

CITIZENS WITHOUT SOVEREIGNTY

INTRODUCTION

HOW DO PEOPLE LIVING in an authoritarian regime maintain their sense of dignity? To revolt against the system is one possibility. To exit the system, through emigration or suicide, is another. But beyond protest or escape lies another strategy, which is to invest the seemingly insignificant areas of life that the authorities do not control with the maximum amount of meaning. From this perspective, the task facing citizens without sovereignty is to take an inventory of the disparate spaces that remain free and to order these spaces into a coherent whole, an imaginary sphere in which virtue and autonomy acquire meaning in relation to the activities that are possible.

The history of France from the reign of Louis XIV to the French Revolution provides a special opportunity to think about this process of transfiguring reality so as to preserve dignity. Because France was an absolutist system in which the kings claimed a monopoly on sovereignty, everyone else was officially powerless in the public sphere. In contrast to England, France had no national elections or political parties, and its inhabitants, including even the members of the Parlements, had no constitutional right to resist royal policies. The defining features of French citizenship were not political rights but permanent residency on French soil and obedience to the king. Citizenship did not imply membership in governmental institutions.¹

It is common to believe that French intellectuals in this period took the initiative against absolutism and voiced the complaints of a subjugated people. The Enlightenment is known as a great backlash against absolutism, a critique of monarchical government, a breakthrough toward democracy. But very few of the *philosophes* advocated political equality. Most of them accepted not only the concept of royal sovereignty but also the concept of privilege, the juridical principle that made France a community of differentiated estates and orders rather than a community of individuals possessing the same status before the law.

Some sociologists and historians have appreciated the fact that French men of letters before 1789 were not democratic, that there was no intelligentsia as in imperial Russia—no group of thinkers who plotted to overthrow the regime. In this context, Norbert Elias's work is particularly important. Elias inverted the traditional image of the Enlightenment, treating

¹ Charlotte Catherine Wells, "The Language of Citizenship in Early Modern France: Implications of the *droit d'aubaine*" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1992), especially 163–64, 261–62, 269, 284.

4 INTRODUCTION

it as part of the absolutist system rather than its enemy. He focused on the royal court as an instrument with which the monarchs pacified the nobility and exerted control over French culture. In the wake of this “civilizing process,” according to Elias, not only the nobility but also the bourgeois class, including bourgeois writers, became subservient to the state. This subjection was evident in the universal tendency of French men of letters to glorify courtliness. Courtliness was the basis of life at Versailles, but more broadly, it was a set of norms that assigned supreme importance to the refinement of manners in everyday life. Elias believed that the emphasis on external refinement became the keystone of French high culture because it effectively served two purposes. It subordinated the elites to the state by getting them to see themselves as polished gentlemen instead of potent warriors and magistrates. And it sustained the elites’ sense of pride by giving them an aesthetic criterion, polite manners, with which they could measure their superiority over the rest of the population.²

Elias wrote primarily about seventeenth-century France, but it is clear that he saw no mutations in the evolution of French culture before 1789. His brief analyses of Voltaire, Turgot, Holbach, and other Enlightenment writers highlighted the continuing fascination with manners in French thought and the direct relationship between courtly notions of “civility” and Enlightenment conceptions of “civilization.”³ It is interesting to note that the work of a distinguished specialist on the Enlightenment, Robert Darnton, is consistent with Elias’s interpretation (though there appears to be no direct influence of one upon the other). Darnton suggests that the Enlightenment evolved into a part of the elitist and hierarchical establishment. During the last decades of the absolute monarchy, the *philosophes* pursued favors from above, not revolution from below. They were attached to the court and had more interest in gaining pensions in the royal academies than in criticizing inequality. “Rather than challenge the social order, they offered a prop to it,” he writes.⁴

These views are intriguing, but in this book I have tried to establish how French authors created a unique ideological space that was neither democratic nor absolutist. Many French thinkers in the years 1670–1789 were profoundly egalitarian without advocating the distribution of sovereign power. They accepted the state’s monopoly of the means of administration but did not bow in slavish subservience to it. The rise of an egalitarian ethos that was not democratic was possible through the invention of a new mode

² Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* (Oxford, 1983), and *The History of Manners* (New York, 1978). I discuss these works more fully in Chapter 3.

³ See especially *The History of Manners*, 40–50.

⁴ Robert Darnton, “The High Enlightenment and the Low-Life of Literature,” in *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 14. I consider Darnton’s views more fully in Chapter 4.

of thought, one that made the concept of equality meaningful as the rule of social life without implying the elimination of hierarchy in political life. A distinction between social equality and political equality runs throughout French classical culture and the Enlightenment. This distinction may seem elementary in itself, but the social domain of existence was not a preexisting area that French writers simply construed in egalitarian terms. Indeed, the novel aspect of French social egalitarianism was not the affirmation of equality per se but the invention of the social as a distinctive field of human experience.

To understand the significance of this invention, it is necessary to understand the barriers in the absolutist system that made it difficult to articulate any concept of society as a detached field of experience. One such barrier was the very idea of absolute monarchy. Defenders of royal sovereignty did not formally recognize the existence of a social realm in the sense of a sphere of activities separate from the supervision of the monarch. In their view, no important forms of exchange could subsist without the intervention of sovereign authority. Nothing, then, was apolitical. The invention of the social field required a demonstration that some meaningful activities are self-instituting; that in some situations human beings can hang together of their own accord; that humans, in short, are sociable creatures.

Another barrier to the construction of the social field was Christian metaphysics. Christian thought located perfection in the afterlife rather than in a specific domain of worldly life. More profoundly, religion posed an obstacle to formulating ideals of social autonomy because human life as a whole was understood to be in a state of dependence upon the metaphysical beyond. As Brian Singer writes:

Within the religious imaginary, society is without a sphere of immanence from which it can appear as given of itself. It appears instead as given from without by a divine other, as subjected to a sphere of transcendence that alone provides it with its form, finality, and meaning. As such, society cannot be perceived, known, or acted upon except insofar as such perceptions and actions are sanctioned by, draw their inspiration from, and in the last analysis, retrace the will of God.⁵

It might seem that the growth of science in the early-modern period was enough to destroy this ontology and to release “society” into the open air where it could be recognized as a thing in itself. But the rise of an empirical disposition was perhaps as inimical to “society” as religion was. French thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not wish to represent “society” simply as a set of facts. They were in search of a heavenly city:

⁵ Brian C. J. Singer, *Society, Theory, and the French Revolution: Studies in the Revolutionary Imaginary* (London, 1986), 13.

6 INTRODUCTION

an idealized refuge from the powers that be, a locus of equality in a world otherwise dominated by arbitrary distinctions of rank.

Ernst Cassirer stated, "The strongest intellectual forces of the Enlightenment do not lie in its rejection of belief but rather in the new form of faith which it proclaims, and in the new form of religion which it embodies."⁶ Far from being a simple product of secularization, "society" issued from the effort to project the ecumenical function of reason onto a worldly object. François Furet has spoken of "the appropriation of ontology by society" as well as of "a link between the emancipation of society from transcendent justification and the eventual substitution of society for transcendency as a principle of thought."⁷ These are penetrating formulations, and they have guided my concerns throughout this book. But it is worth noting that Furet and Singer see the formation of a social religion as part of the evolution of democratic ideology. Their views accord with the school of interpretation that portrays prerevolutionary creativity as a movement toward the radical republicanism of 1789. Republican thought, however, originated not in prerevolutionary France but in ancient Greece and Rome. The concept of the *polis* as a self-sustaining association of active citizens did not have to be invented but only revived, and the high point of this revival in France, prior to 1789, was the Renaissance.⁸ French classical culture and the French Enlightenment did not add much to the republican tradition, partly because that tradition was already well developed, but mainly because the absolutist structure of the regime made it inherently treasonous and utopian to cultivate this mode of thought.

The philosophical significance of French thought about society lies in the ways that it mediated between these other ideologies: its acceptance of absolute monarchy and its simultaneous idealization of activities that the monarchs did not care to control; its concern with worldly interaction and its simultaneous effort to imbue secular exchange with spiritual meaning; its repudiation of the republican ethos and its simultaneous articulation of a nonpolitical *polis* where citizens without sovereignty could be free.

One of the signs that a new style of thinking had emerged was the rise of a new vocabulary. The term *sociabilité* was coined in the early eighteenth century and became the slogan of moderate literati who idealized private life and saw reciprocity as the bond among humans in "society." In 1765, the *Encyclopédie*, edited by Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert, included an entry on the word *social* and stated that it was "a term recently introduced in [our] language." The word *société* itself was centuries old, but the frequency of its usage rose considerably in French writing in the seventeenth and eigh-

⁶ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1979), 135–36.

⁷ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1981), 192.

⁸ On Renaissance legal and political thought, see Wells, "The Language of Citizenship," 20–46, 176–235.

teenth centuries. Much of this book is concerned with the meaning of these terms and the ways in which writers employed them to evoke the possibility of a free existence within the gaps and interstices of a hierarchical regime.

The fact that these words are ubiquitous in today's language, including the language of historical writing, makes it particularly interesting and problematic to analyze them. Any historian who tries to write a book without using the terms "social" and "society" will realize just how indispensable they have become in the discussion of collective life. Many of the alternatives to "society," such as "regime" and "nation," have a more political or statist resonance. Those terms seem inadequate when one wishes to talk about patterns of exchange that would form a determinate system regardless of the nature of the political constitution. Other words, such as "group" or "association," do not have the connotations of permanence and broad extension that "society" has. It is daunting to consider the possibility that historical discourse as we know it derives intimately from an earlier phase of cultural production, a period in which authors were intent on proving that individuals naturally cluster into peaceful and durable systems of interaction, that there must be an immanent meaning to activity outside the political sphere because otherwise life would simply have no meaning.

In order to avoid using a descriptive language that might be implicated in the language being described, and in order to make what Willard Quine calls the "semantic ascent" ("the shift from talking in certain terms to talking about them"),⁹ I have tried to use the words "social," "society," and "sociability" only in an analytical manner in the following chapters—either to draw attention to the ways that other authors use them or to define ideal types of the forms of human interaction. I have not employed them casually to talk about such things as "French society," "social institutions," and "the social order," for to do so would dilute the significance of the language in question. This lexical consciousness and the repeated italicization of the relevant French words (*société*, *social*, *sociable*, *sociabilité*) whenever they appear in primary sources will, I hope, heighten the reader's sensitivity to the vocabulary and evoke a feeling of surprise that such a thing as social discourse ever came into existence.

While focusing on "society" as a specific way of talking about the world, I have tried not to ignore society in the conventional sense of concrete practices, for the linguistic approach is insufficient even for the analysis of language. Words have meaning not only within semantic fields but also within institutional fields. If the concept of sociability helped to transfigure absolutist reality, then it is important to stipulate what that reality was. If it was designed to lend dignity to action within the unregulated spaces of the

⁹ Willard v. O. Quine, "Semantic Ascent," in *The Linguistic Turn, Essays on Philosophical Method*, ed. Richard Rorty (Chicago, 1992), 169.

8 INTRODUCTION

regime, then it is useful to know what those spaces were and why the state left them alone. I have devoted Chapter 2 (The Language of Sociability) exclusively to semantic issues, but in the other chapters I have drawn upon institutional history in various ways. My approach to institutions is often schematic, partly because of my limited knowledge but also because there seems to be no alternative when one wishes to understand intellectuals in context. It is necessary to treat institutions analytically—to seize their organizing principles and to denote them in concise terms that resonate in the discourse used to interpret philosophical texts. Conversely, it is necessary to treat texts institutionally—which does not mean reducing them to the “interests” of their authors but focusing on the configurations of institutional space within the texts and how these configurations line up, so to speak, with the institutional map drawn by people in power. Without this mutual accommodation, without an institutional history condensed into ideal types and an intellectual history delineating the structure of imagined organizations, the different kinds of history cannot illuminate each other. Practitioners of the subdisciplines will remain strangers to each other, instead of cooperating in the humanistic study of how consciousness manages to discover a home in a hostile world.