilege that was presumed to underlie the court's decision.³⁵ Even some radical champions of the Third Estate hopefully assumed, in early 1789, that the most enlightened among the nobility might indeed make "a painful sacrifice" if only their patriotism and generosity could overcome the debilitating effects of *esprit de corps*.³⁶

Ironically, as Michael Kwass has compellingly argued, the willingness of France's elite to politicize questions of taxation, liberty, and equality may have grown out of the monarchy's attempts to universalize taxation—thereby fabricating the oxymoronic "privileged taxpayer"—and the royal administration's inability to master the consequences of that century-spanning fiscal reform.³⁷ Irrespective of the origins of this elite commitment, in the vigorous political climate of 1788–89 representatives of the First and Second Estate continued to insist that renunciations and acts of generosity, in order to be meaningful, could not be matters of compulsion but had to be voluntary, motivated by love of the monarch and a noble sense of honor.³⁸ Only by that means, aristocrats insisted, would be created "that passion, that enthusiasm which has produced so many heroic and sublime actions among us, so many efforts and sacrifices which mere laws could not have produced."³⁹ Observers tended to accept the idea that, even in the presence of mandates from their constituents, the deputies to the coming Estates-General could not and should not be legally compelled or constrained in their

³⁴ While condemning the magisterial defense of privilege, the marquis de Condorcet remarked that the Parlement of Paris's solicitation of the Estates-General was unique: "an example of the purest zeal, of the most generous devotion ever recorded in the annals of history; this act forever guarantees [the Parlement] universal confidence, esteem, and veneration." Condorcet, *Réflexions d'un citoyen, sur la Révolution de 1788*, 2nd ed. (London, 1788), 4, 9. For the circumstances behind Condorcet's political evolution away from ministerial sympathies, see Keith Baker, *Condorcet: From Natural Philosophy to Social Mathematics* (Chicago, 1975), 248–52, 264–69.

³⁵ Dale Van Kley has persuasively argued that the Parlement's action was less a knee-jerk defense of privilege than the summa of parliamentary constitutionalism, indebted to Jansenist ecclesiology and commonwealth ideology; see Van Kley, "The Estates-General as Ecumenical Council: The Constitutionalism of Corporate Consensus and the Parlement's Ruling of September 25, 1788," *Journal of Modern History* 61 (1989): 1–52, esp. 47–48.

³⁶ Camille Desmoulins, *La France libre* (Paris, 1789), 28.

³⁷ Michael Kwass, "A Kingdom of Taxpayers: State Formation, Privilege and Political Culture in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of Modern History* 70 (1998): 295–339, and *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation*, 114, 313–14.

³⁸ Walton emphasizes the association of voluntarism with elites and obligation with inferiors, and he suggests that patriotic giving was a way of reversing this formula; see "Between Trust and Terror," 53.

³⁹ Mavidal and Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 1:489.

behavior. As the barrister Jean Desraines put it, “the nation’s destiny will perhaps depend irrevocably on the spirit that animates the deputies to the Estates-General. . . . Infinite goods or limitless evils will flow from this initial source.”⁴⁰

Against the backdrop of the Estates-General, the combination of voluntary participation and hierarchical notions of honor and obligation underpinned a wide-ranging discussion over how best to revive or inspire “patriotism” in the monarch’s subjects, a debate that retraced and occasionally challenged earlier claims that a virtuous transcendence of self-interest was not possible in a monarchical state.⁴¹ Selfishness—whether individual or collective—was often singled out for criticism; thus, procedural and electoral issues, such as voting by head or by order, could be seen as potential arenas in which the divisive power of “amour-propre” threatened the community.⁴² Nor was the concept of “virtue” itself an infallible guide to transcending selfishness and egotism; as one jaundiced pamphleteer put it, “most people envisage virtue according to their prejudices: one person believes that it demands such-and-such a sacrifice, the other does not.”⁴³ Hopeful observers insisted, however, that the Estates-General would succeed if it could fuse patriotic sentiment with the “public” interest, thus elevating minds and hearts beyond the ordinary.⁴⁴ Whether that interest was defined by the king or the emergent “nation” remained open to dispute.

⁴⁰ Jean Desraines, *Des États généraux, et principalement de l’esprit qu’on doit y apporter* ([Paris], 1789), 6, 7, 18. See also Jérôme Pétion, *Avis aux français sur le salut de la patrie* [Paris, 1789], iii–iv.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Charles-Joseph Mathon, *Discours sur les meilleurs moyens de faire naître et d’encourager le patriotisme dans une monarchie* (Paris, 1788). On the longer-term debate over patriotism and monarchy, see Bell, *Cult of the Nation*, 60–77.

⁴² Royal propagandists challenging the pretensions of the Parlements thus staunchly defended the monarch’s prerogatives while asking: “Would you know what the common enemy of the Nation is? It’s egotism, it’s the perversity of our present manners and mores.” *Matières intéressantes à traiter aux États Généraux* ([Paris], 1789), 4–5, 11.

⁴³ *Reflexions d’un magistrat sur le patriotisme, les divers formes du gouvernement, les caractères de la Souveraineté, la nature de l’Office dans les Etats Monarchiques: Suivies d’observations sur le Privilège [sic] Parlementaire de la Bretagne; Avec des preuves* (n.p., 1788), 4–5.

⁴⁴ As a colonial pamphleteer hopefully observed, the French empire was touching a glorious epoch in which its dispersed, disconnected parts would reunite with élan: “Spirits animated and exalted by the presence of their king, moved by the great interests subjected to enlightened discussion, will revive patriotic sentiments too long buried by chill inertia.” *Voeu patriotique d’un Américain, sur la prochaine assemblée des Etats-Généraux* (n.p., n.d.), 1. The language of exaltation, feeling, and enthusiasm is omnipresent within such genres of pamphleteering; appeals to gratitude, in particular, were often redolent of the language of sensibility. Similar emotional investments are why William Reddy suggests that the French Revolution remains an “extraordinary moment in Western history. For a few decades, emotions were deemed to be as important as reason in the foundation of states and the conduct of politics.” See Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 143.

It is no surprise, then, that contemporaries were both fixated on the convocation of the Estates-General and the rituals and behaviors surrounding it and prepared to react with exuberance or disappointment. The opening ceremonies of the Estates-General powerfully enunciated the themes of monarchical selflessness and generosity, but they did so in a climate of sartorial formality and ritual solemnity. On Louis's behalf, Garde des Sceaux François de Barentin opened by celebrating the king's paternal devotion to his subjects, expressed in "the generous sacrifices of which his Majesty has offered so many recent examples, relieving his people by suppressing expenses that his predecessors had always believed essential to the dignity and majesty of the foremost throne in the universe." The king's example, Barentin suggested, should set the tone for the assembled representatives, who would engage in their own "patriotic contest" (*concours patriotique*) in which "all titles will be dissolved within that of citizen. Henceforth, all will feel but one sentiment, one desire—to establish on a solid and unchanging foundation the common happiness of a nation that is loyal to a monarch worthy of its love and respect."⁴⁵

This stirring evocation of the patriotic sensibilities that would link generous monarch and grateful "citizens" was compromised only by the fact—laconically noted by illegal journalistic accounts—that Barentin's feeble voice was virtually inaudible. Nevertheless, the themes of royal devotion and reciprocal sacrifice were put to use as well by Jacques Necker, state banker and Physiocratic disciple. In a three-hour oration that was devoted largely to fiscal minutiae, but that controversially advocated the separate deliberation of the orders and thus irritated those who had hoped the administration would champion the cause of the Third, Necker spoke hopefully of the submergence of personal differences and disputes between the orders in the name of the common good. The foundation for this concord would be hierarchical sacrifice and reciprocal recognition. The willingness of the clergy and nobility to renounce possessions dating to the very origin of the monarchy deserved deference: it was only "just and reasonable" for the Third Estate to "leave to the representatives of the first two orders the entire honor of such a sacrifice." Necker insisted that the willingness of the privileged orders voluntarily to renounce immemorial exemptions was precisely what lent the deed its power and solemnity: to demand this pending act of self-dispossession was to diminish it.⁴⁶

The ceremonials surrounding the opening of the Estates-General were, of course, understood by contemporaries as highly programmatic and even, in some cases, as cynically manipulative.⁴⁷ The representatives and allies of the Third

⁴⁵ Mavidal and Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 8:2, 5.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8:24.

⁴⁷ One deputy of the Third noted in a letter to a foreign correspondent that Necker's interminable speech had not "allowed to filter through the tiniest allusion to any willing

Estate would, over time, find the king's professions of generosity to be steadily compromised by court infighting and constant vacillation on matters large and small, ranging from the enforcement of humiliating regulations to heavy-handed attempts to intimidate the deputies and their fractious Parisian supporters.⁴⁸ Ultimately, the model of royal generosity visible across the prerevolutionary debate may help explain the durable popular appeal of the stereotype of political duplicity—a loving monarch misled by ambitious ministers or evil courtiers—that insulated Louis from direct criticism in 1789 and beyond.⁴⁹

The association of honor, patriotism, and selflessness with France's social elite would become a key target of propagandists for the Third Estate. The preeminent example may be the figure of abbé Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, who catapulted to fame with brilliant polemics such as *An Essay on Privileges* (December 1788) and *What Is the Third Estate?* (January 1789). It is hardly necessary here to reiterate Sieyès's contribution to our understanding of revolutionary discourse and its distinctive language of representation, borne of the complex fusion of economic and political idioms.⁵⁰ But it is valuable to retrace how and why Sieyès's model of society both confronted and challenged hierarchical notions of generosity and obligation. To Sieyès, society comprised an association of individuals gathered for mutual security and the enjoyment of natural rights but also knit together by utilitarian social functions. Almost by definition, hierarchical obligations deriving from sources other than utility were incompatible with an equitable social order.⁵¹ Sieyès's main argument was that privilege—consonant with the etymology of the word—placed its possessor “outside the law common to all.” To recompense useful services, whether to king or *patrie*, with elevations to privilege or through legal distinctions was inherently to unmake the social body; it

abandonment of any part whatsoever of royal authority to the nation”; see Mercy-Argenteau to Kaunitz, cited in Georges Lefebvre et al., eds., *Recueil de documents relatifs aux séances des Etats généraux*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1953), 1:228. The indefatigable Adrien Duquesnoy found the controller-general's address to be otiose as well as insulting; see *Journal d'Adrien Duquesnoy, député du Tiers état de Bar-le-Duc, sur l'Assemblée constituante, 3 mai 1789–3 avril 1790*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1894), 1:7–8.

⁴⁸ Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture, 1789–1790* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), 121–29.

⁴⁹ On the social purchase of the theme of the king “misled,” see Lisa Jane Graham, *If the King Only Knew: Seditious Speech in the Reign of Louis XV* (Charlottesville, VA, 2000), 19.

⁵⁰ An excellent recent synthesis is Michael Sonenscher, “Introduction,” in *Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès: Political Writings, including the Debate between Sieys and Tom Paine in 1791*, ed. and trans. M. Sonenscher (Indianapolis, 2003), vii–xliv.

⁵¹ John Shovlin, “Toward a Reinterpretation of Revolutionary Antinobility: The Political Economy of Honor in the Old Regime,” *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 35–66.

produced individuals who sought “less to be distinguished *by* [their] fellow citizens, than . . . to be distinguished *from* [their] fellow citizens.”⁵² Privilege inevitably had deleterious effects, creating groups devoted only to their particular interests and closed off to the inspirations of the common good. As Sieyès put it, “for the privileged individual, the idea of the *patrie* reduces to the caste to which he belongs.”⁵³

Sieyès’s writings on privilege are not without their ambiguities: despite forceful diatribes against noble privileges, Sieyès tended to overlook those privileges exercised by the clergy as well as those enjoyed by tradespeople or city dwellers.⁵⁴ Unambiguous, however, is Sieyès’s declaration that the very “virtues” of the nobility—valor and sacrifice—were no claim to gratitude or to political deference. *What Is the Third Estate?* routinely mocked the aristocracy’s “generosity” and “noble conduct” and bristled with sarcasm toward the “gifts” and “sacrifices” made by the privileged. Sieyès explicitly castigated the nobility’s willingness to pay taxes more equitably, suggesting that “such novel zeal, such concord, and such urgency” were essentially directed at undermining the Estates-General before it could even meet: “by offering a voluntary concession, might not the [Second Estate] hope to forestall equality of taxation as an act of justice?”⁵⁵ Whatever the aristocracy’s claims to generosity, Sieyès insisted that there was no need for the Third Estate to reciprocate; France’s historical instability was itself the product of overreliance on the “gift of the strongest.”⁵⁶ To Sieyès, reciprocity was only possible (or meaningful) between individuals in a condition of civic equality, knit together by shared law. Any other form of generosity was effectively demeaning if not coercive, for it implied that contributions to the public weal were mandated by something other than equity and justice.⁵⁷

⁵² Sieyès was emphatic that privilege was not the same thing as recompense; to grant privilege in recognition of service would “demean the whole for the part.” Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, *Essai sur les privilèges* (n.p., 1789), 2, 8, 13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 14; see also 17, 23–25.

⁵⁴ William H. Sewell Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and “What Is the Third Estate?”* (Durham, NC, 1994).

⁵⁵ Emmanuel Sieyès, *Qu’est-ce que le Tiers état*, ed. Roberto Zapperi (Geneva, 1970), 159.

⁵⁶ For examples of sarcastic or ironic treatments in Sieyès, see his discussion of “cession volontaire” and other acts of noble conduct; *ibid.*, 159, 160, 193, 195. For brief mentions of Sieyès’s critique of noble “generosity,” see Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation*, 297; and Egret, *French Pre-revolution*, 202.

⁵⁷ Sieyès argued, e.g., that “public esteem” was effective only among civic equals. Only the free exercise of individual wills created collective obligation and moral engagements—“everything is exchange among men; and in every act of exchange, there is necessarily, on one part and the other, an act of free will”—and only reciprocal assent transformed individuals into a society. For a forceful articulation of this position, see Emmanuel Sieyès, *Vues sur les moyens d’exécution dont les représentants de la France*

Despite their acknowledged popularity, Sieyès's ideas were firmly located on the political margins across the first half of 1789.⁵⁸ But in the new National Assembly, born on June 17, 1789, from an Estates-General that had been both deadlocked and radicalized by its participants, the problem of how to conciliate generosity, reciprocity, and equity would become pressing.⁵⁹ By July and August 1789, as deputies fitfully embarked on their new constitutional mission and began to articulate what it meant to be a representative of the sovereign nation's will, they brought inherited idioms of sacrifice into explicit contact with the new language of "rights." This emerged vividly in what was immediately acknowledged by contemporaries to be one of the Revolution's most momentous occurrences: the assembly's sweeping abolition of privilege during the nocturnal session of August 4, 1789.⁶⁰

Despite the importance of what transpired in the National Assembly that night, much about the session of August 4 remains enigmatic, even though its basic contours are well known.⁶¹ Against the background of widespread rural and antiseigneurial unrest, a loosely coordinated set of tactical concessions intended to appease the countryside spiraled out of control. At the initiative of the vicomte de Noailles (the marquis de Lafayette's landless cousin-in-law) and the duc d'Aiguillon (one of France's greatest landowners), the realm's leading churchmen and nobles took the lead in renouncing a range of seigneurial rights and obligations, after which the assembly crowned its session with a decree that announced the "destruction" of the feudal regime. Contemporary accounts strikingly and uniformly framed the night's significance according to themes of sacrifice and

pourront disposer en 1789 (n.p., 1789), 16. In his unsuccessful proposal for a Declaration of the Rights of Man, Sieyès emphasized the role of reciprocity and stressed that obligation vanished in the face of compulsion; see *Préliminaire de la constitution française* (Paris, 1789), 22–23.

⁵⁸ Margerison, *Pamphlets and Public Opinion*, 97–103. The best overall account of early August 1789 remains Michael P. Fitzsimmons, *The Night the Old Regime Ended: August 4, 1789 and the French Revolution* (University Park, PA, 2003).

⁵⁹ Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 132–48.

⁶⁰ Historians concur on the enduring importance of August 4, 1789, but disagree on both the role of ideology and the event's representative or unique status. François Furet characterized it as an aspiration to "reconstruct society on rational principles," but others have stressed contingency rather than ideology. Compare Furet, "Night of August 4," in *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, ed. François Furet and Mona Ozouf, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 107–14; Fitzsimmons, *Night the Old Regime Ended*, 18–19, 216–17; and Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 169–75. John Markoff emphasizes, to a much greater extent, the radicalizing effect of the feedback between rural unrest and the National Assembly; see Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, PA, 1996), 11–14.

⁶¹ Such reconstruction is particularly difficult because the official *procès-verbaux* were put together well after the renunciatory urge had passed. See Patrick Kessel, *La Nuit du 4 août 1789* (Paris, 1969), 135.

equity, understood as a means of simultaneously contributing to the collective good and restoring public tranquility.

In their public and private correspondence, participants in the session—as well as the journalists who subsequently commented on it—invoked the language of generosity and gift giving to communicate the emotive force of what one dubbed “the night of sacrifices.”⁶² As journalists reconstructed the evening’s séance, they noted that the assembled deputies, partaking of a formula that one observer dubbed “devotion to the public good,” began by calmly abjuring the humiliating exactions (*corvée, mainmorte*) of seigneurialism. Pandemonium ensued only after the first personal renunciation of feudal rights.⁶³ One deputy summed up the evening for his constituents as the “noblest, most heart-touching séance that ever was: a war of generosity between the representatives of the most loyal, most sensitive nation in the universe.”⁶⁴ Some contested that description. The *monarchien* marquis de Lally-Tollendal sardonically wrote to his constituents afterward, “I could barely bring myself to listen during the famous night of August 4; I was cringing inside, since I didn’t have a personal sacrifice to offer; and the easy generosity of sacrificing other people’s possessions didn’t appeal to me.”⁶⁵

The question of other people’s possessions was central, for it broached two key dilemmas: first, the linkage between rights and reciprocal obligations; second, the model of agency that underlay any act of voluntary dispossession. The duc d’Aiguillon, one of the leaders of the renunciations, noted on the evening of August 4 that while many nobles and proprietors stood willing to “sacrifice their feudal rights to justice,” the nation could not insist on such sacrifices: “equity forbids demanding the abandon of any property without justly compensating the owner.”⁶⁶ In the days immediately after August 4, the National Assembly effectively declared a truce in the war of generosity in order to codify nonpersonal obligations (such as those on land) and redefine them as types of property

⁶² Journalists and orators understandably celebrated the patriotic exaltation of the moment; Antoine-Joseph Gorsas noted that the evening was “aptly called the night of sacrifices.” *Courrier de Versailles à Paris* 31 (August 8, 1789), 2:169. The virtual displacement of reason by sentiment on August 4 is emphasized by Reddy, *Navigation of Feeling*, 182–84.

⁶³ According to the *Courrier Français*, “this act of patriotism reawakened spirits; henceforth, each person pressed forward to present his gift to society.” Quoted in Kessel, *La Nuit du 4 août*, 147.

⁶⁴ Laurent-François Legendre, quoted in *ibid.*, 178.

⁶⁵ *Mémoire de M. le Comte de Lally-Tollendal ou seconde lettre à ses commettans* (Paris, 1790), 111ff.

⁶⁶ In the matter of patriotic sacrifice, d’Aiguillon insisted that it was critical to delimit the boundaries of legitimate property with great care in order to “agree upon the aspects of feudality that are necessary to sacrifice for liberty and a proper constitution.” Mavidal and Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 8:344ff.; *Réimpression de l’ancien Moniteur*; 31 vols. (Paris, 1854–63), 1:279, 284. A different version of the séance is cited by Kessel, *La Nuit du 4 août*, 140.

revocable only by indemnification.⁶⁷ In the process, deputies raised the question of precisely what kind of entity was capable of sacrificing for the common good. As objections were raised concerning the tithe and other forms of impositions, a crucial fault line emerged over the status of church property. By August 8, those objections had been crystallized by men such as Alexander de Lameth, who insisted that collectivities (and especially corporate bodies) did not meet the conditions of reciprocal exchange. The nation, Lameth argued, was by definition the real beneficiary of all the bequests and donations that had, over time, constituted the wealth of the First Estate. Such possessions were not property but a trust in which “the nation is always to be found between the individual that gives and the political body that receives.”⁶⁸ For Lameth, only an individual could truly express generosity and thereby offer a sacrifice. Here he echoed, whether consciously or unconsciously, arguments that had been circulated earlier in 1789 concerning responsibility for the state’s deficit; some contemporaries argued against the establishment of a single public debt (funded by annuities benefiting only “the capitalists”) by insisting that “generosity consists of giving what belongs to oneself and not what belongs to the other . . . heroism consists in making great sacrifices for the public good oneself, rather than imposing them on the public.”⁶⁹

This focus on individual giving is crucial: the revolutionary dynamic that began with the Estates-General and eventuated in the night of August 4 destroyed the hierarchical model of sacrifice based on generosity from above and reciprocity from below. Marisa Linton has persuasively suggested that the renunciations of August 4 represent an attempt (at least temporarily successful) by patriot nobles to establish their moral and political credentials as authentic “men of virtue.”⁷⁰ Yet contemporaries were often highly jaundiced in the face of this apparent virtue; some argued that the renunciations of aristocrats or the dispossession of clerics were not deeds of generosity to be repaid with public esteem but instead a long-delayed correction of abuses that had disfigured the relationship between individuals and the nation. As the déclassé comte de Mirabeau put it in early August 1789, it was both demeaning and contemptible that a people seeking to establish liberty should be required to honor nobles and clerics for renouncing their

⁶⁷ For an excellent discussion of the legislative compromises, see Markoff, *Abolition of Feudalism*, 460–63; and Peter Jones, *The Peasantry in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1988).

⁶⁸ Mavidal and Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 8:370. See also Fitzsimmons, *Night the Old Regime Ended*, 56.

⁶⁹ *Gardez-vous de consolider la dette sans modifications* (Paris, [1789]); cited in Jean-Pierre Hirsch, *La Nuit du 4 août* (Paris, 1978), 102–3.

⁷⁰ Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford, 2013), 60–62.

privileges. On what grounds, Mirabeau asked his readers, was it appropriate to call the restoration of fundamental rights to the people a “sacrifice?”⁷¹

From late 1789 onward, revolutionaries began to emphasize and celebrate public expressions of generosity that were socially horizontal, consonant with the new values (property, freedom of conscience) and obligations (maintenance of the state) promulgated in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of August 1789. Above all, sacrifice was redefined as a civic pact between willing individuals and a worthy nation, a public expression of a people and nation regenerating one another. Possibly the single most celebrated episode of such “civic sacrifice” took place on September 7, 1789, when a group of eleven women chastely dressed in white came to the floor of the National Assembly.⁷² Wives and daughters of Parisian artists, these women responded to the nation’s fiscal crisis by intentionally mimicking (in approved neoclassical fashion) an episode from the history of the Roman Republic drawn from Plutarch. Whereas Roman matrons under Camillus (446–365 BCE) had delivered their jewels to the Senate to enable a promised wartime sacrifice, the women of 1789 offered their own jewels as a “patriotic gift” (*don patriotique*) to assist the nearly bankrupt state treasury in preserving what they termed the “sacred” engagements of public debt.⁷³

The women created a sensation when they publicly offered the nation “jewels that they would blush to wear, now that patriotism demands their sacrifice,” and their civic deed was reported widely in revolutionary newspapers and captured in numerous engravings.⁷⁴ The assembly voted the women the honors of the séance, and an enthusiastic impromptu celebration (*jusqu’à l’ivresse*) accompanied the delegation as it exited the assembly and passed through the courtyard of the Louvre.⁷⁵ However, none of the women in the deputation uttered a word in the

⁷¹ *Courrier de Provence* 24 (August 5–8, 1789), 2–3.

⁷² For the session, see Mavidal and Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 8:591–92; also Nicole Pellegrin, “Les femmes et le don patriotique: Les offrandes d’artistes de septembre 1789,” in *Les Femmes et la Révolution française*, 2 vols. (Toulouse, 1990), 2:361–80. Although twenty-one women participated by offering donations, ten were unable to attend the séance. For an alternative discussion of this deputation, see Walton, “Between Trust and Terror,” 55–57.

⁷³ *Liste des citoyennes, femmes ou filles des artistes, qui ont fait hommage de leurs bijoux à l’Assemblée nationale, le lundi 7 septembre 1789, à titre de contribution volontaire, destinée à l’acquittement de la dette publique* (Versailles, 1789). The original Roman episode was known to eighteenth-century audiences via translations such as Jacques Amyot, *Les Vies des hommes illustrés de Plutarque*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1784), 2:75–178.

⁷⁴ Raup-Baptestin, *Les Généreuses françaises, anecdote historique: Prompts effets du bon exemple; Nécessité de l’établissement d’une caisse patriotique* (n.p., [1789]), 6.

⁷⁵ A number of journalistic accounts described the deputation and its effects. See Mavidal and Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 8:588ff.; *Moniteur*, 1:445; *Patriote Français* 39 (September 10, 1789), 1; and *Révolutions de Paris* 9 (September 5–11, 1789), 18–22.

presence of the assembled deputies.⁷⁶ While this display of modesty fit into prevailing stereotypes about women in public, it also legitimated a specific form of feminine patriotism that women such as Olympe de Gouges regarded as a demure but effective response to Rousseau's denigration of women as limitless egotists.⁷⁷ It seems to have worked, because even disdainful journalists such as Jean-Paul Marat initially celebrated the female patriots whose example would "inspire the sacred fire that elevates and purifies spirits, this enthusiasm for the great things that produces the happiness of peoples and states!"⁷⁸

To judge from contemporary reactions, the conflagration spread. Although patriotic offerings and schemes had been an intense feature of public life since the commencement of debate on the Estates-General, the example of feminine sacrifice sparked a torrential outpouring of subsequent offerings. Hamlets offered collections, magistrates and officials forwent the normal fees to which they were entitled, regiments of soldiers offered medals, schoolchildren offered the prizes they had gained through their work, painters offered their canvases.⁷⁹ By September 19, 1789, the assembly had acknowledged this influx of contributions by deciding to publish a weekly list of "patriotic gifts" received by the nation; the practice of acknowledging such gifts and publicly recognizing their donors would become a ritualized feature of political séances in the assembly but also in many political clubs.⁸⁰

And the royal government did not ignore such examples of civic patriotism. On September 24, 1789, Jacques Necker announced on behalf of the king that the royal family and the court stood ready to contribute on the nation's behalf: "I suggested to the king that his dinner plate be sent to the mint. The king agreed, and fulfilled this sacrifice with dedication deserving of our admiration; and as soon as the queen learned of our efforts, she ordered me to send her dinner plate, too. . . . And the king's ministers followed the royal example." While Necker

⁷⁶ The message was read to the assembly by the deputy Pierre-François Bouche ostensibly because, as one of the women wrote, their "natural" timidity and frail voices made it inappropriate for them to read it aloud. Raup-Baptistin, *Les Généreuses françaises*, 5.

⁷⁷ Olympe de Gouges also insisted that the domestic lives of women conditioned them to particular empathy for the public good: "The *patrie* is our common family. Our sex is eminently endowed with the family spirit. Who is more moved by public calamities than women?" See de Gouges, *Remarques patriotiques par la Citoyenne, auteur de la Lettre au Peuple* (n.p., [1788]), 49, 56–57.

⁷⁸ *Le Publiciste parisien* 1 (September 12, 1789), 5.

⁷⁹ *Moniteur*, 1:453, 476, 506, 507. See also Walton, "Between Trust and Terror," for a wider recounting of gifts received.

⁸⁰ The assembly painstakingly enumerated more than 170 items (including a purse containing sixteen *louis d'or*) brought by the artists' wives on September 7; see *Extrait du registre des dons patriotiques, tenu par ordre de l'Assemblée nationale* (Versailles, 1789), 5–7.

hoped this “example might encourage the true friends of the public good,” he also used it as the rhetorical justification for an exceptional measure: a one-time patriotic contribution (tax) of 25 percent of individuals’ revenues to close the gap between the state’s fiscal needs and the sums raised by voluntary efforts.⁸¹ While the proposal was exceptional, unpopular, and eventually rendered unnecessary by the eventual sequestration of church property, it built on a preexisting tradition of explicitly linking voluntary contributions to state finance. Before 1789, numerous authors had proposed “patriotic levies” (*impôts patriotiques*) that would be recompensed by public esteem, thereby linking *citoyen* and *patrie* in a web of “beaux sentiments.”⁸²

Arguably, what made such currents so powerful is that they were explicitly rendered as the individual’s right (and, it was implied, the feeling individual’s duty) to articulate a direct linkage to the collective good. After 1789, this was increasingly presented as a matter of egalitarian access, defined not by an individual’s possession of active citizenship but rather by a patriotic desire to contribute.⁸³ As one of the female participants in the September 7 delegation wrote, “the regeneration of the state will be the work of the nation’s representatives . . . [but the] liberation of the state must be the work of all good citizens.”⁸⁴ Such claims were, in effect, evidence of a profound interrogation of the connection between rights, civic identity, and voluntarism that boiled over after 1789. Patriotic voluntarism enabled some revolutionaries to insist on the need to broaden political rights beyond the initially restrictive, property-based separation between “active” and “passive” citizens; as early as December 3, 1789, the assembly’s Constitutional Committee pondered whether a voluntary fiscal contribution should confer the same political rights as the proposed *marc d’argent* (the property qualification required for eligibility to sit in the assembly).⁸⁵ Radicals would be particularly active (although not initially successful) in challenging the fiscal justifications for political rights. Maximilien Robespierre famously attacked the

⁸¹ Mavidal and Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 9:140. Although this royal generosity raised a substantial sum—900,000 livres—it was far from enough to ease the predicament of the treasury, which had been unable to subscribe emergency loans. On the failure of the *Caisse* more generally, see Walton, “Between Trust and Terror,” 59–60.

⁸² *Agenda national, ou Tableau succinct des objets politiques & civils qui seront traités aux États-Généraux; accompagné de Notes & d’Observations* (n.p., 1789), 28–29, 52–53, 71–73, 81–83. Olympe de Gouges had unsuccessfully advanced the idea of a patriotic depository; see de Gouges, *Lettre au peuple ou le projet d’une Caisse patriotique* (Paris, 1788); partially reprinted in de Gouges, *Écrits politiques*, ed. Olivier Blanc, 2 vols. (Paris, 1993), 1:37–45.

⁸³ This is also a central claim in Walton, “Between Trust and Terror,” 61.

⁸⁴ Raup-Baptestin, *Les Généreuses françaises*, 5.

⁸⁵ See Pierre Rosanvallon, *Le Sacre du citoyen: Histoire du suffrage universel en France* (Paris, 1992), 83; the extended debate is in Mavidal and Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 10:391–406.

marc d'argent in March 1791 by insisting that “it is not taxation that makes us citizens; the quality of citizenship demands only that one contribute to the upkeep of the state according to one’s faculties.”⁸⁶ Ultimately, the relationship between taxation and citizenship was transformed between 1789 and 1792, as revolutionaries moved from a model of obligation by estate, to property-right citizenship (evidenced by the terminological shift from *impôt* to *contribution*), and finally to the experiment of democratic masculine suffrage.⁸⁷ Across these differential expressions of citizenship, many revolutionaries would insist that patriotism (with or without actual citizenship) was conditioned primarily by participatory willingness; civic belonging, in this sense, was neither derivable from social position nor simply a matter of rights stemming from nature.

Participatory forms of civic sacrifice were indisputably powerful and would endure, with dramatic success, from 1789 through year II. The sites of patriotic giving would shift over time from the National Assembly to the National Convention to the Jacobin Club; the crises that occasioned such patriotism would mutate from state insolvency to the mortal danger of war against Europe. But in quantity, universality, and justification, patriotic generosity constituted, in Catherine Duprat’s words, “a singular phenomenon of the revolutionary period, breaking with the [philanthropic] gestures of the past.”⁸⁸ And Duprat points out the startling extent of this generosity: merely in the year between August 1793 and thermidor II (July 1794), at least 5,600 patriotic gifts (of money or kind) were mentioned or acknowledged by the members of the National Convention. Many contemporaries seem to have agreed with the female patriot who insisted in late 1789 that while legislators might be charged with governing and guiding the people, it was incumbent on ordinary men and women, irrespective of their station, to contribute however they could, to “distinguish themselves by the impact of [their] sacrifices.”⁸⁹

THE INTERSTICES OF SACRIFICE: INTENTION AND MEDIATION

The use of terms such as *concoure* and *distinction* is telling because revolutionaries initially hoped that patriotic sacrifice would provide models of efficacious

⁸⁶ *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, 10 vols. (Paris, 1910–67), 7:162. As Robespierre’s colleague, the journalist Camille Desmoulins had put it, the nation’s “active citizens” were those who had taken the Bastille. See *Révolutions de France et de Brabant* 3 [December 1789], 109.

⁸⁷ Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation*, 307–10.

⁸⁸ Duprat, *Pour l’amour de l’humanité*, 1:149, 155. See also Alzas, “Don, patriotisme et sociétés populaires en l’an II,” 49–52, 64.

⁸⁹ *Discours prononcé par Mme. Rigal dans une assemblée des femmes artistes et orfevres, tenue le 20 septembre [1789] pour délibérer sur une contribution volontaire* (n.p., [1789]), 2.

and beneficial civic behavior. Across the reconciled family that was the French nation, every act of patriotism would inspire another: the contagion of noble liberty would spread like fire (a favorite metaphor) from heart to heart, exalting spirits to even greater sacrifice. Much like the Revolution's pedagogy, its patriotism was obsessed with the power of the example and the value of emulation; to this extent, both were inheritors of the sensationalist epistemology of the eighteenth century. Yet, in practice, acts of dispossession and generosity—whether performed by paternal king, patriotic noble, or selfless citizen—elicited formidable problems of interpretation, and the possibility of differentiation via sacrifice raised troubling new questions to revolutionary observers.

When might an act of civic patriotism truly be worthy of emulation and propagation? For contemporaries, the crucial issue was not the form taken by a voluntaristic act done in public (in other words, the ritual or its efficacy); what mattered were the motivations and intentions presumed to underlie the deed. Historians, too, have recognized this problem. Charles Walton views the transformation of patriotic giving after 1789 as a powerful and widespread response to political instability and fiscal turmoil, but one that generated an “intensifying moral scrutiny” that, over time, transformed it from civic display into “a litmus test of loyalty to the Revolution.” Despite the failure of voluntary giving to solve the manifold challenges of economic redistribution and political stability, Walton suggests that “expressions of unity through generosity were pragmatic precisely *for being reassuring*,” as attempts to build social trust at a moment of intense fear and anxiety, and as a way of allowing contemporaries to imagine noncoercive forms of community.⁹⁰

Yet from the perspective of many revolutionaries, acts of dispossession and generosity were far from being “reassuring” displays of trust. Instead, sacrificial practices elicited formidable problems of interpretation and opened a wider debate about motivations and sincerity.⁹¹ Noble patriotism, royal paternalism, and civic selflessness could look quite different through a lens that focused not on surface actions but on interior intentions. The magnanimity of the night of August 4, 1789, for example, swiftly began to generate extraordinary suspicion among many contemporary observers. In the National Assembly's renunciation, some

⁹⁰ Walton, “Between Trust and Terror,” 48 and 66. Walton eloquently cautions against the temptation to dismiss such practices as “tragically gratuitous” just because they failed.

⁹¹ Walton, e.g., acknowledges that, given the dependent relationships between eighteenth-century craftsmen, artists, and their elite clients, episodes such as the jewelry donation by artists' wives “might be interpreted as camouflaged self-interest,” but he suggests that “reducing patriotic giving to calculation alone would obscure the sense of fear, urgency, and hope inspiring it.” *Ibid.*, 57. From the perspective of the modern-day interpreter, this is certainly true; however, the point is that contemporaries frequently carried out precisely such types of motivational reduction and did so in a climate shaped by patriotic exaltation as well as melodramatic anxieties.

glimpsed the sinister hand of aristocrats who intended to provoke disorder and fear; the deputy Antoine-Claire Thibaudeau, for example, intimated that the people's enemies might well hide behind "the shadow of feigned generosity."⁹² But the theme of aristocratic falsity received its most intense exposition in the hands of Jean-Paul Marat, the radical journalist whose notoriety as *l'ami du peuple* was already cemented by late 1789. Looking back on that noble renunciation just a few months after the event, Marat advanced a deeply pessimistic assessment of the purported "war of generosity" waged in the séance of August 4. While the nobility's sacrifices may have been dictated by elevated sentiment, Marat noted, the fact that they waited until fire glimmered in the windows of their chateaux was hardly proof of sincerity. The "greatness of the sacrifices" offered by these self-congratulatory nobles was tempered by the fact that their renunciations were "mostly illusory"; the abrogated privileges would in any case have been abolished by the new Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen or else voided by the forthcoming Constitution. Rather than generosity, Marat saw in the deeds of August 4 the contours of a hideous conspiracy to "lull the people" and roll back the political liberty that had been won forcibly by the Revolution.⁹³

Marat's radical pessimism can be most persuasively explained as a revolutionary manifestation of the pan-European idiom of "classical republicanism." An idiom of active civic life predicated on independence and virtue, classical republicanism equated the prospects of liberty with the triumph of the "public good" over partial, selfish interests and focused on the corrupting effects—the chains of dependency—deriving from the rise of commercial society and the encroachments of the state. Keith Baker and others have influentially argued that Marat was one of the key figures in the revolutionary transformation of "classical republicanism" into a principle of power; after 1789, institutional and intellectual constraints on what had formerly been a "discourse of opposition" vanished, and fear of popular lassitude and moral corruption could be projected into an unbounded revolutionary future of world historical struggle against omnipresent enemies.⁹⁴

These readings of the "classical republican" Marat suggest why surveillance and denunciation would become favored instruments in ferreting out conspirators hiding behind the mask of false patriotism.⁹⁵ Yet when calibrated against the

⁹² Kessel, *La Nuit du 4 août*, 132.

⁹³ *Ami du peuple* 11 (September 21, 1789).

⁹⁴ Baker, "Transformations of Classical Republicanism," esp. 43ff.

⁹⁵ On the range of conspiratorial fears during the Revolution, see esp. François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Foster (Cambridge, 1971); 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; Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford, 2001), 63–65; and Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser,

languages and practices of civic generosity and obligation, these explanatory patterns take on additional complexity. Suspicion and denunciation could obviously be brought to bear on events of suspect motivation or execution, but they potentially discolored deeds or actions that revolutionaries considered meritorious and praiseworthy. Marat disapproved of the false sacrifices of August 4 because they were prompted by conspiratorial intent, but he likewise began to caution against civic gestures that he and others had previously praised, such as that made by the artists' wives in September 1789. Both were dangerous to the nation, but patriotic acts were dangerous in particularly insidious and indirect ways. Marat warned that, paradoxically, the compelling power of the feminine example had produced such an explosion of generosity that alert patriots should suspect the motivations behind these new sacrifices: "Patriotic gifts multiply each day, as citizens of all backgrounds press forward with their offerings. Is it love of the patrie? Is it a need to distinguish oneself? Is it a sense of shame over not being seen to come forward?" Yet it was not really the potential foibles or insincerity of citizens that most troubled Marat. It was, instead, the very purposes to which this powerful exemplarity might be turned. Patriotic gifts were, paradoxically, a threat to the Revolution precisely because they were exemplary; by inspiring citizens, by heightening popular sentiment, by inviting public expressions of individual virtue, such giving opened insidious new avenues of manipulation. The king's ministers, Marat insisted, were actually using patriotism to prop up the national debt, itself the dark record of royal excess and aristocratic vice. In this sense, the fervor of patriotic contributions simply revealed the administration's genius and its comprehension of the weak and vain character of the French. The proof of this, Marat intoned, lay in the fake sacrifices made by the powerful: "[if] the king sends his silver dinner plate to the Mint, that is an ostentatious act without merit. What does the loss of silverware cluttering his buffet mean to a king? His table is no less splendidly decorated. What am I saying? It is a false sacrifice, onerous to the State. Soon that magnificent silver service will be replaced by one even more superb." The ever-credulous French were, in Marat's eyes, poised to fall back into slavery (but not if he could help it).⁹⁶

Marat may have expressed such fears with particular intensity, but he was far from being an isolated or idiosyncratic case. Other revolutionaries could likewise look back on 1789 and emphasize the difficulty of interpreting the real meaning of

and Marisa Linton, eds., *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester, 2007). A comparative perspective is provided in the pioneering article by Gordon Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982): 401–41. On denunciation, see Colin Lucas, "The Theory and Practice of Denunciation in the French Revolution," *Journal of Modern History* 68 (1996): 768–85.

⁹⁶ *Ami du peuple* 25 (October 5, 1789).

deeds by France's former elites. The values in which nobles had so long been saturated made it impossible fully to know their secret depths until it was too late:

Civic glory belongs only to those who pursue the public good from pure and disinterested motives. Such motives are too seldom the basis for the conduct of princes. Their individual code is based on ambition, pride, and the passions. . . . They so frequently drape themselves in virtue, and are so often praised as such, that it is extremely difficult—I should say almost always impossible—to justly praise a prince at the exact moment that he appears to perform a great action. Sometimes a century must pass before a single secret of their passions can be brought to light.⁹⁷

Such pessimism did not need to wear the garb of classical republicanism; revolutionaries could likewise scapegoat leaders (such as the Marquis de Lafayette) who were perceived to be motivated primarily by private interest and whose sacrifices were correspondingly viewed as insincere. Even the example of the “self-denying ordinance” of May 1791—when, at Robespierre’s urging, the members of the Constituent Assembly voted themselves ineligible to stand for election to the new Legislative Assembly—can be seen as the fearful avoidance of the possibility of self-interested politics.⁹⁸

Problems of trustworthiness and self-interest illuminate the keen anxiety that could surround that most characteristic manifestation of revolutionary patriotism: the oath. Since Mona Ozouf’s pioneering work on revolutionary festivals, the propensity for oath taking has become a familiar ingredient of revolutionary culture. From the Tennis Court Oath of June 1789 to the oaths associated with federation, fraternity, and civic religion, collective promises became many things: a public cementing of new willed relationships, expressions of a new consciousness of time and space, and even impulses to hold the community together by implicit threats and promises.⁹⁹ Certainly, as Timothy Tackett has shown, the struggles over the oath of clerical allegiance mandated in 1791 by the Civic Constitution of the Clergy produced an anguished debate over the conditions under which oaths should be sworn or abrogated. But it was primarily radicals who queried the presumed relationship between oaths and civic belonging, precisely because men such as Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just regarded the oath as the “lien du

⁹⁷ [Elysée Loustalot], *Introduction à la Révolution, servant de préliminaire aux Révolutions de Paris, dédiées à la Nation et au district des Petits-Augustins* (Paris, 1790), 65–66. The *Introduction* was intended to serve as historical background for readers of Prudhomme’s *Révolutions de Paris*; for an excellent discussion of the work and its attribution to Loustalot, see Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution*, 220–23.

⁹⁸ Shapiro, “Self-Sacrifice, Self-Interest, or Self-Defense?”

⁹⁹ On the meaning of oaths, see Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire*, 295ff., and “Fraternity,” in Furet and Ozouf, *Critical Dictionary*, 694–703; Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1984), 21, 27.

contrat politique,” a public and secular promise binding citizens one to another.¹⁰⁰ Radicals also insisted that oaths were not efficacious in themselves; as Robespierre noted in June 1791, against the backdrop of a debate over the reliability of military commanders, oaths were superfluous (*inutile*) for good citizens and had no power to enchain bad ones.¹⁰¹ The force of any oath, such as that mandated for the National Guard, lay not in words of fidelity and loyalty but in the obligation to act.¹⁰²

Seen from within, revolutionary sacrifice thus exposes an interpretive dilemma. On the one hand, historians can certainly assess the successes and failures of patriotic generosity, gift giving, and patriotism in pragmatic terms. In this light, Charles Walton has shown that—despite manifest examples of local foot dragging, tardiness of contributions, and the friction of ad hoc institutions—certain forms of patriotic generosity had become, by the Terror, virtually a “litmus test” for holding office or establishing civic credentials. Indeed, Walton even points to the unusual example of two tax farmers saved from the guillotine in autumn 1793 by their documented history of civic generosity.¹⁰³ Yet on the other hand, the relative paucity of such examples suggests a different framework of explanation: as revolutionaries queried the ends to which sacrifices might be directed, they discovered the conjoined problems of mediation and agency.

Patriotic acts drew civic meaning from their eminent publicity; performed without secrecy, open to public view, they were seemingly transparent to the observer. But, revolutionaries cautioned, this transparency was deceptive. Fully to understand a sacrificial act required fathoming an agent’s intentions, assessing just what was being renounced, and pondering how meaningful that selfless deed might be to the collectivity. It was in this light that the mere sacrifice of things—

¹⁰⁰ Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, “Esprit de la Révolution et de la Constitution de France, par Louis-Léon de Saint-Just, électeur au Département de l’Aisne pour le canton de Blérancourt, district de Chauny” (1791), in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. M. Duval (Paris, 1984), 314.

¹⁰¹ *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, 7:476. This theme was repeated, in a different manner, by Louis-Marie Prudhomme in the final issue of his *Révolutions de Paris* in February 1794. Although by then Prudhomme was in danger of arrest, he vociferously attacked the practice of oath taking as incompatible with true freedom and republican energy; see *Révolutions de Paris* 225 (25 pluviôse–10 ventôse An II), 532.

¹⁰² See the emphasis Robespierre placed on the term “maintenir” in the National Guard oath on January 7, 1790; *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, 6:178–80. On the occasion of the Festival of Federation in July 1790, Marat similarly warned against the naive belief that mere words could transform military men such as de Broglie into patriots: “Do you really expect that a civic oath will quiet the passions [of such men], extinguish their rage, bind their arms, or make of them new men?” For examples of the danger of oaths, see Jean-Paul Marat, *Oeuvres politiques*, ed. Jacques de Cock, 10 vols. (Brussels, 1989–95), 2:873–75, 5:2801–2, 3066–69.

¹⁰³ A superb yet succinct portrait of local foibles is Walton, “Between Trust and Terror,” 62–65.

money, goods, commodities, property—became potentially suspect, since such goods could in principle be replaced or even construed as superfluous “luxuries.”¹⁰⁴ Acts of self-denial that were grounded on things were potentially illusory (a renunciation of something one had no right to possess) or revocable (a renunciation—like that of the king’s plate—made meaningless by the ease of recuperation). In this schema, the willingness to sacrifice was a desired sign of attachment to the collective good, but it was never more than an unstable and insufficient indicator that potentially could serve nefarious ends, concealing from revolutionaries the counter-revolutionary selfishness or tyrannical ambition in their very midst.

PRACTICING SAFE SACRIFICE

Despite those apparent dangers, revolutionaries refused to dispense with the language of civic generosity and reciprocal obligation. The couplet “generous people” (*peuple généreuse*), familiar through the eighteenth century, continued to retain talismanic force across the Revolution’s most violent as well as its most placid episodes. It is clear that contemporaries themselves frequently tried to knit the language of generosity, reciprocity, and selflessness into their aspirations for the fraternal social order that had been reborn with the foundation of the First Republic in September 1792.¹⁰⁵

The language in which revolutionaries tried succinctly to express the moral quality of the Revolution, its mission to liberate the world, and the essential goodness of the people was, of course, highly programmatic. Yet it strikingly (and, one might say, hopefully) tried to meld fraternal love, patriotic selflessness, and sacrificial reciprocity in the service of new moral and political identities. By October 1793, for example, militants contributing to the newspaper *Feuille de Paris* insisted that fraternity was the guarantor for a new type of governing authority as well as the ideal individual expression of its values:

Our new government, our new morality, all our reciprocal rights and duties, all our virtue, all our happiness derive from the happy contract we have sworn to consider one another as brothers and love one another accordingly. . . . The terms of our social pact require that our actions and thoughts be truly fraternal. From this must flow disinterest that is proof against all challenge. A good citizen is less the owner of property than the trustee of whatever is produced beyond subsistence by the citizen’s own capital and his own efforts [*dépositaire du produit superflu des ses fonds et de son industrie*]. The citizen does not await, but seeks out the occasion to sacrifice his possessions to the general as well as the specific needs of the people.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Jones and Spang, “Sans-culottes, *sans café, sans tabac*,” 50, 56.

¹⁰⁵ Lynn Hunt offers examples in fiction and visual culture; see Hunt, *Family Romance*, 86–87.

¹⁰⁶ *Feuille de Paris* (October 23, 1793). For a reading that stresses the effective limitations of fraternity, see Marcel David, *Fraternité et Révolution française* (Paris, 1987).

Almost casually, this journalistic proclamation suggested that revolutionary activism—actively doing rather than waiting—trumped the mere sacrifice of possessions; the language of trusteeship emphasized that it was not the ownership of property but its disinterested dispossession that enabled a sincere sacrifice.¹⁰⁷

In many ways, revolutionaries had come to exhibit remarkable skepticism toward material renunciations. To give up commodities or to pay obligations in specie was no more reliable a guarantee of patriotism than the mere adoption of revolutionary clothing or other patriotic accoutrements. In October 1793, for example, the Commune of Paris cautioned patriots against those who “affected pure and austere republicanism” but had “taken no active part in all that matters to the Revolution, and who attempt to excuse this fact by citing their payment of taxes, their patriotic gifts [*dons patriotiques*], or their service, whether as replacement or otherwise, in the National Guard.”¹⁰⁸ By early April 1794, Robespierre had repeated and intensified this warning by insisting (against the proposed scrutiny of the wealth of members of the convention) that neither the appearance of poverty nor wealth established civic virtue and that monetary contributions alone were scant foundation for patriotic trust. Instead, “the proof that we require is a life whose moments are all marked by virtuous actions, a life filled with sacrifices made to the *patrie*. What does it matter whether one has fulfilled one’s militia obligation [*monté sa garde*] or regularly paid one’s taxes?”¹⁰⁹ Mere attention to the forms of patriotism risked deceit; the only reliable means to distinguish between true patriots and hidden enemies was to demand “real services” to liberty and not mere words.¹¹⁰

Perhaps inevitably, contemporaries were drawn to assign a gradation of values to patriotic sacrifice, yet they plainly struggled to do so. The emphasis on action over words, on real sacrifices rather than fiscal dispossessions, helps explain the extraordinary attention devoted to the figure of the revolutionary “martyr.” Although contemporary celebrations of selfless heroism can be found from the earliest moments of the Revolution, there is no doubt that the First Republic witnessed a profusion of official and unofficial campaigns to propagandize an exemplary if motley group of heroes, ranging from ex-aristocrats such as Louis-Michel le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau (assassinated in January 1793 for voting the king’s execution), to celebrated journalists such as Marat, to precocious child warriors such as Joseph Barra (killed resisting the Vendéens). Their stoicism and

¹⁰⁷ Coleman, *Virtues of Abandon*, 271.

¹⁰⁸ See the circular from the Conseil General of the Commune in October 1793 (20eme jour, 1ere mois, An II), reprinted in Walter Markov and Albert Soboul, eds., *Die Sansculotten von Paris: Dokumente zur Geschichte der Volksbewegung, 1793–1794* (Berlin, 1958), 214.

¹⁰⁹ *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, 10:424–26.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10:360–61.

sacrifice was celebrated in almanacs, pedagogical texts, popular engravings, and sometimes even placement in the Panthéon.¹¹¹

Scholars have long stressed the sacralizing qualities of the Revolution's celebration of these dead heroes; just as the Jacobins moralized the abstract entity of the "people," so too they constructed martyrdom as a way of showing the contours of true and verifiable patriotism.¹¹² If such proof was necessary, it was surely because the events of the Revolution had already coughed up postmortem embarrassments aplenty. The most famous example was that of the comte de Mirabeau, celebrated by the Jacobins as a patriot after his sudden death in April 1791 but then widely reviled (and hung in effigy) after November 1792, when the king's arrest exposed the secrets of the *armoire de fer*, including incriminating correspondence between Mirabeau and the court.¹¹³ Numerous revolutionaries thus cautioned their fellow citizens against idolizing living heroes, since the real import of their deeds might not be known until long after their demise.¹¹⁴

Revolutionary martyrdom—willed self-immolation in the name of the nation—was proof against such corrosive doubt. Robespierre thus strikingly paid homage, on December 28, 1793, to the young Barra, victim of the brigands of the Vendée: "Only the French have thirteen-year-old heroes; it is liberty that produces men of such great character. You [members of the Convention] must offer this model of magnanimity, of morality to all the French and to all peoples: to the

¹¹¹ Such initiatives are analyzed in Bell, *Cult of the Nation*, 136–38, 154–59.

¹¹² Revolutionary martyrdom has been read as an appropriation of the structures of religiosity (a line of interpretation traceable back at least to de Tocqueville), but it has also been seen as a mechanism for producing secular cohesion within a threatened community (a line of interpretation grounded in the work of Durkheim). See especially Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire*. Such arguments also draw support from evidence that revolutionaries themselves used religious parallels (as well as a range of allusions to the classical world) to communicate the nature of revolutionary sacrifice. Orators such as the abbé Fauchet, whose extraordinarily popular speeches of August 1789 celebrated the "martyrs du bien public" who were killed taking the Bastille, redefined Christian charity as the willingness to self-immolate for the *patrie*. See *Discours de M. l'Abbé Fauchet, sur la liberté Française, prononcé le mercredi 5 août 1789, dans l'Eglise paroissiale de Saint-Jacques & des SS. Innocens, durant une solennité consacré à la mémoire des Citoyens qui sont morts à la prise de la Bastille, pour la défense de la Patrie* (Paris, 1789), 1–6, and *Second discours sur la liberté Française, prononcé le 31 août 1789, dans l'église Paroissiale de Sainte-Marguerite, en présence des trois Districts réunis du Faubourg Saint-Antoine* (Paris, 1789).

¹¹³ See Joseph Clarke, *Commemorating the Dead in Revolutionary France: Revolution and Remembrance, 1789–1799* (Cambridge, 2007), 98–110; Antoine de Baecque, *Glory and Terror: Seven Deaths under the French Revolution*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (London, 2001), 15–35. On the destruction of Mirabeau's bust in the Jacobin Club, see *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, 9:143–44.

¹¹⁴ This theme was invoked by numerous journalists, including Marat, Louis-Marie Prudhomme, Camille Desmoulins, and Robespierre. See also the discussion in Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 69–70.

French, so that they strive to acquire similar virtues and attach great value to the title of French citizen; to other peoples, so that they despair of subjugating a people that can produce heroes of such tender years.”¹¹⁵ Robespierre’s speech of February 5, 1794, on political morality, which famously conjoined “vertu” and “terreur,” explicitly identified love of the *patrie* with love of democratic equality. But he also explicitly addressed how sacrifice shaped the community of true citizens: “It is even more true that this sublime feeling [patriotism] presupposes that the public interest will be preferred over all individual interests; from this it follows that love for the *patrie* even presupposes or produces all other virtues: for are not these virtues identical to the moral strength [*force de l’âme*] that makes sacrifice possible? How could the slave to avarice or ambition, for example, immolate that idol for the *patrie*?”¹¹⁶ The ultimate act of generosity, the ultimate real service to liberty, was mortal self-transcendence.

This is perhaps the public register to which belong Robespierre’s well-known and oft-repeated claims, particularly at the height of the Terror, of personal willingness to sacrifice his own life for the cause of liberty. At many of the bitterest moments of factional intrigue in 1793 and early 1794, Robespierre reiterated in public speeches at the Jacobin Club and National Convention that true patriots faced implacable conspirators and even fanatical assassins. In late May 1793, for example, in a thinly disguised attack on the soon-to-be-arrested Girondin deputies, Robespierre decried the “liberticide measures” championed by the associates of that revealed traitor, General Dumouriez, and declared his courage to the end: “there is no sacrifice that I am not ready to make in order to save liberty, beginning with that of my own life.”¹¹⁷ It was a litany that Robespierre repeated over and over, even to the depths of illness and despair that became starkly visible on 8 thermidor II, when Robespierre used what would be his last complete speech before the convention not merely to threaten the nation’s enemies but also to identify himself as a “living martyr of the Revolution.”¹¹⁸

In a richly textured examination of political friendships during the Revolution, Marisa Linton has argued that during the Terror such languages of martyrdom were pervasive among leading revolutionaries—not just among Jacobins but among their bitter factional rivals as well—and existed as a complex outcome of ideology (virtue), associational structure (personal friendship), and tactics (the

¹¹⁵ *Oeuvres de Maximilien Robespierre*, 10:293. The convention had earlier voted Barra’s family a pension of 3,000 livres, and his dying moments would subsequently be idealized on canvas by Jacques-Louis David’s workshop.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 10:353. This particular speech relied dramatically on defining republican democracy as generosity and humanity to one’s fellow citizens; the only “obligation” owed to the Republic’s enemies was “severe, inflexible justice.”

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9:523.

¹¹⁸ Annie Jourdan, “Robespierre and Revolutionary Heroism,” in *Robespierre*, ed. William Doyle and Colin Haydon (Cambridge, 1999), 54–74.

emotional and practical exigencies of revolutionary politics). Linton argues that in a violent, fearful political climate, the willingness to die (or, alternatively, to kill one's own friends) allowed individuals to "achieve authenticity"—to create (sometimes as their final act) a persona consonant with self-identification as a man of "virtue."¹¹⁹

Yet this reading is also consonant with and, indeed, deeply embedded in the way contemporaries thought about sacrificial acts. If contemporaries stressed martyrdom—the willingness to be immolated in the name of the nation—it was precisely because only this kind of self-sacrifice was proof against corrosive doubt. The macabre example of Joseph Chalier, guillotined by the champions of the Federalist uprising in Lyon, is here illustrative. On December 12, 1793 (1 nivôse year II), Lyon patriots returned Chalier's withered remains—including his severed head—to the National Convention. Deputies solemnly applauded Chalier's personal probity and his final sacrifice, at which point Georges Couthon, one of Robespierre's colleagues on the Committee of Public Safety, declared: "forget the living, honor the dead; that is how to establish the Republic solidly."¹²⁰

A Republic of the dead. The language used by radicals seems absurdly grandiloquent and impossibly stilted, but that very stereotypical quality is evidence of its public projection, if not necessarily its efficacy with the public. It is possible to arrive at this predilection (or obsession, if you will) for self-immolation via different interpretive avenues, but contemporaries were signaling something essential: to die in the Revolution's name was to establish a kind of trust that could not be undermined. Other types of sacrifice—things, money, objects—were not taken seriously, precisely because they could be undone. But the gift of the body was stable. Unlike the renunciation of mere goods or things, the sacrifice of the self was trustworthy precisely because it was irrevocable; bodily sacrifices were defined in a zone beyond selfishness and exchange, exemplars that could not be turned against the Revolution. The stoicism of dying revolutionaries, their repeated enunciations of a willingness to self-immolate, expressed a promise that was understood even when it remained unspoken: "my sacrifice, fellow citizens, you can trust." Think of it as the ultimate bid to belong.

CONCLUSION: REVOLUTIONARY MEDIATIONS AND THE MEANINGS OF SACRIFICE

What, ultimately, can contemporaries' equivocation over sacrifice tell us about revolutionary culture? Just this: social-science inspired readings of sacrifice offer powerful functional and formal explanations of self-abnegation, generosity, and gift giving, but these theoretical insights are not the same as the implicit and

¹¹⁹ Linton, *Choosing Terror*, esp. chap. 11, "Achieving Authenticity."

¹²⁰ Mavidal and Laurent, *Archives parlementaires*, 82:75.

explicit constructions that contemporaries imposed on such deeds. Approaching revolutionary sacrifice from the perspective of self-aware contemporaries—via their own assessments of rituals, languages, and practices—reveals the contingent transformations of sacrifice and self-abnegation. For contemporaries, the profusion of sacrificial practices during the Revolution occasioned constant disputation and reevaluation, which exposed troubling questions of action, identity, trust, and mediation. Sacrifice was widely refracted through revolutionary culture particularly because it was a dynamic process rather than a stable ritual. Taking a broad perspective, Patrice Higonnet has persuasively argued that practices of self-immolation and self-abnegation represented Jacobin attempts to create “communitarian wholeness” and were evidence that their “thirst for harmonizing sacrifice ran deep.”¹²¹ Focusing on revolutionary elites, Marisa Linton has argued that both violence and self-immolation were ways for individuals—particularly leading Jacobins—to resolve the “lived contradictions of virtue, friendship, and authenticity.”¹²² These rich interpretations are perhaps better suited to explaining the omnipresence of revolutionary sacrifice than to explaining the contingencies of sacrificial practice and contemporaries’ conflicted attempts to understand it.

Revolutionaries reworked the meanings of sacrifice under the pressure of unforeseen circumstances, which arose when instances of collective or individual generosity unfolded in surprising ways and elicited novel responses. Revolutionaries discovered the complexity of patriotic sacrifice and its associated features—generosity, gift giving, virtue—precisely because they were forced continually to tack back and forth between models of civic behavior and the contingencies of revolutionary events. From the late 1780s to the mid-1790s, the French moved from rejecting a generosity grounded in hierarchy, smacking of coercion if not condescension, to framing a willed obligation to “give” to the nation as well as to fellow citizens, to pondering the harm that might lie beneath outward acts of patriotic attachment. The idioms by which they justified acts of sacrifice and gift giving—*patrie*, *bien public*, *générosité*, *vertu*—were flexible, but it proved no simple thing to define revolutionary agency. After 1789, the French belonged to a political community delineated by legal rights yet incarnated through actions that could neither be grounded in legal obligation nor be reduced to passive compliance. Here revolutionaries discovered the circuitous mediations required by a new world of politics that was simultaneously perceived to be rights grounded yet profoundly voluntaristic.¹²³

¹²¹ On the attempt by Jacobins to “commune with society through heroism,” see Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 201–6, quotation at 205.

¹²² Linton, *Choosing Terror*, 285.

¹²³ This type of reading is important because “voluntarism”—the revolutionaries’ apparent confidence in the efficacy of human will—continues to play a major role in how we understand the Revolution’s utopian trajectories as well as its somber ones. Yet

In this new political universe, the willingness to sacrifice commodities or property was frequently read as a necessary but not sufficient test of patriotic community. As contemporaries began to rethink the nature of revolutionary sacrifice, the abiding marker of patriotic generosity became its physical irrevocability. This bodily focus should not be read merely as a manifestation of stoicism or archaic “classical republicanism” or the sacralizing power of blood or even the self-understanding of a political elite striving for “authenticity” in word and deed. It could be any or all of these things, but it was also something more: the outcome of a dynamic process of defining sacrifice, through which contemporaries constantly renegotiated the imperatives of civic equality and patriotic activism. Practices of self-abnegation that at first seemed laudable might reveal themselves, under the pressure of constant scrutiny and the impact of contingent events, to be worryingly unstable—or even potentially threatening. Invariably, the practice of revolutionary sacrifice meant also contestation over how it should be performed, what it might symbolize, and what it would achieve. For revolutionaries, sacrifice celebrated the possibility of self-abnegation in a world of fraternal equals, but it also hinted that bridging the gap between the ideal of voluntaristic community and its actual practice would be anything but simple.

revolutionary voluntarism is still frequently framed schematically (as confident proclamations of novelty or historical rupture) or indicted as illusory (as a utopian disdain for the inertia of habitude). For an excellent appraisal, see Lynn Hunt, “The World We Have Gained: The Future of the French Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 6–9.