Daniel Guérin

Class Struggle in the First French Republic

Bourgeois and Bras Nus 1793–1795

translated from the French by Ian Patterson

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Translator's Note

French terms have been translated wherever possible and explanatory phrases inserted where necessary. However, some aspects of revolutionary France demand fuller explanation.

Revolutionary administration

Under the law of 22 December 1789, which reorganised the electoral system, France was divided into 83 'départements', each of which was administered by an elected Council. Each Council appointed an Executive – or Directory – of eight members, including a *procureur-général-syndic* who was responsible for the implementation and enforcement of law. These départements were subdivided into 'districts', and the districts subdivided again into 'communes'. District administration mirrored that of the département, and the commune was controlled by a General Council, with a mayor and municipal officers (including a *procureur syndic*) as its executive. In Paris and other large towns the commune was further divided into electoral 'sections', Paris having first 60 then, after June 1790, 48 sections. The 48 sections were also grouped for some purposes into 12 'arrondissements'.

The sections, embodying the people's sovereignty, were at the heart of political activity in Paris and had their own committees whose functions and compositions changed with the political development of the revolution. The *comités civils* were intermediaries between the Commune General Council and the sections and arrondissements, and were responsible for supervising and assisting the work of the police administration, as well

as providing information for the municipal authorities.

More important than the *comités civils* (which, because their members were for a long time unpaid, tended to be composed of the more affluent members of the lower bourgeoisie) were the *comités de surveillance* or *comités révolutionnaires.* After 10 August some of the Paris sections set up *comités de surveillance révolutionnaire* with special responsibility for examining the behaviour of suspects. After the defeat at Neerwinden in March 1793 the Convention agreed to 12-member committees being set up on a national scale in each commune or section. These rapidly extended their powers, and under the law of 17 September 1793 were reorganised into semi-independent bodies with wide powers to combat counter-revolution. The sansculottes on these committees received payment for their work. With the strengthening of central government, these committees were suppressed. On 24 August 1794 the *comités révolutionnaires* were replaced by *comités de surveillance* which operated at arrondissement level in Paris and the large towns, and at district level elsewhere, under the control of the Committee of Public Safety, as organs of the central power.

When the revolutionary government ended the sections' permanent assemblies on 9 September 1793, the sansculottes transformed the sections into *sociétés populaires* (the popular clubs which, in some sections, had existed since 1790) or *sociétés sectionnaires* to circumvent the law, and through them continued to control the political and administrative life of the sections until May 1794, when the *sociétés* were finally dissolved.

Political divisions

The revolutionary bourgeoisie in the Assembly and the Convention were led by two groups, the Girondins, who sat on the right-wing of the Chamber and were the spokesmen of the mercantile bourgeoisie, and the Montagnards, who sat on the left, so-called because the group of Paris Jacobin deputies at their head occupied the upper seats in the Chamber, the Mountain. After the Girondins were defeated on 31 May 1793 many of

their supporters went over to the Montagnard side. The majority of deputies did not adhere to either party and were referred to as the 'Marsh' or the 'Plain'.

Outside the National Convention the popular vanguard found spokesmen in the 'enragés', revolutionaries who despite their bourgeois origins identified totally with the working people of Paris, and were given the label enragés (which literally means 'madmen') by the bourgeoisie because of their extremism.

Finally, the term 'bras nus'. It was coined by the nineteenth century French historian Michelet to distinguish those who did hard physical labour – worked with their 'bare arms' – from the more petit-bourgeois among the sansculottes, and is used to refer to the members of the embryonic working class that Daniel Guérin describes.

Chronology

1789

5 May: Estates-general assemble at Versailles.
17 June: National Constituent Assembly declared.
12–14 July: Paris revolution. Fall of the Bastille.
25 August: Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.
5–6 October: Women's march to Versailles. King forced to return to Paris.
November–December: Church lands confiscated by the state. Assignats issued against them.
22 December: Property qualification decreed for voters and deputies.

1790

February: Burke's diatribe against the revolution in the House of Commons.
19 June: Abolition of the nobility.
12 July: Civil Constitution of the Clergy.
14 July: First Festival of Federation.
27 November: Constituent Assembly requires oath of loyalty to the Civil Constitution from all French priests.
December: Austria crushes Belgian revolution, with British support.

1791

14 June: Le Chapelier Law bans strikes and workers' organisations.

20 June: King flees to Varennes.
17 July: National Guard massacre 50 Parisians at a meeting at the Champs de Mars.
30 September: Constituent Assembly dissolved. None of its members allowed to stand for re-election to the new Legislative Assembly.
1 October: Legislative Assembly meets.
Autumn: Revolt of blacks in Santo Domingo.

1792

January–February: Food riots in Paris.
20 April: Girondin government declares war on Austria.
14 July: Festival of Federation: 'fédérés' form action committee.
August: Paris sections win right of permanent assembly.
10 August: Insurrection. Revolutionary Commune set up in opposition to official Paris Commune.
All citizens admitted to section assemblies – property qualification abolished.
Assembly appoints Executive Council.
23 August: Fall of Longwy – France threatened with invasion.
25 August: Feudal dues abolished without compensation.
1 September: Fall of Verdun.
2–6 September: 'September massacres' of prisoners in Paris.
20 September: Prussian defeat at Valmy.
21 September: National Convention meets.
Year I of the Republic begins.
14 November: General Dumouriez enters Brussels.
11 December: Trial of King Louis XVI begins.

1793

21 January: Louis XVI executed.
1 February: War declared on Holland and Britain.
25–26 February: Food riots in Paris.
10 March: Attempted insurrection.
18 March: Dumouriez defeated at Neerwinden.

21 March: Convention sets up *comités de surveillance* on national scale.
31 March: Revolutionary Commune – lasts a morning only.
15–16 April: Dumouriez goes over to enemy. Marches on Paris. Committee of Public Safety set up.
29 April: Commune sets up committee to correspond with the 44,000 municipalities in France.
May: First Law of the Maximum fixes price of grain.
Federalist revolt at Lyons.
10 May: Claire Lacombe founds Society of Revolutionary Republican Women.
12 May: 48 Paris sections elect a central revolutionary committee, which meets at the Evêché.
31 May: Insurrection.
31 May–2 June: Fall of the Girondins.
24 June: Adoption of Robespierrist Constitution of 1793.
10 July: Danton removed from Committee of Public Safety.
13 July: Marat murdered.
27 July: Robespierre joins Committee of Public Safety.
14 August: Carnot joins Committee of Public Safety as war chief.
26 August: Fall of Toulon.
5–6 September: Insurrection in Paris, kept under control by Hébert and Chaumette. Terror begins. Jacques Roux arrested.
9 September: Ban on sections meeting in permanent session. Sections form *sociétés populaires* (or *sectionnaires*) to evade ban.
16 September: Law of Suspects decreed.
17 September: *Comités de surveillance* reorganised as *comités revolutionnaires.*
Revolutionary militia created.
29 September: Law of General Maximum fixes wages and prices of 39 basic necessities.
October: Dechristianisation campaign started.
9 October: Fall of Lyons: defeat of federalist revolt.
10 October: Constitution suspended until end of war.
30 October: Convention bans women's political clubs.
31 October: Execution of Girondins. Festival of Reason.

18 November: Danton returns to Paris.
21 November: Robespierre attacks dechristianisation.
4 December: Revolutionary militia disbanded. Establishment of the revolutionary government. Commune made strictly subordinate to central power.
12 December: Committee of Public Safety issues proclamation against strikes and workers' collective action.
19 December: Toulon recaptured.

1794

10 February: Jacques Roux commits suicide rather than face Revolutionary Tribunal.
15 March: Arrest of Hébertists.
24 March: Hébert and Hébertist leaders executed.
30 March: Arrest of Dantonists.
5 April: Danton and Dantonists executed.
15 May: Jacobin Club votes to exclude *sociétés populaires.*
22 May: All *sociétés populaires* in Paris dissolved.
June–July: Anti-working-class offensive.
8 June: Festival of Supreme Being.
21 July: New wages maximum in Paris.
26 July: Robespierre's last speech in the Convention.
27 July: 9th of Thermidor. Arrest of Robespierre. Insurrection fails.
28 July: Robespierre and Robespierrists in the Paris Commune executed.
19 November: Jay Treaty signed between United States and Britain.
26 November: Import restrictions lifted on non-prohibited goods.
9 December: Maximum Laws repealed.

1795

1 January: Pichegru enters Amsterdam.
1 April: Germinal uprising: Paris sansculottes invade Assembly.

20–21 May: Prairial insurrection, finally defused.
30 May: All churches restored to religious use.
22 August: Constitution of Year III reintroduces property qualifications for voters.
10 September: Babeuf transferred to Plessis prison in Paris.
5 October: Vendémiaire: last insurrection (against Constitution of Year III).
October: Dissolution of the National Convention. Directory begins.

1796

16 March: Assignat abolished.

1797

27 May: Babeuf executed, Buonarroti deported.

Preface (*English Language Edition*)

When I began writing this book I had no preconceived ideas. My one preoccupation was to form my own idea of the French revolution, to see it directly rather than through the eyes of intermediaries. As I worked I put all previous interpretations and doctrinal considerations out of my mind so that I could simply examine the facts. And the more I did this the more convinced I became that the French revolution was still topical, more so now perhaps than ever before. Only those people who have formed a false idea of it for various reasons, or who have given a truncated picture of what it was like, can fail to see its relevance to the present.

For the French revolution was not simply a bourgeois revolution, its interest for us is not just the retrospective one of having originally brought to power the class which is now in the process of losing its power; it is directly connected to our present struggles and problems, for as well as being a bourgeois revolution it was the first attempt by the oppressed to free themselves from all forms of oppression.

Looking closely one can trace, right from the start of the revolution, the slow, sure progress of the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the workers of that time, the people the nineteenth-century French historian Michelet expressively calls 'bras nus'.

To begin with, the French revolution is the first modern revolution to have involved the broad mass of the people in activity, to have roused them from their slumbers, and to have been largely carried out by them. The English revolution of the seventeenth century was military rather than popular. And

although it did briefly go beyond the frontiers of the bourgeois revolution and provide a brave glimpse of a communist perspective, it was primarily the work of Cromwell's puritan soldiers; it did not rouse the people.

Of course the bourgeoisie played their part – a large part – in the French revolution. Their theorists paved the way for it. Their parliamentarians directed its course with their speeches and decrees. The legislative work and the militant action of the revolutionary assemblies should not be underestimated. But the bourgeoisie were to prove incapable of putting an end to the old feudal, clerical, absolutist regime without the help of the bras nus. There were not enough of them, nor did they have the physical force. With a few exceptions, they were very reluctant to arm themselves and take to the streets. And they were afraid that too brutal an assault on the Ancien Régime might shake their own class domination, and that made them hesitant to act.

If the Paris sansculottes had not captured the Bastille on 14 July 1789, the National Assembly's rebellion would have had to yield to the royalist bayonets. If the bras nus had not marched to Versailles on 5 October and forced their way into the Assembly, the Declaration of the Rights of Man would never have won approval. Without the irresistible tide of pressure from the country areas the Assembly would not have dared – albeit timidly – to attack feudal property rights on the night of 4 August 1789. Without the powerful mass movement of 10 August 1792, the expropriation, without compensation, of feudal dues would probably never have been decreed; and the bourgeoisie would have hesitated over the republic and over universal suffrage.

Whenever the course of the revolution intensifies one finds the bourgeois equivocating, or stopping half-way, and each time it is pressure from the bras nus that forces them to push the bourgeois revolution to its conclusion. Even insofar as it was a bourgeois revolution, bringing the bourgeoisie to power in the end rather than the proletariat, the French revolution was a mass revolution. Studying it therefore helps us to

interpret the permanent laws of the self-activity of the masses, as well as offering us a chance to examine the forms of popular power that the masses spontaneously create in their struggles; in this respect, the French revolution was not only the cradle of bourgeois democracy but also of communal or soviet democracy, the democracy of workers' councils.

But this revolution was not a revolution in which the masses worked on behalf of the bourgeoisie without realising it. It was also, to a certain degree, a revolution that the masses were making for themselves and nobody else. They did not take the offensive with the intention of making a 'bourgeois' revolution. They rose up in the hope that it would alleviate their poverty and misery and throw off an age-old yoke, not just that of the feudal lords, the clergy and the agents of royalist absolutism, but the yoke of the bourgeoisie as well; indeed, it tends to be forgotten that the bourgeoisie, on the eve of 1789, was only very partially an oppressed class. They already held a considerable amount of economic power. And in addition they were allowed to pick up the crumbs from the feudal feast; many bourgeois had been given noble titles and enjoyed income from feudal estates. The bourgeoisie, in short, together with the aristocracy, the church and the absolute monarchy, shared the profits that resulted from the exploitation of the working classes. The idea of freeing themselves from the old yoke led the oppressed naturally to the idea of struggle against all those with privilege, including the bourgeoisie.

In order to win the support of the bras nus, and because the proclamation of the rights of man was useful in the fight against the Ancien Régime, the bourgeoisie made them think that man's oppression of man was at an end, and the reign of liberty and equality was beginning for everybody. These words did not fall on deaf ears. Time after time the bras nus invoked the rights of man against the bourgeoisie and bourgeois oppression. Similarly, by attacking feudal and clerical property rights, the bourgeoisie weakened the whole idea of the sanctity of private property. They recognised this, and that is why they were so often timorous.

The poor peasants, the people without any land, imagined, as Jean Jaurès said in his *Histoire socialiste de la Révolution française* that 'the time had come for all men to enjoy the fruits of the earth'. In the partition of estates, although it did not yet mean common ownership, the bourgeoisie had sown the seed of agrarian communism which would never be entirely removed from popular consciousness. And throughout the revolution the memory – perhaps over-exaggerated – of the agrarian laws of ancient Rome, whose aim was to give public lands to the poor, terrified the rich.

The more the revolution intensified, the clearer it became that the two fractions of the 'third estate', the bourgeoisie and the bras nus, despite their common struggle against the Ancien Régime, were separate from each other, and composed two distinct classes with conflicting interests.

The split between bourgeois and bras nus appeared most visibly in the cities, especially in the capital, as it was there that economic development had concentrated a rich and powerful bourgeoisie and an already sizeable number of workers, both artisans and workers in small-scale industries. So while feudalism and religious fanaticism continued unchecked in the more backward regions of France where the bourgeois revolution was still to be made, in Paris and some of the other urban centres the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletarians was openly making its appearance. Its first signs were already visible by the beginning of 1792, much to the disquiet of the bourgeoisie.

The French revolution thus offers a striking example of the 'law of combined development' that Trotsky (in his *History of the Russian Revolution*) applied to the Russian revolution of 1917. The whole of society does not reach the same stage of evolution at the same time, and the explanation for this is that forms of ownership and means of production develop unevenly. Even today some peoples in Indonesia and central Africa are still at a level of development that we passed several thousand years ago. Archaic conditions of land tenure and cultivation in regions like the Vendée and Brittany helped

keep them in the darkness of bondage right up until 1793, and even longer.

The development of industry on the other hand and the concentration of population in large towns (by 1793 Paris already had nearly a million inhabitants) put the Parisian sansculottes several centuries ahead of the peasants of the west. In many respects revolutionary France was the France of the middle ages. Illiteracy, superstition and the old habit of submission still burdened the people in the more backward provinces. But modern France was rapidly disengaging itself from its surroundings. A primarily urban vanguard was boldly transcending the bourgeois revolution. Two worlds overlap: the carriage that took Louis, king 'by the grace of God', to the scaffold, also held the enragé, Jacques Roux, representative of the Paris Commune and the not yet fully articulate pioneer of the anti-bourgeois revolution.

The vanguard, in Paris particularly, saw more or less clearly that the revolution they had fought and shed their blood for had not in reality brought them the equality that had been proclaimed their legal right. Instead, it had just revived the old oppression of man by man in a new form. For a moment they faltered, wondering if it was really necessary to guillotine a king in order to establish new tyrants. But then they pulled themselves together, understanding that the cause of humanity is not served by retreat but only by constant advance, and they began to turn against the bourgeoisie the weapons that the bourgeoisie had forged against the Ancien Régime.

On top of this, an event arose outside the revolution which had repercussions on it so great they cannot be over-emphasised. This was the war of expansion that the French bourgeoisie launched against Europe, and in particular against England, France's most dangerous commercial, maritime and colonial rival. This conjunction of revolution and a conflict that prefigures those we now call 'imperialist' accelerated the process of differentiation between bourgeois and bras nus. The bourgeoisie were not prepared to bear the costs of a war which they had undertaken solely for the profit it would bring them,

and they shifted the heavy burden of military expenditure on to the shoulders of the people. They resorted to an uncontrolled inflation of the currency, which in turn led to galloping increases in the cost of living and the further impoverishment of the poor.

At the same time the war, grafted on to the revolution, substantially modified the political components of the revolutionary problem. From 1792 onwards the two phenomena are closely linked. It is impossible to trace the course of class struggle in the revolution without taking the war into account. And, equally, it is absurd to isolate, as the French chauvinists do, the revolution's wars from the class struggle between bourgeois and bras nus.

In one sense the French revolution and the war could be said to have a common origin, in the rivalry between France and England that had been going on throughout the eighteenth century. The French bourgeoisie on the eve of 1789 were obsessed by the frightening progress that the British had made over France in industry and commerce, on the seas and in the colonies. Britain's politically and economically liberal government had made it possible to begin her industrial revolution thirty years sooner, with the advent of mechanisation. They did not have the patience, though, to wait until France could compete with Britain on equal terms at the economic level; they set out to smash their redoubtable rival by brute force. That was one of the causes of the wars of the revolution.

There has been a great deal of misunderstanding about this. The fact that the Girondins declared war on Austria in March 1792 and not on England, which only came into the war nine months later, has prevented most historians from seeing what was really at stake. When the mercantile bourgeoisie, whom the Girondins represented in the political sphere, set their sights on Vienna, their ultimate target was London. The intention of Brissot and his friends from the first was the conquest of Belgium and Holland, Britain's forward bulwark on the continent. They knew what they were doing. The day

war was declared a deputy put them on their guard and warned them such a conquest would indubitably lead to armed conflict with England. The famous 'natural frontiers' watchword was directed far more against 'perfidious Albion' than against Austria or Prussia. It was primarily so that France could control the lower Rhine, from Aix-la-Chapelle to its mouth, and hold Antwerp as a pistol levelled against England. War was declared on the Emperor before being declared on King George, but only because Belgium was still at that period an Austrian province.

But this war of conquest and expansion that had been started purely to serve the interests of the French bourgeoisie took on a quite different character as well. The fact that there were émigré aristocrats in the Coalition's ranks, and that the Coalition was in secret communication with royalists in France, coupled with the united front of kings against the revolution, gave the war something of the character of a revolutionary war. As long as the French army was victorious in its conquest of Belgium, the war was primarily one of expansion. But as soon as it was beaten and repulsed, which happened twice, and the nation's territory was invaded and the revolution directly threatened, the war of expansion was superseded by the revolutionary side of the war.

The sansculottes did not distinguish clearly between the two aspects of this dual-purpose war. But their class instinct warned them that in one respect it was not their war. They were not patriots in the modern sense of the word. Their idea of country did not encompass the interests of the Girondin bourgeoisie. Jacques Roux made that quite clear on their behalf in the Convention. All the talk about natural frontiers left them cold. Their patriotism coincided narrowly and exactly with their class interests. They only gave the war their wholehearted support when France had been invaded and the revolution, their revolution, was in danger.

The mercantile bourgeoisie for their part were under no illusions about the war's dual character. They had launched into it with enthusiasm when there was a hope of making a

profit, but as soon as the French troops retreated from Belgium and, to the sound of the tocsin, the sansculottes proclaimed that the revolution was in danger and undertook to defend it themselves; as soon as the revolutionary nature of the war eclipsed its expansionist character, the Girondins suddenly became defeatists. They were more afraid of the red peril, as it would be called today, than the danger on their borders. General Dumouriez, their man, took defeatism to its logical conclusion, went over to the enemy side and then, his treachery complete, tried to march on Paris and crush the revolution.

The Montagnard wing of the bourgeoisie, less directly committed to foreign trade but very much involved in the acquisition of national lands (property confiscated from the church, aristocracy or émigrés, and sold at auction) and also in war supplies, adopted a different, more subtle, attitude which in the long term was to prove better for the bourgeoisie as a whole: they made close links between the revolutionary war and the expansionist war, put the former at the service of the latter and, as the sansculottes rose to the revolution's defence, turned that courageous enthusiasm against the British rival, personified in the Prime Minister, William Pitt the younger. But these close ties between the war's two aspects only lasted for a short time. There was too much divergence between the interests of the bourgeoisie and the bras nus for a more lasting association to develop. And even for the brief period that the two classes were closely associated in the conduct of the war the class struggle continued to set them at odds with each other.

Some men from within the Montagnard bourgeoisie, perhaps because they were more in contact with the masses and better able to gauge their feeling, began to get more worried about the tide of popular activity than about the external enemy. With prudent circumspection they planned a compromise with the Coalition as a possible prelude to the re-establishment of order in France.

When war sets two great powers against each other, the ruling class on both sides tends to split into two camps: one

stubborn and unyielding, mesmerised by the idea of 'diehardism', of going the whole distance, determined not to give in before they have crushed the enemy; and the other sensitive to the disadvantages of war, its ruinous cost, the risks it involves, the way it radicalises the people (in the present instance, in France) and consequently inclined to test the ground with a view to eventually restoring peace. These two camps could be seen on both sides of the Channel. They mutually supported each other, a minority of French 'pacifists' manoeuvring in concert with a few members of the Whig opposition.

It is interesting that the secret emissaries who were used to try to resume the interrupted dialogue between France and England were all British. This was because nobody could run the risk of being accused of defeatism in a revolutionary war. The French government, then controlled by the men of the Girondin party, had hardly broken off communication with Pitt's cabinet on 1 February 1793 when they dispatched an emissary by the name of James Matthews to London at the beginning of April. The date coincides exactly with Danton's appointment to the Committee of Public Safety. Matthews returned to Paris at the beginning of June with a letter from Lord Grenville, the Foreign Secretary. The British would not refuse to negotiate with the republic if it would give Britain an assurance of its peaceful intentions.

But the French supporters of war to the finish wrecked this preliminary to negotiations. Danton lost his place on the Committee of Public Safety on 10 July, largely because of his 'pacifist' intriguing. At the end of August Matthews returned again to Paris to make known the conditions under which the cabinet in London would be prepared to conclude peace. The British demands were deemed unacceptable and aroused an absolute fury of indignation among the diehards on the Committee of Public Safety. In order to cut short negotiations the Committee had Matthews thrown in prison and his papers seized.

At the end of 1792, i.e. before peace was wrecked, Francois Noël, then France's minister at the Hague and a

close friend of Danton, had already manipulated another Englishman, William A. Miles, into sounding out William Pitt. But that move had not been able to prevent the outbreak of war. Appointed minister at Venice in May 1793, Noël did not give up. During the summer of 1793 the great wave of the revolutionary vanguard's activity broke, and although it opposed them at the social level, the intransigent supporters of the war turned it to their advantage, while Danton, evicted from power, made a prudent retreat to the safety of his native province. But in November events took another twist: he returned to the capital to arrange an alliance with Robespierre for the purpose of slowing down the hurricane of the revolution at home as well as abroad. When Noël heard of the collusion between the two men, and the renewed influence it gave his friend Danton, he reopened his correspondence with Miles at the turn of the year. Pitt was getting worried about the prolongation of the war and, through Miles, he passed overtures of peace to Danton. But once again the attempt failed.

The time was not ripe. The state of revolutionary public opinion made compromise with Britain impossible. On 9 February 1794 Noël had to write to Miles that he had been overoptimistic about Danton and Robespierre's freedom of action. 'You seem to think of them as though they were two Cromwells who had got rid of all their opponents. That view needs correcting. They do seem to have influence, but they would lose it all as soon as they abused it.' Some weeks later, in fact, the diehards on the Committee of Public Safety forced Robespierre's hand and cut short all ideas of peace at one blow, and sent Danton to the scaffold.

Yet Robespierre had not really given up trying to reach a compromise with Britain. During the summer of 1794 he did his best to consolidate his own power against that of his colleagues in the government who supported the war, and he showed himself receptive to feelers put out by Benjamin Vaughan, an English M.P. Vaughan was a member of the Whig opposition led by Charles Fox, a pacifist politician who was friendly towards France, and a bitter adversary of Pitt's.

Harassed in London where he was threatened with an accusation of high treason, Vaughan fled in a small boat, and reached the French coast at Cherbourg. The diehards in the government had him arrested immediately, but Robespierre intervened on his behalf and he was released. Vaughan was allowed to leave for Geneva and from there he wrote to Robespierre suggesting a status quo peace to the Republic by which they were to renounce their annexationist claim to Belgium, Holland and the left bank of the Rhine. But the coup of the 9th of Thermidor put an end to that last attempt at string-pulling for peace, and the day after Robespierre's execution his colleagues in the government accused him posthumously, on the basis of his correspondence, of 'secret dealings with the enemy'.

For most of the Montagnard bourgeoisie the desire to beat their British rival was stronger than their fear of the masses and their anxiety to re-establish law and order. They did not hesitate to liquidate the defeatist Danton, whom Robespierre had meanwhile opportunistically broken with. And they also discovered a way of containing the popular torrent and restoring order other than by concluding a compromise peace with the foreign enemy. They cleverly disengaged the war of expansion from the revolutionary war, and replaced the brave disorderly enthusiasm of the sansculottes with their own military techniques. They created from above a war industry and a provisioning organisation free from pressure from the masses. They shelved the instruments of popular war like the sansculotte generals, the 'revolutionary militia' [the *armée révolutionnaire* which enforced the maximum and fought counter-revolution within France], leftist propaganda in the army, etc. They formed a new generation of professional officers, plebeian by origin but ambitious and already detached from the people, less committed to the revolution than impatient to make a career for themselves.

Thus freed from the hold of the bras nus, the Mountain moved almost imperceptibly from revolutionary war, popular war, to the war of expansion, bourgeois war: the entry of the

republic's army into Belgium in the spring of 1794 began the cycle of the conquest of Europe and inaugurated the pillage and depredation which would not be over until 1815, with the fall of Napoleon and the victory of the British-led Coalition.

From its outset the armed conflict that was to continue for so many years between Britain and France had two distinguished champions, each relentless in his stubborn determination to continue the struggle and grind the hated enemy into the dust.

In Britain it was the great political writer and parliamentary orator Edmund Burke who whipped up war feeling, clashing with the leaders of the Whig opposition, Richard Sheridan and Charles Fox. While passionate francophiles like the poet William Wordsworth loudly sided with the French revolution, which he celebrated in glowing verse, even going as far as to profess atheism, Burke fulminated in the Commons against the French revolutionaries who, he said, 'have even destroyed religion and worship' and 'against the altar have raised a hideous atheistical system'. In his declamatory *Reflections on the Revolution in France,* which appeared at the beginning of November 1790, Burke abused both the French *philosophes* whom he called atheists and infidels and the revolutionary people of Paris who in October 1789 had had brutally to bring back from Versailles to the capital a royal couple who were double-crossing the revolution. Because he had earlier seen Queen Marie-Antoinette in her splendour Burke thought he had to weep buckets of tears at her fate. Sir Philip Francis, a liberal politician with a warm sympathy for the French revolution, replied sharply on 2 November, after having read the proofs of the book, 'No tears are shed for nations . . . When the provinces are scourged to the bone by a mercenary and merciless military power, and every drop of its blood and substance extorted from it by the edicts of a royal council, the case seems very tolerable to those who are not involved in it.' Alluding to Louis XIV's Edict of Nantes of 17 October 1685 and the draconian expulsions that accompanied it, and to the royal treasury's monopoly of the sale of salt, Philip Francis added:

> When thousand after thousand are dragooned out of their country, or sent to row in the galleys for selling salt against the law, when the liberty of every individual is at the mercy of every prostitute, pimp or parasite that has access to power . . . my mind, I own, is not at once prepared to be satisfied with gentle palliatives for such disorders.

Burke was even more bitter towards revolutionary France than Pitt and from then on he preached a constant, merciless crusade, a struggle to the death, against it.

The angry reactionary's counterpart on the other side of the Channel was the bourgeois revolutionary Bertrand Barère de Vieuzac, the prime enemy of British power on the Committee of Public Safety and a man whose vindictive passion never weakened. It was he more than anybody who was responsible for having Danton removed from the Committee of Public Safety and for repulsing the last British conditions of peace. He delivered the slogan 'Let England be annihilated' from the Convention tribune on 21 September 1793 as if he was Cato the Elder attacking Carthage. And he paraphrased the *delenda est Carthago* to the Convention again on 22 January 1794 in an angry speech in which he pictured nothing less than the destruction of 'that abominable government', shouting: 'The Committee of Public Safety will never cease to hold up this mortal enemy before the courage of the French.' Much later, in 1798, he published a virulent three volume book entitled *The Freedom of the Seas or the English Government Unmasked.* In it, he defended his, to say the least, debatable assertion that the British government had been 'the sole aggressor in this general war', in order to end once again on the old refrain: 'So the English government must perish'.

Of all the French statesmen Barère did most, in 1793–94, to ensure the failure, one after another, of all attempts at negotiation between the rival commercial, maritime and colonial powers. And it was to make sure his stubborn plan triumphed that he did more than anyone to have first Danton, then Robespierre, sent to the scaffold. It is worth noting that

Barère's book was rescued from oblivion and an abridged edition published in 1942, under Marshall Pétain's government, during Hitler's occupation of France, with the purpose of turning French public opinion against the British, the 'hereditary enemy'.

American political attitudes to the French revolution were as varied as those of British politicians. Thomas Jefferson had represented the United States government in Paris from 1785 to 1789. There he had shown a great love of France, and his fascinating and eminent character made him very popular. In fact in June 1789, he involved himself in France's internal affairs so far as to suggest a compromise between the king and the nation to the leaders of the third estate. A few months after that he returned to the United States as Secretary of State to President George Washington. Although he was a liberal, not a revolutionary, he displayed goodwill towards the development of the revolution in France. He did not forget the considerable debt of gratitude his country owed France for help during the war of independence against Great Britain. He saw the excesses committed in Paris as warnings against the abuse of monarchy rather than warnings against democracy, and similarly looked on the war waged against France by the Coalition, under the commanding wing of Britain, not as a simple war between powers, but as a confrontation between antagonistic forms of government. He was openly hostile to the British system, with its still largely feudal institutions and its tradition of arbitrary rule. Back in the United States again, he made known his displeasure that those of his fellow-countrymen who were most deeply involved in lucrative business had become increasingly sympathetic to England as American commerce had returned to English ports.

Thus he came into conflict with the spokesman of these privileged individuals, Alexander Hamilton, a government colleague, and Secretary to the Treasury, whose self-interested sympathies lay in the direction of Britain and its reactionary government.

Jefferson was very much aware that in Paris, during the autumn of 1793, the Committee of Public Safety had made numerous declarations of friendship towards those it honoured with the title of 'free peoples', the United States and Switzerland. In a major speech to the Convention on 17 November 1793 Robespierre, who had just made his alliance with Danton, had urged Europe to make peace, explicitly repudiated policies of conquest, addressed greetings to the citizens of the new world and had a decree passed that expressed the French nation's feelings of 'goodwill and regard' towards the United States. This policy of cordiality vis-à-vis the USA and other neutral countries concealed a double purpose: one economic, for the republic badly needed to buy large quantities of grain and cattle from these countries; and one diplomatic, because the neutral countries were looked upon as possible mediators between the warring parties, and by maintaining the best possible relations with them, they kept a way open for peace.

For a variety of reasons though relations between Jefferson and Hamilton turned sour, and on 31 December 1793 Jefferson left the Department of State in exasperation, and the pro-British party, those who thought it more profitable to trade with Britain than with revolutionary France, turned it to their account. But Jefferson's short-lived successor as Secretary of State, Edward Randolph, was scarcely less favourable to the republic than his predecessor.

It was a diplomatic row that spoilt things. The republic's minister plenipotentiary in the new world, Edmond Genet, had been too indiscreet about asking for the United States' support for the French against Britain, even going to the extreme of commissioning privateers and endeavouring to secure recruits. President Washington was forced to make a proclamation of strict neutrality in the European conflict. And as Genet continued his activities, outraging the government he was accredited to, the United States President asked for him to be recalled, which in the end, in 1794, he was. The dispatch of American ships carrying provisions for the republic also caused serious difficulties for the federal government. The

United States had allowed an important convoy of ships carrying wheat to leave for France in the spring of 1794, and the French fleet, under Admiral Villaret de Joyeuse, was able to ensure its safe arrival. The British fleet, commanded by Admiral Lord Howe, did not try to intercept the convoy because it was occupied elsewhere, and also, no doubt, because they were unwilling to provoke a serious incident with the United States. This sort of trade though, brought with it a number of risks. Because of their neutrality the American ships did not enjoy the protection of a national navy. The situation was further strained by the fact that British men-of-war were authorised to intercept American merchant vessels and impress American seamen; it was only resolved on 19 November 1794 when the Chief Justice, John Jay, signed a treaty with Britain. In it, among other things, the United States undertook to abstain for twelve years from intervening in the war on France's side, and agreed to an irksome limitation of their commercial privileges. The treaty was not welcomed by the French republic, who considered it as an act of hostility. A few years later France demanded the abrogation of the Jay Treaty, and America's refusal to comply was to lead the two powers to within an inch of war.

One indication of the cordial relations between Washington and Paris during the stormy days of the French revolution was provided by the continued presence of an American minister plenipotentiary in the French capital. Appointed to the post in 1792, he was the sole representative of a foreign country to continue to fulfill his duties despite all the storms, throughout the period of the Terror.

This diplomat, Gouverneur Morris (1752–1816), had been in Europe, mainly in France, since 1789. Aristocratic and libertine by temperament, and somewhat cynical in his political outlook, he found it difficult to conceal his lack of enthusiasm for the revolution. But he was a citizen of the new world and his background gave him a sense of reality that was not blinded by the ideological exaggerations of the revolution.

He had the gift of sharp, lively observation and his letters to members of the American government demonstrate a remarkable understanding of the intricacies, subtleties and contradictions of the revolutionary turmoil he so lucidly followed.* He was also experienced in financial matters as he had been assistant to his namesake, Robert Morris, the superintendent of finance, who had financed the war of independence in a masterly manner, converted the decolonised America to a decimal currency system, and created the dollar and the cent.

From his Paris embassy, Gouverneur Morris was thus in a position to make an authoritative analysis of the fortunes of the assignat, and the ups and downs of the process of inflation. Thus on 16 November 1793 he told Jefferson of the astonishment with which he watched the recovery of French paper currency under revolutionary coercion. Ironically, he noted the unusual nature of the 'phenomenon of a paper money rising in value, while the sum emitted goes on increasing'. He went on to explain the reason for this peculiarity:

> Whatever is discovered *hidden* is confiscated, and that which is not hidden is taken to the treasury . . . If, therefore, louis d'ors should at length be under par, I should not be surprised. The sum of precious metals and materials in the treasury and mint is already very great (they say a *milliard*, or forty millions sterling); it is, I suppose, exaggerated, but it is daily increasing. And, at the rate things go on, government will have accumulated in the city of Paris all the gold and silver, and a great part of the diamonds, pearls, etc. of France.

On 6 March 1794, in a letter to his friend Jefferson, now no longer Secretary of State, Gouverneur Morris commented on an initiative taken by a group of financiers headed by the Franco-Swiss banker Jean-Frédéric Perregaux. The revolutionary authorities had obliged French merchants and bankers to bring their money home from abroad and exchange it for assignats at par. As a coercive operation like that could not

* These letters were collected in 1832 in the three-volume *Life of Gouverneur Morris*, by Jared Sparks. See also *The Diary and Letters of Gouverneur Morris*, edited by Anne Cary Morris in 1888.

be certain of success, Perregaux's group offered the republic 50 millions of foreign credit over and above the compulsory declarations levied on those Frenchmen who had money or possessions abroad. Perregaux's initiative left the American representative in Paris sceptical. He confided to Jefferson that he had little hope of its being effective. Yet the appeal to private credit might well have been necessary, he added, to '(face) numerous and pressing engagements for indispensable supplies from abroad'. But the enemy powers organised a systematic boycott of the dealings of Perregaux's agents, who could hardly find anybody to accept their drafts. There can be no doubt that the direct supply of goods to the republic from the United States and the other neutral countries, and the credits granted in consequence made reprovisioning possible, and saved the revolution from famine.

In the same letter quoted above, of 16 November 1793, Gouverneur Morris described the amazing success of the dechristianisation campaign then at its height, and described it with humour and without seeming the least affected by it.

> I must, by the way, drop one word as to the overthrow of the Catholic religion. It is now expiring under wounds from that true French weapon, ridicule. The people who, five years since, fell down in the dirt as the consecrated matter passed by, now dance the *carmagnole* in holy vestments . . .

Perhaps as he wrote those lines he also betrayed the mockery of a protestant, congenitally rebellious towards the ceremonies of the roman church.

Gouverneur Morris's political communications are equally lucid when it comes to analysing the more or less clandestine collusion between Danton and Robespierre. There he proves shrewder and more alert, or at any rate braver, than most French observers of the time, who either lacked his detachment, or else, because of the permanent threat of the guillotine, had to maintain a greater level of discretion. On 21 January 1794, catching a glimpse of the true nature of the new 'moderantist' course, he wrote to Jefferson that the

Dantonist party 'with whom Robespierre is connected' wanted 'by mildness and something like a government of laws, to inspire a sort of attachment to the revolution'.

As for Danton, the American minister plenipotentiary was under no illusion about what went on in the back of the demagogue's mind, and he was able to understand it the more easily for having, with his aristocratic temperament, a similar distrust of the masses. On 15 April 1794, he wrote to Edmund Randolph, the new Secretary of State (in the past tense as Danton had just died on the scaffold): 'Danton always believed . . . that a popular system of government for this country was absurd; that the people were too ignorant, too inconstant, and too corrupt to support a legal administration; that, habituated to obey, they required a master.'

The depravity of Danton's life had not escaped Gouverneur Morris, who also liked to enjoy himself. In the same letter he added, on the subject of the dead man, '. . . he was too voluptuous for his ambition, too indolent to acquire supreme power. Moreover, his object seems rather to have been great wealth than great fame.' And, dotting his i's, he concluded too peremptorily that the Dantonists had been 'the Royal faction'.

He showed the same acuteness in his appreciation of Robespierre's as yet unadmitted plans for consolidating the bourgeois revolution to his own advantage. Shortly after Danton was executed, 10 April 1794, he told President Washington that of all those he had seen

> Robespierre has been the most consistent, if not the only consistent . . . I think that the Establishment of the Republic would, all things considered, be most suitable to him. Whether he thinks so is another question, which I will not pretend to answer, nor how far such establishment may appear to him practicable . . . it might be supposed that Danton's plan could be by such a person carried into execution.

One could almost believe that the diplomat had had access to the apprentice-dictator's secrets!

Later on in 1794, as we have seen, the French government

demanded that the American government recall Gouverneur Morris, in response to the recall of Genet, his counterpart in the United States. But Morris preferred to stay on in Paris, as a matter of personal choice, which allowed him to send President Washington a prophetic letter on 30 December. Some five months after the fall of Robespierre he wrote, with some pride, 'I have long, you know, predicted a single despotism'. And emphasising that Robespierre had almost been that despot, he added: 'I am still convinced that [the French] must end their voyage in that port.' Thus the former American representative in Paris predicted the 18th Brumaire of Napoleon Bonaparte five years before it occurred.

Thanks to their representative in Paris, the American rulers of the time, as we can see, had the good fortune to be better informed about the true course of the French revolution than more than one French historian of our own day.

Introduction

Some fundamentals

Throughout the French revolution, the issue of the form that popular power should take was raised constantly and caused deep antagonisms. The bourgeoisie had taken over the idea of 'popular sovereignty' themselves, needing it to use in opposition to sovereignty by divine right.

The ground had originally been broken by Locke in the seventeenth century. He argued that the idea of the monarch deriving his power from God alone, having to account for it to nobody on earth, was a recent one, invented in the last few centuries. And turning back to the example of antiquity he claimed that as men were free, equal and independent, nobody could be forced to submit to the political power of another without his consent, nor could any civil society exist unless it was founded on the will of the majority. At the same period Pierre Jurieu, a French protestant theologian, and an opponent of Bossuet, Louis XIV and absolutism, was also setting up the sovereignty of the people in opposition to the law of divine right.

But the idea of popular sovereignty was enormously potent, and the bourgeoisie had always been aware that there was a danger it might be used against them. They did their best to take precautions against it, doing what they could to limit the implications of the principle, so that it would not occur to the 'common people' to interpret it in ways that would be injurious to the bourgeois order. But the ancient world had not just conceived the abstract idea of popular sovereignty:

in carrying through the exercise of sovereignty by the people themselves it had created an actual precedent.

In fact, direct democracy only ever emerged in a few cities, notably Athens; and even there the greatest thinkers, frightened of the power of the plebs, disparaged it. It was never complete democracy either, as women were excluded from it, and the whole system rested on the worst form of oppression: slavery. It was warped at its base by the unequal distribution of wealth and the struggle between rich and poor. Nonetheless, for the first time in history, men had asserted and tried to put into practice the idea that all power originated from the people and that the people should exercise it themselves without intermediaries.

So while the modern bourgeoisie had to argue, in opposing absolutism, that power originated in the people, it could not admit their right to exercise it. The idea had to be modified. In the seventeenth century, the English republicans grafted the idea of sovereignty of the people on to an institution which had originally had no connection with it at all. Parliament was born in England of the dislocation of the feudal regime. It was the result of a compromise between aristocracy and bourgeoisie. The lords had begun to meet regularly to discuss their affairs among themselves. Little by little, they had to allow into the 'barons' council' representatives of the bourgeoisie that was emerging in the towns. The English republicans turned this parliament into an embodiment of the sovereignty of the people. In 1656, Henry Vane wrote a pamphlet setting out the central principles of bourgeois republicanism, which the nineteenth-century French historian François Guizot, in his book on the English republic, summarised as 'the complete and absolute sovereignty of the people, as the sole source of all power; a parliament consisting of one single assembly, as the only representative of the people and alone in possession of the sovereignty'. The innovation was certainly progressive. It went a long way towards exploding the old feudal institution, and gave it a new content. But at the same time limits were set. In theory all power originated

in the people, but in practice they were denied the right of exercising it; they were only allowed to delegate it. Sovereignty passed to an assembly which made laws and governed in their name.

Thus bourgeois thought believed it had found a harmless way of enlisting the people's support in the attack on absolutism. Montesquieu, and with him the French bourgeois of the eighteenth century, enthusiastically adopted the 'representative system'. 'The great advantage of representatives', wrote the author of *L'Esprit des Lois*, 'is that they are capable of discussing public affairs. The people simply aren't fit to do it, and that is one of the main drawbacks of democracy'. 'There was one great flaw in most ancient republics; the people were entitled to pass resolutions that then needed putting into practice, something they were quite incapable of. The people should not take part in the process of government except to choose their representatives.'

The people were not even allowed to delegate their sovereignty. That right was reserved for a minority of those well enough off to pay the *cens*. Condorcet and Turgot only wanted to grant citizenship to property-owners. Even Rousseau never mentioned universal suffrage, and was an admirer of the government of the bourgeoisie at Geneva. And in June 1789, Camille Desmoulins was stating his approval of classical law for having 'cut that class of people called proletarians out of the body politic', consigning them to a *centuria* (a military, political and administrative unit made up of a hundred citizens) without influence on the people's assembly. He added: 'Distanced from public affairs by countless needs, and continually dependent, this *centuria* can never be dominant in the state . . . Will a servant vote with his master?'

But the distrust of the people, the wish to keep them in a subordinate role, still came through rather too crudely. Could they have succeeded in bringing the masses out on to the streets, getting them to attack the citadels of absolutism, if they had continued to curtail their sovereignty so severely? The revolutionary bourgeoisie realised that at times it was neces-

sary to jettison something: after three years of revolution, and urgently in need of popular support, it finally gave the people universal suffrage.

That concession was not enough to satisfy the bras nus, though, who demanded guarantees that their deputies would not abuse the sovereignty delegated to them. Rousseau took it upon himself to paint the representative system in more alluring colours. The enfant terrible of the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie started with a denunciation of dupery:

> 'The English people', he wrote, 'believes itself to be free; it is gravely mistaken; it is free only during the election of members of parliament; as soon as the members are returned, the people is enslaved; it is nothing . . . The idea of representatives is a modern one, inherited from feudal government . . . In the ancient republics . . . the people never had a representative; the word was unknown . . . The moment a people adopts representatives it is no longer free; it no longer exists.'

But from that stinging critique of parliamentary government, which opened the way to Proudhon, Bakunin, Marx and Lenin, Rousseau was careful not to draw the conclusion one might have expected – the necessity for direct democracy. Quite the reverse: he refused to allow that the form of government that existed in a small ancient republic could be adopted by the modern world:

> 'All things carefully considered I do not see how it will be possible henceforth among people like us for the sovereign to maintain the exercise of his rights unless the republic is very small . . . In the strict sense of the term, there never has been a true democracy, and there never will be . . . One can hardly imagine that all the people would sit permanently in an assembly to deal with public affairs . . . If there was a nation of gods it would govern itself democratically. Such a perfect form of government is not suited to men'.

Neither representative system, nor direct democracy. What then? Rousseau got himself out of the difficulty through a loophole; he gave in to the idea of delegation of popular

sovereignty, but on condition that the people could be offered some guarantees against the independence of their delegates: the people's deputies would not be representatives (*représentants*), they would only be agents (*commissaires*). They would not be able to decide anything conclusively. 'Any law which the people themselves have not ratified is void.'

Rousseau had prepared the way for Robespierre, who had only to adopt some of his master's stratagems to the situation of the sansculottes. 'The sovereign will can never be represented'. 'The word representative can never be applied to any deputy of the people . . . Laws do not take on the character of laws until they have been formally accepted by the people . . . Decrees are not acted upon before being submitted to the people for their ratification, because the people are supposed to approve them'. The delegates of the people must not be 'despots above the law.' The Robespierre constitution of 1793, the most democratic French constitution, was a skilful attempt at a compromise between the bourgeois conception of a sovereign parliament and the people's desire for direct sovereignty; the reality of power stayed in the hands of the parliamentary assembly; the people could not exercise its sovereignty itself, in its primary assemblies, except by using its veto against some of the laws elaborated by the central parliament.

Here we reach the absolute limit of the concessions the revolutionary bourgeoisie was prepared to make to win the support of the bras nus (the manual workers). And it only ever made them on paper, as the 1793 constitution was never put into practice. Robespierre remained intransigently hostile to direct democracy: 'I know', he said, 'that the people cannot always be making decisions; nor is that what I want'. He maintained he had organised sovereignty 'so that it is equally distant from the storms of absolute democracy and the calm betrayals of representative despotism'.

> 'Democracy', he said, 'is not a state in which the people, in permanent assembly, rule on their own over all public affairs; still less one where thousands of fractions of the people

> decide the fate of the whole of society through a series of isolated, hasty and contradictory measures . . . Democracy is a state where the sovereign people does what it can on its own, and does through its delegates what it is unable to do itself.'

But the inevitable happened: the unsophisticated logic of the people made short work of the ruses that were meant to distract them from their path. They made their own deduction, despite all the attempts to forbid it. They retained only what was in their interest from the subtle reasoning of Rousseau and Robespierre, and the rest they ignored. They had been told ad nauseam that the people were sovereign, and that sovereignty was inalienable, and could not be represented. So they concluded that they had the right to exercise this sovereignty themselves, at all times, to make their voice heard whenever they chose, to attack their delegates whenever they behaved unsatisfactorily, even to take their place.

Opponents of popular sovereignty warned the bourgeoisie when the revolution began, that the man in the street would be bound to interpret it radically. Baron Malouet had pronounced this warning to the Constituent Assembly. 'In trying to bring "sovereignty" closer to the people, you have been continually tempting them with it without conferring its power on them. I cannot believe that this is sound. You weaken supreme power by making it dependent on an abstraction.'

In fact the objections of bourgeois thinkers to direct democracy were overturned by popular logic. To the horror of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, the sansculottes time after time opposed the so-called sovereignty of the parliamentary assembly with the real sovereignty of the people, directly exercised in the places they gathered: the sections, the communes, the *sociétés populaires.*

Thus on 3 November 1792, the Section de la Cité circulated the other Paris sections with a statement for their approval: 'The citizens of Paris declare . . . that they recognise no sovereignty except a majority of the communes of the republic . . . that they only recognise deputies in the Convention

as composers of a draft constitution and provisional administrators of the republic'.

In the course of the unsuccessful insurrection on 10 March 1793, a number of sections, and then the Cordeliers Club, passed a resolution drawn up by the enragé, Jean Varlet. 'The département of Paris, being an integral part of sovereign power, is invited to seize the exercise of that sovereignty. The electoral body of Paris is authorised to replace the members (of the Convention) who have betrayed the people's cause.' Inside the Convention, the Girondin Vergniaud read out the text indignantly. 'Unhappy people', he exclaimed, 'the anarchists have led you astray by their misuse of the word sovereignty. They would very nearly have overturned the whole republic by making each section believe it possessed sovereignty.'

On 4 May a deputation from Faubourg St Antoine marched to the Convention. Their speaker announced that he was followed by eight thousand citizens, 'members of the sovereign power, who were coming to dictate their will to their delegates'. The enragé Théophile Leclerc wrote in his paper: 'Sovereign, claim your place. Delegates of the sovereign come down from the seats on the terraces – they belong to the people. Your place is on the amphitheatre floor.' The young journalist's injunction was one day to be put into action. On the first of Prairial Year III (20 May 1795) a crowd of rioters burst into the assembly-hall of the Convention and invoked their right of sovereignty, one man shouting to the delegates, 'Get out, the lot of you, we are going to form the National Convention ourselves.'

However the logic of the popular movement did not start from a preconceived idea, a theory of direct democracy. It was not yet capable of the kind of critique of bourgeois parliamentarism that modern marxist and libertarian thought would provide. On the contrary, the people were taken in by the fiction of a sovereign central assembly. It struck their imagination and commanded respect as the symbol of unity of a nation which so recently had still been fragmented into estates and provinces. They did not oppose parliament or try to substitute

another form of power coming more directly from themselves except when parliament, interpreting the interests of the bourgeoisie, went counter to their own. It was only then they invoked the principle of the sovereignty of the people to intimidate their delegates and try to exercise sovereignty themselves.

The new forms of political power the people discovered weren't abstract ideas created in the heads of theoreticians. The people weren't philosophers. They spontaneously made use of the old institutions, enlarging them and giving them a new content. The Paris Commune came out of an old tradition, dating back to the eleventh century, the period when the third estate in the towns had organised itself within feudal society, and had fought hard for, and won, communal liberties. In the fourteenth century the Paris Commune, led by the *prévôt des marchands* (senior magistrate) Etienne Marcel, came into conflict with the power of the crown and the other two estates. That, briefly, is the historical origin of the commune. Now let us see how it was given new life: in 1789 the Paris deputies to the Estates-general were elected by an assembly of electors; after the fall of the Bastille this assembly took over the administration of the capital and took the old name of Commune. This Commune, however, had no more than a purely formal resemblance to that of the middle ages. There was as much difference between the medieval and revolutionary communes as between a pre-1789 guild and a modern trade union. The medieval commune and the guild are still steeped in feudal society, and although they form the first rudiments of bourgeois society they remain essentially feudal, while the revolutionary commune and the modern trade union go beyond bourgeois society and open the way to a new type of social organisation.

The forty-eight sections of Paris, which drawn together in the framework of the Commune were the real centres of the new popular power, were of much more recent origin. For the two-tier process of election to the Estates-general, Louis XVI's minister, Jacques Necker, had divided Paris into sixty districts; these were to elect electors who would, in turn, nominate the

Paris representatives of the third estate. This procedure, which aroused strong protest, seemed to be designed to divide and weaken the revolutionary spirit of the capital. The bourgeoisie of Paris completed what the Ancien Régime had begun: they shaped the institutions of communal democracy which the people would one day try to turn against them. In the days after 14 July 1789 the division of Paris into sixty electoral wards, which originally were intended to meet only once, was made permanent. Later the sixty were replaced by forty-eight sections. On the eve of 10 August the sections won the right of permanent association from the Assembly; and after 10 August, not only the *cens* payers, but all citizens were admitted to them.

All revolutions are characterised by the temporary coexistence of two contending forms of political power. This dual situation can be clearly seen, in a fairly embryonic form, in the French revolution. It was glimpsed by Claude Ysabeau, a contemporary 'deputy on mission' [after March 1793 deputies were sent to the provinces to impose the policies of the Convention and the Committee of Public Safety] who wrote to Jean-Baptiste Bouchotte, the War Minister, on 19 November 1793, 'What is this new power that thinks it can rise up against legitimate authority? Or, rather, are there two powers in France?'

The first signs of this phenomenon appear in July 1789. On the verge of the revolution, dual power existed not only between the king and the National Assembly, but also between the National Assembly, embodying the wishes of the haute bourgeoisie, and the Paris Commune, founded on the lower strata of the third estate in the capital. The second power, the direct expression of the people, not only treated the parliament as its equal, but despite its infancy even adopted a patronising tone towards it. Some days after 14 July, an orator from the Faubourg St Antoine declared at the bar of the Assembly, 'Gentlemen, you are the saviours of the country; but you have your own saviours as well.' The second power asserted its existence by forging boldly ahead.

Dual power appeared much more visibly during the 10 August insurrection of 1792. In the second half of July, the

sections had nominated delegates who gathered in the Hôtel de Ville [the Commune's administrative centre, the city hall]. On 10 August, the meeting of the sections took over from the legal Commune and set up a revolutionary Commune, which stood against the bourgeois Assembly as the organ of the people's will. The day after the insurrection a deputation from the Commune spoke to the Legislative Assembly in the following words, 'The people who send us here told us to say that they are prepared to renew their trust in you, but they told us at the same time to make this clear: they can recognise no judge of the extraordinary measures they have been driven to by necessity and resistance to oppression except the French people, your sovereign and ours, in their primary assemblies.'

But dual power is a revolutionary not a constitutional fact. It can only be transitory. Sooner or later one power has to eliminate the other. In the days following 10 August the power of the revolutionary Paris Commune and the power of the Assembly were momentarily balanced. This situation, which provoked an acute political crisis, lasted only a few weeks. The Commune lost.

Dual power re-emerged on 31 March 1793. As on 10 August, a revolutionary Commune had taken over from the legal one, and against the Convention and its Committee of Public Safety it looked like a new power. But this time the duality only lasted for a morning. Official power was quick to stamp out the insurrectionary Commune.

After the fall of the Girondins the struggle between the Convention and the Commune, between bourgeois power and the power of the masses, though muted, continued. It flared up again in November 1793 when the Commune, taking the Convention's place, dragged the country into the dechristianisation campaign and imposed the Cult of Reason in the Assembly. The bourgeoisie replied by trimming the Commune's powers with the decree of 4 December which made them strictly subordinate to central power.

The struggle between the two powers revived in February–March 1794. This time it was the *sociétés populaires*

of the sections, organised in a central committee, rather than the actual Commune, that represented the power of the masses. But twice – before the fall of the Hébertists and before the fall of Robespierre – the leaders of the Commune, under pressure from below, had made moves towards a coup d'état. That was dual power's swan-song. The bourgeoisie accused the Commune supporters of wanting to 'debase the national representation', and they smashed popular power, and in so doing dealt the revolution its death blow.

As the former members of the Committee of Public Safety were to sum it up after Thermidor: 'A few *magistrats* disguised as ardent patriots made the Commune General Council into a rival of the National Convention. Local office was weighed against the authority of the people's deputies.'

The people indeed were taken in by the fiction of a sovereign Convention, for they could not yet see the defects of parliamentary rule as a constitutional institution, but parliament was already showing its congenital incapacity to keep up with the rapid progress of the revolution; first, because it was elected for long periods and the consciousness of the masses had changed profoundly since the election; and also, because at the time of its election it represented the wishes of the backward majority of the nation, it made up the rearguard of the revolution rather than its leaders. The example of the Convention is particularly typical. Elected in the aftermath of 10 August, in the climate of fear the insurrectionary Commune's brave action had aroused in the départements, it reflected the state of mind of the most backward layers of the population. It was soon left behind by the lightning progress of public opinion, and in particular found itself in ever sharper opposition to the will of the most active, most advanced and most class-conscious minority in the country, the vanguard of the revolution.

The sansculottes instinctively felt the need to oppose indirect, abstract, parliamentary democracy with much more direct, flexible, transparent forms of representation. The sec-

tions, communes and *sociétés populaires* were able to interpret the day-to-day wishes of the revolutionary vanguard immediately. And the feeling of being the most effective instruments of the revolution, and its most authentic voice, gave them the courage to challenge the power of a Convention which however commanded respect.

But the leadership of the revolution was not confined to the capital. The need to articulate the wishes of the vanguard of the people, not just in Paris but throughout France, more directly and more often than the parliamentary regime could, gave rise spontaneously to the idea of a federation of communes. Here again we are not talking about a replica of the past, a resurrection of the medieval leagues of communes, but an entirely new institution. Like the Paris Commune the federation was originally the idea of the progressive bourgeoisie. Communes on the Paris model were set up all over France. And quite naturally these local centres of power, equally distrustful of royalty and the Assembly that dealt tactfully with it, felt the need to form a federation around the Paris Commune.

The National Assembly balked at that, and reclaimed the movement for themselves. The Festival of Federation on 14 July 1790 was nothing but a caricature of federation turned to the advantage of central power and the king himself. But the idea of federation stayed firmly rooted in popular consciousness, and later the true picture sprang up again out of the caricature: the 'fédérés' attending the Festival of Federation on 14 July 1792 spontaneously joined with the sansculottes of the Paris sections to overthrow the monarchy. The insurrectionary Commune of 10 August was the combined manifestation of the meeting of delegates from the forty-eight Paris sections and the Action Committee of the 'fédérés' in Paris.

The appeal the Commune's *comité de surveillance* sent out to all the municipalities in France on 3 September was particularly significant. It explained that the Commune on the eve of 10 August had found it necessary 'to regain control of

the strength of the people in order to save the nation', said they were 'proud to enjoy the complete trust of the nation' and asked all the communes in France to ratify the measures of safety they had taken for the common good.

In the spring of 1793, when the struggle against the Girondin majority in the parliamentary Assembly was at its height, the demands of the moment again gave rise to the idea of a federation of the communes of France, under the aegis of the Paris Commune. On 29 April, the General Council of the Commune decided to form a corresponding committee of twelve members, which would be responsible for corresponding with the 44,000 municipalities. At the same time, the secretary of the committee sent out a printed circular to the communes of the republic, in which he asked them to carry on a correspondence with Paris which was to be friendly, direct and, above all, as regular as possible. He invited them to stay in close contact with the Paris Commune. 'That is what Paris wants', he wrote, 'That is the only kind of federalism the people of Paris want . . . All the communes in France should be sisters.'

The Commune, while denying that it wanted to impose its power on the rest of France, put itself forward as the political leader of the 44,000 communes, promising to send them the texts of the strenuous resolutions they were adopting to save the common weal. They spoke of the parliamentary Assembly with a relaxed deference, tinged with suspicion and even some contempt. 'The Convention, which has our constant support, despite the well-earned criticism many of its members deserve, has seconded the greater part of the measures we have drawn up for the salvation of the country.' The implication being that it was the Commune rather than the Convention that had taken the measures of public safety, the latter merely seconding, and even then only in part.

This desire for federation continued until the fall of the Commune, much to the bourgeoisie's displeasure. At Chaumette's trial in April 1794 the president asked the accused sternly, 'Chaumette, have you not violated our laws and principles? Did you not have a committee appointed to correspond

with all the communes of the republic? . . . Did you consult the law, and the properly constituted authorities, before you set up a corresponding committee?' And Louis Roulx, a witness and a member of the Commune, declared, 'I am in a position to prove that Chaumette's correspondence with the départements had only one purpose, and that was federation.' From December 1793 onwards, the bourgeoisie strengthened the central power all the time, in order to smash any attempted federation between the communes or the *sociétés populaires.*

The bourgeois philosophers who had pronounced direct democracy unworkable in large countries, on the grounds that it would be materially impossible to bring all the citizens together in one meeting, were thus proved wrong. The Commune had spontaneously discovered a new form of representation more direct and more flexible than the parliamentary system, and which while not perfect, for all forms of representation have their faults, reduced the disadvantages to a minimum.

Yet the bourgeoisie continued to maintain that democracy of the communal type was retrogressive rather than progressive vis-à-vis the parliamentary regime. They, of all people, accused the Commune of trying to resurrect the past. Whereas of course the Commune, the embryo of the new power, had absolutely no intention of returning to the disintegration and atomisation of the middle ages; they were not going to jeopardise the nation's hard-won unity. Quite the opposite: they were the expression of a far superior unity to that created by coercion under absolutism and later under representative government and bourgeois centralism.

Revolutionary federalism as it appeared in the French Revolution inspired that of Proudhon, and following him, Bakunin, Marx, the 1871 Commune, and finally Lenin.

There were two faces to the second power: it was the form of democracy that allowed the mass of working people the most direct and complete expression of their will; and at the same time it was coercive. This contradiction, inherent in all revolutionary power, occurred because the vanguard of the

society, the leadership of the revolution, were still a minority compared with the mass of the country they were sweeping along with them. They would, of course, have liked to dispense with having to impose their power on the rest of the nation and to convince the country as a whole that they were its leadership and its voice rather than tyrants. But the backward layers of the population, still blind or feeling their privileged positions threatened, would not be persuaded, and they put up resistance – sometimes passive, sometimes active – to all the efforts the vanguard made to ensure the triumph of the revolution.

As a result, the class-conscious minority could not avoid using some measures of coercion. Although they had started the revolution in order to put an end to oppression and lay the foundations of an authentic democracy, they did not hesitate to use the violence they condemned in principle. There were two historic justifications for their stance: first, the temporary nature of the coercive measures, which only needed to continue as long as was necessary to overcome the last vestiges of counter-revolutionary resistance; and secondly, their special task as trustees of the highest interests of the revolution, and therefore the whole of society. In contrast to the violence of the privileged classes which was used to the disadvantage of the majority of the nation, the revolutionaries were genuinely convinced that the purpose of the violence they practised was to bring all men to a higher stage of humanity.

The most conscious of the revolutionary figures saw the necessity of this. On 6 April 1793, Marat burst out in the Convention with the words 'Liberty has to be established through violence, and the time has come for a temporary organisation of the despotism of liberty in order to crush the despotism of kings.' Jean-Jacques Rousseau, nurtured on the classics, had allowed that in times of danger 'a supreme head must be appointed with the power to silence all the laws and temporarily suspend the sovereign authority'. Following his example, Marat shocked the doctrinaire supporters of formal democracy by proposing 'a military tribune, a dictator, or triumvirates, as

the only way to crush traitors and conspirators', 'the establishment of a supreme magistrature to resist tyranny and force the untrustworthy delegates of the people to do their duty, as the one measure left that can save the country at this time of frightening crisis, when the very people seem to despair of their safety'. But how can the existence of one or more appointed leaders be reconciled with democracy and respect for the will of the people? Marat tried his best to resolve the contradiction by saying he was calling for a leader rather than a master, that the two words were not synonymous, and that dictatorship, 'the only way to save the people', must not be 'accompanied by powers that might be abused by ambition'.

In fact, in 1793–94 two quite different kinds of coercion appeared at the same time. In comparison with the nation as a whole, the revolutionary bourgeoisie and the sansculottes were both minorities, and both were agreed on the need to use revolutionary powers of coercion to crush counter-revolutionary resistance. But the kinds of coercion they envisaged were very dissimilar. The revolutionary bourgeoisie wielded an arbitrary, uncontrolled, barbaric 'terror' through the medium of a dictatorship imposed from above, called the Committee of Public Safety (scarcely disguised by the fiction of the sovereign Convention, and with a tendency to concentrate power in the hands of an increasingly small number of people); the popular vanguard wanted a 'terror' that would be used consciously and specifically against those who were sabotaging the revolution by the armed sansculottes organised democratically in their clubs and in the Commune. Because both these moves towards coercion took shape at the same time, it is easy to confuse them. When the bras nus mobilised to demand emergency measures after Dumouriez's treachery, in April 1793, the revolutionary bourgeoisie followed. But instead of basing the coercion on the Commune, the federation of local organs of popular power, they made it an expression of a central power, claiming parliamentary legitimacy; it was then transformed yet further into a centralised bourgeois dictatorship directed not only against the reactionary majority in the country (the

aristocrats and Girondins) but against the popular vanguard as well.

The substitution of a dictatorship in part directed against the popular movement for the popular coercion the bras nus had called for led to violent, formless protests from the militants who were its victims – Hébertists, enragés, and Babouvists. But the objective conditions of the period prevented them from challenging the bourgeoisie's ideas with a clear libertarian conception of revolutionary coercion. That would have to wait until the nineteenth century, when Marx and Bakunin, albeit in different terms, could frame it retrospectively from their study of the French revolution.

Lastly, the role the religious question played in the French revolution was hardly less important than the fundamental political problems outlined above.

First and foremost, it was an integral part of the assault that the mass of the people launched against the detested Ancien Régime. The sansculottes' hostility towards the church was one manifestation of their class instinct. Whereas the eighteenth-century *philosophes*, in the seclusion of their studies, rebelled against religion in the name of abstract principles, the people on the ground saw the church as one of the main obstacles in the way of human emancipation. The scandalous conduct of the priesthood, their corruption and venality as well as their complicity with aristocracy and absolutism, had done far more to open people's eyes than the meditations of the *philosophes*. The high dignitaries of the church led lives that flagrantly belied the morality they preached. The words '*abbé*' and 'libertine' had become synonymous in everyday speech.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century Jean Meslier, a humble *curé* of plebeian origins, had sounded the first note of rebellion against the church. His *Testament* and other, similar works were secretly circulated for a long time, first in manuscript and then in clandestinely printed versions. It was not only the upper strata of society that read them, either.

Ordinary workers, copyists, itinerant booksellers, artisans and printers deciphered them eagerly and made the connection between the anti-religious struggle and the struggle for social emancipation. Long before 1789, they opened the way to de-christianisation.

As for the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie, they were torn between two opposing forces. They hated the church passionately because it was one of the most steadfast supports of the old neo-feudal world of absolutism and therefore one of the most serious obstacles to their complete emancipation, and also because they coveted the enormous temporal wealth of the clergy. And yet, on the other hand, they rightly saw in religion a force for continued social stability. They were grateful to it for keeping the people obedient, teaching respect for bourgeois property, and persuading them to renounce any hope of improvement in their earthly lot by promising them happiness in the afterlife. They were afraid that if the people were not kept under control by the priests they would reject the moral principles inculcated by the church and, left to follow their own instincts, would endanger the bourgeoisie's own class domination.

A social class never being absolutely homogeneous, the eighteenth-century bourgeois were more or less committed to one or other position; some placed the main emphasis on the struggle against religion and the church, while others stressed the necessity of religion to keep the people obedient. The philosophical dispute between materialists and deists was partly a reflection of these divergent preoccupations.

The materialists' conception of morality was basically analogous to that of the deists. Like them, they considered morals indispensable, at least for the oppressed; it was quite plain to them that the people's appetites (in other words their class demands) had to be curbed. But they saw religion, with its links with absolutism, less as a tool to be used than as an obstacle to be destroyed. So they set about disentangling morals from religion. They maintained that a morality bound to religion was qualitatively inferior, and that there was another

morality just as capable – more capable even – of ensuring that the crowd respected established order. Religion, they argued, was morally useless, even immoral. They considered it a slur on the human spirit that religion should have been set up as the basis of morality, and so they tried to find morality a foundation in something else. This was nothing new. None of the classical thinkers had linked morality to religion, they had all claimed that their ethics were based on experience and rational thought. The materialists revived that tradition. They replaced God with Reason, an abstraction to which they attributed various meanings, all of which, however, characterised morality as something unchanging and unalterable.

But these laborious constructs inadequately concealed the fragility of the new edifice. The materialists believed that they had discovered a rock-solid foundation for morality, but in practice it turned out to be no better than clay. They had made reason and human consciousness, rather than superstition, the basis of morality. But where was that going to lead them?

The eighteenth-century deists did not trust this substitution of Reason for God. They believed that the capacity to think rationally was the prerogative of a small elite of the educated and privileged, and could not be used to guide the ignorant masses. What the ordinary people needed was someing different, resting on simpler, everyday foundations, an ethic of the poor. So they favoured the old method, whose solid worth had been proved by centuries of use. But at the same time they were convinced, like the materialists, of the need to combat the church if they were to ensure the ultimate supremacy of the bourgeois class. So they set to work to separate God from the priests. Priests were unnecessary, they argued, but religion was indispensable. So, after intensifying their attack on the church and religion, they set about reviving for all they were worth part of what they had just overthrown. God was put back on his pedestal in the ruins of the temple.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's deviousness is typical here. The *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard* contains some of the most powerful pages ever written against catholic dogma and

revealed religion. But the demolition job is accompanied by a quite opposite task. Rousseau refuted the catholic religion only to put natural religion in its place, and dethroned the God of previous generations only to replace it with the Supreme Being. He turned the full force of his earlier attack on the clergy against the materialists, even going as far as to write that fanaticism had far less fatal consequences than the philosophical spirit, which he resented for taking away morality's stoutest support and depriving the people of the surest relief from the troubles that beset them, the expectation of heavenly joy. At a time when the bourgeoisie, driven by anti-clerical hatred, was tempted to forget the edifying virtues of religion, Rousseau reminded them, to the horror of the materialists, that God was morality's firmest foundation.

Carried to its ultimate conclusions, though, deism led back to the catholic religion. Diderot saw how dangerous the direction was that Rousseau was taking. 'He is an extremist who veers from atheism to bell blessing. Who knows where he will finish up?' In fact, Rousseau's mystical wanderings were to lead him from the Supreme Being to the catholic God, from natural religion to the threshold of religion pure and simple. He lets slip an illuminating remark at the end of the *Vicaire savoyard*: 'It is inexcusably presumptuous of us in our uncertainty to profess a religion other than the one we are born into.' He treated the gospel as a 'sacred book' and wrote that 'if the life and death of Socrates is that of a wise man, the life and death of Jesus is that of a God'. Thus he helped force back into the narrow rut of fanaticism the very consciences he had previously enlightened. He rendered a service to catholicism which it has not forgotten, and its followers still recognise him for it today.

As long as they were principally concerned with the overthrow of the Ancien Régime and its ally the church, the eighteenth-century bourgeoisie in the main sided with the materialists against the deists. The rancour of the *philosophes* pursued Rousseau to the grave. But since the beginning of the

revolution, the bourgeoisie had been too afraid of the masses to want to upset the church. It was only very slowly that they moved towards the bourgeois democratic solution of the relationship between church and state, that is the separation of the two rival powers, with no state subsidy (*budget de cultes*), no dominant or privileged religion, no outward signs of any religion, which becomes a purely private affair.

The half-baked compromise they reached first, the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (12 July 1790), fell far short of that programme. The deputies made catholicism a privileged religion, with the priests in charge paid and appointed by the state and bound to it by an oath of allegiance. They restricted themselves to making a few economies in the clergy's expenses. They cut down the money available for ecclesiastical establishments, streamlined the machinery, and set up a state religion on the cheap. But the cassocked crooks showed no gratitude for this timidity. The Vatican came out against the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, inciting the priests to refuse to take the oath and organising refractory priests to sabotage the revolution.

The revolutionary bourgeoisie was therefore forced to go further than the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, but they still moved hesitantly and circumspectly, being split between the miserliness that was urging them to make more cuts in the cost of supporting priests, and their fear of the popular movement which told them to spare the church as a force for order. The least scrupulous were those of the bourgeoisie who had acquired national lands [nationalised property of church or aristocracy]: they were haunted at night by the spectre of the old church taking its revenge, and the restitution of the confiscated estates to the clergy.

Not daring to abolish the state subsidy, they were only able to nibble away at it piecemeal, while they set about little by little separating the church from the state. Before the Legislative Assembly was dissolved on 20 September 1792, they decided that keeping a register of births, marriages and deaths should be the responsibility of the state, not the church. And,

finally, measures were taken which represented a move towards the abolition of outward signs of the catholic religion. On 1 June 1792 the Paris municipal authority passed a decree aimed, indirectly, at banning processions; little by little religion was forced out of the public sphere into the domain of private life.

Later, in November 1793, the torrent of dechristianisation that was let loose frightened the revolutionary bourgeoisie, and they rallied to the deist Robespierre. Throughout the revolution the Incorruptible had been more concerned with the usefulness of religion than with the need to combat the church. He proclaimed himself a follower of Rousseau and was particularly antagonistic to the materialists for the way they had persecuted his teacher. He not unskilfully attacked them where they were weakest by pointing to trivial things about them that were reactionary. He described them, quite correctly, as aristocrats and *grands bourgeois*, but he made no mention of the extremely progressive aspects of their thought.

Robespierre had made frequent professions of deism before the autumn of 1793: one must not 'fly in the face of the religious prejudices the people are so attached to'. The dogma of the divinity was deeply entrenched in people's minds and kept them tied to the catholic religion. To attack that religion directly would be 'to attack the morality of the people'.

When the Incorruptible turned against the dechristianisers at the end of 1793 he was inspired more than anything else by moral – that is, class – preoccupations. He proclaimed God a 'noble idea for the protection of the social order' and of the 'unalterable principles of all human societies'. Man in this scheme being unable to tell right from wrong, religion was required to give 'people the idea that their moral precepts had been sanctioned by a power greater than man'.

Rousseau's disciple openly declared that he wanted to protect religion, not destroy it. He warned the dechristianisers to beware of breaking the sacred bond that joined man to his maker, and to beware of corrupting the people.

After 1793 the idea that religion was necessary for the

maintenance of bourgeois order gained ground, and was taken up and developed by all sorts of social reactionaries. But nobody set out its advantages as cynically as Bonaparte: 'There can be no society without inequality of wealth, and inequality of wealth can't exist without religion. When someone is dying of hunger while the next man has more than he can eat, there is no way he can accept the difference unless there is an authority there to tell him: "It is God's will; there must be rich and poor in the world. But after this, and for all eternity, things will be divided differently."' And to Jean Pelet (de la Lozère) the emperor Napoleon said the same: 'Religion . . . incorporates an idea of equality into heaven, which prevents the rich being massacred by the poor.'

Robespierre drowned his class prejudices in spiritual outpourings, whereas Bonaparte was more direct about them. But their intentions were the same.

Whether 'morality', the famous eternal moral absolute placed for all time in the hearts of men, was derived from religion or from reason, both the deists and the materialists were clearly talking about bourgeois morality. It was left to subsequent centuries for evolutionist philosophy to establish that human nature is not immutable, and that there can be no absolute morality independent of time, place, race and individual circumstances, but that each society, at each moment in history, institutes its own moral laws, showing the relativity of morality. And taking that breakthrough further, modern revolutionaries in their turn discovered that morality is only a temporary, relative expression of class relations, and that pure morality, put forward as a universal, unchanging rule, is just the ethics of the ruling class; and with social relations thus called into question the morals of a century ago will suddenly look outworn and become an object of scorn for the new generation.

1.
The Split to be Avoided

1 War is grafted on to the revolution

This book is about the most important crisis of a long revolution that started in 1789, a crisis that developed between 1793 and 1795. There is a purpose for choosing this particular period because it was during those years that modern class struggle made its first embryonic but quite distinct appearance, when, after the bourgeoisie had eliminated absolutism, the people the bourgeoisie enslave and exploit came into conflict with them for the first time.

The intrinsic development of the revolution itself was bound to lead to some differences among the people then called the third estate. But the split between bourgeois and bras nus was accelerated by an issue grafted on to the revolution from outside – war. The bourgeoisie financed the war through inflation. War and inflation brought them massive profits. But at the same time the uncontrolled issue of currency caused chronic shortages and rising living costs. The contrast between the bourgeoisie's opulence and the suffering of the people grew more blatant every day and, especially in the towns, began to create the beginnings of a split between the rich and the poor.

Despite their common struggle against the Ancien Régime, the two sections of the third estate were in mutual opposition and began to resolve themselves into two distinct classes with opposing interests. In Paris, particularly, there was a vanguard who realised, although still confusedly, that the revolution they had fought and shed blood for was not provid-

ing in practice the equality proclaimed in law, but was making some people richer and impoverishing others.

Before moving on to the heart of the subject we must therefore look at the events that accelerated the progress of the revolution and at the same time modified its course. There is also another reason for examining them; during the period in question, home policy was strongly influenced by foreign policy and the position of the revolutionary bourgeoisie and their political spokesmen is often only explicable in the light of the war and as a function of it.

What caused the war?

Leaving aside secondary considerations one can say that, in essence, it was one episode in the commercial and colonial rivalry between France and England that grew increasingly intense as the century wore on. Even in those days, for all the slender pretexts of succession, religion or morality, wars were really caused by commercial interests.

Between the two nations, war followed war with peace treaties providing no more than brief respites. Holland was one of the main bones of contention. Its geographical position meant that it could be both a British bridgehead to the continent and a French outpost against England. At the same time, its wealth, the importance of the Dutch fleet, and the brisk trade of its ports made both sides look very covetously on it. The Netherlands were thus the object of a bitter struggle for influence between the two opponents in the period leading up to armed fighting. France had provisionally had to back down and abandon Holland to English influence, but promised to be revenged at the earliest opportunity.

There was competition between the two rivals elsewhere as well, in the East Indies, whose wealth had hardly begun to be tapped. Until the middle of the eighteenth century the *Compagnie française des Indes* (French India Company) had a clear advantage over the British. But the Treaty of Paris in 1763 forced France to renounce all political claim to India and left the *Compagnie française* nothing but the crumbs from the feast. After the Treaty of Versailles of 1783, though, the balance

of forces swung in France's favour. France also had the support of the Dutch fleet and the British rulers were haunted by the fear that they might be planning to take the Indian empire, just as they had earlier been instrumental in the loss of their North American colonies.

In 1787 the government in London became so worried that they decided to reinforce the Indian garrisons and the Indian Ocean fleet, and ordered the governors of Bengal and Madras to be prepared, in the event of war breaking out, to attack French settlements in the East Indies. In October or November 1792, several months before hostilities fully commenced between France and England, the British government gave the order to attack French possessions in India. The leaders of the revolution, for their part, also had their sights firmly fixed on India. But it was finally England which took France's last commercial bases in India (in August 1793).

The West Indies (or Antilles), the brightest jewel in the French colonial crown, were also greatly coveted by the British, firstly for their wealth, but also because, once conquered, the islands could provide England with a secure base for the reconquest of its former American colonies. In fact, the war allowed England to snatch Guadeloupe and Martinique from France in April 1794.

Although French trade with the colonies flourished, it did so largely under foreign colours. France was dependent on Britain for transporting merchandise. From 1787-89 only a fifth of overseas exchange was carried under French colours, while nearly half went under the British flag. And this was a severe handicap to France.

The rivalry was exacerbated after 1780 by the enormous changes brought about by the industrial revolution, which for numerous reasons happened on the English side of the Channel first, where, from about 1760, the old means of production had begun to give way to mechanisation and large-scale capitalist industry. In thirty years, England became one great factory flooding the world with cheap goods.

France was twenty or thirty years behind England, and it

was not until 1780 that small hand machines, spinning jennies, imported from across the Channel, began to replace the archaic spinning wheels. In 1790 there were only about nine hundred in the whole of France. Mechanical spinning remained a cottage industry, scattered through the country and the towns. Between 1787 and 1790, the first British-invented spinning machines appeared, Arkwright's water-frame and Crompton's mule. From then on, the spinning industry lost its artisanal structure and was concentrated in factories. The industrial revolution really started in France round about 1789.

Thus handicapped, French industry had been unable to resist British competition in foreign markets. The alliance with the United States had opened up a new market for French trade, it is true, and while hostilities lasted they exported a great deal, but they lost standing because of the poor quality and high prices of their goods. As soon as the peace was signed, England flooded the American market with products, and the French found themselves unable to supply the goods the new United States required either at the price and on the credit terms the British offered, or of the same quality.

French industry was beaten in its own home market too. A commercial treaty was reached between the two countries in 1786 that reduced the previously prohibitive taxes on cotton and wool goods imported from Britain to almost nothing (10-15 per cent ad valorem). These English goods, in fact, had been very popular in France for some years. Even when they were prohibited or heavily taxed, they were still smuggled in. The Paris government, influenced by the theorists of economic liberalism, decided to experiment in free exchange. They thought foreign competition would stimulate national industry and encourage French manufacturers to modernise their production processes, and introduce machinery.

But competition does not work unless both sides are on equal terms. Politically, economically and socially, the regime in France was so decrepit that it stifled industry and made it impossible to adapt overnight to competition from England and to resist it. The result was disastrous. France was literally

invaded by cheap English goods, cottons especially, of a far higher quality and at a far lower price than similar goods made in France.

British imports rose from 24 million in 1784 to 63 million in 1788. The same year there was a warning cry from the Normandy Chamber of Commerce. The main centres of the French textile industry, Rouen, Amiens and Abbeville, were cruelly hit by unemployment. From then on, the French bourgeoisie was obsessed with the one aim of denouncing the 1786 commercial treaty and denying the British access to the French market, even at the risk of war. The commercial treaty came up frequently in the negotiations which preceded the war footing between France and England, in 1792. Its denunciation by the French government was followed a few weeks later by the declaration of war.

Once hostilities had begun, the prohibition of English goods remained one of the revolutionary government's war aims. In London nobody disguised the fact that a victory for the republic would mean that British industry would lose the French market for good.

Despite French industry's handicaps, though, France's foreign trade did develop considerably between 1788 and 1792, partly as a result of the introduction of mechanisation, particularly in the textile industry, but principally because of the devaluation of the paper currency, the assignat, and the consequent premium on exports.

However, there was something disturbingly artificial about this prosperity. First, with the favourable rate of exchange other countries did not just buy up French industry's manufactured products, they also took whatever primary products they could lay their hands on (such as wool, hemp, linen and cotton), whether from France or from the colonies, thus threatening to deprive French industry of indispensable raw materials. So much so that on 24 February 1792 the Legislative Assembly had to prohibit their export.

Next, the export bonus that followed the devaluation of the assignat provided only a temporary, artificial impetus.

Rising prices fast made up for the benefits of the exchange rate.

Other signs of trouble appeared. The revolt of the blacks in Santo Domingo at the end of 1791 seriously affected trade relations between metropolitan France and the colonies in the Antilles.

Finally, the home market was showing signs of collapsing. The rising cost of living was reducing the purchasing power of the masses and the disappearance of luxury that followed the dispossession of the nobility had a grave effect on industries like the silk industry: at Lyons the first signs of industrial crisis appeared in summer 1792. There was only one way to give the economy new impetus – war.

2 Expansion towards Belgium and Holland

But who should they attack, and where? The French bourgeoisie looked towards Belgium (then known as the Austrian Netherlands) and Holland, which, being adjacent territories, had the great advantage of accessibility. They were also rich. Belgium offered the greedy French bourgeoisie the estates owned by the clergy and the House of Austria. Besides which, Belgium and Holland consumed a substantial amount of French production.

Conversely, the two 'Low Countries' acted as British industry's gateway to Europe. From Ostend and Antwerp, British goods were distributed all over the continent.

The conquest of Antwerp and Amsterdam might allow France to challenge England's maritime supremacy and threaten the British Isles directly. Furthermore, the Dutch bourgeoisie had accumulated extremely large gold reserves. With that wealth, France would be able to support a long war without financial embarrassment. 'Amsterdam will soon be your treasury!' said the financier Cambon, one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the war. Cambon had a double financial interest in the venture, both as an industrialist because he and his family owned a cotton factory which was suffering

from the downturn in business and British competition, and as a financier, since the conquest of Belgium and Holland would allow him to channel money from those countries into the Treasury coffers. Danton's attention was equally firmly fixed on the Low Countries. 'Let us take Holland', was his leitmotiv.

The conquest of Belgium and Holland, then, was uppermost in the French government's mind in 1792 and the beginning of 1793; later, the invasion of French territory and the need to rely on the popular vanguard to defend the revolution pushed that plan into the background for a while. But the revolutionary bourgeoisie did not give it up. As soon as the military situation was on a proper footing again and victory was in sight they moved again towards their permanent objective, the conquest of Belgium and Holland. By the eve of the 9th of Thermidor (27 July 1794) the reconquest of Belgium was almost complete and on 1 January 1795 Pichegru's forces occupied Amsterdam.

As Belgium belonged to Austria, the French bourgeoisie used the large number of émigrés gathering along the eastern frontier as an excuse to declare war on the Austrian government rather than the one in London. But the basic conflict was between France and England. The ruling Girondins were well aware that by sending their armies across the northern frontier France would sooner or later be fighting Great Britain. They knew full well that William Pitt had not taken his eye off Antwerp since 1789.

His Britannic Majesty's Prime Minister was at first pleased by the revolution, thinking that any weakening of the French king's power could only benefit England; and the French did not reach Antwerp at once. But when the Belgian uprising broke out at the end of 1789 and the rebels offered their support to the French revolution, and Camille Desmoulins and Lafayette took up their cause so wholeheartedly, the English bourgeoisie began to hate and fear the revolution. A few months earlier, English poets were still writing odes in its praise. Now the liberal Burke delivered a fierce diatribe

against it in Parliament (February 1790). Helped by England, though, Austria managed to crush the Belgian uprising (in December 1790) and London was thus delivered from the nightmare prospect of French intervention in Belgium. The Girondins could not have forgotten that episode by the beginning of 1792 and therefore could have had no illusions about the way England would react, sooner or later, if French armies entered Belgium.

And if they still had any doubts about it, François-Louis Becquey, a deputy opposed to the war, made it his job to warn them. On the day war was declared on Austria, 20 April 1792, he predicted in the Legislative Assembly that England would certainly not stay neutral. Recklessly, almost obliviously, the Girondins challenged the Prussians and the Austrians to war. The two powers embarked on it unenthusiastically, after trying to avoid it as their attentions were really engaged elsewhere, in Poland, where Russia was threatening their essential interests. The conflict might have ended in an 'honourable' compromise if French designs on Antwerp and Amsterdam had not brought England into the lists.

The government in London waited as long as they could before drawing their swords. Peace was more profitable for England than war, according to Adam Smith, the theorist of Britain's expansion. But although England wanted to avoid getting involved in hostilities for as long as possible, she stuck to her old tactic of getting other countries – Prussia and Austria – embroiled instead.

But when British interests were directly threatened, England did not hesitate to launch all her forces into war. As long as the Austrian and Prussian troops could hold back the French armies that had invaded the Austrian Netherlands, Pitt did not move. But when after Valmy (20 September 1792) and Jemmapes (6 November) General Dumouriez entered Brussels on 14 November, and the French government, in violation of earlier treaties, declared the river Scheldt free for navigation as far as its mouth, there was panic in London. The British cabinet abandoned its mask of neutrality. On 26

October the French ambassador Chauvelin warned his government that Pitt would declare war rather than allow France to conquer Brabant peacefully.

Cambon's response was the decree of 15 December 1792, completed by the instructions to commissioners in Belgium (8 January 1793). The affair began with the noble pretext of liberating the people of an occupied country, but once liberated the people were asked to pay the cost of their liberation themselves, provide for the expenses of the occupying armies, take assignats in exchange for their gold and in addition to make contributions in kind.

Covetousness became increasingly blatant. In a decree on 24 October 1792 the Executive Council proclaimed that the French forces would not lay down their arms until the republic's enemies had been driven back across the Rhine. At the beginning of 1793, Danton made his famous speech, 'France's frontiers are marked by nature. We will reach them in all four directions, the sea, the Rhine, the Alps and the Pyrenees.' And General Dumouriez announced that the next step would be the invasion of Holland and war with Great Britain. On 29 January the armies received the order to invade the Netherlands. On 1 February the Convention declared war on the King of England and the Stadholder of Holland.

An all-out struggle started between the two powers, and was pursued with extraordinary relentlessness. The war, this foreign body inserted into the revolution, was not initially an ideological conflict, as is too often claimed, between monarchist, semi-feudal Europe and revolutionary France. England only condemned revolutionary beliefs when they began to threaten her essential commercial interests. As for the French, the claim that they were bringing liberty to neighbouring countries was just an excuse to cover up their lust for expansion.

Later, when France was invaded and the gains of the revolution were threatened and the sansculottes formed the spirit and core of resistance, the war temporarily took on the form of a war in defence of the revolution. But its basic character as a war of expansion and conquest reappeared fairly

quickly. In fact, it was so little conditioned by the revolution that it outlived it for nearly a quarter of a century.

3 Who pays for the war?

How was this war that the French bourgeoisie had pushed the revolution into going to be financed? Having made the revolution in order to stop paying out heavy taxes to an absolute monarchy and a parasitic nobility, the bourgeoisie were determined the burden should fall on shoulders other than their own.

They could have at least reduced government expenditure by refusing to recognise the debts of the Ancien Régime. But the king's creditors, the bourgeois, meant the republic to carry on paying interest on the royal debt and the clergy's, down to the last farthing.

The monarchy had raised cash by making over financial or judicial offices to rich bourgeois, and when the revolution abolished the offices of the Ancien Régime they paid scrupulous compensation to their former holders. More than half a billion was spent on liquidating them.

And it was out of the question to finance the war through taxation. It was in order to stop paying taxes that the bourgeoisie had made the revolution, to put an end to the hated revenue authorities. The 35,000 tax collectors of the Ancien Régime were discharged, the General Tax Farm was abolished and the levying of new taxes to replace the old ones was made the responsibility of local administrations. As the municipalities were controlled by the well-to-do, they were very unwilling to organise the collection of taxes. Out of the 300 million due in land tax for 1790, only 150 million had been collected by February 1793, by which date tax arrears totalled 648 million. And the real value of those outstanding was being rapidly reduced by the depreciation of the paper currency, the assignat.

There was no hope of financing the war by borrowing, either. The bourgeoisie did not want to risk its capital by throwing it into the bottomless pit of military expenditure.

They preferred to keep it in safety abroad, or convert it into coin and bury it somewhere. The obstinate lack of capital could not, in those early days, be made up by drawing on small savings, the way it can today. There were no great banking houses through which they could be channelled into the state coffers. It was impossible to finance the war with short-term credit.

Since the bourgeoisie did not want to pay there was only one expedient left, to extract the billions needed for the war partly from the pockets of counter-revolutionaries but for the rest, and far more importantly, from the pockets of the people. The bourgeoisie confiscated estates from the clergy and émigrés and at the same time plunged into inflation.

To begin with, only the aristocracy was supposed to bear the cost. The assignat was not meant to be an instrument of inflation, just a simple bill issued against the estates taken from the clergy (worth 4 billion) and from the émigrés (worth 3 billion). As the estates were sold, the assignats guaranteed by them were to be taken back by the state and annulled. Nothing of the sort happened. Why? Because in the first place, the assignats were issued at a faster rate than the estates could be sold, and because the bourgeoisie speculated successfully by buying these 'national lands' far below their true value, and because the republic very generously offered to redeem them in twelve annual instalments.

So the assignat rapidly turned into an instrument of inflation, a way of financing the war. In May 1793, the number of assignats was already 5 billion. This orgy of paper was followed by rapid depreciation of the currency. The one hundred franc assignat, with an exchange value in Paris in June 1791 of 85 francs, fell to 29 by September 1792. There were two consequences of this: basic necessities rose rapidly in price, and at the same time were subject to severe shortage.

So the war which the bourgeoisie had begun with a light heart had an unforeseen result. Far from creating a diversion from the revolution, it drove it further forward. The rise in the cost of living and the scarcity of goods began to alienate

the bras nus from the bourgeoisie and disunite the forces that had combined to overthrow the Ancien Régime. The masses of the people were suffering from hunger, especially in Paris, the very place where their intervention had been most decisive. The sansculottes of Paris had offered their support and spilled their blood for the revolutionary bourgeoisie, who now, by way of thanks, deprived them of the basic necessities of life.

The first signs of a split between bourgeois and bras nus appeared early in 1792. In January there was fairly widespread unrest in the working-class quarters of the capital against rises in the price of sugar. Delegations from the sections took protests to the Assembly denouncing 'the vile hoarders and their infamous capitalists'.

At the beginning of 1793 the antagonism took clearer shape. In Paris and Lyons a new kind of movement appeared, purely economic, directed against not the Ancien Régime but the high cost of living and scarcity of goods. These rarely took the form of strikes, though, because at that time a large number of workers were not wage-earners (there were more artisans than there were workers paid by the day) and because the wage-earners, dispersed as they were in hundreds of small businesses and denied the right of combination by the Le Chapelier law of 1791, could seldom join together to win their demands for higher wages.

Furthermore, the sansculottes did not really understand the unfamiliar workings of inflation; they failed to grasp that rising prices were the direct consequence of the increased amount of currency, not just the result of a few counter-revolutionary hoarders and speculators. They thought it was relatively easy to control prices, using the law and a few policing measures. That is why they demanded price controls on basic goods more often than an increase in the day's pay.

Nonetheless, there were some strikes. At the beginning of April 1793 the bakers' boys united, demanding fifty sous a day and a bottle of wine. At the beginning of May the journeymen carpenters, stonemasons etc. asked for higher wages to compensate for the rise in the cost of food. In March and June the

Convention had to take steps to end strikes in the paper factories. But at the end of 1792 and subsequently the bras nus fought less on a workplace basis than through the local sections, which brought all the citizens together. The Paris sections acted together to put pressure on the Convention and force them to take steps to stop the cost of living rising. Deputation after deputation brought petitions to the bar of the Assembly, with crowds in support of them massed outside or forcing their way into the hall.

The bourgeoisie had no illusions about the class nature of these demonstrations. Their reaction was swift and, it should be emphasised, unanimous. Forgetting their fratricidal quarrels, the Girondin right and the Montagnard left were united against the vanguard of the people. The Jacobins, in more direct contact with the sansculottes, and even threatened as well with losing their support and being outflanked by extremists, were nonetheless implacable. Their only response to the starving people's demands, at least in the first part of 1793, was to argue: Help us get the revolution firmly established first. Then, and only then, will we give you bread.

In Paris at the beginning of February 1793 a delegation from the forty-eight sections took a petition to the bar of the Convention asking for legal control of basic supplies (*subsistances*) and a fixed maximum price for wheat (the 'maximum'). Angry voices erupted all over the hall, some calling for the orators to be thrown out. Marat, the 'Friend of the People', was on this occasion the one who defended the scared property-owners. He called the proposals 'excessive', 'weird', and 'subversive of all proper order'. The next day, the deputies of the département of Paris felt it necessary to dissociate themselves from the authors of the petition by means of a *Letter to their constituents.* Among the signatories to the letter were the main Jacobin leaders: Robespierre, Danton, Marat, Billaud-Varenne, Collot d'Herbois, the younger Robespierre and the painter Louis David.

A few days after that, a delegation of women from the Quatre-Nations section went to ask the Jacobins for the use of

their hall for the following day to discuss supplies and hoarding. When the Society set the request aside, with the excuse that too many discussions about foodstuffs alarmed the republic, there were shouts from the galleries that that included wealthy merchants and hoarders growing rich on public misfortune.

On the 25th, the sansculottes moved to direct action. To the dumbfounded indignation of the bourgeoisie, who called it looting, they entered shops and forced the shopkeepers to sell their goods at prices they had fixed themselves; there were a large number of women among them, especially washerwomen who were complaining about the high price of soap. That evening at the Jacobin Club, Robespierre gave vent to his anger. 'When the people rise up, can it not be for a cause worthy of them? Do they have to concern themselves with wretched groceries all the time?'

The following day, 26 February, a delegation of women went to the Hôtel de Ville, the city hall, to ask for price controls on all necessary basic commodities. Jean Pache, just elected mayor of Paris, replied ironically, 'If a fixed price was put on your husbands' work, what would you say? Would you be happy about it?' At the Convention the same day Barère spoke attacking the demonstrators of the previous day. And Cambon, on the 28th, declared that property was 'under constant threat', and called for a severe law to deal with anyone wanting to interfere with it.

At the beginning of March, the Jacobins, offended at being called hoarders and speculators, sent out a circular, drawn up by Robespierre himself, to affiliated clubs. They denied all responsibility for a movement they claimed to have opposed with all their power and which they said only their enemies could have provoked. 'The people of Paris can strike down tyrants, but they have nothing to do with grocers. They have better things to do than crush petty hoarders.'

But the bras nus did not want to be dictated to by the Jacobins. Undisturbed, they continued to make demands and to put pressure on the Convention and the Commune. Early in April the Halle-aux-blés section circulated the other sections

with the draft of an address to the Convention calling for a law against hoarders and money-merchants.

On 1 May the pitch rose further. The sections from the Faubourg St Antoine sent a deputation to the bar of the Assembly. Their spokesman, a tapestry-worker called François Musine, said in rough proletarian language:

> 'For a long time you have been promising a general maximum on all basic essentials . . . Always promising, never doing anything about it . . . Make sacrifices; forget that most of you are men of property . . . So far, the whole cost of the revolution has fallen on the poor; it's time the rich and the egoists became republicans as well and looked to their courage instead of their property . . . Here are our proposals for the general good . . . If you don't adopt them we inform you . . . that we shall be in rebellion; there are ten thousand men at the door of this hall'.

From both right and left, from Girondins and Montagnards, came an outcry of indignation.

4 The bras nus call the bourgeoisie to account

Getting no satisfactory response, the people turned to direct action. On 26, 27 and 28 June there were serious disturbances in Paris. As they had in February, the bras nus forced tradesmen to sell their goods, particularly soap, at lower prices. Some citizens from the Poissonière section arrived at the Commune General Council on the 28th and suggested that 20 cases of soap that had just been commandeered should be distributed at 20 sous a pound. The Council unanimously rejected the proposal. Jacques Hébert, deputy *procureur** of the Commune, took the malcontents to task in his paper, *Le Père Duchesne*. '*Eh, foutre*! You spend your time catching flies when there are lions to be fought. Great heavens, are we to make war on sugar and soap merchants?'

* the *procureur* was the first magistrate of the Commune and the deputy *procureur* his assistant.

Throughout July and August there was unrest in the faubourgs. It was not only the high cost of basic essentials that angered the sansculottes, but also their scarcity. Paris was badly off for supplies, there was not enough bread, and there were always queues at the bakeries. At the end of July, with the supply of flour to the capital becoming increasingly precarious, feelings ran high in the sections. One, Beaurepaire, asked all the other sections to appoint two special representatives each, with a view to demanding market records and the disclosure of flour stocks from the Commune. On the 31st, the delegates from each section assembled at the Evêché.

On 6 August there was a stormy session at the Commune General Council. A number of sections had sent deputations and delegates. Protests broke out on all sides. The next day, the 7th, Anaxagoras Chaumette, the *procureur* of the Commune, gave a report to the General Council about the 'indecent scene' that had taken place that morning at the municipal building. 'Men who made too much noise for their stomachs to be really empty' had come to complain and 'insult them'. The same evening at the Jacobin Club, Robespierre complained that someone was stirring up discontent. He accused this mysterious 'someone' of wanting 'the shops to be looted by the people'.

In Paris during the second fortnight in August attacks on the municipality and its handling of the question of supplies grew more and more angry. One after the other, the sections of Gravilliers, Popincourt, l'Observatoire, les Sans-Culottes etc. demanded the arrest and dismissal of the mayor, the *procureur* of the Commune and the supplies administrators. Pache, the mayor, decided it would be wise to make some concessions. He appointed a new supply administration, and issued a long proclamation denouncing 'the people who were always agitating over food supplies', and suggesting that his fellow-citizens should 'make them keep quiet'.

This long period of restiveness finally erupted at the beginning of September. On the first, a delegation from the fraternal society of the Unité section went to the Commune and read out an address in which the sufferings of the hungry sans-

culottes were evoked, and which reminded the audience once again of promises made and not kept. 'Give us a reason to love the revolution . . . No more promises, we want actual results.' The next day, the 2nd, the movement spread through Paris, and reached the workshops, including those of the National Printworks. At dawn on the 4th, workers left their workplaces and assembled, several thousand of them, in the Place Hôtel-de-Ville. There were building workers, particularly masons and iron-workers, workers from the armament factories, printers, etc. For the first time, the proletariat was breaking away from the heterogeneous mass of the sansculottes.

A table was placed in the middle of the crowded square, a committee was formed and the meeting came to order. A petition was drawn up and put before the crowd. A deputation was appointed and went to the municipal authorities. Said its orator, the young printer Christophe Tiger:

> 'Citizens, the difficulty of getting bread from the bakers is the reason why we have come to interrupt your important work for a moment. We have suffered in silence for two months in the hope that it would come to an end, but far from that, the trouble is getting worse day by day. So we have come to ask you to turn your minds to the measures that public safety demands; see to it that the worker who has worked all day and needs to rest at night does not have to stay up half the night and lose half his day's pay in order to try and get bread, often unsuccessfully at that'.

And the orator asked for urgent steps to be taken to ensure that Paris was adequately supplied with bread.

There then began a dialogue between the mayor and the workers, who fired questions at him like 'Is there any food in Paris? If there is, put some on the market. If there is not, tell us why not. The people are roused, the sansculottes who made the revolution offer you their arms, their time and their lives.'

Outside the crowd was growing impatient and it finally forced its way into the building. From the packed hall shouts of 'Bread! Bread!' came from all sides. Overwhelmed, Chaumette ran to the Convention to warn them of what was going

on. The municipal officers moved their session to the main hall, which was soon filled. There were people everywhere, on the benches, in the galleries, on the floor and in the corridors. Discussion started again. The same questions, the same answers, and the constant cries of 'Bread! Bread!' Finally, Chaumette returned from the Convention with a decree, according to which a maximum price for basic essentials would be fixed within eight days. But the workers no longer believed the things the authorities said. 'It is not promises we need', they shouted, 'it's bread. And we need it now!' The following day, the 5th, Tiger was arrested, after once again harassing Chaumette.

5 The enragés, spokesmen of the popular vanguard

The angry speeches of Musine and Tiger are strikingly vivid and powerful; they do not mince their words, they say what they want to say straightforwardly without false humility or false arrogance; they give the impression that they are speaking for a class that is beginning to assert itself against other classes. But what they say still lacks clarity and consistence. They cannot see beyond their immediate preoccupations. Their thought is deeply moulded by fourteen hours grinding work a day, and by hunger. Most often they were content, to use Hébert's phrase, 'to cry out for bread'. Thus when Mayor Pache plunged into explanations for the non-implementation, in most départements, of the law of the maximum on grain, the people's orator (Tiger) interrupted him. 'We are not asking whether the law of the maximum has been implemented or not, only if you'll answer this question: Is there or is there not any bread?'

A few men, close enough to the people to experience their suffering yet not subject to long hours of work every day, whose bourgeois education had given them the necessary eloquence, had to speak for the bras nus in their place. Called 'enragés' by their enemies, Jacques Roux, Théophile Leclerc and Jean Varlet were, in 1793, the direct and true interpreters of the mass movement. They were, as Marx unhesitatingly

wrote, 'the principal representatives of the revolutionary movement'.

And to the names of these three must be added Gracchus Babeuf, for while it is true that he was only partially associated with the enragés and was more their continuator than their comrade-in-arms, he belongs to the same breed of men as Jacques Roux, Leclerc and Varlet, and all four have a number of features in common.

All were well educated. Jacques Roux, the son of an official turned magistrate, came from a well-off family. Ordained priest, he taught philosophy and applied physics in various seminaries, finally becoming chaplain in a chateau. Leclerc was the son of an engineer with the highways department and received a good education. Varlet, a postal clerk, likewise came from a 'good family'. He had been a brilliant pupil at the Collège d'Harcourt. Babeuf, son of an official and himself a quantity surveyor and specialist in feudal law, was extremely well educated.

All four had suffered from life and their fellow men. All four were rebels, refugees from their class. Jacques Roux had been 'oppressed, slandered and persecuted'. His love of justice had 'made him lifelong enemies'. Leclerc, sent to Guadeloupe when he was young, found himself 'the victim of the aristocracy' there. Varlet, who had harangued the crowd from a portable stand in the open air since the revolution began, had had to put up with all kinds of insults from his opponents. Babeuf, who had a family to provide for, had experienced the depths of poverty and attracted a whole pack of enemies.

All four had shared the awful poverty of the masses. Jacques Roux, who lived among poor artisans in the Gravilliers quarter, could issue this accusation to the bourgeois Jacobins:

> 'Deputies of the Mountain, you can never have been up between the third and ninth floors of the houses in this revolutionary city. If you had, you might have been moved by the tears and groans of countless men, women and children, with no bread and no clothes, reduced to this state of misery and misfortune by speculation and food hoarding'.

Leclerc invited the legislators to get up at three in the morning and go down and take their place with the citizens thronging around the bakery doors: 'Three hours spent at a bakery door would do more to make a legislator than four years in the Convention.' Varlet wrote this brief autobiographical account:

> 'Four years in the public square among groups of the people, among the sansculottes and the rags I love have taught me that, naive and free of constraints, the poor devils from the garrets reason more accurately and more boldly than the fine gentlemen, the great orators and the groping scholars; if those want real knowledge they should go and live among the people as I have.'

And Babeuf brusquely upbraided the members of the Assembly thus: 'Delegates! There are no real sansculottes among you. It is plain that hardly any of you has known the heart-rending anguish of want.'

On behalf of the people they were in daily contact with, the enragés raised a protest which went far further than the grievances of the unassuming popular delegations. They dared to attack the bourgeoisie directly. They saw that the war – the bourgeois war, the war for commercial supremacy – was making conditions worse for the bras nus; they realised that inflation was a fraud, bringing the rich profits and ruining the poor. Jacques Roux read a petition at the bar of the Convention on 25 June 1793.

> 'Just because the disloyal deputies [the Girondins] have called down the scourge of a foreign war on to our country, must the rich also declare an even more terrible war on us? We might not get peace for twenty years, and the enormous cost of the war . . . [*Angry mutterings from the left side of the Assembly*] Beware that you are not accused of discrediting paper money, and thus laying the way for bankruptcy.'

And the petition began to seem more like an indictment:

> 'Liberty is a mere illusion when one class of men can allow the other to starve with impunity. Equality is a mere illusion

> when through their economic monopolies the rich hold the power of life and death over their fellow men. The republic is a mere illusion when counter-revolution is taking place day by day through the price of food, which three-quarters of the citizens cannot afford without suffering.'

A few weeks later in his paper he was still more precise and pointed out the source of the massive profits being made at the people's expense; he singled out for attack the war suppliers and those who bought up national lands.

> 'You used just to have a small trade in the street: now you have vast warehouses; you were just a petty clerk in the administration, and now you equip fighting ships; your family used to beg from anybody, but since they've been made responsible for provisioning troops on land and sea, they flaunt their indecent wealth. I'm no longer the least surprised that so many people love the revolution; it has provided them with a specious excuse for amassing a fortune for themselves, patriotically and in the minimum of time.'

Or again, 'The property of the clergy and the national estates have almost all passed into the hands of people who have grown rich on the blood of widows and orphans.'

But the thought of the enragés went no further than that indictment. They did not put forward a consistent programme of opposition to the economic and financial system of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, because they could not. While they saw something of the nature of capitalist exploitation, and denounced it, they did not completely understand its internal mechanism, or try to put an end to it. They merely wanted to limit its effects. They believed, with the people, that if the merchants 'had wanted to sell more cheaply, gold and silver would not have gone so high'. The falling value of paper money and the high cost of living they attributed to the manoeuvres of speculators and hoarders. They did not realise that speculation and hoarding were caused by inflation. They wanted to remedy the disorder by coercive measures which could contain the evil for a while but not cure it. The popular orators had

already envisaged these remedies. The enragés merely formulated them better.

To stop the depreciation, they called for the exchange of assignats against currency to be forbidden. To end rising prices they demanded price controls on all basic essentials, and to alleviate scarcity they advocated the prohibition of their export. To put an end to speculation and hoarding, they demanded the introduction of Terror, with the death penalty for hoarding, the guillotine permanently erected in public squares and 'revolutionary militias' (*armées revolutionnaires*) sent out against the rich.

In the end, this programme was taken over by the Jacobins when they turned to demagogy, and put into practice for several weeks. But private interests tried to dodge the regulations and prohibitions. To outflank them they would have had to introduce more and more coercion instead of relaxing it, which would have meant pushing the measures to their ultimate conclusion and socialising the economy, taking the fortunes of the rich to finance the revolutionary war.

But the enragés were not able to go as far as that. Conditions for a transition to a new form of economy were not yet ripe. Jacques Roux, Leclerc and Varlet did not represent the modern proletariat: the industrialisation which generated it was still embryonic at that period; they spoke for a heterogeneous mass dominated by petit bourgeois and artisans still committed to private property. They contented themselves with demanding measures which would limit the damage done by the new capitalism, but not stop it completely. They only attacked the property of speculators and hoarders, not the existence of property itself.

Jacques Roux raged against the property of bandits and hoarders, but he took 'people and property' under his protection. Varlet demanded solely that 'the wealth amassed at the expense of the public by theft, speculation, monopoly and hoarding should become the property of the state as soon as society acquired evidence of misappropriation'. The boldest measure advocated by the enragés was the establishment of

public shops; they would be set up in cities and market towns, the prices of the goods would be competitive and rich farmers would be forced to bring their wares to the common store. But this idea of collectively organised food distribution only appears as a fleeting glimmer in Jacques Roux's thought.

It was left to Babeuf, much later, to transcend Jacques Roux's thought, although he was already in advance of the enragés, his background making him spokesman for the poor peasants of Picardy. The nationalisation of ecclesiastical estates at the end of 1789 had given them courage. By challenging the legality of the church's property, the bourgeoisie had unintentionally begun to break down the idea of private property. In 1791, Babeuf had realised that once a profane hand had been raised against the sacred right of property, lack of respect for property could become boundless. The *loi agraire* (agrarian law), 'the law the rich fear and which they can see approaching', the law in which he saw the 'corollary of all laws', combined land-sharing with common ownership and inalienability, collective ownership of the soil and individual exploitation of it. And outside the rural framework Babeuf put the whole idea of property in question. He wrote,

> 'Why . . . ascribe a fundamental character . . . to institutions which are only the temporary expression of a continuously developing social movement that is transcending them . . . Evolution goes on and the future remains open . . . If democracy is not frozen like a block of ice, if it stays fluid and changeable, it cannot stop short of practical equality.'

But he did not yet dare risk making that audacious vision the basis of popular agitational work. He could only confide it to a friend. The objective conditions of the period prevented communism from developing or finding a response.

6 The political inconsistency of the enragés

When we turn from the economic sphere to the political, the enragés are just as inconsistent, and we find the same audacity and the same powerlessness. They had an idea of the

way forward but were unable to take their thought to its conclusion. They could not link their economic demands to an ultimate objective which would transcend the confines of the existing system; nor indeed could they direct the mass movement towards a new form of power.

But compared with the Montagnards, hemmed in by parliamentary legalism, they had the undeniable merit that they proclaimed the need for direct action. They also had the courage to attack established reputations, even the highest of all, the one it was most dangerous to hurt. They had the courage to take on that popular idol, Robespierre. Théophile Leclerc ranked him among the 'few insolent despots of public opinion'. Jacques Roux prophetically denounced 'the seemingly soft-spoken men who turn out to be bloodthirsty', 'the resuscitated hypocrites that credulous citizens worship today as if they were gods, not realising that they are imperceptibly laying a yoke upon them, and that they are hiding a rod of iron beneath the roses'. Claire Lacombe's Society of Revolutionary Women even went so far as to call Robespierre 'Monsieur Robespierre', at that time an unforgivable insult.

But that sort of insolence laid the enragés open to attack without in any way strengthening their political position. Robespierre's prestige remained enormous among the sans-culottes. The objective conditions of the time made it impossible for the enragés to pose a new power drawn from popular insurrection in opposition to the power of Robespierre and the Committee of Public Safety. They were torn between contradictory feelings: on the one hand they recognised the need for revolutionary coercion ('I know', wrote Jacques Roux, 'that in the present circumstances, recourse to violent measures is necessary') but on the other they denounced the 'terrifying dictatorship' that they themselves had demanded against the aristocrats and which now, turned against them, blocked their propaganda, took away their means of expression, and not long afterwards, their liberty as well.

The enragés, in short, were useful but inadequate spokesmen for the popular vanguard. They were more mirrors than

leaders, reflecting the relative confusion of the popular vanguard.

A section of this vanguard was overcome by sterile demoralisation. Inflation, the high cost of living and the revolutionary bourgeoisie's indifference towards the suffering of the people began to separate the sansculottes from the Montagnard party. The disillusionment felt by the bras nus who had hitherto followed the Mountain blindly, even giving their blood for it, was beginning to make some of them regret the sacrifices they had made for the revolution. They began to ask themselves whether they had gained anything from the change of regime, even whether they had not been better off under the king.

The enragés themselves occasionally laid themselves open to this kind of criticism from the Jacobins. The idea that the new oppression is even worse than the old crops up fairly often in Jacques Roux's speeches and writings; at least under the Ancien Régime the poor had been treated with some consideration. Attacks on those in power sometimes took a reactionary form. The enragés denounced the Terror and demanded freedom of the press (because the emergency measures were directed against them) at a time when coercive measures were necessary to check the counter-revolution. They thus seemed to be associating themselves with the reactionary opponents of the so-called 'public safety' regime, which they might have avoided if they had managed to ensure that the necessary coercion was truly popular and directed at the aristocracy, rather than controlled by the bourgeoisie with one edge turned against the people. But while the form of some of their actions could be misinterpreted, they did not at any time enter into an agreement with the right-wing enemy.

The Jacobins were engaged in a struggle to the death with the survivors of the Ancien Régime and, after 31 May, with the Girondins, who had gone over to the royalist side: and they were waging an even bitterer war against the enemy abroad; there was thus a natural tendency not to differentiate between left- and right-wing opposition and to see the least opposition from the popular vanguard as the work of a 'fifth

column'. As, in addition, they were relatively ignorant about the mass movement and only had a very embryonic idea of the class struggle that was beginning between bourgeois and bras nus, they were all too willing to accuse any independent initiative by the sansculottes of being inspired by counter-revolution. But it was too much in their interests to clamp down on sansculotte agitation by pinning the 'counter-revolutionary' label on them for the sincerity of their motives to go unquestioned. On more than one occasion they declared the existence of a royalist plot solely in order to smash extreme left agitation more easily.

On 4 September 1793, Robespierre delivered a particularly venomous speech to the Jacobins: 'These villains wanted to butcher the National Convention and the Jacobins and patriots.' If we are to believe Claude Basire, a member of the National Convention, the Committee of Public Safety had found proof of an aristocratic plot. As for Hébert, he said in his paper that he could see Pitt's influence at work. But an important Montagnard and member of the Convention, René Levasseur, refuted those slanders in his *Mémoires*. 'There is no doubt', he wrote, 'that it was the activity of the people which led . . . to the unrest in the capital.'

7 In the wake of the revolutionary bourgeoisie

In short, then, there was no collusion between the popular vanguard and the counter-revolution, at any rate in Paris. That was something that only happened in one or two major provincial towns. At Lyons, Bordeaux, Marseilles and at Toulon the federalist revolt succeeded in drawing in some of the sansculottes, fed up with the depreciation of the assignat and the high cost of living. But it did not happen in Paris, nor in most other places, despite all the factors tending to bring the bras nus into opposition to the bourgeoisie.

The sansculottes of 1793 still only had a hazy perception of the way the bourgeoisie had appropriated the revolution to their own benefit. And their hatred of the counter-revolution

was stronger than their anger at the high cost of living and the scarcity of basic commodities. The perfidiousness of bourgeois rule had not yet become sufficiently clear: on the contrary, they had given proof of their abilities in the struggle against the hated survivors of the Ancien Régime. New conditions and new ideas had not yet provided the perspective of a revolutionary outcome for the still embryonic struggle between bras nus and bourgeois. For the success of the revolution, the masses of the people were prepared to accept huge sacrifices, although they grumbled, sometimes angrily, about it, and they were capable of enduring very severe hardship for it.

But at the same time the most advanced bras nus were bitterly invoking the sacrifices they had consented to and the hardships they had accepted. They were angry at the rising cost of living, the daily increasing shortages, the impunity enjoyed by the monopolists and profiteers, and the inefficiency of the authorities who were unable to enforce the law. They realised that the dictatorship of 'public safety' was not just directed against the aristocrats but also against the popular vanguard. They were growing uneasy about Robespierre's murky behaviour and his over-clever mediations between bourgeois and bras nus. Yet despite this the popular vanguard still swung behind the revolutionary bourgeoisie. To prevent the latent split between bourgeois and bras nus from happening, the Montagnards only had to give the masses something to keep them occupied and they would then be able to detach the sans-culottes from the enragés and bring them back into their sphere of influence.

It was time for the revolutionary bourgeoisie to jettison something. Distressing but necessary. The bourgeoisie are by nature miserly; the smallest concession breaks their heart. But the war forced them to overcome their reluctance in order to make certain, at least for the time being, of the support of the sansculottes. They could not win the war either at home or on the frontiers without the strength and enthusiasm of the bras nus. They could not face extreme dangers on their own, first because they were only a minority in the country, then again

because they were most reluctant to shed their precious blood in rough fighting, and also because they were not unanimous in wanting to go through with their historic task. There were plenty of hangers-back and hesitaters among them. The bourgeois revolution could not triumph unless the bras nus wanted to continue shedding their blood for it.

Marc-Antoine Baudot, a member of the Convention, throws some light on this point in his *Notes historiques.* 'Only the masses could repel the foreign hordes; consequently they had to be roused and given an interest in success. The bourgeoisie is naturally peace-loving, and anyway not sufficiently numerous for such large-scale operations.'

Situated between a popular vanguard that wanted to settle the problems of the bourgeois revolution in a plebeian manner, and a section of the bourgeoisie who out of class hatred preferred to forget about the revolution altogether rather than join hands with the bras nus, the Mountain did not hesitate. 'The Convention', wrote Levasseur, 'had to use the ardour of the poor, activate it, nourish it and encourage it . . . as they were the people prepared to defend the country and establish liberty.'

But they had to pay a price for it. In 1791, Marat only summoned the proletariat to the rescue out of desperation at seeing the revolution blocked and hindered by the stupid egotism of the moderate bourgeoisie. He saw they would have to offer immediate inducements if they were to win the necessary support of the popular masses. He was nothing more than a bourgeois revolutionary – just more precocious and more rational than the others.

In March 1793 Robespierre could only see one way of preventing the disorder that threatened to break out, and that was to 'relieve public poverty'. Jeanbon Saint-André and Elie Lacoste encapsulated the attitude in a brief, striking formulation: 'It is absolutely essential to keep the poor alive if you want them to help you win the revolution'. The bourgeoisie put a brave face on things, and resigned themselves to opening their coffers for a few months. The price had been paid.

2.
A Divorce in the Revolutionary Bourgeoisie

1 The Girondins do not want to pay for the bras nus' support

All the revolutionary bourgeoisie had to do to obtain the necessary support from the sansculottes was to make a few material sacrifices. But first of all they had to cut themselves off from a section of their political establishment. The split between the Montagnards and the popular vanguard was only avoided at the cost of a split among the ruling class themselves. Unless we look carefully at what caused it, its precise character and the conditions in which it occurred, it will be impossible to understand the new course of events which began with the Montagnards' accession to power. Was the fall of the Girondins a class conflict ending in a victorious popular uprising, or just a quarrel between ruling groups that culminated in a palace revolution? Somewhere between these contradictory interpretations, a result of the event's ambiguous nature, lies the truth.

Girondins and Montagnards belonged to the same class. There were no fundamental differences between them. Both were passionate defenders of private property. Robespierre, Danton, Marat, Hébert and Billaud-Varenne proclaimed its intangible, sacred quality on dozens of occasions, as did Brissot, Vergniaud, Roland and Condorcet. Girondins and Montagnards spoke out with equal horror against the *loi agraire*, the common ownership of land. They had the same fear of direct democracy, of the armed intervention of the sovereign people in public life, and of popular federalism; and they shared the same fondness for the parliamentary fiction, legality and political centralism. Both were convinced followers of economic

liberalism. They praised the advantages of freedom over control in the same terms. They were in principle opposed to all forms of regulation and price control.

Yet the conflict between Girondins and Montagnards did not simply erupt over a question of ambition, or pride, or political rivalry. It set, not two classes, but two fractions of the same class against each other; one group, which did not hesitate to ask for help from the bras nus to save the bourgeois revolution, and the other, which preferred to come to terms with the counter-revolution at home and abroad rather than pay the price and – even for a short time – give the sans-culottes their way.

It remains to be seen why one section of the revolutionary bourgeoisie resigned themselves to joining forces with the people, while the other refused. It has been said that the Girondins were more civilised and would have felt an instinctive repugnance for the 'coarse, uneducated' people. But that will not do. Men like Maximilien de Robespierre, de Saint-Just de Richebourg, Barère de Vieuzac, Hérault de Séchelle – to name only a few – with their aristocratic manners and their impeccable dress, were just as far removed from the plebeian temperament as the Brissots and the Vergniauds.

The different attitudes of the Gironde and the Mountain towards the bras nus stem from a difference of interest. Much of the Girondins' support came from the bourgeoisie involved in the trade and export of consumer goods. The main centres of the textile industry – Grenoble, Rouen, Montpellier, Montauban, etc – the Lyons silk trade, and the wholesalers of Bordeaux, Marseilles and Nantes, specialising in trade with the colonies, provided their main backing. The textile industry and exports had done very well in 1791 and again in 1792. They had benefited from the long political pause that separated the 1789 revolution from the revolution of 10 August 1792. Inflation and the fall of the assignat had stimulated production artificially. People with paper money – daily more abundant – hastened to turn it into goods. The manufacturers put up their prices at will. There were no controls to limit their profits.

Labour costs had not yet risen to the same extent as prices. Manufacturers exploited women, children and cripples for derisory wages. Orders came from abroad, attracted by the low prices of the goods. Yet, as we have seen, signs of unrest soon began to appear and the Girondin bourgeoisie thought they could cure it by starting war.

But the war did not come up to their expectations. Belgium and Holland were not conquered. Twice running the French armies were driven back into their own territory, and after 1793 the English blockade made relations between the republic and its distant markets very difficult. Foreign banks closed down their operations in France, paralysing overseas trade. At home, a whole series of factors – the growing scarcity of labour (largely the result of the raising of volunteers), its increasing cost, the shortage of raw materials, the priority granted to war industries, the freezing of exchange that followed the introduction of controls, the fall in consumption due both to the pauperisation of the masses and the abstention of the rich (who either hoarded their capital or exported it), and the disappearance of luxury – were putting the consumer industries in a critical situation. At Lyons in the autumn of 1792, 30,000 silk workers were unemployed. In Rouen in July 1793, the number of workers had fallen from 40,000 to eight or ten thousand. In 1793 most of the capitalists whose money was invested in consumer industries or foreign trade were on the brink of insolvency.

Losing money, their profit margins reduced to nothing, the Girondin bourgeoisie refused to make any concessions to the masses, and stood out against any measures which would have shifted even the slightest part of the burden of war costs from the backs of the workers on to the rich.

The Montagnards by contrast represented the section of the bourgeoisie that benefited enormously from inflation, acquiring national lands, equipping and supplying the army and, later, manufacturing arms. But there was not an impenetrable barrier between the two sections, far from it. As a large part of the bourgeoisie abandoned their old activities and

investments in favour of new sources of profit, they moved from the Gironde to the Mountain. The revolutionary bourgeoisie got enough money for them to allow the crumbs from the feast to go to the bras nus. They resigned themselves to some measure of control as being the only way they could ensure that their profitable operations continued.

It was a different story for the other fraction. Unwilling to bear the cost of the war, the Girondins were hostile to progressive taxation and met plans for forced borrowing with angry filibustering. The Lyons silk manufacturers sparked off the uprising of 29 May in order to avoid paying the six millions in tax demanded by the Lyons municipal authorities, with the full support of the people's representatives in the city. To escape paying the loan, big business in Marseilles moved considerable funds out of the country.

The Girondins, unwilling to agree to any sacrifices, were equally opposed to any measures likely to improve living conditions for the masses. After 10 August, the Commune of Paris had set up large-scale public works schemes to alleviate unemployment. The best the Girondin government could do was reduce wages (26 September 1792) and lay workers off (18 October).

The Girondins were opposed to any measures likely to consolidate the value of paper money. They put up bitter resistance to the plan Cambon put forward which led to the forced currency of the assignat. The prohibition on the sale of gold and silver, and the suspension of foreign exchange operations, jeopardised the monetary speculation which Etienne Clavière, the Gironde's finance minister, and his circle were indulging in.

The Girondins were implacably hostile to any price controls on basic essentials. They stubbornly maintained that free competition was the sovereign cure for all ills. Jacques Brissot blamed the high cost of living on 'the anarchists' constant ranting against property owners and merchants' which stopped the circulation of grain. One of the first acts of the federalist rebels, in the localities where they seized power, was to end the maximum on cereals.

2 Sooner stop the revolution

Putting their own immediate interests before the higher interests of their class, the Girondins were opposed to any emergency economic measures and any of the other radical steps which were all that could give at least partial satisfaction to the people. They were prepared to stop the revolution sooner than buy the co-operation of the bras nus.

In a revolution, to stop means to go backwards. And the Girondins, tired of the revolution, slipped almost imperceptibly into the arms of the royalists. Having turned their backs on the revolution, they could no longer regard the expropriation of the clergy's and émigrés' property as permanent. So they were most unwilling to withdraw their capital from trade and invest it in national property, and rejected that easy way of making up their commercial losses when Cambon obligingly offered it them. It was on this issue perhaps that the Girondin interests clashed most violently with those of the Montagnard bourgeoisie. The sale of national property was in fact the supreme, the central preoccupation of the revolutionary bourgeoisie.

All Cambon's financial policies, as well as his private life, were based on the national estates he and his family had been prominent in buying up. It is significant that Cambon was one of the Montagnards most fiercely attacked by the Girondins before they faded from the scene. In return, Cambon accused the predominantly Girondin administrations in the départements of systematically sabotaging the sale of national property, and asserted that some of the administrations were giving assistance to Pitt.

While they were moving closer and closer to counter-revolution in France, the Girondins were making overtures towards a compromise settlement abroad. They had been in favour of the war, but they had wanted it to be a quick, offensive one. In the event, however, it was a defensive war, with France invaded and cut off from the rest of the world, and a revolutionary war fired by the energy of the ordinary people. Hence their volte face. If we were to trace a graph of their

patriotism we would see that while the French armies invaded Belgium and won victories that allowed them to anticipate rich pickings, they supported the war. But as soon as the wind of defeat began to blow, and as soon as the sansculottes of the Paris faubourgs took to the streets protesting against treason and demanding measures of public safety, they suddenly became defeatists.

Dumouriez was routed and had to beat a hasty retreat from Belgium. Once again, France was threatened with invasion. In Paris, the atmosphere was like September 1792 again. The faubourgs were on the move, demanding terror measures and measures of public safety.

The sections called for the setting up of a revolutionary criminal tribunal, that would pass judgement without appeal or reprieve. The Convention transformed this imperious demand into a decree, and two days later, on the 10th, Robespierre demanded a powerful government to deal with the new situation; on 21 March, with the news of defeat at Neerwinden, the Assembly decreed, under pressure from the popular vanguard, that each commune should set up a *comité de surveillance*, composed of twelve sansculottes.

The Girondins were terrified by the revolutionary character the war was adopting, and they took soundings with the British government about peace. On 2 April, Dumouriez impulsively asked his soldiers to march on Paris 'to put an end to the bloody anarchy that reigns there' and 'purge France of murderers and agitators'. With the Austrian general the Duke of Coburg he planned to smash the revolutionary Commune, dissolve the Jacobin Club, hold new elections and restore the monarchy. But nobody followed him and, cut off from his army, he went over to the enemy alone, or very nearly so.

The general was just ambitious and his aims were primarily personal ones. But if his attempt had been successful, the Girondins would have welcomed him as a saviour. Anyway, Dumouriez himself had made sure they were compromised, and from then on the Girondins were branded with the stigma of appearing to have been in league with Dumouriez, a theme

which Robespierre used as the basis of a cunning speech on 3 April.

To sum up, an important section of the bourgeoisie of 1793 betrayed the general interests of the bourgeois revolution by putting their personal interests first. The other section, with its interests tied to continuing the war and the revolution resigned themselves to the break. Out of two potential splits, with the Gironde or with the bras nus, they had of necessity to choose the former. After some hesitancy and beating about the bush they decided to remove the Girondin leaders from power.

3 The Mountain faces two dangers

It was not an easy operation to carry out as the Mountain was caught between two fires, between the Girondin bourgeoisie and the sansculottes. They risked rousing the reactionary majority of the country against them. The Gironde had considerable forces at their disposal. Almost all the press and almost all the administrations in the départements were on their side, as well as the greater part of the population in those départements where there was no immediate danger from the war. They had support within the army, too, and in the ministeries, and even in Paris in the sections and National Guard of the rich quarters.

The Girondin départements were blackmailing the Mountain continuously with the threat of civil war. They gave in: no precipitation and no insurrection was their watchword. They were afraid that if they allowed the people to intervene in this quarrel between bourgeois they might let loose the whole torrent of popular forces. Insurrection in Paris was no mere spectre of the imagination for them, it was a living reality. Memories of the previous summer still haunted them. The last thing they wanted was to revive that fearful second power, the extra-legal assembly of section delegates which on 10 August 1792 had driven out the legal Commune and installed itself there instead. It had set itself up against the

Assembly, an arrogant rival, and it had taken considerable effort to bring them back into line.

The same memories were still fresh in the minds of the sansculottes. The people had learned that the sections were the natural organs of popular insurrection. Quite separately from the official meetings called by the Hôtel de Ville one section would convene a general meeting of delegates from the other sections (usually held in the Electoral Club's premises at the Evêché). Thus an insurrectionary committee was formed which in the event of victory would replace the usual municipal authority and dictate its wishes to the parliamentary Assembly.

The fears of the Montagnard bourgeoisie were well-founded. They received a first confirmation on 10 March 1793. That day there was an unsuccessful attempt to repeat the coup of 10 August, this time against the Gironde. On the night of the 9th, agitators, including Jean Varlet the enragé, got several sections to agree an address, in which sections were asked to send delegates for the purpose of forming an insurrectionary committee. They called for the gates to be shut and the tocsin to be rung. At the head of a large crowd, they took their address to the General Council of the Commune. But the whole affair proved abortive. They were not even given a hearing.

But it was only a partial defeat. The Montagnards knew that if they urged the people to fundamental opposition to the Gironde they would be launching an insurrection, which this time they were afraid they might not be able to control and lead back into legal channels.

The Mountain had to face another problem as well. The Girondin leaders were all representatives of the people, members of the Convention. How were they to remove a section of the Assembly without seriously interfering with national sovereignty and trampling underfoot the very principles the revolution was founded on, the principle the bourgeoisie had invoked to overthrow the Ancien Régime? The problem was made even more delicate as the Gironde on the one hand, and the popular vanguard on the other had each in their own way

appropriated the idea of national sovereignty and were using it against the Mountain. Finding a way out of this impasse required Robespierre's subtle ingenuity, his unique talent for doing a balancing act and his gift for adapting the absoluteness of ideas to fit the always relative needs of public action.

Although he was ready to break with the leaders, he wanted to avoid a break with the Girondin majority in the country. He hoped to isolate the leaders from the rest of the troops and finally rally the class (in which, in fact, he was largely successful). So he had to avoid anything that might look like force. And that is why he set so much store by keeping the Convention, despite its reactionary composition. It was thanks to being able to shelter behind it that he was able to maintain the appearance of legality. A vote of the Assembly, obtained by a wise combination of persuasion and intimidation, would give all power to his party and to himself.

There was another no less pressing reason for Robespierre to cling on to the parliamentary fiction. He not only had to beware of the right, but of the left as well; he had to protect himself against the popular vanguard. If he interfered with an Assembly that was supposed to exercise the sovereignty of the people by delegation, he would be slipping towards the abyss of direct democracy, he would be encouraging the armed people to exercise their sovereignty, and he would be dealing the last blow to the fragile construct built up by the bourgeois philosophers of the eighteenth century to distract the people from that mortal temptation. As far as he was concerned it was for the Convention, not the people, to decide questions of state.

The Montagnards had to find a way out of a dilemma: they could not interfere with the sovereignty of the Convention without opening the way to popular insurrection and direct democracy; but they could not allow the Girondins to go on paralysing the revolution and the war; and they could not get rid of the Girondins except with the help of the bras nus.

4 A subtle process: rousing the popular vanguard and keeping them under control

So the Mountain had no choice but to introduce some – limited – coercion. They could not avoid appealing to the people for support, but they put it in a vigorously circumscribed form, the people having to restrict themselves to putting pressure on the Assembly. The surgical operation was inevitable but it had to be done from within. The sole purpose of the people's intervention was to give the Convention the courage to use the lancet on itself. For it was the Convention that, with proper respect for all the legal forms, had to purge itself of its corrupt members. The fiction of parliament, the indispensable defence against direct democracy, was not to come to the slightest harm. In short, they had to play with uncontrollable and unpredictable forces; they had to rouse the popular vanguard and restrain them at the same time. Less skilful people would have got their fingers burnt in the process.

In order to organise popular pressure, they did not jib at using the extra-legal organs which had unleashed the movements of 10 August 1792 and 10 March 1793. It was risky, but there was no other way of doing it. They had to give carte blanche to one of the unofficial meetings of section delegates convened independently of the official Commune.

On 28 March, at the news that Dumouriez was proposing to march on Paris, twenty-seven sections, on the initiative of Varlet and a few others, spontaneously appointed special delegates or commissioners who met at the Evêché and took the title of 'Central assembly of public safety and correspondence with all the départements of the republic for the protection of the people'. At first, the Montagnard bourgeoisie was seized with panic and retreated in the face of this new manifestation of the spectre of direct democracy. Speaking to the Jacobins, Marat called the initiative 'unpatriotic' and had a citizen arrested who came to report to the Society about it. Only Robespierre was bold enough to see the advantage they could gain from the initiative.

A few days later came the news of Dumouriez's treachery, and it sealed the alliance between the Mountain and the popular vanguard against the Girondins. On 15 April a majority of the sections signed a petition demanding the recall of twenty-two Girondin deputies 'guilty of the crime of disloyalty to the sovereign people'. But a campaign of petitions was not enough to persuade the Assembly to get rid of the Girondin leaders. It required more serious organisation of popular pressure. The bras nus had to be set on the offensive; like it or not, they had to use the extra-legal organs the popular vanguard recognised as their own. On 5 May the *Contrat social* section invited the forty-eight sections to elect delegates to form a 'Central Revolutionary Committee'. The meeting took place on the 12th and brought together eighty members.

The unofficial assembly at the Evêché gave the nascent movement an independent subversive identity, calculated to inspire the bras nus with confidence. But that was not its only advantage. It allowed the Jacobins to avoid compromising themselves and to keep up every appearance of legality. They only operated behind the scenes; they left the movement's initiatives with the non-accountable committees, with no official sanction, which they manoeuvred and restrained from the wings.

The official Commune, dominated by the Jacobins, behaved as if butter would not melt in their mouths. On 20 May, during a meeting of section commissioners that the police administration had called at the town hall, some very violent proposals were formulated under enragé influence. They demanded not only the arrest of the Girondin leaders but also their death. Jean Pache, the mayor, ruled that the proposals should be regarded as null and void. Thanks to the existence of the Evêché, they had saved face.

The Commune was also covering up the secret activity of the Central Revolutionary Committee. On 30 May, on the eve of the coup d'état, the *procureur syndic*, Anaxagoras Chaumette [who was responsible for enforcing the laws], appeared before the Committee of Public Safety and told them that Paris would be steady and well-behaved, order would be maintained,

and national representation would always be respected and inviolable. As for the Jacobins, they calculated their moves carefully, weighed their words and took great care that every step they took was dressed up in a legal form. They purposely gave no precise orders. The Commune escaped. The Jacobins said nothing. It was up to the Evêché to exercise the final pressure on the Convention.

5 How the enragés were 'had'

The game involved risks. Might not the popular vanguard get carried away and go beyond the appointed limits? Were not the enragés, urged on so far by the Jacobins, likely to escape from their guardians? There were signs that these fears might not be groundless. The enragés fanned the flames. Théophile Leclerc spoke at the Jacobin Club on the 13th and called for 'violent measures' against the Girondins which Robespierre was quick to oppose. And Varlet put 'most inflammatory proposals' to the Cordeliers on the 22nd.

At the last moment, on the very eve of the crisis, Robespierre realised that the official, legal bodies had to take the stage again or risk being outflanked. He let the directory of the département convene an official meeting of all the département authorities, the Commune and the sections on the morning of the 31st.

The Evêché did not waste any time either. The meeting in session there took steps to prepare for the insurrection. They shut the gates of the city and, on their own authority, appointed Hanriot commander of the armed forces of Paris. Finally, they summoned the people of Paris to insurrection the following day. At three in the morning on the 31st the tocsin was rung from Notre Dame.

The official leaders of the Commune were torn between two contradictory feelings. They were still grateful to the Evêché for organising popular pressure in the agreed way, behind the scenes and in its place. But they were also beginning to be worried by the enragés' influence on the insurrectionary

committee. However, Robespierre and the Montagnard leaders had not completely lost control over events. They still had one card up their sleeve. They had played a trick on the Girondins, and now it was the turn of the enragés.

To achieve that, they put forward and used an emissary. He was the magistrate Claude Dobsen, whom the Gironde had conveniently made into a martyr; he had been arrested but had been freed as a result of popular pressure. Dobsen was therefore ideal for president of the insurrectionary committee. Robespierre and Pache gave him the job of keeping the enragés under control.

Dobsen was the guiding force in the Section de la Cité, which included the Evêché and which had always been in the forefront of revolutionary activity, and he was progressive enough to win the complete trust of the popular vanguard. But he also had close links with the other side. He came from a good bourgeois background. One of his close relatives was a former tax-farmer-general. Influenced by a German masonic sect, the Illuminati of Bavaria, he had founded lodges in Champagne before the revolution, and formed lasting friendships with moderate parliamentarians. In 1791 he set up another masonic society, the *Cercle social,* with a Girondin, Abbé Claude Fauchet. He rose to the highest offices in his masonic order, and these distinguished secret positions assured him of valuable support in all political spheres. He was the perfect go-between.

One interesting point: the insurrectionary committee started off with nine members. But at the last moment a tenth was added and, what is more, the newcomer succeeded in grabbing the presidency. It was Dobsen. Robespierre and the Montagnards owed the control of the popular insurrection of 31 May very largely to him.

Shortly before midnight on the 30th, Varlet won a victory on the insurrectionary committee. He successfully moved that all authority should be suspended and even that Pache, the mayor, should be arrested. But then Dobsen come on to the scene and proposed that after being suspended the General

Council of the Commune should be reinstated. At the Hôtel de Ville, the three authorities – the insurrectionary committee, the official Commune and the commissioners convened by the département directory – came together to form a central revolutionary committee of twenty-five members. The extra-legal power was absorbed into the official bodies. The insurrection was safely channelled.

For those critical moments, Dobsen was the thin thread that bound the popular vanguard to the revolutionary bourgeoisie. The enragés realised immediately that he had been manipulating them, and made their anger known. In a pamphlet published after the 9th of Thermidor, Varlet recalled the day they had been swindled: all the pseudo-insurgents had done was replace Brissot with Robespierre.

From then on the enragés were no more than a powerless minority on the central revolutionary committee. The president, Dobsen, the mayor, Pache, Chaumette the *procureur* of the Commune, and Hébert the deputy *procureur* were united against them. When a citizen offered to put himself at the head of the Paris battalions and march on the Convention, the Council expressed 'their complete outrage, their utter horror at such a proposal'. Pache declared that 'the people of Paris can distinguish between their true friends and the fools and fanatics who try to mislead them and embroil them in misconceived schemes'. Dobsen prevented the young leftist Sébastien de Lacroix from developing 'certain very violent schemes' and forced him to stop speaking. When Sébastien de Lacroix was brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal in April 1794 he was accused, with other extremists, as 'a crime, that on 31 May he almost went beyond the limit at which the revolution stopped'.

When a member demanded that the Girondin leaders should be arrested, Chaumette 'rose indignantly against the proposition'. If anybody still dared to reopen the subject he would denounce them to the people. To put an end to it, a majority member proposed 'to put up on the door of the chamber a formal censure of any proposition likely to harm

national representation'. The central revolutionary committee, by Chaumette's own admission, had used every means in its power to 'moderate the volcanic activity' of the popular vanguard.

The revolutionary bourgeoisie were not just scared that the enragés might make the Commune take 'exaggerated' measures on the political level; they were well aware that economic demands were at the heart of the great wave of popular feeling, and above all they were afraid that under cover of the struggle against the Girondins the social question might suddenly be posed. So they manoeuvred Council members into promising to respect property. After which a speaker from the Commune was hurriedly sent to repeat the same pledge to the Convention.

6 Civil war narrowly averted

But the danger of civil war was not averted yet. The alarm-gun, fired with the Commune's consent during the day, had brought the bras nus out into the faubourgs, heading for the Convention, while the bourgeois sections dominated by the Girondins went to the aid of the Assembly. Thirty or forty thousand men belonging to the two opposing parties were massed round the Tuileries. Was this the beginning of civil war? Far from it. They fell into each other's arms and fraternised.

Yet the majority of the Convention still turned a deaf ear. A carefully calculated amount of popular pressure was still needed to make them decide themselves to eliminate the Girondin leaders. How was this pressure to be reconciled with respect for national representation? There were moments when the parliamentary fiction hung by a thread, and when the Jacobins themselves were caught up and confused by the contradictions of the situation.

The Mountain was forced to play a double game: they had to make the Convention sensitive to the pressure of the crowd and they also had to protect the Convention from the

crowd. On the 31st, Dobsen, as well as marching to the Assembly with the mass of the people, gave instructions to a police commissioner to watch over the Girondin leaders and make sure no harm came to them.

After beating about the bush for two days, the Convention had still not decided to vote the arrest of the Girondin leaders. There was no alternative but to resort to stronger measures. The tocsin was rung again in the evening of 1 June and the next day there was a huge crowd, estimated at about 100,000, around the Assembly. The whole of Paris had come out on to the streets. Would the Montagnards be able to continue their subtle game? Would not the slender thread that kept the insurrection on the bounds of legality break at the last moment? Right up to their end, their virtuosity never failed them. The Convention was surrounded by battalions of the National Guard, handpicked and entirely reliable: five or six thousand men. This body of picked men was enough to intimidate the Assembly, prevent the Girondins from fleeing and the sections from the rich quarters from giving any assistance. At the same time it protected the Convention from any possible excesses on the part of the people.

What happened next was like a comic play. Hanriot, the commander of the National Guard, ordered his men not to let any deputy leave the Assembly. The majority of the Convention wanted to force their way past. They came into the Tuileries courtyard and tried to go out by the big gate on the Place du Carrousel. The sight of the Convention caused an irresistible movement; armed sansculottes blocked the way of the people's representatives and shouted to them to stay in their places until they had voted the decree they were waiting for. The contradictions in the bras nus' attitudes and feelings towards the Convention never appeared more clearly. The sansculottes were hesitating between their respect for the bourgeois parliament and their distrust of it. A gunner shouted at a deputy, Jean-François Lacroix, who was complaining about being 'degraded' and 'insulted', 'You'd like us to insult you, you wretch, but we shan't give you the pleasure'. Hanriot

shouted theatrically, 'To arms, gunners, stand by your cannon!'

The deputies had to turn back. They retraced their steps to the chamber and, ready at last to come to terms, voted the arrest of twenty-nine Girondin deputies. It had worked. Barère, speaking for the Committee of Public Safety which tried to play a mediating role between the Gironde and the Mountain, had brought up the illegality of the measures. But Georges Couthon, Robespierre's spokesman, saved face in language worthy of Tartuffe: 'Citizens, all members of the Convention may now be doubly sure of their liberty . . . You know now that you can be free in your deliberations.'

There was, however, still a risk that the rest of the country would not be so convinced that everything had happened correctly. A posteriori, it was thought necessary to retouch the event to give it the full air of legality. Pache arrived at the Committee of Public Safety on 3 June, flanked by two members of the revolutionary committee and Hanriot's second-in-command. These citizens declared that they had used all the means at their disposal the day before to prevent any confusion or disorder, and that the citizens had unanimously demonstrated a commitment to watch over the safety of national representation, the trust lodged in the city of Paris.

As the event receded, imaginations got to work. On 14 June, the Jacobin Club sent this account to its affiliated societies.

> 'The citizens of Paris, seeing in national representation the safety of their country, formed a rampart around the people's representatives with their bodies and their bayonets. The deputies have never been freer. Tired after a long session, they came out to fraternise with the people.'

7 The second power neutralised

Despite the efforts to idealise the coup after it had happened, the famous *journée* was still too much like 6 December 1648, when Cromwell's plebeian army surrounded the Palace of Westminster and refused to allow the presbyterian leaders

in, 143 of whom were expelled from parliament and arrested.

This precedent bothered the Convention. The Mountain would have been happy to dismiss the Girondins from power by a quiet vote in the Convention. They would willingly have dispensed with the business of clearing the decks for action, the tocsin calling people to insurrection twice in succession, 100,000 sansculottes let loose in the streets, and the brutal orders of the plebeian Hanriot.

But it was the Girondins who were responsible for making the division in the bourgeoisie into a public issue, when it could all have been settled within four walls. From the very start of the quarrel they constantly tried to provoke the split. They had, very clumsily, attacked all the men who sensed the danger of a split in the bourgeoisie and set about acting as mediators between them and the Mountain. They drove people like Cambon, Lindet and Danton to extremes. It was they who provoked the sansculotte intervention, who waved the red flag in front of the bull.

They opened hostilities on 13 April by sending Marat to the Revolutionary Tribunal. On 24–26 May, by order of the Commission of Twelve [a commission of inquiry composed entirely of Girondins], they had the leaders of the official Commune, as well as those of the Evêché, arrested – men like Hébert, Dobsen and Varlet. On the 25th, Henri Isnard delivered their anathema on revolutionary Paris. 'If harm should ever come to national representation, I declare in the name of all France, Paris would be reduced to nothing. It would not be long before people had to search the banks of the Seine for evidence that Paris ever existed.' And, most important of all, while the Jacobins still hesitated to make the break, the Girondins sparked off a counter-revolutionary uprising at Lyons, on the 29th, risking involving themselves in civil war. When the news reached Paris on 2 June it contributed substantially to reviving the Mountain's flagging energy.

Having won the vote in the Convention and removed the Girondin leaders from the political scene, the Montagnards wanted to do their utmost to keep the damage down to a

minimum, and direct the torrent of popular feeling back to its proper channel. Above all they had to get rid of the Evêché. Dobsen had already done something towards that by amalgamating the insurrectionary committee with the official authorities. But they still had to expel the enragés from the unified Assembly. The Girondin leaders had hardly been arrested before the Committee of Public Safety ordered the Commune to make a complete change in the central revolutionary committee to get rid of 'dangerous elements'.

The second power was sold for a mess of pottage. They agreed to dissolve on condition the bras nus who had taken arms during the three *journées* received a few sous' compensation, and the members of the insurrectionary committee were given a sinecure: a *comité de surveillance* for the département of Paris was created for them, and given the job of maintaining political order in the city and suburbs under the direction and on the payroll of the Committee of Public Safety.

The enragés were forced back everywhere, and reduced to silence. On 4 June, Leclerc appeared at the Commune General Council and told them they were wrong to think the insurrection was over. 'Are all the suspects in prison? I doubt it . . . Why are you so slow to get rid of your enemies? Why are you so frightened of shedding a few drops of blood?' He was interrupted by 'universal censure' and had to leave the rostrum. The president had to restore order. Hébert demanded 'that any man proposing bloodshed should be regarded as a bad citizen'. Leclerc was arrested and treated as a suspect, undergoing lengthy interrogation.

The conciliators, Cambon, Barère, Lindet and Danton, who made up the Committee of Public Safety, wanted to go even further down the path of reaction. Their draft decree of 6 June called for Hanriot, the victor of 2 June, to be relieved of his job as commander of the National Guard. Robespierre and the majority of Montagnards did not dare go as far as that and the decree was rejected on the 8th. But the fact that the text could even be tabled at the Assembly is enough to show what the prevailing atmosphere was like.

The fact that the Girondin leaders were finally put to death gave 31 May, after the event, an air of violent purgation. But their execution did not take place until months later; mixed up with the enormous numbers of victims of the Terror, they were not sent to the scaffold until the end of October 1793, some not until June 1794. After their arrest on 2 June, in fact, they were treated very well. They were simply put under house arrest, watched over by a gendarme. Twenty of them took advantage of the situation to flee, and went to rouse the départements against Paris. The enragés were bitterly angry at the Montagnards' lenience. Leclerc wrote, 'In revolution, half-measures do not save the state, they bring about its downfall.'

Etienne Clavière and Pierre Lebrun, two Girondin ministers, were both included in the decree of arrest. They stayed in their jobs for several weeks. Even though he was a prisoner, Lebrun continued to draft and sign instructions to the republic's agents abroad. When the Committee needed to discuss things with him, they sent for him and his gendarme. This comedy went on until 21 June.

On 8 July, Saint-Just, speaking for Robespierre, asked the Convention, in a report, for mercy for fourteen of the arrested deputies. It was not only Girondin deputies that were treated well after 31 May, either; administrations of the départements, one of the main strengths of the Gironde, carried on working and were able to incite the people under them against the central government. Most of them were not thoroughly purged until September or October.

The majority of the Girondin deputies were not included in the proscription of 2 June. On the 6th, 75 of them protested against the arrest of the 29. They were not even challenged. Arrested only in October when the wave of Terror was breaking, they were saved from the guillotine by Robespierre. After the 9th of Thermidor they were officially reinstated by the Convention. It was a significant atonement: the bourgeoisie felt a kind of remorse at having been forced to sacrifice a section of themselves.

8 But the struggle goes on

The day after the event, the popular vanguard realised they had been fooled. At the beginning of June, the Nogent-le-Rotrou section wrote to the Paris Jacobins,

> 'We all admire, friends and brothers, this latest revolution that has happened under your eyes . . . But do you think it has gone far enough? . . . Let us therefore unite against the stupid and cruel bourgeois aristocracy; let us enlighten them, if possible, and tell them that if the influence of reason, the force of principle, and moral insurrections are not enough to turn them from their errors or conquer their apathy, then the people, the terrible class of sansculottes, will have to resort to other, quicker, more effective measures'.

Despite all the objective factors that ensured that the sansculottes followed in the path of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, and despite all the tricks of Robespierre and the Jacobin leaders, the struggle went on. Not so much between Girondins and Montagnards, as between bourgeois and bras nus.

3.
Providing Support for the Poor

1 From the Gironde to the Mountain

The homogeneity of the revolutionary bourgeoisie was only momentarily threatened. The great majority of the property-owners who had supported the Gironde came over to the Mountain. This can be seen at the parliamentary level: the uncommitted mass in the Assembly [known as the 'Marsh' or 'Plain'], numerically far more important than the Mountain and the Gironde put together, voted with the Girondins up until 31 May. From then on, the five hundred-odd timid, conservative deputies (the sansculottes called them 'toads of the Marsh') fell into step with the Montagnards.

Fear was not the principal motive for the change. Nor can their adherence to the Mountain be explained by the lavish assurances it offered the rich, the political overtures it made to them, or by the dramatic adoption of a constitution botched together in the space of a few days. They were won over on the basis of self-interest. First, and in a general way, the Montagnards succeeded in giving them an interest in the success of the bourgeois revolution. They stressed to them that if they were to consolidate the gains they had won from the Ancien Régime, the war had to be continued to the end, and counter-revolution had to be completely crushed at home and abroad.

Hébert wrote in *Le Père Duchesne*: 'Hoarders and monopolists of Paris, there is only one decision you can take, and that is to join fearlessly with the sansculottes; among them you will have nothing to fear, and your property will be secure.' These words were all the more reassuring to the property-

owners because they were sincere, and that sincerity had been tested: hadn't the insurgents of 31 May been scrupulously respectful of property?

More than anything else, though, the Montagnards succeeded in making the offer the Gironde had rebuffed acceptable to a large number of bourgeois. They involved them in a share of the loot; they held out the lure of national lands and war profits. The Mountain's easy victory, the sudden isolation of the Gironde when they had so recently had the support of the majority of the country, and the by-and-large relatively rapid defeat of the so-called federalist revolt, can all be explained thus: a substantial section of the bourgeoisie with interests in consumer industries and commerce changed their position. They discovered new sources of profit under the Public Safety regime, and rebuilt their fortunes by acquiring national lands, supplying the armed forces and manufacturing war equipment.

Having won the support of a large part of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie, the Montagnards managed to get them to agree that they needed to put down some sort of insurance on their new sources of profit. They persuaded them to accept a few sacrifices in aid of the bras nus. They reassured them in advance by telling them that the sacrifices would be limited and temporary. Limited because the revolutionary bourgeoisie did not intend to bear more than a small fraction of the cost of the war, nor to provide more than very incomplete relief of the sansculottes' poverty; and temporary because they had decided not to pay for their co-operation longer than was strictly necessary.

The distress of the bras nus was to be alleviated in several ways. The first, dependent, if one may say so, on charity, consisted of the distribution of aid in cash and kind; another, more financial, consisted in influencing the money supply, limiting its depreciation in order to give it a steady value; and the third was economic and meant directly influencing prices and stopping their uncontrolled rise. The three measures were introduced simultaneously.

2 Measures of revolutionary charity

The measures of revolutionary charity did not affect the actual economic and financial mechanisms of the system. They did not change the general distribution of national income. They only involved partial and occasional claims on the wealth of the well-to-do. The Montagnard bourgeoisie played the role of almoner, a small sacrifice that gave them the right to keep their property and saved them from the anger of the people.

To relieve the most crying misery, where the dangers of repercussion were greatest, the local authorities were empowered to levy taxes from the rich. On 4 February 1793 the Paris Commune decided to levy a special tax of four millions on the rich, and on the 7th they received the Convention's approval. Similarly, the département of l'Hérault decided to compensate the citizens selected for military service by means of a tax on the rich, and on 13 May that initiative was approved by the Convention and put forward as an example. The Paris Commune decided on 5 May, followed by Lyons on the 14th, to levy taxes of 12 and 15 millions respectively on the rich. In the Loiret, the deputy Jacques Laplanche taxed the property-owners at 12, 20, 30 and even 50 thousand livres.

In the Nièvres, Joseph Fouché issued a decree on 19 September abolishing begging and authorising the districts to levy a tax on the rich proportionate to the number of poor. At Moulins on 8 October he authorised the *comités de surveillance* 'to raise all the necessary money from the rich in proportion to their wealth and their lack of patriotism'. Deputy Claude Javogues made a similar decree in the Loire. These deputies had no intentions of overthrowing the social order. They were trying to achieve one well-defined aim, to win the war, and in order to do that to win the temporary goodwill of the sansculottes.

Fears of a split between bourgeoisie and bras nus were strongest in the capital, and the regime was therefore particularly concerned with the welfare of the Parisians, and gave them cheap bread. From the end of 1792 the Commune and

the National Treasury made up the deficit that resulted from pegging the price of bread at three sous.

But the revolutionary bourgeoisie could not think of extending this generosity to the rest of France. Two members of the Convention insisted that the price of bread should be fixed at three sous throughout the republic. Both times the spokesmen of the property-owners opposed it.

In addition, the regime made all sorts of compensation payments to the Paris sansculottes. But the amounts allocated were not enough to achieve any broad and lasting reduction in the poverty of the bras nus. They were piecemeal, and they only benefited a part of the popular vanguard. The Montagnard bourgeoisie might well have preferred to limit themselves to distributing alms, and would gladly have dispensed with interfering with the monetary system and price mechanisms and thus striking a blow against individual liberty and property; but the gravity of the situation brought about by the high cost of living and the scarcity of essentials forced them to adopt more radical measures.

3 Supporting the assignat: the liberal solution

Whatever it might cost, they had to maintain the purchasing power of the assignat. How were they to control the currency? There were two possible methods; the liberal solution and the authoritarian solution. They could, by a number of classic financial measures, reduce the quantity of assignats in circulation. They could also use draconian measures, Terror, to give paper money an artificial value. The Montagnards used each of them in turn. But the liberal method was frustrated by the resistance from the property-owners, and they had no choice but to opt for the authoritarian way.

The classical solution had been advocated by the Girondins themselves. Saint-Just, still imbued with the sacred principles of liberal economics that he had learned at college, espoused it. When it was a matter of sending supporters of the Ancien Régime, and even 'suspects' [those suspected of being

enemies of the state] to the guillotine, he was a very forceful young man; but he was much softer when it came to getting money out of the rich property-owners.

And Cambon, who had supreme control over all finances, was against any tax on war profits. While the war and the maximum [the law that fixed prices on basic essentials] meant losses for the consumer industries, the capitalists more than made up for it on war supplies and by buying national lands. It would not have been difficult to make them disgorge part of their immense profits.

Unwilling to reduce circulation by a massive tax on wealth, the Montagnard bourgeoisie made do with inadequate palliatives. Some assignats were returned and destroyed, but not as many as there were new issues. One practical and effective way they might have reduced circulation would have been to put an end to the scandal of offering the purchasers of national lands the option of paying off their debt in twelve annual instalments. But that arrangement meant that the revolutionary bourgeoisie had plenty of capital they could use for speculation, and they made sure it was not interfered with.

In order to encourage the recalcitrant wealthy to bring their assignats to the Treasury, either in settlement of their tax arrears or to buy national lands, Cambon called in all assignats over a hundred livres that bore the king's head. These assignats, converted into bearer stocks, could be used for a fixed period either in payment of tax or for buying national estates. But the holders manoeuvred, protested and obtained extensions and exemptions so effectively that the operation brought the Treasury no more than half a billion.

Another method which might have been effective, had it not been for the property-owners' obstructiveness, was the forced loan. Cambon confidently expected it to pay off. But the loan met with all sorts of vicissitudes, and in the form finally adopted was not rigorous enough. It only had to be paid once, and was ultimately repayable in national lands. Or it could be escaped by subscribing to a voluntary loan. Nevertheless, the property-owners sabotaged it just as they had abstained from

subscribing to the voluntary loan. The local administrations, where they were dominant, put as many obstacles in its way as they could.

Although Cambon was accommodating when it was a matter of making the rich pay, he showed himself to be intransigent where poorer people were concerned. Even though people on small fixed incomes were already hard hit by the monetary depreciation that devalued their incomes, he made them carry the entire brunt of his deflationary policy. The decree of 24 August–13 September 1793, instituting the Great Book of the Public Debt (*Grand Livre*) meant its unification, conversion and reduction. But the cost of the saving was carried by the small investors: people with unearned income of less than fifty livres – the great majority – did not have the right to Treasury scrip and were paid in assignats depreciated by 60 per cent.

After he had attacked shareholders, Cambon took on the people with life annuities and cut the rate savagely, which resulted in a substantial reduction in annual income for a group that was already badly off.

Altogether, the various attempts to cut circulation brought the Treasury back a fairly derisory quantity of assignats. And so the liberal solution turned out to be almost unworkable. It was not through measures of that sort that they would be able to achieve an effective influence on the cost of living.

4 Supporting the assignat: the authoritarian solution

Whether they liked it or not, the Montagnards had to turn to the authoritarian solution. They tried to give the assignat an artificial value by means of the Terror.

In April 1793 it was decreed that all payments in commercial transactions had to be made in assignats, and that currency could only be given or received in payment at the same rate as assignats. Selling currency was prohibited, the penalty for it being six years in irons. Anyone refusing to accept

payment in assignats would be fined a sum equal to the amount refused.

Such measures were hard to apply within the framework of a liberal capitalist economy. The trade in money continued in secret.

And the Treasury itself continued to sell assignats for currency at prices less and less close to par. They were forced to pay for the purchases they made abroad partly in gold or in foreign currency. The armed forces, particularly, went on paying for the supplies they needed with cash.

Imposing parity between the assignat and currency at home, therefore, called for powerful coercive measures. Only Terror, with its fear of the Revolutionary Tribunal and the guillotine, could make people accept paper money. So the Convention had to move further down the path of control. On 5 September they imposed a series of penalties for the refusal of assignats, which went as far as the death penalty, with confiscation of property.

But the property-owners continued to get rid of the quantities of assignats that flowed through their hands by exchanging them for precious metals which they buried in secret hiding-places. And so the Convention had to go a step further and hunt out the money from the places where it had been hidden. On 13 November they decreed that all gold and silver, minted or not, diamonds, jewels, etc. discovered now or in the future, buried in the ground or hidden in cellars or in walls, would be seized and confiscated for the benefit of the republic. Anyone giving information leading to the discovery of such objects was to receive a twentieth of their value in assignats. The bras nus of the revolutionary committees were given full permission to search the houses of the rich, and they made the most of it. This was one of the Convention's most revolutionary decrees and it caused real panic. All the misers handed over their treasure, hurrying to the state coffers with it, resigned to exchanging it for paper money.

Some of the deputies on mission [deputies sent to the provinces to implement Convention policies] were not content

to allow those who possessed currency 'spontaneously' to exchange their gold for the equivalent value of assignats, but forced them to do so. Thus, on 29 September, Fouché had the administration of the département of Allier decree that all those citizens who possessed gold or silver coin, silver bullion, plate or jewellery, were to take them to the local *comité de surveillance*. Many localities decreed the death penalty for anybody who did not comply.

The draconian measures of the autumn of 1793 had radical effects. The Terror resulted in coins being brought up out of their hiding-places and a large number of individuals had to exchange their cash for assignats of the same value. On 21 November, Cambon announced the news to the Convention in a triumphant speech.

This success made a deep impression abroad. Gouverneur Morris, the United States representative in Paris, told Jefferson on 16 November that the assignat had gradually risen to par, and wondered at the 'phenomenon of a paper money rising in value, while the sum emitted goes on increasing'. But at the same time, he revealed the explanation of such a sensational distortion of the sacred laws of liberal economics – it was the result of compulsion, the Terror. The same measures and the same results applied to foreign exchange. 'For some days past there has been no foreign exchange. There are no buyers, because the person, who takes a bill, is considered as suspected, and persons suspected are put in prison.' What a nerve the French republic had! The businessmen of the young America could not get over it.

But the assignat's brilliant recovery was only temporary. Paper money was in danger of falling again soon if gold and silver were not put out of circulation once and for all. Many people had come round, as a result of the Terror, to exchanging their currency for an equivalent amount in assignats. But the same did not apply to free transactions, which had not ceased altogether. On the assignat market paper money went up significantly, but it did not reach par. Things were already in something of a mess.

And people began, quite naturally, to ask why the eventual fall in the assignat should not be prevented, why it should not be given a stable value by the simple expedient of demonetising the currency, why the idol of gold should not be thrown over once and for all. It was an idea that had been in the air for some time.

On 14 October, Anaxagoras Chaumette boldly proposed to the Commune that work should be substituted for gold as the standard of value: 'It is hands that are needed to power factories and workshops, not gold.'

The sansculottes' thinking coincided to a certain extent with Cambon's, though naturally it stemmed from rather different preoccupations. The sansculottes wanted to prevent a devaluation of the assignat by eliminating the competition from gold and silver. Cambon, reassured about the assignat's parity with metal, was now afraid that the influx of massive amounts of gold and silver that had not previously been in circulation as money, in exchange for assignats, would vastly increase the amount of currency.

On 1 December 1793 he tried to persuade the Convention to agree that cash should thenceforth not be exchanged for assignats, but for simple receipts which would be valid for paying taxes, for forced loans, for purchasing national lands, and in fact for all payments due to the republic. Stocks of gold and silver brought to the Treasury would be simply demonetised.

Here we reach one of the peaks of the revolution, one of the limits beyond which the bourgeoisie of the period could not go. The credit system was still only embryonic, and wealth did not have the immense investment possibilities at its disposal that it does today, and was for the most part kept in the form of currency. Wealth and gold were to some extent synonymous. Interfering with gold conjured up the spectre of expropriation in the minds of the property-owners. The bourgeoisie did not yet know – Cambon himself only had an inkling of it – that it was quite possible to abolish gold and to protect the privileges of the property-owners while maintaining the capitalist system.

They could not foresee that one day totalitarian regimes would succeed in doing without gold. To the bourgeois in the Convention the idea of interfering with gold seemed an outrage against the most sacred of capitalism's institutions. Cambon, whose language sometimes betrayed hesitancy and uneasiness, was too advanced. The Convention, 'flabbergasted' by what they had heard, decided to refer back his report, and the measures he proposed were not taken up.

5 The bourgeoisie resign themselves to the introduction of price controls

In their attempt to provide support for the poor, the Montagnards not only introduced measures of control over currency, they were also driven to act directly on prices, whether they liked it or not. Necessity forced them to ride roughshod over the sacred principles of liberal economics. They could not avoid price control.

There is no doubt that they were deeply hostile to it. There was originally very little to distinguish their attitude from that of their Girondin brothers. The bourgeoisie as a whole, including the young Saint-Just, were firmly committed to economic liberalism. Saint-Just sided against price controls in a speech on 29 November, to applause from the Girondins. In his paper the following day, Jacques-Pierre Brissot congratulated him for his defence of the freedom of trade.

But the sansculottes had quite a different attitude. On 15 November 1792 the electoral assembly of Seine-et-Oise, in a forceful petition read at the bar of the Convention, demanded that the price of grain should be controlled. It was drawn up by the extreme left Montagnard deputy, Jean-Marie Goujon, who had become the exponent of the bras nus' position.

With the cost of living rising and pressure from the people mounting all the time, the Mountain had finally to give in, reluctantly and in order to avoid the worse alternative. René Levasseur in his *Mémoires* stressed that the Mountain only saw the maximum 'as a temporary measure, made necessary by the

seriousness of the situation'. They were really compelled to try introducing price controls.

They introduced them gradually, beginning by fixing the price of grain. Threatened with a riot, the Assembly agreed to it on 3 May 1793. Selling or buying grain above the official price was liable to a fine and confiscation of the goods exchanged. Anyone with supplies of grain had to declare them, and municipal officials were authorised to enter people's houses. In the event of non-declaration or fraudulent declaration, stocks were confiscated. The authorities' agents had the power to order any owner of grain to bring whatever quantity they judged necessary to the market. They could also bring in workers to thresh the sheaves if the owners refused.

The decree was put into force immediately and the growers responded by no longer sending their grain to market. In its earliest form the decree was unworkable. The bourgeoisie were anxious to protect individual initiative as far as they could and intensely disliked the idea of measures imposed from on high, controls coming from central government, nationalisation. For the same reason that they were reluctant to allow the distribution of food supplies to be run through one administration covering all parts of the republic, they did not want a national maximum. So they gave département administrations responsibility for fixing their own prices. The administrations, of course, were composed of rich bourgeois Girondins. They knew that the Convention had been less than enthusiastic about passing the law, and they hoped soon to see it repealed. In the meantime, they worked harmoniously together to sabotage price controls.

Paris, no longer receiving anything from the surrounding départements, was like a town under siege. Starving crowds besieged the doors of the bakeries. The capital urgently needed help. On the insistence of the Paris municipal authorities, the Convention, on 1 and 5 July, voted two major revisions to the law of 4 May, leaving it effectively in pieces.

There was another reason why it could not be applied successfully: it applied exclusively to grain. It fixed the price

of corn without controlling the price of other commodities the farmers bought, including labour, which had gone up considerably. Controls either had to be abandoned or generalised. The bras nus argued that bread was not the only essential of existence, and that the only way they could succeed in influencing the cost of living would be by extending price controls to cover other goods as well.

The riot of 4 September and the menacing crowd of Parisian workers at the Hôtel de Ville prompted the bourgeoisie to promise a maximum on all basic necessities within a week. Having made the promise, though, they tried to avoid putting it into practice. The committee appointed to draft the law temporised and did as little as it could. On 22 September there was another popular demonstration which forced them to deliver the draft.

Jacques Coupé (de l'Oise), who gave the report on behalf of the Supply Commission did so unenthusiastically. Later, the most influential members of the revolutionary government, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Cambon and Barère, claimed that their hand had been forced and that the maximum had been a snare set for the revolution by its enemies. They only accepted it under duress.

The law of 29 September instituted the general maximum. But as if its authors had wanted to impede its application in advance, they only went half-way. They only put controls on the prices of essential commodities, not on all goods; furthermore, repeating the mistakes of the law on grain of 4 May, they 'federalised' the maximum instead of centralising it. It was the same fear of nationalisation at work. Each district had to have its own separately assessed controls, with no provisions made for compensating for transport costs. Nor, on the other side, were the demands of the popular vanguard fully satisfied. During the demonstration on 22 September, the Parisian sans-culottes demanded that the prices fixed should be no higher than those prevailing in 1790. In the Convention's Supply Commission some members argued for a 100 per cent increase in wages. The Convention did not accept these demands; they

decided that 1790 prices should be increased 33 per cent and wages 50 per cent. So it brought only the most meagre benefit to wage-earners.

The bras nus were not completely satisfied. When price controls came into force in Paris (on 12 October), crowds gathered outside grocers 'to force them to sell their goods at prices even lower than the ones fixed by order and the law'.

In addition, the inconvenience caused by the lack of centralisation soon began to make itself felt. The districts followed their own selfish preoccupations and fixed their prices as they pleased, without taking any account of neighbouring districts. There were more than six hundred prices for the same goods. Districts set high prices for the goods they produced themselves, while those they needed to buy were kept cheap.

On 2 November 1793, Barère had to propose an amendment from the Committee of Public Safety which represented a further step down the path of centralisation and control. It was decided, first, that the prices of all goods would be fixed, not just those of essentials; and second, that they would be fixed centrally. A general list was to be drawn up showing the prices of all goods at their place of origin or manufacture. All the districts would have to do would be automatically to add on the cost of transport, calculated on the basis of distance and weight. But it took months to complete the list, and by the time it came into force at the end of March 1794, it was too late.

6 Measures of control over trade

The farmers had sabotaged the law of 4 May; the producers and merchants sabotaged the law of 29 September. As long as no radical steps were taken to smash their resistance there was little escape from the Hobson's choice of scarcity or a high cost of living. If they put controls on prices, then basic essentials disappeared; if they reintroduced a measure of freedom, prices went up immediately. Some merchants preferred to close their warehouses or workshops rather than sell at the prices laid down in the maximum. Shops and markets emptied

as if by magic, and the black market took the place of the official one. Others bent the law by selling adulterated or spurious goods at the regulation prices.

Merchants had to be made to sell their wares. On 16 July, the Convention passed a stringent law against hoarding. It declared that stealing merchandise or basic essentials from circulation was a 'crime of the utmost seriousness' for which there was only one penalty, death. The municipal authorities could appoint hoarding commissions, empowered to enter private houses, and take and sell goods of recalcitrant merchants themselves. From then on, all basic essentials were under the control of the authorities. There were no more trade secrets.

In Paris, the hoarding commissioners were chosen by general assemblies of sections, and there were a fair number of workers among them (a printer, a cabinet maker, a mason, a stitcher, a joiner, a tailor, a tapestry worker and a printer and gilder). When the law of the maximum was passed, they naturally became the people who enforced it, under the control of the revolutionary committees.

Not only did they have to force merchants to put their goods on sale, they had to force them to sell them at the decreed maximum price. On 18 September, Collot d'Herbois asked the Convention to extend the list of suspects to include merchants who sold their goods at exorbitant prices. The advocates of the property-owners opposed him. Michel Lecointe-Puyraveau expressed his fears that if merchants were persecuted they might abandon trade altogether. He was supported by Robespierre, who did not want a general law to provide a means of 'harassing good citizens'. But popular pressure made the Assembly insert an article into the law of 29 September, under the terms of which anyone selling or buying above the maximum would be entered on the list of suspect persons and treated accordingly. Theoretically at least, the guillotine was placed in the service of the maximum.

As already said, the merchants, not content with violating the price regulations, put up the price of goods indirectly by adulterating them. On 18 October, in the Commune General

Council, a citizen speaking for the commissioners of the forty-eight sections successfully proposed the creation of food inspectors (*inspecteurs de subsistances*) who would have the job of watching for frauds in the sale of foodstuffs, and punishing them. On the 20th, the council decreed that two tasters were to be nominated by each section to taste the wines and other drinks that were constantly being adulterated.

Similar measures were introduced in the départements dominated by the sansculottes.

At the same time, in order to make sure the markets were supplied, the right of requisition was made general. A decree on 22 October placed the right – for the entire Republic – in the hands of a three-member Supply Commission. Through the right of requisition, as Barère declared, the republic became 'temporary owner of everything that trade, industry and agriculture have produced or brought on to French soil'. With no alternative available, the Montagnard bourgeoisie finally resigned themselves to putting the organisation of supplies and provisioning into the hands of a heavily centralised national administrative body. The Supply Commission had full power to seize any goods at the price decreed by the maximum, and distribute them. They could also requisition troops. They set energetically about their task.

7 The revolutionary militia let loose in the field

A new kind of armed force was put at the Commission's disposal: the revolutionary militia. For a long time the sansculottes had been demanding the right to intervene in supply and provisioning. On 20 October, the central revolutionary militia was recruited, organised and ready to start their work. Their commanding officer, Charles Ronsin, paraded them outside the Assembly. A few days later on the 30th, Barère told the Convention that 1500 men of the Paris revolutionary militia had begun active service to protect requisitions, and at that the revolutionary militias in the départements went straight to work as well.

The sansculottes insisted on the revolutionary militia

being given summary powers of repression. On 4 October, Chaumette called on the Commune General Council to set up a mobile tribunal, and a guillotine mounted on wheels, which could follow the revolutionary militia from place to place. The Convention did not go as far as the Commune on that, but the threat of the guillotine had its effect. Wherever they went, the revolutionary militia had a salutary intimidating effect on the farmers.

But the effectiveness of these operations was limited. It provided an opportunity for them to gain the upper hand for a while over the hoarders and swindlers who were sabotaging the law of the maximum, but it did not put a stop to their resistance. These measures were expedients, and as such did not provide a lasting solution to the problem. Inspections of private houses and the campaigns of the revolutionary militia broke down the wall of private property for a short while, here and there, but not in any permanent way. As long as individuals retained the free disposition of the means of production and exchange, the law of individual interest was bound to triumph over all the measures of coercion and intimidation. Simplistic people like Hébert saw the revolutionary militia and the guillotine as a sort of magic wand which could resolve all difficulties and miraculously recreate abundance. But other more clear-headed spokesmen of the popular vanguard saw that further steps would have to be taken if scarcity and the high cost of living were to be remedied in any lasting way.

On 5 October, the southern *sociétés populaires* held a congress at Marseilles, at which they adopted a definitely collectivist plan which they addressed to all the *sociétés populaires* and the republic's authorities:

> 'Every time the legislative body announces that pressing dangers to the republic demand emergency measures of public safety as regards food supply, then for as long as the crisis lasts, the fertile soil and productive industries of France are simply to be deemed vast national factories with the nation as owner and beneficiary (usufructuary) and the owners merely their agents. As a result of this public safety

> measure, the nation will have all products at its disposal, and will see to it that the necessities of life are equally distributed between everybody.'

At the Commune General Council on 14 October, Chaumette, carried away with anger at the closure of workshops and warehouses, cried, 'Right then, if these people abandon the factories, the republic will take them over and requisition all the raw materials!' A commission was given the job of drawing up a petition to the Convention 'drawing its attention to the raw materials and factories' in order to 'requisition them, and impose penalties on owners or manufacturers who leave them idle, or even hand them over to the republic which has no shortage of hands who can get them going'.

On 4 November, the Supply Commission sent two commissioners to Troyes (Aube) to find out whether merchants had stopped trading since the law of the maximum had been introduced, and in the event of any factories being neglected by their owners to requisition them and place the most intelligent and patriotic of the leading workers in charge. On the 15th, Jean-Marie Goujon wrote on behalf of the Commission to two commissioners; after denouncing the traitors who refused to buy manufactured goods, he added, 'If merchants refuse to buy, their unco-operativeness will be punished. And the republic will buy the goods. Workers will work for the republic, which will increase their enthusiasm.'

The substitute deputy from Mont-Blanc, the lawyer Jacques Grenus, wrote to one of his friends, in November:

> 'I think the principles of the maximum are leading us towards community, which is perhaps the only way of preserving republicanism, as it destroys the individual ambition that struggles ceaselessly against equality . . . You'll see that, if we are to get the maximum accepted, national warehouses will have to be established for the surplus from consumption and industry, so that it can later be equitably distributed. Then we shall be moving towards a commonwealth where everybody brings the product of his activity to share with everybody else.'

At Lyons, the Jacobin Paillardelle suggested to deputy Joseph Fouché that he should 'invite the nation to take over all trade and industry and work it for themselves'. Antoine Buissart wrote to his friend Robespierre from Arras (Pas-de-Calais), on 2 February 1794, that 'the communes, through the medium of a committee of supplies and merchandise, should be the only people allowed to trade . . . Then all profits would be used to benefit the republic'.

The idea of communalising trade appeared in Paris, too. Here again we come up against the limit beyond which objectively the revolution and subjectively the Montagnard bourgeoisie could not go. The measures of control and intimidation of October 1793 were either too great or not adequate enough. They went against the normal functioning of the capitalist regime without substituting a new system of production and exchange. The bourgeoisie had to go further or retreat. But it was not possible to go further: they were in an impasse, which is why, in the end, they retreated. The controls only achieved their full effect for a few weeks between mid-October and mid-December 1793.

8 To what extent was the burden on the poor lightened?

During the short space of time the maximum was fully effective, the period it had the support of the Terror behind it, did it bring any relief to the poverty of the bras nus, and if so, to what extent? The law of 29 September had two quite separate parts to it, the maximum on goods and the maximum on wages. And it only benefited the bras nus if the price of goods alone was rigorously controlled. When the maximum was promulgated, wages in some places were twice or even three times the 1790 rates. Fixing them at the 1790 rate plus 50 per cent meant substantial reductions.

So the question of whether the maximum improved conditions for the poor comes down, in the end, to a question of relative strengths. In areas where the sansculottes were organised and militant, where they controlled the authorities and

where they had brought substantial pressure to bear on the property-owners, the prices of goods were rigorously controlled, a tight watch was kept on traders, the price controls were observed and markets and shops were kept stocked, while wages by contrast stayed, or rose, well above the prescribed maximum. That is what happened in Paris, and wherever *sociétés populaires* were active in the provinces. On the other hand, in the areas where the property-owners had kept a tight grip on local authority and where the sansculottes were weak and badly organised, producers and traders were able to flout price controls with impunity, and starve the shops and markets of goods, while the maximum was rigorously and inflexibly applied to wages.

In Paris, for the few weeks the controls were really forcibly applied, the results were remarkable. The price controls on goods were respected but Paris wages remained far above the maximum rate.

People have tried to minimise the significance of this memorable, though short-lived, experiment, and turn it into a defeat, wanting us to believe that everything falls apart when the sacrosanct laws of economic liberalism cease to be observed; the period during which authoritarian measures were in force – in the monetary sphere as much as in relation to prices – has been intentionally confused with the period that followed, when controls were eased, and the public authorities themselves encouraged people to break the law. They have claimed that the battle of the assignat and the battle of the maximum were lost. They gloss over the short but glorious period when they were actually won.

But the experience of the autumn of 1793 also teaches us that the victories of authoritarian economics, however decisive they may be, remain fragile and transitory as long as they are not taken to their ultimate conclusions, beyond the framework of bourgeois law and private property. In this area, as in so many others, the revolution was finally forced to retreat not because it had been wrong to move forward and challenge the sacred principles of liberal economics, but because the objec-

tive conditions of the period prevented such sacrilege being pushed any further.

9 The contribution of the bras nus

Although they were insufficient, the measures taken to 'support the poor' had the desired effect. They prevented the split between bourgeois and bras nus, and made the sansculottes fanatical defenders of the revolution. But while the service they rendered was immense, it was of limited importance and limited duration.

It was of limited importance, first because the sansculottes, for all their willingness and enthusiasm, lacked both education and technical skill, which no amount of devotion to the revolution can ever make up for; and also because the bourgeoisie were only slightly less afraid of the popular masses than of the counter-revolution, and so kept co-operation with the people to a minimum. And their contribution was limited in duration because the bourgeoisie only gave the sansculottes a free hand during the months of extreme danger. As soon as they felt less threatened they dispensed with their help. They dismissed plebeian solutions. They preferred to put their own techniques into effect.

The sansculottes' participation in defence of the revolution came about in the first place through the network of *sociétés populaires.* Clubs modelled on the Paris Jacobin Club, and closely linked to it, grew up throughout the country. The deputies on mission by-and-large recognised their usefulness and relied on them. After purging their own ranks, the *sociétés populaires* helped the deputies on mission to purge the authorities, tracking down the half-hearted and untrustworthy officials.

The sansculottes' help was sought in the technical field as well as in the political struggle. The Supply Commission, which Jean-Marie Goujon had fired with a particularly democratic spirit, put out circular after circular asking the *sociétés populaires* for support in its difficult and responsible task.

The bras nus were called on for support all the time. The

sociétés populaires – in Paris, the sections – were asked to intensify arms production, they were begged to find workers who could make the tools needed to manufacture guns and swords and to discover artisans who knew how to make bayonets. They were asked to take part in a special felling of wood to supply the republic's arsenals and construction works. They were urged to help in the manufacture of saltpetre by gathering and drying useless plants so they could be used to make artificial saltpetre-beds. And they took part in the campaign to collect shoes, which the defenders of the republic were cruelly short of.

The revolutionary enthusiasm and commitment of the *sociétés populaires* meant that the circulars they received were generally taken very seriously. They did everything in their power, with the means at their disposal, to carry out the tasks they were given. The letters and accounts of their doings that they drafted in reply to the correspondence from Paris are ample evidence of their zeal and conscientiousness.

Through the *sociétés populaires,* the bourgeoisie succeeded in taking advantage of the most energetic forces in the country. But the service they rendered must not be overestimated. The *sociétés populaires* only played an auxiliary role, and that only fully for a limited period. The collaboration of the clubs was really only sought for the few months between October 1793 and April 1794. After that, circulars to *sociétés populaires* became rare. The clubs were stripped of their privileges or held in suspicion. The stimulus increasingly came from above; and gradually the great machine of the revolutionary administration was substituted for the activity of the people themselves.

The collaboration of the bras nus was similarly established in the network of revolutionary committees, which was the direct result of the work of the Paris sansculottes. On 21 March 1793, the Convention decreed that every commune, and every section of the communes that were divided into sections, should elect a committee of twelve members 'not to be chosen either from the clergy or the former local nobility or their

agents', whose function would be to keep reports on strangers.

But the sections were not long in extending the powers of these committees. The revolutionary bourgoisie reacted by clipping their wings. It was only after September, under popular pressure, that they were given vast powers. They had armed force at their disposal. And it was they who issued and revised certificates of citizenship, on which each person's life depended, and without which it was impossible to get or keep a position in the revolutionary administration. They were elected by the sections and were made up of real sansculottes:

'Cobblers, ragmen, porters and footmen', as the counter-revolutionary Georges Duval wrote scornfully, adding,

> 'This motley band of wretches was . . . almost always presided over by a hairdresser or a bailiff or one of his men, or even by a former *valet de chambre* from one of the better houses . . . Several cobblers have risen to become chairmen in Paris . . . The tanner Gibbon presided over the revolutionary committee in the Sans-Culottes section, which was almost entirely composed of rag dealers. The Panthéon's was chaired by Pierre Isambert, the shoemaker, . . . and that of the Fontaine de Grenelle by a porter at the Hotel de Luynes, and so on.'

These humble artisans took their functions very seriously, and hunted down the enemies of the revolution in their own localities or *quartiers* with pitiless energy, rooting out the suspect and the half-hearted. They did not just attack the aristocracy either, they had the courage to attack the rich as well, and arrested a banker here and a merchant there, although these were almost immediately released through the protection of the central authorities.

In Paris and all the centres where they formed a solid nucleus, the sansculottes' role was of prime importance. Thanks to them the counter-revolution was flushed out of its most secret lairs. It was a considerable service. But again it was limited, especially in the country, as a result of the shortage of men that beset the revolution. The mass of the people were still illiterate and ignorant. Not every locality had a core of

militant sansculottes, by a long way. And then, the bras nus could not always live on the three livres' compensation allotted to committee members; they had to earn a living, which did not leave them the spare time needed to attend to public business. In a number of places, the revolutionary committees were only recruited with difficulty. There could be no real democracy without equivalent economic emancipation.

The revolution often found itself in a dilemma: whether to rely on ignorant and unskilled sansculottes who were nonetheless politically reliable, or to have recourse to men who were educated and capable but unsafe. Sometimes the first solution prevailed, sometimes the second. The service performed by the revolutionary committees was also of limited duration. The committees were not powerful and they were only independent of central power for a few months. After that they were integrated into the bureaucratic apparatus of the so-called revolutionary government, and initiatives came less from the people themselves than from above.

The bras nus gave their support through the revolutionary militia as well. The idea of arming the sansculottes and forming them into a patriotic force took shape early in the people's minds. On 5 April 1793 the Convention decreed that there should be formed 'in every large town, a guard of citizens chosen from the less well-off', and that these citizens should be 'armed and paid at the republic's expense'.

But although it was decreed in principle, it ran into all sorts of obstacles when put into practice. The Montagnard bourgeoisie was much more afraid of the revolutionary militia than of revolutionary committees. And it was certainly less easy to keep control of armed, indisciplined detachments of workers, moving from place to place and behaving, wherever they went, as if they owned the place, than twelve sedentary members of a local *comité de surveillance*. Nonetheless, Robespierre and the Jacobin leaders had to admit the usefulness of a revolutionary militia.

On 5 September 1793, Chaumette came to the Convention on behalf of the Commune and said, 'We have come to

demand that you form the revolutionary militia which you have decreed and which the scheming and fear of guilty people have so far frustrated.' Popular pressure was so strong that the Convention had to stop retreating. They at once decreed:

> There shall be in Paris, an armed force paid by the Treasury, made up of 6000 men and 1200 gunners, whose purpose will be to curb counter-revolutionaries, to carry out the revolutionary laws and measures of public safety decreed by the National Convention, wherever the need arises and to protect food supplies.

Now the resolution had been agreed, the sansculottes decided to hurry things through. The same day, the Convention agreed a relatively democratic set of regulations for the revolutionary militia. The volunteers could appoint their NCOs and company officers themselves, by a majority vote. Only the superior officers would not be subject to election by the men, but would be chosen by the central authorities. On the 17th, the Provisional Executive Council, applying the regulations, appointed the revolutionary militia's chief of staff. But the bras nus made known their wish to monitor and ratify the choice. On the 25th the *société populaire* of the Montagne section decided to ask the Committee of Public Safety for a list of the citizens making up the general staff of the revolutionary militia for them to look over and approve. At the same time, they invited the 'Jacobin Club and all other *sociétés populaires* to follow their example so that the militia, whose purpose is to be the terror of internal enemies of the republic, will be as free as possible of unreliable elements'.

The Jacobins took up the suggestion, and on the 27th they put discussion of the revolutionary militia's general staff on their agenda. The names of the citizens composing it were read out, and those that were there were asked to speak. Each made a declaration of faith in the revolution. The majority of them were accepted; some were refused. But once again there was an obstacle: the shortage of skills. But if the plebeian leaders lacked ability they were honest enough to admit it, and they

made up for it by their respect for democracy and the extreme conscientiousness with which they carried out their duties for the revolution.

Besides the central revolutionary militia, the *sociétés populaires* or the deputies on mission formed revolutionary militias in the départements, which were recruited just as democratically as the central one. Hence among the officers at Lille were a publican, a housepainter, a laundryman and a cloth merchant.

Revolutionary militias, central and provincial, spread terror effectively wherever they went. They were not just responsible for applying the maximum; they generally imposed their presence on all the enemies of the revolution. Wherever they appeared, counter-revolution went underground. But as soon as the militia withdrew, counter-revolution raised its head again.

The revolutionary militia was composed of rough men, with little education and no experience in military affairs. They were often brutal and coarse, sometimes corrupt and not always completely disinterested; but* they were passionately committed to the revolution. Wherever they went, the men with long moustaches and long sabres were the terror of egotists, the half-hearted and counter-revolutionaries.

But even here, the help they gave was limited. The severe shortage of skills paralysed recruitment to the revolutionary militia; the bourgeoisie, for their part, refused to increase its complement, despite the insistence of plebeian leaders. So it remained totally inadequate to keeping the counter-revolution under control across the whole country. And anyway the revolutionary militia only had a free hand for two or three months, from October to December 1793. After that short period, the bourgeoisie gradually cut down its responsibilities so that they could, in the end, disband it.

* With deference to Richard Cobb, English historian of the revolutionary militias.

4.
Liquidation of the Enragés

1 The enragés left in a political vacuum

The split between bourgeois and bras nus had been avoided. By making the right concessions the Montagnard bourgeoisie had succeeded in capturing the energy of the bras nus and using it in defence of the threatened revolution.

What became of the enragés who had at one point been in the leadership of the popular vanguard? By putting part of their programme into effect, the Mountain had won over their sansculotte audience. They had dried up the wellspring that fed their agitation. All they had to do now to be rid of them completely was to cut the slender thread that was keeping Jacques Roux, Théophile Leclerc and Jean Varlet suspended in that political vacuum.

The Jacobin leaders nad been trying to undermine the enragés' influence for some time. But they did not dare risk silencing them completely until September, when the maximum was decreed and Jacques Roux and his friends lost their raison d'être.

So the liquidation of the Girondins, the necessary prelude to a policy of concession to the sansculottes, had to be followed a few months later by its counterpart, the liquidation of the enragés.

2 The Jacobins attack Jacques Roux's popularity

The enragés had campaigned against the high cost of living and against speculation with genuine success. They had managed to pull in behind them not only a number of the

sections but also the Cordeliers Club and, after some hesitation, the Commune and even the Jacobins.

On 25 June, Jacques Roux came before the bar of the Convention as leader of an important delegation, and read out their petition with an authority that stemmed from the knowledge that he was supported, and that he was putting into words what the great majority of the people felt. That day the deputies heard a speech couched in the most advanced terms the spokesmen of the popular vanguard could use, given the objective conditions of the period. It was a day that marked the high point not only of Jacques Roux's career but also of the enragé movement. Jacques Roux had gone further than the revolutionary bourgeoisie could tolerate. He realised this himself, and some while afterwards admitted that he had told the Convention some 'hard truths' and that he had picked his time badly.

If 25 June was the day that marked the apogee of the enragés, it also saw the beginning of the repression that was to descend on them. Several times while he was reading the petition, Jacques Roux provoked 'angry stirs' in the Assembly. The speaker was called to order by the president, and some of the petitioners who had come with him dissociated themselves. When he had finished, the president, Collot d'Herbois, then Jacques Thuriot, successively accused him of playing into the hands of the counter-revolution, and of talking like Coburg (Friedrich-Josias, Duke of Saxe-Coburg, Austria's field-marshall). But at the same time, Thuriot cast all pretence aside and accused him of speaking in class terms: 'You have just heard expounded at that bar', he exclaimed, 'the monstrous principles of anarchy.' Following him, Robespierre emphasised the subversive nature of the text Jacques Roux had read out, and warned against a petition 'whose motivation appears popular, but which is basically inflammatory'. Thuriot, then Louis-Joseph Charlier, called for Jacques Roux to be arrested immediately and sent before the Committee of General Security.

The Convention, though, were well aware of the orator's popularity and the support for his opinions in the faubourgs,

and they did not dare go as far as that. Two days later, Jacques Roux scored a new triumph. When he appeared at the Cordeliers Club he was welcomed with shouts of 'Long live Jacques Roux! Long live the sansculottes!' In an impassioned speech he protested at the treatment he had received from the parliamentarians, and his account was loudly applauded. The president gave him the fraternal embrace. The society agreed to post up his speech and to send it to the sections, to affiliated societies and to administrative bodies.

That was the limit. Robespierre put a stop to it. He decided to use harsh measures to deal with these poor, unarmed, naive men, unschooled in the stratagems and trickery of politics, whose only strength was to have won the sympathies of the bras nus by honestly expressing their aspirations. He persecuted militants who had been in the forefront of the revolutionary struggle since 10 August 1792, and who only a few weeks earlier had helped the Montagnard bourgeoisie eliminate the Gironde. It was with justifiable bitterness that Jacques Roux wrote, 'They have always used men of true spirit to make revolutions, and when they do not need them any longer, they smash them as they would a glass.'

Before using police measures to eliminate Jacques Roux, they had to remove the support he had among the masses, discredit him in the eyes of the sansculottes and dislodge him from the various groupings that he had succeeded to a greater or lesser extent in involving in his campaign. They began with the Jacobin Club. There, on the 28th, Robespierre declared war on the enragé leader. He had no hesitation in presenting Jacques Roux as an 'enemy agent' in order to bring about his downfall.

The same day, the former priest was given a cold reception when he came before the Commune General Council (of which he was, himself, a member) to defend himself. They harboured resentment against him for endangering law and order. Chaumette, in fact, responded by saying his petition had been 'the tocsin for pillage and the rape of property.' The next day, the 29th, the Council ruled that Jacques Roux would have

to reply to the 'serious accusations' that had been made against him.

Jacques Roux's greatest success had been in the Cordeliers Club, and it was there above all that he had to be discredited. The Jacobins delegated no fewer than twelve speakers to go along. All their star performers were mobilised: Robespierre, Collot d'Herbois, Jacques Hébert, Louis Legendre, Didier Thirion, Pierre-Louis Bentabole, and so on. Everything was planned in advance. One after the other, the speakers did their duty, and slung their bit of mud at Jacques Roux and at Théophile Leclerc, who had courageously taken up his defence. Collot d'Herbois called him 'an agent of fanaticism, crime and treachery', Leclerc was accused of being 'a fugitive from Coblentz' (rallying place for French aristocratic exiles) 'in the pay of Pitt'. Jacques Roux wanted to reply, but the crowd made such an uproar that he was unable to make himself heard. In the end, Jacques Roux was expelled from the Cordeliers, along with Leclerc, 'hounded like a villain, a fanatic and a monster'. The famous petition he had read to the Convention was disowned.

The operation of 30 June was used to justify the repression that Jacques Roux was going to have to face. On 1 July, the General Council of the Commune, 'bearing in mind that citizen Jacques Roux had been expelled from *sociétés populaires* for his unpatriotic opinions', unanimously condemned his behaviour.

It was Marat who dealt the final blow. The hapless Jacques Roux, spurned on all sides, appeared in *L'Ami du Peuple* as 'a grasping schemer who has taken up with extremism, whipped up intensity of feeling, and taken patriotism to its wildest extremes'.

The Jacobin leaders' prestige was still high among the sansculottes, and the slanders had their effect. Disowned by the *sociétés populaires* and the Commune, Jacques Roux met the same response in the sections. The evening of the day Marat's article appeared, he went to the République section and mounted the rostrum to read out a new petition he pro-

posed sending to the Convention. He was greeted with boos and jeers. His own section, the Gravilliers, abandoned him. At the beginning of July, his opponents used their positions on the executive to take over the section's main committees. And on 7 July one of them, the revolutionary committee, opened an enquiry against the militant by interrogating his companion.

3 Jacques Roux smashed

For a time nothing more happened. But at the end of July and the beginning of August, when agitation broke out in the sections on the question of food supplies and popular pressure once more began to make itself felt, Jacques Roux was again made the scapegoat.

At the General Council of the Commune on 28 July one of Chaumette's assistants, Pierre-François Réal, made an angry attack against the enragés. Their only crime had been to incite housewives to demand bread. 'The one way to be sure of putting an end to food supplies is to talk about them!'

A few days later, on 5 August, Robespierre renewed the attack on the enragés in a speech to the Jacobins. He attacked Jacques Roux and Théophile Leclerc bluntly as 'two men in the pay of the people's enemies'. To hear him, you would have thought the priest had wanted to murder shopkeepers and merchants for pricing their goods too high. Both were apparently emissaries of Coburg and Pitt.

Skilful politician that he was, Robespierre had spotted one of his adversaries' weak points. Jacques Roux and Leclerc had been involved in heated arguments with Marat, including one on the day before he was murdered. On 9 July the former priest had gone round to visit the 'Friend of the People' to demand that he retract what he had written about him. On the 13th, Marat was assassinated by the dagger of the counter-revolutionary, Charlotte Corday. With the tribune dead and his ashes not yet cold, Jacques Roux and Leclerc declared themselves his successors and even took over the names of his papers, *Le Publiciste de la République française* and *L'Ami du*

peuple. This attempt to monopolise Marat's memory by two men who had quarrelled with him did lay them open to hostile criticism.

Robespierre saw the weak spot and struck. On 8 August he pushed Simone Évrard, Marat's companion, to the bar of the Convention, where she asked the Assembly secretary to read out an address, the style of which betrayed its true author: 'In particular, I denounce two men, Jacques Roux and a man called Leclerc, who are claiming to continue his patriotic papers, and are making his shade speak to insult his memory and mislead the people.' And Robespierre, to set the seal, followed on with: 'I demand that the conduct of these usurpers of Marat's name . . . be reported to your Committee of General Security which shall be responsible for taking the necessary measures against them.'

The Jacobin leaders had succeeded in placing enemies of the former priest on the executive and in the committees of his own section. But on the 19th, Jacques Roux managed to win back the ground he had lost. Taking full advantage of an error on the part of the section commissioners, he had the *comité civil* and the *comité de surveillance* dismissed, as well as the commissioner of police. He himself was elevated to the presidency.

Thereupon his main enemy in the Gravilliers section went before the General Council of the Commune on the 22nd, flanked by a deputation from the *comité civil* and the *comité de surveillance*, and demanded the reinstatement of the dismissed commissioners, and proceedings against Jacques Roux. Chaumette accused the priest of having 'interfered with the people's sovereignty' by removing elected representatives from office.

But still the Gravilliers section did not abandon Jacques Roux. They twice made representations on his behalf to the Commune, on 22 and 25 August. Faced with the force of popular pressure – they were on the eve of the great upsurge of the beginning of September – the Jacobin leaders did not dare keep Jacques Roux in prison. On the 27th he was freed on bail.

The concessions made to the sansculottes restored calm, and circumstances made it both desirable and easy to eliminate Jacques Roux. On 6 September, while Hébert and Chaumette were winning over the bras nus and leading them in a peaceful procession to the Convention, the former priest walked into a trap. He came with other delegates from the sections to the Jacobin Club. His presence there aroused protests and it was demanded that he should be taken to the General Security Committee as 'very suspect'. In the end he was handed over to the section's revolutionary committee. Free when he entered the Jacobin's hall, Jacques Roux left a prisoner. The revolutionary committee of the Gravilliers section denounced the arrest as illegal; a '*société populaire*', they declared, 'could not, under the law, take precedence over an elected body'. They decided to make enquiries around the Club for the reasons behind the measures taken against Jacques Roux.

But the Jacobins were tenacious in their malice, and ratified their decision against the former priest, and announced that the next day they would send supporting documentation. (On the 8th they appointed a commission to take information against Jacques Roux.) Then the section committees sent the prisoner to the Committee of Public Safety of the département of Paris, which in turn, deeming that 'the unanimous decision of the Jacobin Club on his case constitutes overwhelming evidence against him', sent him to the Sainte-Pélagie prison without any further form of trial. It was in vain that, on the 23rd, the Gravilliers section made an appeal to the Commune General Council on his behalf, and declared their belief that he still deserved their trust. Hébert claimed that he was 'responsible for the rising cost of sugar and soap'. In the end, the Council dismissed their appeal on the grounds that suspect persons had by law to be imprisoned.

This final step was to cost Jacques Roux's supporters in the Gravilliers section dear. On 28 November the section's revolutionary committee decided to have nine of them imprisoned, and on 3 December they were taken to La Force prison. About the same time, the *Publiciste de la République*

française, which Jacques Roux had continued editing from prison, ceased to appear.

The enragé leader rotted in jail for months until he was finally brought before the court of summary jurisdiction on 12 January 1794. From there he was sent before the Revolutionary Tribunal. The repression he had suffered had not surprised him. It was predictable. 'It is natural', he had written in August, 'that after I have shown myself an implacable enemy of all kinds of tyranny, and declared war on moderates, egoists, cheats, hoarders and all the villains who starve us . . . it is natural, I say, that I should be the target for the rage of traitors of both the old and new regimes'. So he knew at once what was in store for him. But not wanting to die the ignominious death of a counter-revolutionary, he forestalled it. As soon as he learnt that he was to be referred to the Revolutionary Tribunal, he stabbed himself five times. The judges asked the injured man why he had tried to take his life. 'You have nothing to fear', they told him, 'from appearing before the Revolutionary Tribunal. Marat, whom you thought of as a friend, also went up before it and came away triumphant'. But Jacques Roux replied, 'There are many differences between Marat and myself. Marat did not have my energy, nor had he been persecuted in the way that I have.'

On 10 February, the enragé leader, determined to escape the Revolutionary Tribunal, made another suicide attempt. This time he did not fail.

4 Leclerc and Varlet muzzled in their turn

Théophile Leclerc was no less a target than Jacques Roux. The enragés' enemies had often linked his name with that of the former priest. One after another Marat, Robespierre, Collot d'Herbois, Simone Évrard and others had called down the forces of repression on his head. Leclerc was under no illusions. In his *Ami du peuple* he wrote, 'I have to be very careful in my choice of expressions because there is a lot of ill-will lying in wait for me.' He tried in vain to justify his

youthful enthusiasm: 'I think the men who are new to the scene only appear too impassioned because the old men are growing tired; I am still convinced that only young people are hotblooded enough to bring about a revolution.'

On 8 September Desfieux told the Jacobins that anyone who had evidence against Leclerc was invited to give it to the commission responsible for gathering information against Jacques Roux. The police had their eyes on the young militant.

Leclerc wrote in his paper on 15 September, 'Every minute I expect the order which will abruptly cut my words short.' On the 16th a member told the Jacobins that Leclerc deserved 'the severest punishment'. They called on the Committee of General Security to arrest him.

That number of *L'Ami du peuple* was to be the last. Leclerc was not arrested but he was silenced all the same; he had to suspend publication of his paper and give up all political activity. That was the price he had to pay for provisionally retaining his liberty. He left Paris, joined the army and went off to a garrison in the provinces.

Jean Varlet was left. The open-air orator was regarded with a certain indulgence by the Jacobin leaders, probably because his activities had always been more political than social and most importantly, perhaps, because Varlet had distinguished himself in the struggle against the Girondins. He had been one of the victims of the Commission of Twelve. He had not attacked the class interests of the revolutionary bourgeoisie quite as directly as Jacques Roux and Leclerc. At the session of the Cordeliers on 30 June, when the other two had been expelled, Collot d'Herbois had spared Varlet.

But the agitation against the decree which limited sections to having two meetings a week was to be fatal to him. On 17 September Varlet presented the Convention with a petition against the decree supported by a majority of the sections. He used fairly strong language, accusing the Assembly of attacking the rights of the sovereign people and of wanting 'to close the people's eyes, to reduce their vigilance'. This language made

the Jacobin leaders almost as angry as Jacques Roux had on 25 June:

> 'I demand', cried Claude Basire, 'that this petition be referred to the Committee of General Security, and I demand that they discover its source [*mutterings from the petitioners*]. I must say, in conscience, that Varlet, the deputation's orator and a very rash young man, if he is not actually in the pay of the aristocrats, has been hounded out of the Jacobin Club.'

The speaker asked why the young Varlet was not serving at the frontier. Someone else proposed that he should be guarded by a gendarme. But the Assembly had more sense of shame than the Jacobin Club had the day they trapped Jacques Roux, and Varlet was able to walk free from the Convention chamber.

But the next day he was imprisoned by command of the Committee of General Security 'for having put forward counter-revolutionary proposals among a group of people'. This arbitrary arrest provoked angry indignation among the sansculottes and a large number of sections took up Varlet's defence.

The public authorities turned a deaf ear. It was not until weeks later, on 12 November, that a member reminded the Council that 'the patriot Varlet' was still under arrest, and demanded his release. Hébert this time intervened in his favour, and it was agreed that two commissioners should seek 'the speediest judgement', and that if necessary he should be set free. On the 14th Varlet was free. Free but neutralised.

5 Rout of the Revolutionary Republican Women

The enragés had not only attracted the most revolutionary sansculottes in Paris around them, they had also drawn in the most revolutionary of the women, who, because they were responsible for buying food for the home, felt the cruel effects of high prices and shortages much more directly than the men. Riots against the cost of living in February and June 1793 had been primarily the work of women. The Society of Revolution-

ary Republican Women was to some extent the women's section of the enragé movement. It had been started on 10 May, in the heat of the struggle against the Gironde, by a young actress called Claire Lacombe. From the start, the society's economic and political activities, the fight against rising prices and the struggle for liberty, were closely linked.

But after the Girondins had been defeated, the Jacobins had less need of the women's support, especially when they saw the Revolutionary Republican Women making common cause with the enragés. At their session on 16 September Claire Lacombe was insulted and prevented from speaking in her own defence. It was decided to write to the Revolutionary Women and encourage them to get rid of the suspect women who led the society, and to urge the Committee of General Security to have them arrested.

Claire Lacombe was soon under lock and key, only to be set free, however, the following day.

The Revolutionary Republican Women were not intimidated by that. On the contrary, they stepped up their activity. On 21 September a deputation of them went to the Croix-Rouge section. They drew up political as well as economic demands, Terror as well as the maximum. On the 30th they went to the General Council of the Commune and, in their name, Claire Lacombe called for searches of merchants' houses as the only way of enforcing the maximum. The Council decided to adopt the petition and present it to the Convention.

But the attacks increased. In the Convention on 6 October the *Société révolutionnaire des hommes du 10 Août* denounced the 'unpatriotic intentions of various women who call themselves revolutionaries' and called for their society to be disbanded. The next day Claire Lacombe was admitted to the bar at the head of a deputation and spoke angrily against those who the day before had compared her to Charlotte Corday. She affirmed the will of the revolutionary women to fight on: 'Our rights are those of the people, and if we are oppressed we shall resist the oppression.'

Claire Lacombe and her sisters met with particular hos-

tility from the market women of les Halles. The scarcity of goods had already reduced their business considerably, and the campaign in support of the maximum and its rigorous implementation had aroused their antagonism. The fishwives were slipping towards counter-revolution. The Revolutionary Women, who met near les Halles, identified themselves by wearing either the tricolour cockade in their hair or the red cap; some even wore red trousers. The fishwives picked on these items of dress to demonstrate their bad temper. The militants were threatened and insulted.

The enemies of the Revolutionary Republican Women turned these incidents to their advantage by stirring up the fishwives against the women's club. They persuaded the women of les Halles to believe, quite wrongly, that Claire Lacombe and her comrades wanted the Convention to pass a decree forcing all women to wear the red cap and trousers. Thus on the morning of 28 October a mob of about six thousand unleashed furies gathered near where the Revolutionary Republican Women held their meetings in the outbuildings of St Eustache's church. The meeting was invaded and members of the Club were interrupted and insulted.

Claire Lacombe's companions saw clearly what the manoeuvre meant. One of them declared it was a plot to dissolve the society. At this point a representative of public authority arrived. He sided with the fishwives, said that all women were free to wear whatever they liked on their head, and forced the president to take off her red cap. Then, turning to the onlookers, he said, 'The Revolutionary Republican *citoyennes* are not in session, everyone can come in.' At which a huge throng burst into the hall, heaped the most offensive invective on the members and then laid violently into them.

It was the aggressors, not the victims, who complained, taking their grievances to the Commune, which congratulated the public authority representatives 'who had taken steps to stop this Society meeting for some time to come'. The next day the women of les Halles were admitted to the bar of the Convention where they presented 'a petition in which they com-

plain of the so-called revolutionary women who wanted to force them to wear red caps'.

The following day, Jean-Pierre Amar, the Assembly *rapporteur*, had the nerve to maintain that the Revolutionary Republican Women had wanted to rouse Paris in support of the Girondins. Then, broadening the debate, he launched into a violent anti-feminist diatribe. Women should stay at home, they were unsuited to public life. 'It is not possible for women to exercise political rights'. The bourgeois in the Convention broke into loud applause at this reactionary language, and passed a decree banning all women's clubs and *sociétés populaires*, whatever their denomination.

The Revolutionary Republican Women made a last effort of resistance. On 5 November a deputation of *citoyennes* came to the bar of the Convention to protest. Numerous voices demanded that they should not be heard, and that was agreed unanimously. The chamber rang with applause, and the women petitioners had to leave the bar 'in a hurry'.

On the 17th, a similar deputation went to the Commune. They were met with boos and so much noise that it was impossible for any of them even to try to speak. From the benches, people shouted, 'Down with the women's red caps!' The president donned his hat, and when peace was restored, Chaumette, the misogynist, accused the 'viragos' of being 'paid by foreign powers'. And he took up Amar's anti-feminist diatribe:

> 'Since when have women been allowed to deny their sex and behave like men? Since when has it been decent to see women abandoning their domestic duties, and their children's cradles, to go out into the public arena and make speeches . . . to perform the duties that nature intended men to do?'

The Revolutionary Women were eliminated because they wanted to sow too soon the seeds of a revolution that would liberate women.

5.
A Diversion Turns into an Upsurge

1 The secret of Hébertist demagogy

After the enragés had been liquidated, their position was inherited by a group of men generally referred to as Hébertists. Hébert never, properly speaking, saw himself as a party leader, and in fact denied being one. The term, in its strict sense, is used of a fairly narrow circle of Paris politicians centred on Hébert and the Cordeliers Club, with offshoots in some provincial towns. But the people we are going to look at now go beyond that restricted framework.

From a sociological point of view it would be preferable to call them plebeians, men with roots among the people but who have risen above them and developed their own special interests. Whether they originally came from the people, like Anaxagoras Chaumette and Jean Rossignol, or whether they were déclassé bourgeois like Jacques Hébert and Charles Ronsin, they did not speak directly and authentically for the bras nus. They learnt to know the people either through their own background or through their everyday contact with the masses, and they could imitate their language brilliantly; and they were expert in the art of controlling them and using them.

All that distinguished the enragés from the people was their education and their ability to express themselves. Apart from that one difference they conveyed the aspirations, feelings and anger of the popular vanguard with directness and precision, retaining all their spontaneity and, often, all their confusion as well. They were absolutely disinterested. Although they were poor, they never tried to use their influence

to obtain positions or sinecures for themselves. They did not regard the revolution as a career. There was a streak of ascetism in them.

The same could not be said of the plebeians. They did not have the evangelical spirit, although they were not simply careerists, either. The sincerity of the republican convictions of most of them is unquestionable. What distinguished them from the enragés was their impatience to enjoy themselves. Their revolutionary faith was very much mixed up with their material desires. So, for example, they fought energetically and persistently for the 'sansculottisation' of the army and the War Ministry, not only as protection against the serious threat posed to the revolution by reactionary officers and officials, but also because they were eager to take over their positions themselves, like Francois Vincent, Minister Jean-Baptiste Bouchotte's assistant and a militant at times.

The plebeians served the bourgeois revolution and, at the same time, used it to further their own ambitions. Their attachment to bourgeois property flowed directly from their cupidity. The reason why they wanted to guarantee everybody the right to enjoy their income was because they were intriguing for position and greedy for large salaries for themselves. But although this bound them to the revolutionary bourgeoisie they did have interests of their own to defend against them. The bourgeoisie did not want to give up more than the smallest possible piece of the cake. They only consented to reward their services insofar as they were indispensable to the victory of the revolutionary bourgeoisie and the conduct of the war. But the Jacobin regime did involve itself in an enormous amount of incidental expense. The plebeians found themselves places in the plentiful cogs of the revolutionary administration in their thousands, first in the War Ministry, and then in the Ministry of the Interior, in the administration of supplies, in war production, in various cogs of the repressive machine and so on.

Cambon, the financial overlord, was most unfavourably disposed towards these parasitic plebs. In every section they

invaded the plebeians came into conflict with the revolutionary bourgeoisie. So the struggle for executive power was brisk. There was a double system of government: an emergency government, the Committee of Public Safety; and an ordinary government made up of ministers, the Provisional Executive Committee. The revolutionary bourgeoisie had the upper hand on the Committee of Public Safety. The plebeians had taken over the most important department of the Provisional Executive Council, the War Ministry. That was why, from September onwards, they demanded the implementation of the new constitution, which would mean transforming the Provisional Executive Council into a real government, which in turn implied the disappearance of the Committee of Public Safety. They hoped in that way to have all power under their control. Hébert, particularly, saw in it the opportunity for personal revenge; he had not been given a place on the Committee of Public Safety, and when he had tried for the Ministry of the Interior after the resignation of the previous incumbent, they had passed him over in favour of somebody else.

There was an equally intense struggle over the revolutionary militia. The plebeians grouped around Ronsin did all they could to increase its strength and extend its influence, even to merge the regular army with it; the bourgeoisie frustrated every plan. There were also conflicts over secret funds. Bouchotte, the War Minister, distributed important subsidies to the press. Reasonably enough, he showed favouritism to his plebeian friends – Hébert's *Le Père Duchesne* received considerable amounts – which irritated a section of the bourgeoisie. In his paper, *Le Vieux Cordelier*, Camille Desmoulins made an unusually angry attack of Hébert and, through him, Bouchotte.

There was another bitter struggle over war production between the bourgeois, who wanted arms factories and foundries to be run by industry, or in other words abandoned to private capitalism, and the plebeians, who wanted them run under state supervision, meaning under their own direction,

for the benefit of the nation. This latter system would have ensured them well-paid jobs, and would have allowed them to divert some of the profits to their own pockets.

So there were the plebeians, with limitless appetites which people kept limiting. They were constantly trying to win new jobs, new fiefs and new sources of income. They wanted to take over everything, and nobody was leaving them more than crumbs from the feast. So they needed to make more of an impetus on the revolutionary bourgeoisie, they needed to put pressure on them, if they were to get the largest possible slice of the cake.

How was the pressure to be exercised? There was not much that, as weak individuals, they could do on their own. They needed the support of the masses. Their voice would only make itself heard if it was echoed and amplified by the rough voice of the crowd. So in order to defend their own interests against the revolutionary bourgeoisie, they were forced to rely to a certain extent on the bras nus.

But although they were agitators and demagogues, they were also puppets. The bourgeoisie might not have given them all the cake they wanted, but they were nonetheless partners of a sort when it came to sharing it: partners, that is, in defence of private property. The plebeians could rouse the masses when they needed to, but they could keep them in check as well. They used the bras nus to bring a degree of pressure to bear on the bourgeoisie, but they did all they could to prevent the pressure degenerating into open struggle.

2 A distraction from the struggle for food supplies

It was the beginning of September 1793 when the Hébertists, having played their part in the liquidation of the enragés, took over their leadership of the mass movement. They used the restlessness in the faubourgs to extract various political gains that concerned them directly. But at the same time they set about channelling the stream of popular protest and diverting it away from the purely economic demands that

had prevailed in July and August and were now threatening to lead to social conflict.

On 4 September, a crowd made up almost entirely of workers burst into the Hôtel de Ville, and their spokesman, Christophe Tiger, demanded bread. When Chaumette came back from the Convention with nothing but a promise, the bras nus' anger exploded. Whatever the cost, the crowd had to be brought back under control, and to that end the *procureur syndic* used extreme measures. He jumped on to a table shouting, 'This means the rich have declared war on the poor and they are out to crush us. Very well, we will have to forestall them by crushing them first. We've got the strength.'

But the next day popular delegations, led and flanked by the Commune's official authorities, trooped quietly to the Convention with a petition drawn up by Chaumette. Delegations were admitted to the bar, and invited to sit on the raised seats in the chamber. Forgetting the words he had used the day before and the commission the demonstrators had entrusted to him, Chaumette made a speech that was hollow and grandiloquent.

The worker, Tiger, could not find the demands he had formulated for the sansculottes in the petition Chaumette had drawn up. At the General Council on the evening of the 4th he had already attacked the Commune *procureur's* text with several motions, and on the morning of the 5th he went to Chaumette's house and told him to 'make sure the petition we're going to take to the National Convention really expresses the wishes of the people'. A short time later, while the delegations were on their way from the Hôtel de Ville he went among the marching citizens, shouting 'Stop, stop! Chaumette's petition doesn't represent the wishes of the people.' Describing the incident at the Commune General Council that afternoon, Chaumette called Tiger a 'counter-revolutionary' and an 'assassin' and had the 'gentleman' arrested immediately. The pressure of the masses was already much weaker than the day before, which was why they were able to get

away with treating somebody in that way who, for a short while, had been the people's spokesman.

By the time evening came on 5 September, the Assembly had still voted nothing but political measures: forming the revolutionary militia, speeding up the Revolutionary Tribunal, granting allowances to members of revolutionary committees, arraigning former Girondin ministers and so on; and the day after, two politicians – Billaud-Varenne, a supporter of the Terror, and Collot d'Herbois, who was close to Hébertism – were appointed to the Committee of Public Safety. The Montagnard bourgeoisie were prepared to make a few concessions to keep the plebeians quiet, but they scarcely contemplated taking economic measures. And in his paper, Hébert preached patience to the people.

But popular pressure continued despite all the sedatives the Hébertist plebeians administered, and the revolutionary bourgeoisie had finally to commit themselves to introducing price controls. On 29 September, they passed the law of the maximum, which was followed by a whole series of coercive measures aimed at getting goods back into the markets and shops.

These radical steps made the question of supplies less acute for a time, and Hébertists decided that the right moment had come to divert the masses towards less burning issues than the economic one, towards forms of struggle that did not bring bourgeois and bras nus into confrontation with each other. They launched the 'dechristianisation' campaign, through which they planned to mobilise the masses and use them to advance their own political ambitions with the minimum of risk.

To a certain extent, the renewal of the struggle against the church enjoyed the support of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. In fact, at the level of religion, the bourgeois revolution was far from complete (see Introduction pp.37–43). In addition, the bourgeoisie had tried to split the clergy and seen them respond with a united front against them; sabotage by refractory priests was replaced by sabotage from the constitu-

tional clergy. So each blow against the priesthood not only consolidated their gains, made the confiscation of church lands more secure and allowed them to impose further economies on them; it also, more importantly, made them safer from the threat of further clerical sabotage.

Although the campaign was launched by the Hébertists, it was much more in tune with the feeling among the bras nus. They did not have the education to refute religion with philosophical arguments, of course. They were not even completely free of religious superstition. But their class instinct told them that in practice religion was a tool for the oppression of man by man. So it would be wrong to think of the dechristianisation campaign as the work of a few demagogues. It is true, nonetheless, that hostility towards the church was buried deep in people's minds and hardly ever took concrete form. The intervention of the dechristianisers released a torrent of long-repressed passions.

The Hébertists fanned the flames to distract the bras nus from the struggle against the property-owners and the struggle for bread. By launching the masses into an attack on heaven they aimed to make them forget, as far as possible, about their earthly concerns, material questions like food supplies and the cost of living. Having once diverted the movement, they were banking on keeping control of it and using it for their own ends. The dates here speak for themselves. On 4 September the workers of Paris invaded the Hôtel de Ville demanding the maximum. On the 5th, Chaumette and Hébert succeeded, not without difficulty, in containing the movement. On the 29th, the maximum was passed. It was between these two dates that the dechristianisation campaign began.

It did not actually start in Paris. The Hébertists thought it wiser to test the ground in the provinces first of all, and safer to leave the initiative of the movement with a deputy on mission, invested with official powers. So, towards the middle of September, Chaumette left Paris for Nevers, where he originally came from, and where his family still lived. On the

21st he was in his native town. On the 22nd he and deputy Fouché were at the unveiling of a bust of Brutus, where he made a speech. This was a first attempt to substitute republican celebrations for religious ceremonies.

In Joseph Fouché, the Hébertists had found the man they were looking for. Unlike a number of them, he did not come from a working family. His parents were well-off landed bourgeois, with plantations in the colonies. Although he had not taken holy orders, he had been a member of the clergy. A former physicist, he had a rigorously logical mind and realised that the revolution could only survive by being thorough-going and finishing what it set out to do. As a landowner, though, Fouché was not seriously committed to the fight against private property. In the département where he had been sent on mission he had contented himself with imposing a few taxes on property owners and scaring them with verbal threats, and he agreed with the Hébertists in bringing total revolution into the more modest framework of a campaign against religion.

Chaumette was Fouché's inspiration and guide. Before he arrived, Fouché had rather given the appearance of a moderate; he had taken no particular steps against religion and priests; but on 26 September, under Chaumette's influence, he called a meeting of the *société populaire* at Moulins, in the parish church of Notre Dame, and claimed that he had been commissioned to 'substitute for the superstitious, hypocritical religion the people unhappily still hold to, the worship of the republic and natural morality'. Following that, he published a decree on 10 October:

> *No form of religious worship may be carried out anywhere except in their respective temples . . .*
> *The Republic recognises no privileged or dominant religion; all religious emblems on the roads, in the squares or in any other public place, will be destroyed . . .*
> *In each municipality, dead citizens of all denominations will be taken . . . to the place allotted for common burial,*

covered with a sombre cloth on which will be painted Sleep . . .
The communal place where their ashes will rest is to be set apart from habitation, and planted with trees, in the shade of which will be raised a statue representing Sleep. All other effigies will be destroyed . . .
Over the entrance to this field, hallowed by a religious respect for the shades of the dead, will be this inscription: 'Death is an eternal sleep.'

All that the Hébertists in Paris had to do was use the example of Nevers as a precedent. A close relationship grew up between the two towns. On 26 September, the day after his return, Chaumette told the Commune General Council of the various circumstances of his journey. In the General Council on 4 October he began his offensive against priests and religion. On the 14th, receiving a deputation from the *société populaire* at Nevers, he launched into a violent indictment of the 'charlatanism of the priests', and had it decreed that it would be 'forbidden for ministers of any religion to perform their functions outside the buildings designed for the performance of the various acts of worship'.

On 1 November the dechristianisers led a deputation of citizens from Nevers admitted to the Convention to demand the suppression of ministers of the catholic religion.

3 The dechristianisers strike a major blow

The campaign for dechristianisation gained adherents from the sansculottes in the sections as well as the General Council of the Commune. On 6 November a co-ordinating body of the sections, similar to the one that emerged at the Evêché before 31 May, the *Comité central des sociétés populaires*, read the Jacobins a draft petition they wanted to present to the Convention, calling for an end to the remuneration of priests. On the 8th it was the Commune's turn to hear the petition which was loudly applauded. Nevertheless, the Council

having observed 'that the wish of the committee is not that of the general assemblies', they decided the petition should be sent to the forty-eight sections for their approval.

The sansculottes of the sections followed the lead and the Convention seemed to acquiesce. The dechristianisers decided the time was ripe to strike a major blow, one which would make an impression on the popular imagination and at the same time force the hand of those bourgeois who were still reticent. Late in the evening of the 6th, after the Jacobin Club's session, a delegation from the *Comité central des sociétés populaires* went to the house of Jean-Baptiste Gobel, the Bishop of Paris. The old man was asleep. They woke him up. They explained that the time was come for him to give up his ecclesiastical office. He complied. After consultation with his episcopal council he went to the département, where he found the representatives from the Commune and the delegates from Nevers. He promised to resign the following day. On the 7th he appeared at the bar of the Convention accompanied by his curates and flanked by the Paris authorities led by Chaumette. He placed his cross and his ring on the table and donned the red cap. The Assembly, presented with a fait accompli, reacted with apparent enthusiasm. There was massive applause. The president embraced Gobel and announced that the Bishop of Paris had become a 'reasonable being'. Several deputies who were members of the catholic or reformed church came forward and declared that they renounced their ecclesiastical functions.

On the 10th, Abbé Sieyès momentarily broke the silence he had kept during the Terror and renounced a pension of 10,000 livres that he had been given as compensation for his former benefices. On the 13th the Assembly proclaimed that all official authorities had the power to receive declarations from ecclesiastics and ministers of all religions that they were abdicating from their profession.

Having struck the blow, the dechristianisers exploited it fully. The Commune decided, on their own initiative, to hold a festival in honour of Reason in the 'former' cathedral. The

ceremony took place on the morning of the 10th. The Convention was sitting and did not go to Notre Dame, so in the afternoon the Commune shifted their setting to the Assembly chamber itself. The 'national representation', intimidated by the invasion, decided that Notre Dame would thenceforth be consecrated to the Cult of Reason, and moved bodily to the cathedral, followed by a large crowd.

The dechristianisers thought they were in control of the situation. The success of the movement they had created was exceeding their expectations. Hébert's paper operated as vehicle for the anti-religious campaign, and carried the thoughts of the Paris dechristianisers out deep into the provinces. The propaganda in *Le Père Duchesne* was adapted to its popular readership, and had far more effect than all the elegantly written tracts and abstract philosophising. Hébert had the gift of sansculottising philosophy. He did not discuss regilious dogma. He had his own way of undermining it. He took over Jesus, and made him into an ally against the priests. With lively common sense he showed the revolutionary nature of his teachings. He saw in him a 'true sansculotte forced to die at the hands of the priests', the 'founder of all *sociétés populaires*' and 'the most enragé Jacobin you could find under the canopy of heaven'.

The campaign went far beyond expectations. The sansculottes of the provinces fell avidly on copies of *Le Père Duchesne*. In most of the *sociétés populaires* in the Midi at the end of 1793 and the beginning of 1794, issues of the paper were read aloud, discussed and sometimes even reprinted.

4 An irresistible torrent

The originators of the movement had no idea that it would snowball in the way it did. The sansculottes became passionately committed to dechristianisation. Since the Montagnard bourgeoisie had submitted to introducing price control and coercive measures, the question of food supplies had lost a little of its urgency. And the long-accumulated hatred of the

old order was anyway stronger than the discontent that scarcity and the cost of living provoked. They were angry at the way the bourgeois grew rich at their expense, but the feeling was still confused and they did not link it up with a desire for specific political change. On the other hand they wanted to smash every remnant of a past they had hated. The tyrannies of the Ancien Régime had all fallen beneath the axe of revolution – the only one that remained partially intact was the church. The revolution would not be complete until those accomplices of the rich and noble were driven out.

Yet religious prejudice, the legacy of centuries, was immensely hard to overcome, more so than the Ancien Régimes itself, and the people would not have dared move to liberate themselves without some outside help. The dechristianisers made the move for them. By daring to attack the church and the priests directly they freed the people from themselves. From that point, the spell was broken. It only needed that audacity for the clouds of incense and the sacred trappings surrounding religion to be suddenly brushed aside. For the sansculottes it was as if a great weight had been lifted off them. There was an explosion of joy, a cry of deliverance, a 'torrent', as Danton and Robespierre both grumbled.

The bras nus gave their lively imaginations free rein. They tried to outdo each other in the brilliancy and humour with which they celebrated the liberation of humanity. Freed of the weight that had oppressed them for so long, it was as if they had wings. They danced on the overturned tabernacles. The scenes that unfolded throughout France were unlike anything that had ever happened before. Beside them, the official spectacles, revolutionary ceremonies laboriously planned and staged by the painter Louis David, seemed studied, artificial and lifeless because the people were missing. The difference between them was the whole difference between the revolutionary bourgeoisie and the people.

Extraordinary performances were put on in the Convention itself in mid-November. One after another, the sections paraded before the Assembly, which for a few days was turned

into a vast popular theatre. A troop of men dressed in priestly robes, carrying banners and crosses, suddenly whipped off their clothes; stoles, mitres, chasubles and dalmitics were thrown into the air to shouts of *Vive la Liberté* and the accompaniment of *La Carmagnole*. Their imagination free, new words were invented for the revolutionary tunes.

> Abbés, canons, gross and fat,
> Vicars, curates and prelates,
> Franciscans proud as cavaliers,
> Capucins, Recollects, White Friars,
> May they never flourish more
> And all disappear before
> The sansculottes, the people!

In the provinces bonfires crackled to the merry-making of the crowds. On 15 October a civic festival was held at Vézelay. The vicar of the old basilica got married, and to celebrate the occasion they had an auto-da-fé of all religious objects. There were similar festivities at Amiens, Rochefort, Auch and Cherbourg, in all of which devotional books and religious 'idols' were burnt.

Some people have called these events masquerades and complained about their disorganised, carnival nature. But the mockery in them was not frivolous. Far more effectively than pedantic speeches, it broke the spell that had so long kept the people grovelling at the feet of priests, idols and relics. There was a feeling of deep seriousness behind the laughter. The sansculottes took what they were doing very seriously. They knew they were living at a momentous time. The president of the Convention expressed what they were feeling when he told the Section de l'Unité: 'In one instant you have annihilated eighteen centuries of error.' The same vibrant emotion is to be found in most of the reports of this period.

5 From religious freedom to compulsion

The great surge of popular feeling swept the dechristian-

isers further than they originally intended to go. They could not stop in mid-stream. Popular logic would not accept half-measures: if the priests were charlatans, as the people had just become aware, why only ban the outward signs of religion? Why only take away the salaries of the men in black while leaving them free to continue their noxious functions? The dechristianisers were caught up in their own momentum. The end of religious freedom was in sight.

It was not long before the churches themselves were attacked. Old forms of worship were replaced by the worship of Reason or Truth, which, in theory at least, was not incompatible with religious freedom. The republic was happy just to institute and patronise a new religion in competition with the old one. Redesignating a few churches did not put a stop to the catholic religion, which could continue in other churches. But in practice the Cult of Reason showed a tendency to become monopolistic and in some regions did not leave a single place for the old religion. The logical next step was the compulsory, official closure of all churches.

The same progression applied to the priests. At first they were merely asked to renounce their profession 'voluntarily', and they were encouraged to marry. In theory, the fact that some members of the clergy, encouraged by the public authorities, gave up the priesthood was no bar to other priests continuing to perform their functions quite freely. In fact it was not long before coercion took the place of choice, renunciation became compulsory and it was made impossible for the clergy to celebrate mass.

The decision to abolish worship did not come from above but from below, from the sections and the sansculottes. One after another, the Paris sections closed churches or used them for other purposes. All the General Council of the Commune had to do was rubberstamp the unanimity. On 23 November, after Chaumette had read an indictment, it was decreed that all churches and temples, of whatever denomination, in Paris were to be closed at once, and anyone asking for a church or temple to be reopened was to be arrested as a suspect.

The sansculottes of the revolutionary committees set off in pursuit, rooting priests out of their last defensive positions and putting them in jail, making it impossible for them to officiate. Religious freedom was not specifically abrogated, it just ceased to exist.

The example set by Paris was followed in the provinces, at least in a number of regions. In numerous départements, as in the capital, they went beyond the stage of freedom of worship, going as far as shutting up churches and taking coercive measures against the priests. Anticipating the Spanish revolution of 1936 the deputy on mission in the Somme decided 'The churches are to be converted into markets so that the people can go and buy their food where for centuries they have swallowed poison.' At Montmédy (Meuse) the former cathedral was 'changed into a vast Vauxhall, where dance lovers can enjoy themselves to the sound of a large number of musical instruments'.

Dechristianisation took the most violent form in places where fanaticism was most deeply rooted. Soldiers of the revolutionary militia set fire to churches in Finistère and Morbihan after looting them and rubbing their boots with sacramental oil.

On 21 December Lequinio, the deputy on mission at Saintes, issued a decree 'that ministers or former ministers of any religion were expressly forbidden to preach or teach morality, under pain of being considered suspect and, as such, arrested immediately'.

In many regions the break between the peasants and their priests was both serious and profound. Thus, for example, a woman from Picardy shouted out in her patois, 'They come here, these *curés*, and tell us that bits of wood are saints. Oh, we'll tell them: You're liars, we don't want anything more to do with you.'

6 What is to take the place of religion?

For centuries the country had been immersed in catholicism. The ceremonies and rituals of the apostolic and roman religion composed the web of everyday life. Then this thousand-year-old tradition was suddenly broken, overnight. In Paris the sansculottes seemed to abandon the religion of their fathers remarkably easily, and find adequate substitutes for religious ceremonies. Meetings were generally held in churches that had been transformed into Temples of Reason; they were well-attended and very successful. It was easy, too, to find substitutes for religion in provincial towns where the sansculotte influence was dominant. Marc-Antoine Jullien, with the imagination and energy of youth, proposed a whole programme of festivals – to be held every ten days – to the *sociétés populaires*, who adopted the idea.

But in the countryside it was much less easy to make the inhabitants forget their ancestral customs, because the Sunday mass fulfilled a deeper need there than it did in the towns, being the only antidote to solitude and the monotony of existence. And also because the lack of education seldom made it possible to replace the Sunday ceremony with speeches or lectures in the way they did in the towns.

On 30 September Fouché was talking about an 'immense vacuum', in a letter to the Committee of Public Safety. The word 'vacuum' reappears in the reports of deputies on mission. No longer able to go to mass, country dwellers began to miss it. Finding no substitute for the old ceremonies, the rural population tended to drift back to the old religion, even when their hatred of the priests sometimes continued undiminished.

Lack of education was the main obstacle the suppression of religion came up against in the country. It is not easy today to realise the extent of the ignorance in which most French people still lived in 1793. Illiteracy was very widespread, especially in the rural areas. The number of schools could be counted on your fingers. The correspondence from the deputies on mission on this point is just a long monotonous complaint.

The revolutionary bourgeoisie had been less than half-hearted about making good the Ancien Régime's deficiency in the field of national education. They feared the spread of knowledge almost as much as absolutism had. An educated populace might pose a threat to their power. The revolutionary assemblies had tackled the problem time and again but they always managed to put off the solution. The Convention's Public Education Committee discussed project after project without taking any decisions. The Committee was meant to be run by the former Abbé Joseph Sieyès, but he was an untrustworthy character, and was sabotaging it. People's suspicions gradually crystallised: the bourgeoisie was in no hurry to educate the people. All they ever did was consent to register children for primary school, and then they only paid the masters derisory salaries.

So the ignorance of the masses made dechristianisation a fragile affair. The great majority of peasants continued to hate the Ancien Régime and the priests. But even in places where the suppression of the catholic religion had been demanded or accepted by the population a relapse was possible. Jean-Baptiste Bo, a deputy on mission in Verdun, wrote to the Committee of Public Safety on 14 March 1794, 'The people . . . are like a watch that won't go unless it's wound up with a key every day.'

Of all the anti-religious measures, it was the replacement of Sunday with the *décadi* (a holiday every ten days or *décade*, instead of every seven) which was the most difficult to establish and which aroused the greatest resistance. But then there was a quite specific material cause for the *décadi*'s unpopularity; with Sundays every seventh day was a day of rest, whereas with the *décadi* it was only every tenth. The bourgeoisie had taken advantage of the change in the calendar to make people do more work. This increase in human labour was enough to ensure Sunday's victory over the *décadi*.

On 8 November, the Committee of Public Safety was told that the workers in the armament factories not only kept the day of rest at the end of each *décade*, but also stayed away on

Sundays and all the other festivals of the old calendar. They were forced to issue a decree, that for as long as the war lasted the workers were not to be distracted from manufacturing arms by any religious observance. And the replacement of Sunday by *décadi* was one of the causes of the strikes in the paper industry in November and December 1793.

Resistance was no less strong in the countryside. The *comités de surveillance*, the districts and the deputies dealt out harsh penalties for Sunday absenteeism, in vain; and in vain Pierre Dartigoeyte, the deputy in the Gers and Haute-Garonne, decreed on 10 May 1794 that offenders' names would be entered on a special list entitled 'The commune's idle citizens and suspects'; even these rigorous measures did not succeed in getting the *décadi* accepted.

7 The priests no longer necessary, but still a need for God

There were certainly regions where dechristianisation aroused fairly strong resistance, backward regions which had always been refractory to the revolution and which saw the suppression of the catholic religion as a new opportunity for them to demonstrate their hostility to the regime. The main area, predictably, was Brittany. And in the Midi, too, prejudice was deep-rooted. The letters of the deputies on mission there show strikingly the predominance of purely political – counter-revolutionary – motives in the instances of resistance to dechristianisation: religion was merely the pretext.

What is striking, by contrast, is the readiness with which the masses, in the towns as much as in the country, accepted the suppression of the catholic church. They seemed superficially still sunk in the mists of the Middle Ages. But it was very easy to break the majority of them from their priests and from the catholic church.

Yet was religion really extirpated from the peasant consciousness? To say so would be to underestimate the economic and social forces which drove men in their wretchedness to

seek refuge and consolation in the idea of God. The revolution did not so far improve the human condition as to allow men to dispense with God.

Obeying priests and practising religion under their direction are only the superficial, secondary aspects of religion; belief in the afterlife and faith in God are the fundamental elements of it. It is relatively easier for man to free himself from the hold of priests than from the hold of God. The struggle against the 'black race' forms a natural part of the political and social struggle. It is only the external forms, man's life in society, that is at stake. The church's temporal role – its corruption and venality, the support it gives the ruling classes against the oppressed classes, the obstacle posed by obscurantism to the progress of the human spirit – becomes clear to the masses as soon as they begin to throw off the ancient yoke and revolt against the oppression of man by man. But belief in God and the immortality of the soul have more inward roots, ones which concern the deepest fibres of being. It is far harder to remove them from men's hearts. In 1793 the people, on the whole, were strong enough to take on the power of the priests, the charlatans who had so cruelly exploited them for centuries. They could not so easily dispense with the divinity.

Because the aspiration towards God is the essential content of religion, it was not possible to take the work of dechristianisation to its proper conclusion and finally root christianity out of people's hearts, without changing the profound reasons why man feels the need of a God. And if they did not go that far what they accomplished was bound to be superficial, and risked being ephemeral. Sooner or later, their fondness for God was going to lead the masses back to the God of their fathers, the God of catholicism.

Because life in society was based on the oppression of man by man it inflicted suffering on human beings, who sought relief from it in religion. Also the incapacity of the oppressed to see the mechanism of the oppression they suffered under, and their powerlessness to free themselves from it, kept alive

in their hearts the same primitive fear their ancestors had felt in the face of nature.

Happiness on earth such as somebody like Saint-Just could scarcely dream of was all that could have diverted men from their search for heavenly happiness. But the bourgeois revolution was incapable of making people happy on earth. They replaced the old forms of subjugation with new ones. If they made a few concessions to the bras nus, temporarily, to win their support against enemies at home and abroad, these only improved their condition very slightly and for a very short time. The sansculottes in the towns profited most from them. But the revolution did nothing, or very nearly nothing, for the poor peasant; in some respects it made their centuries-old sufferings even more acute.

8 The revolution against the poor peasant

Buying national estates was big business in the revolution and it was the constant, central preoccupation of a significant section of the bourgeoisie. One of the main reasons why the Girondins were so easily beaten and ousted from power, and why the federalist revolt misfired and was quelled without too much difficulty, was because the Gironde had the owners of national estates against them and also because former Girondins among the bourgeoisie became Montagnards from the moment they bought national lands. The sale of property confiscated from the clergy and émigrés was the keystone of the whole revolutionary system. It provided finance for the revolution and gave the bourgeoisie a stake in its success.

The Constituent Assembly had two purposes in mind when they agreed to the confiscation of national lands: enriching the bourgeoisie and making up the budgetary deficit. These were actually contradictory, because the estates could not be sold too expensively if they were to line the pockets of the bourgeoisie, nor too cheaply if they were to fill the Treasury coffers. So they compromised. The bourgeoisie paid a fair price, a very advantageous one for them, and were given very

generous payment terms. But nobody thought of distributing any of these great tracts of land to the small peasants, or letting them have it at a low price. Partly because the bourgeoisie and the well-off country-dwellers demanded all of it for themselves, and partly because the Treasury wanted to make money, not dole out charity.

To eliminate undesirable buyers it was decided that sales should be by auction, and that the auctions should be held in the main towns of the districts; that way they cut out the poor, who could not go to town without losing a day's work. And the land to be sold was purposely divided by the district administrators into lots too large for small peasants to be able to buy.

The peasants tried to overcome the obstacles placed in their way. They grouped together to buy a piece of land and then share it between them. In some places they resorted to violence to keep the urban bourgeoisie out of the auctions. The Convention, continuing the work of the Constituent Assembly, put a stop to those practices.

Sale by auction and the size of the lots made it too difficult for the ordinary peasant to acquire them, but the bourgeoisie still made sure that they could buy them cheaply. They not only, with the complicity of the local authorities, assessed properties at well below their true value, they also gave themselves easy facilities for paying for them.

As money depreciated the bourgeois purchasers settled their annual account with increasingly worthless assignats. The last payment fell due when the assignat had lost more or less all its value, and the fortunate owners paid off the last of their debt for the price of a mouthful of bread. A few voices were still raised in the Convention in favour of the sharing of national lands among the landless peasants, but spokesmen for a bourgeoisie that had grown rich in the scramble for national lands were always opposed to it.

So the revolution did not give land to the peasants. At the start, before 1789, the peasantry owned 30 to 40 per cent of the land. Most of the property confiscated from the clergy and émigrés was not bought by poor peasants but by bourgeois

in the towns and, to a lesser extent, by the rural bourgeoisie. In the Gard, for example, the urban bourgeoisie bought up five-sixths of the national lands and the rural bourgeoisie the remaining sixth.

They had to offer the bras nus some concession, though, if they were to win their support, so instead of national lands the bourgeoisie offered them the restitution of the common land. It was a kindness that did not cost them very much, and brought very little benefit to the poor peasant. The common lands had a long, sad history. To begin with, all lands, waste as well as cultivated, belonged to the village community. Then, as land gradually increased in value, the lords took over the common lands, by force or by legal fraud, until in 1669 Louis XIV decreed that they were legally entitled to one-third of them (the best third, naturally). The return of common land to the peasant community was one of the peasants' principal demands and one that can be found in numerous lists of grievances (*cahiers*) immediately before the opening of the Estates-general.

The revolution gave the communes their land, but not in the way the poor peasants wanted. It was shared out. The measure introduced by the Convention on 10 June 1793 went against the interests of the small peasantry. Their right to use the common lands represented their one guarantee of continued existence. It upheld the ancient collective rights (like grazing rights) over uncultivated land. Sharing the commons out could only profit the richer inhabitants, who with the complicity of the municipal authorities gave themselves the best land and then bought up from the poor peasants the bits of land they could no longer afford to keep. It hastened the dissolution of the primitive rural community that was already well advanced, and speeded up the merciless evolution from poor peasant to proletarian.

9 Limits of dechristianisation

Having failed to alleviate the poor peasant's poverty,

having failed to offer him a better life on earth, the revolution failed to liberate him from his yearning for paradise. Here we reach the limits of dechristianisation. The objective conditions of the period did not allow a stage of human evolution to be skipped, and so, despite its dynamic start, the campaign finally came to nothing.

With one stride the popular vanguard had outstripped the bourgeois democratic programme in religious matters. They had shut down the churches and hunted down the priests. The sacrilege of it shook the privileged throughout the world, but the end result was fragile and short-lived. Because they respected property, the material basis of religious feeling was left intact. Because they did not free the oppressed from their centuries-old poverty, they did not remove the need for God from their hearts.

So when the bourgeoisie decided to restore the church so that, through it, they could restore order, they were able to do so relatively easily. The masses of the people saw their *curés* return without enthusiasm, and in many regions would continue not to like them; but they let it happen, they went back to it, because they still needed God, and the priests presented themselves as mediators between God and man. The masses took shelter once more under the old tree because those in power had not wanted or been able to cut it at its roots.

6.
The Revolution Makes an About Turn

1 The retreat of November 1793

Even at the height of the revolutionary storm, at the peak of the activities of the popular vanguard, real power stayed where it had been since the first Committee of Public Safety was formed on 5 April 1793, in the hands of a small number of specialists from the revolutionary bourgeoisie; these were Cambon, who controlled finance, Carnot in charge of the war, Prieur (de la Côte d'Or) responsible for armaments, Lindet, who controlled supplies, Jeanbon Saint-André in charge of the navy, and Barère, who specialised in military and diplomatic questions and was the spokesman for the premature 'technocrats' in the Convention. They were resigned to letting the wave of popular activity break, as there was no other way the bourgeois revolution could win, but it had none of their sympathy; in fact, they were afraid of it. Consequently they kept as far as possible from any contact with the masses and the turmoil of the streets. They covered their heads against the storm and were careful not to get involved in direct action; they immersed themselves in their specialist skills in their offices where they were irreplaceable and therefore invulnerable.

But though they affected to leave politics and confine themselves to their specialisations, they did not slacken their hold on the essential levers of command, which all the others depended on. With those under their control, they could easily impose so-called technical solutions to this or that problem on their non-specialist, incompetent colleagues, when their solutions were in fact eminently political, and in line with their class interests.

The great specialists all came originally from the upper bourgeoisie, and some even had connections with the Ancien Régime. Joseph Cambon and Jeanbon Saint-André were the sons of big manufacturers, Bertrand Barère's father was a lawyer, Lazare Carnot's a rich notary, Claude Prieur's a district collector of taxes, and Robert Lindet was the son of a merchant who became a barrister and royal prosecutor (*procureur du roi*). Barère was really called Barère de Vieuzac; he owned noble estates – the fief of Vieuzac in the Haute-Pyrénées – and received feudal rents. Prieur's name was Prieur du Vernois. He was a 'gentleman' with an aristocratic pedigree. Carnot and Prieur were both former officers in the royal army, Carnot decorated with the cross of Saint Louis.

These statesmen were certainly capable, audacious, resolute, energetic, and innovatory, enemies of routine. But these real qualities did not prevent them being basically authoritarian conservatives, sworn enemies of the 'plebs' and determined to govern from above. The bras nus were not at all mistaken in constantly keeping an eye on them, watching them distrustfully and denouncing them as dangerous to the revolution.

The 'technocrats' could not have stayed where they were if one man had not answered for them, and constantly played the part of mediator between them and the popular vanguard: Robespierre. He was devoid – he claimed – of all specialised knowledge. He understood nothing of political economy, finance or the military arts. His association with the 'technocrats' answered a need on both sides. Robespierre could not do without Cambon's financial skill, Carnot's military talents and so on. And Cambon, Carnot and the rest could do nothing without somebody at their side who could control public opinion, capture the primitive energy of the bras nus, put it at their disposal and make it serve the success of their financial and military plans; and someone, finally, who could protect them from the hostility of the sansculottes, and speak in their defence, when the need arose, at the Jacobin Club.

The 'technocrats' and Robespierre together conceived a daring plan, rash enough for the Gironde to denounce it on

the grounds that it was likely to lead to 'anarchy'. They would make concessions to the bras nus, without allowing them anything vital. Their aims were agreed, and the limits set. But wouldn't the plan be upset and the limits exceeded? After they had opened the floodgates so rashly, wouldn't the torrent of popular activity engulf them?

For a moment it looked as if the Mountain had been outflanked. As the wave broke, it appeared to be moving faster and with greater violence than they had anticipated and the people threatened to sweep everything before them. Were the emergency measures, designed to alleviate some of the distressing effects of inflation, going to lead to a nationalised economy and the death of private enterprise, with revolutionary controls enforced by the armed sansculottes? The torrent was successfully diverted from that first course, but now, beating violently against the walls of the church, while it was no longer a direct threat to property, it was threatening the 'moral foundations' of bourgeois society which are so necessary to the maintenance of order. It looked as if the warning the Girondins had given before their fall was going to prove justified and that the Montagnard bourgeoisie were going to be hoist with their own petard. For a moment it seemed as though they were going to sink for good into 'anarchy'.

But no. The dechristianisation campaign had not fostered a new revolution. The relative levels of consciousness between the popular vanguard and the much more aware revolutionary bourgeoisie meant that the former were still incapable of seizing power and even at the height of the storm the revolutionary bourgeoisie were able to keep a flexible but firm hand on the reins of power, never letting go of them for a second. If it occasionally seems that they dropped them, it is because we are not looking closely enough. Those wiry fingers kept their grip.

The bourgeoisie succeeded in the manoeuvre the more easily as the material conditions of the period made it impossible for the revolution to go any further. In all areas, political, economic and religious, the bourgeois revolution had gone as far as it

could, sometimes even a bit further. The tide of revolution could only ebb now. The subjective desire of the bourgeoisie to stop the movement corresponded with the objective inability of the revolution to make any further progress.

For four years, by leaps and bounds punctuated with halts and retreats and followed again with leaps forward, the revolution had progressed continuously. Now it had reached its culmination, the peak of the curve. There was a moment of unstable equilibrium before the downward curve. When and how did that retreat occur? What circumstances caused it? It began at the end of November 1793, when Robespierre was reconciled with Danton and the two embarked on their policy of 'indulgence' towards counter-revolutionaries, and declared war on the dechristianisers.

2 Repercussions of victory

Why did the about turn happen then, particularly? Almost all the important events of the French revolution were affected by the war and its varying fortunes. The mechanism was more or less unchanging: each military defeat changed the balance of forces in favour of the popular vanguard, and each victory altered it in the bourgeoisie's favour. In the first situation, the bourgeoisie appealed to the sansculottes for help and necessity forced them to grant concession after concession; but as soon as the danger was averted they found them less than indispensable, pulled themselves together and pushed the sansculottes aside. The capture of Longwy on 23 August and Verdun on 1 September 1792 consolidated the power of the insurrectionary Commune and unleashed the first wave of terror. The defeat of Dumouriez at Neerwinden on 18 March 1793 marked the beginning of the Public Safety regime, with its generally popular leanings. The fall of Toulon on 26 August 1793 was followed by the revolutionary *journées* of 4 and 5 September, which made both the Terror and the maximum a possibility. Conversely, the victories of Valmy (20 September 1792) and Jemmapes (6 November 1792) marked the decline of the Paris insurrection-

ary Commune, made General Dumouriez a leading figure and strengthened Gironde rule.

The turning-point occurred at the time we have indicated rather than any other because in autumn 1793 fortune began to smile on the republic's armies. They regained control of a perilous situation, and won their first victories. There was success at home, with so-called 'federalism' defeated everywhere in October. The Girondin municipality at Bordeaux was overthrown on 18 September; Lyons fell on 9 October; and on the 27th the Vendéens were beaten at Cholet. And there was success abroad, with the threat of invasion averted. On 15 and 16 October a bold manoeuvre of Carnot's blockaded Maubeuge and defeated the Coalition at Wattignies. The recapture of Toulon on 19 December completed the re-establishment of the republic.

As a result of these victories, the revolutionary bourgeoisie resolved to try to regain some of the ground they had abandoned to the bras nus. When their safety was at stake, they had called on them for help. When nothing but plebeian energy could save the republic, concessions had been made. The worst peril was over and from now on war would be waged by other means. Caught unprepared, short of officers and weapons, they had had to improvise and make use of the only weapon at their disposal – the energy of the sansculottes. Henceforth they would be able to consolidate their victory by their own methods. To begin with, their superiority over the Coalition lay mainly in the enthusiasm of the volunteer armies, but to this anger they were to add – and gradually substitute – military, industrial and administrative skills such as no other European power possessed, and which could only be developed under the dictatorial (or as we would now say, totalitarian) regime they were committed to. Plebeian war, war from below, was coming to an end. Bourgeois war, war from above, was beginning.

3 Danton and Robespierre: two types of demagogue

If the plan to bring the revolution to an abrupt halt and then begin a retreat was to succeed, the revolutionary bour-

geoisie needed the solid support of public opinion. The masses were still surging forwards, and anyone who stood against the stream was in danger of being swept away like a straw. It needed men whose feet were firmly planted in the bed of the stream to make headway against it, men the people knew and who knew the people.

Of all the figures of the revolution, Robespierre was the most popular. The bras nus did not suspect him yet of being an authoritarian. Only a few enragés, like Leclerc, were brave enough to lift the mask, and that turned out to be an unnecessary sacrilege, as nobody believed them. The revolutionary bourgeoisie, the 'technocrats', stayed discreetly in the background and pushed Robespierre to the front of the stage. They left the task of halting the revolution to him. Nobody else could do it because nobody else was so completely identified with it. But it might have been unwise for him to do it on his own. As soon as he began to remove the mask he would lose the support of a part of the popular vanguard, as he would be turning his back on the Hébertist plebeians. A counterbalance to them was indispensable. He needed to ally himself with men who were known to the people, with experience of handling the masses, with speakers skilful enough to make crowds change their minds, with men who possessed political capital and who would bring with them broad currents of public opinion. Robespierre effected a rapprochement with the Dantonists.

Who was Danton? He could be said to play roughly the same political role as Robespierre. Yet no two men could be physically less alike. One was by nature cold and morose while the other was fiery-tempered; Robespierre suffered from liver trouble while Danton's liver could deal with anything; Robespierre talked about virtue all the time while Danton openly derided it, and he led a life of moderation while Danton liked enjoying himself, having too much to eat and getting drunk.

Politically, though, the two men had more than one characteristic in common. Danton, like Robespierre, played the role of mediator between bourgeois and bras nus. Like him, he was two-faced, bourgeois when he faced the property-owners,

plebeian when he looked towards the people. Like him he was adept at keeping the clashes between the two classes to a minimum and at capturing the sansculottes' enthusiasm and using it for the bourgeois revolution. Both were Jacobins and thus relied on the people's support and had no hesitation in appealing to popular energy when it served their interests. Both were agitators but at the same time both were authoritarians. And although they sometimes allowed themselves to be outflanked by the people, they were able to remain in control. They wanted to set bourgeois property and bourgeois law on an indestructible foundation.

Physically, Danton was plebeian to the core. Infinitely more so than Robespierre, more so even than Hébert who did his best to hide his refinement behind an appearance of coarseness. His rough outward appearance, hot temper and 'voice like a tocsin' all marked him out as plebeian. When he fanned the flames he really put his heart into it, and did it much more forcefully than Robespierre and better than the Hébertists. While others were trying to calm the insurrectionary Commune after 10 August 1792, he was urging them to oppose the Assembly. As Minister of Justice he sanctioned the massacres of September, shouting 'I don't give a damn about prisoners!' On the eve of 31 May 1793 he made some powerfully abusive remarks about the Gironde.

But all this noise only made it easier for him to delude the people. His cynicism made him a totally different kind of demagogue from Robespierre. Maximilien was a subtle, capable and wily mediator. He did not despise the people. The things he said made sense. He skilfully persuaded them to link their fate with the fate of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. At heart, Danton despised the masses.

Both men, as we have said, were two-faced, looking to both the bourgeoisie and the people. But with Robespierre, the duality did not exclude unity. The two facets of his personality complemented rather than contradicted each other. Danton's was far more equivocal. What basically differentiated the two men was their attitude to money. Robespierre identified his

personal interests with those of the bourgeois revolution. He was ambitious but in the best sense of the word. He died penniless. Whereas Danton's driving force was just plain greed. Robespierre was incorruptible, Danton was venal. His loud words, his demagogy and the popularity they brought him all served to increase his market value. The influence thus acquired was for sale to the highest bidder.

There was always something murky and mysterious about his public career. Even in the episodes where he looked most promising, when the impression he gave was of a representative of his class, when he was 'the voice of the revolution', something shady was going on. He was not just a mediator between bourgeois and bras nus. His range was much wider, and he was drawn on by his love of intrigue. At that period, unlike today, the sources of wealth were not the property of a single class, nor did one class have a monopoly of corruption. There were several classes willing to buy consciences: the conservative bourgeoisie, the royalist counter-revolution, not to mention the foreigner, the British enemy. Danton sold himself, or offered himself for sale, to each of them. Understanding what he was up to means putting our noses right into the cesspit and, each time, asking the question: who's paying?

Robespierre was quite aware of Danton's dubious record. When he had to drop him a few months later, the indictments he and Saint-Just drew up against the 'alleged idol, long since rotten' would clearly show that he was well informed about everything, or nearly everything. The two prosecutors did not have all the evidence available today, but they knew all about Danton's venality. Robespierre stubbornly shut his eyes to it and overcame his distaste. Time and again he defended the 'rotten idol' with a fervour that Marat, Hébert and all the other figures of the revolution never inspired in him.

4 Danton reappears on the scene

For some time when the sansculotte tide was at its height Danton prudently retreated to Arcis-sur-Aube for his own

safety. On 18 November he packed his trunks and set off for Paris. What prompted his return? What were his intentions, his ulterior motives, in coming back to the capital? A political and financial scandal had just broken. The India Company (*la Compagnie des Indes*) had been found guilty of misappropriation, extortion, falsification and other corrupt practices, and some of the mud that was being stirred up had spattered Danton. One of the central figures involved was Philippe Fabre d'Eglantine, a business man and politician and very close to Danton, who was warned that he had been implicated in the affair. He returned, driven by the urgent desire to stifle the scandal. And to do that he had to put a brake on the revolution. It was an operation he had been thinking about for a long time. He was eager to put an end to the Terror and the war so that he could make the most of life in comfort.

In the autumn of 1793, this personal nostalgia coincided with the wishes of a significant fraction of the property-owning class. Those members of the bourgeoisie who had bought up national lands, and those who had grown rich from supplying materials for the war, wanted peace to enjoy the spoils they had accumulated. They were tired of economic and financial controls and they had had enough of submitting to the will of the plebs. They longed for the return of 'liberty' and the re-establishment of 'order'. Those among them who had left the Gironde and joined the Mountain were overcome again by the Girondin psychosis, the fear of 'anarchy'. And now Danton had, as it were, settled down, they were prepared to back him.

So he became the champion of those who had 'had enough'. He launched the idea of 'indulgence', of clemency and amnesty. No sooner was he back in Paris than he confided his intentions to a close friend and former Minister of the Interior, Joseph Garat: the aim was to separate from the extremists, put new people on the government committees, and put an end to the 'ravings and disasters of the sansculottes'.

These plans fitted in, in the short term at least, with those of the group in power. For a time, both were in agreement; they both wanted to put a brake on the revolution, set them-

selves against the popular stream, and stand up against Hébertism and contain it. Danton and Robespierre came to a provisional agreement. Danton put forward his conditions, and to win his support Robespierre paid his price. He wiped the slate clean, and without hesitation, on 16 November, exonerated the tribune from the India Company scandal.

On 22 November, Danton made his reappearance at the rostrum of the Convention, with the words, 'Human bloodshed must be kept to a minimum!' On 2 December, when a sans-culotte admitted to the bar began to read a poem eulogising Marat, he broke in peremptorily, 'There is no point listening to his funeral eulogy every day, or to turgid speeches on the same subject'. There was an unusual element in this outburst; secure in the knowledge of Robespierre's support, the man back from Arcis-sur-Aube was speaking with a tone of authority.

At the Jacobin Club on the 3rd a member of the *société* at Le Havre asked for a detachment of the revolutionary militia to be sent into the département of Seine-Inférieure with a guillotine, to arrest and punish rebels who had escaped from the Vendée and were making trouble. Danton, assured of Robespierre's backing, rose to speak against the proposition. 'I warn you, you must be on your guard against these attempts to introduce ultra-revolutionary measures, designed to encourage the people to go beyond the limits of the revolution.' The word was out. War had been declared on leftism.

On the 5th, Danton's friend Camille Desmoulins published the first number of a new paper, *Le Vieux Cordelier*. In this and subsequent numbers he set out, in brilliant journalistic form, the programme of *Indulgence* (leniency), an initiative that Robespierre took calmly in his stride. True, it was perhaps rather premature, rather rash, to make the programme public, and the form was rather exaggerated. But he recognised most of it as his, and although he did not dare put it forward himself, nor reveal his ulterior motives, he was quite happy to see it appear under somebody else's name. That way he could gauge public reaction and test how far he could go along the path of 'indulgence' in the current state of public opinion. The irre-

pressible journalist, an old college friend, had visited him and read him the first numbers, asking him – for friendship's sake – for advice and suggestions about what line he should follow. The first issue triumphantly announced the alliance between Danton and Robespierre.

Maximilien intervened publicly several times on Camille's behalf. He took him to task at the Jacobin Club on 14 December, but he did it so kindly that his criticisms had more than a touch of flattery in them. And when Desmoulins was expelled from the Club on 10 January 1794, Robespierre flew to his aid and had the decision reversed, much to the dismay of the sans-culottes. He got the Convention to decree that the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security should nominate 'commissioners to look into ways of releasing any patriots who might have been imprisoned', denying, meanwhile, that he was falling into 'moderantism', as they called it. The next day, Camille Desmoulins loudly congratulated his former fellow-student on having taken up, in part, his idea for a 'committee of clemency' and urged him to take it further.

Robespierre's alliance with Danton was so patently obvious that even Hébert had to bow and grovel to the powers of the day. The reconciliation of the two men extended to foreign policy matters. Parallel with his first steps along the path of indulgence and the concomitant attempts at compromise with the enemy at home, Robespierre followed Danton in taking the first discreet steps towards compromise with the enemy abroad.

5 War declared on dechristianisation

The attack on leftism began by tackling the religious question, which was where the threat was strongest and where having inspired the most powerful surge of mass activity, the most urgent defences were called for. It was also the area in which the Hébertists thought they could most easily begin their manoeuvre against the Committee of Public Safety. Robespierre knew they had to be fought first on ground of their own

choosing. So, strong in his alliance with Danton, he suddenly declared war on the dechristianisers.

This sudden about-turn was at first a defence mechanism: war was not so much declared on irreligion as on the activity of the masses, and it was aimed at the Hébertists less because of their philosophical opinions than because they appeared as leaders of a popular stream, which they had attempted to capture and use to further their own political ambitions.

The attack on dechristianisation also arose in response to another pressing preoccupation. Considerations of foreign policy made it necessary. The lack of ceremony with which the dechristianisers shut down churches and the way they treated priests was making the Coalition – especially pious Albion – increasingly hostile to the republic. Their spiritual indignation masked less disinterested sentiments. The English hated atheist France for reasons connected with commercial rivalry and supremacy as well as because the bad example set by the iconoclasts across the Channel posed a threat to their own class interests. Moreover, the reaction of neutral countries, especially Switzerland, to dechristianisation, as reported by the republic's diplomats, worried Danton and Robespierre considerably, as they were relying on those countries to intervene between France and the Coalition, and eventually enable a compromise to be reached with the foreign enemy. But at a higher level the revolutionary bourgeoisie was growing frightened and angry as they watched the necessary struggle against the men in black degenerate into an attempt to demolish religion. Carried away by their own momentum, the bras nus had gone too far. Not only had they got rid of those expensive parasites, the priests; but now they were about to deprive the people of the opiates that kept them obedient. The whole social order was in danger.

It is significant to note that Cambon, the champion of anti-clericalism and the man who not long before had been proposing that priests should forfeit their stipends, reversed his position completely. On 22 November he spoke against a proposed decree which would have granted a salary to priests

who renounced their position, and took advantage of the opportunity to voice his disapproval of the whole dechristianisation campaign.

Carnot, who like Cambon was a member of the anti-clerical, free-thinking wing of the bourgeoisie, did not say anything in public. But much later he let it be known that the 'fanaticism of irreligion' had filled him with horror.

The vast majority of the Convention thought like Cambon and Carnot without saying so. One member, René Levasseur, writes in his *Mémoires* that 'all sincere Republicans . . . were greatly saddened' to see 'religion . . . trampled under foot'. At the same time he explained the prolonged silence of the Convention and the Committee of Public Safety on the subject. 'A formal protest would have been impossible and useless . . . If we were going to help the people at a point when it looked as if nothing could stop them, we had to begin by following the pulse of dominant popular opinion.'

Despite the apparent adhesion of those in power to dechristianisation, some of those involved in the campaign vaguely sensed their real feelings about it. Fouché had had wind of something since the beginning of October, when he wrote to Chaumette that certain gentlemen in the National Convention were not very pleased about his 'energetic measures'. But there was still no official statement of disapproval. The instructions sent out to the deputies on mission contained no hint at all of a reprimand.

Yet on 27 October, the Comittee of Public Safety showed, for the first time, a totally new attitude. They wrote to André Dumont, who was busily and briskly dechristianising the Somme region, to tell him he was overdoing it.

A more significant fact arose from the Convention session of 7 November during which Bishop Gobel abjured. The constitutional Bishop Henri Grégoire refused to follow suit. This intervention was important on two counts: first, the bishop was leader of the juring clergy and therefore a person of considerable standing; and also because it could not have happened without powerful behind-the-scenes support. Who

would grasp the meaning of Grégoire's demonstration if not the people in the know?

6 The dramatic turn taken by events on 21 November

The climax coincided with Danton's arrival in Paris. On the evening of the 21st, at the Jacobin Club, Robespierre took off the mask and declared war on the dechristianisers.

> 'By what right do they interfere with religious freedom in the name of freedom, and attack fanaticism with a new fanaticism? By what right do they make the solemn respects people pay to the simple truth degenerate into a ridiculous . . . farce? They seem to have thought that by welcoming civic worship the Convention was proscribing catholicism. The Convention has never taken that foolhardy step. And the Convention never will . . . It intends to maintain the freedom of religion it has proclaimed. It will not allow peaceable ministers of religion to be persecuted.'

And he stated that any man in public life, any legislator, who made a system out of irreligion was insane. 'The National Convention abhors it!'

On the 26th it was Danton's turn to attack the dechristianisers and, through them, the popular vanguard, in terms very similar to Robespierre's: 'I demand an end to these anti-religious masquerades in the Convention.' On the 28th, at the Jacobin Club, Robespierre continued in the same vein; delegations of bras nus, who had come to the bar of the Convention to celebrate the death of fanaticism, were treated as if they were counter-revolutionaries, as he stirred up the forces of repression against them.

The logic of his position was leading Robespierre to become the guardian of the catholic religion. On 5 December his *Reply to the manifestos of the kings in league against the Republic* was adopted by the Convention. 'The French people and their representatives respect the freedom of every religion, and none is proscribed.' And on 6 December they passed a decree: 'The National Convention . . . forbids all violence and

threats directed against the freedom of worship.' This was more than a simple reaffirmation of principle. The decree was not just guaranteeing a right, as previous statements had done; it took the form of an interdiction, an article of the penal code, the meaning of which was made clearer by the context of open threats against the dechristianisers.

The mob of reactionaries and counter-revolutionaries urged Robespierre to deal severely with them. The Incorruptible accused them of being 'foreign agents', emissaries of Pitt, a slander which was as unexpected as it was repugnant, for neither Chaumette nor Hébert, who had, unrepudiated, given the signal for the anti-religious diversion, was a fifth-columnist, nor were the sansculottes who had so energetically responded to their appeal.

Faced with Robespierre's blistering attack, the Hébertists showed their true colours, and revealed the strong umbilical cord that bound them to the revolutionary bourgeoisie. They had begun their campaign out of self-interest, using popular pressure to increase their political influence. Now they were under attack their only thought was to get out of the impasse they had so rashly got themselves into, to break their ties with the sansculottes, to seek forgiveness and save their necks.

Hébert suddenly manifested an unexpected indulgence on the religious question: 'Everyone worships his god in his own way.' Chaumette, for his part, praised toleration in the Commune on 29 November. And the two Commune officials retreated still further; in their fear they felt they had to imitate Robespierre and insult their friends the dechristianisers by adding their insinuations that they had acted on foreign instigation.

It was a strategic retreat in deeds as well as words. On 23 November, the Commune *procureur*, carried away by the wave of popular feeling, had rashly ordered all churches in the capital to be closed, and all priests to be placed under surveillance by the revolutionary committees. Two days later, on the 25th, he appeared, repentant, at the General Council and retracted the measures.

But the members of the Council were in closer contact with the popular vanguard than the *procureur* and his deputy, and they protested. When Chaumette had finished his indictment, several of them asked to speak in opposition to it. They knew that once the retreat began 'the churches would be reopened, and fanaticism, temporarily checked, would take on a new lease of life'. But Mayor Jean Pache hurried to Chaumette's aid, and managed to impose his will on the opposition, as he had done earlier with the enragés.

The plebeian leaders were puppets. Self-interest and the desire to hold on to their wealth and positions, and to save their skins, bound them to Robespierre. But the bras nus remained the same implacable enemies of fanaticism. To them, the Commune leaders' retreat was unacceptable.

Opposition continued in the General Council, led by the representative of the Section des Sans-Culottes, the militant engineer Jean-Honoré Dunouy, who had been influential in the decree of 23 November on the closing of churches. Chaumette would not forgive him for first compromising then opposing him, and on 3 December he made him the scapegoat. Dunouy was expelled from the Council. He tried unsuccessfully to be reinstated, then wrote a vehement pamphlet against Chaumette and his associates. Chaumette had said, word for word, 'What I am criticising him [Dunouy] for is being ultra-revolutionary'. And Dunouy denounced his expulsion in language suggestive of the imprecations of Jacques Roux and Babeuf: by 'almost imperceptible touches' they were beginning to 'undermine liberty'.

But retreating did not keep Chaumette out of difficulties. He had gone too far to be able to cover up the fact that he had been the main instigator of the campaign. Robespierre, who did not forget anything, had not forgiven him for his journey to Nevers in September, and it was for that, most of all, that he came under attack. Various journalists blamed Chaumette for having 'destroyed religion in the Commune of Nevers'. Letters repeating these slanders were sent to the Nièvre. The district and the *société populaire* at Nevers responded. They

sent a delegation to the General Council on 25 December which on their behalf declared that they would 'take up the just defence of the slandered Chaumette'.

Yet pressure from above was such that the General Council eventually abandoned dechristianisation completely. On 17 February, a member trying to read out a programme of national festivals to replace those of fanaticism was interrupted by mutterings. There was trouble ahead, for the *procureur-général.* The new inquisition already had him marked down for the stake.

7 Religion returns

Fanaticism, temporarily checked, broke out again. Deprived of the former parish churches which the sections had closed and which mostly stayed that way, religious services started up again in various chapels, like that of Saint-André-des-Arts. The crowds flocked, too, to the convent church of l'Enfant-Jésus at the Enfer gate. Some merchant draper had praised this church, supposedly with the Commune's authorisation. Four priests said mass on Sundays and feast days. The large number of citizens who went there placed their offerings in a trunk.

There were incidents at l'Assomption, rue Saint-Honoré, where mass was said. As a result, presumably, of some breach of the peace, the commissioners of the revolutionary committee of the Section des Piques arrived and wrote down the names of everybody there and made a few threatening noises. There were protests from the devout who invoked the decree of 6 December. 'There is a decree guaranteeing religious freedom, and you see how they treat us.'

Religion gained ground again in the suburbs as well. The people of Colombes declared that 'religious freedom was a natural right, recognised as such by the Convention'. And they decided at once that catholic worship should be recommenced in their church.

The turning point came in the provinces when the

deputies on mission received their new instructions from Paris. On 24 November the Committee of Public Safety was using a new language in its correspondence with the deputies. It was made clear to Nicolas Maure, in the département of Yonne, and François Ingrand, in the départements of Indre, Creuse and Vienne, that it was no longer an appropriate time to brandish the 'weapon of philosophy'.

Jeanbon Saint-André, a member of the Committee of Public Safety on mission at Cherbourg, was deeply committed to dechristianisation. On 8 December he delivered a passionate speech against priests, and on the 10th he was present at a great bonfire. But the following day, the 11th, he received a copy of the decree of the 6th on religious freedom. There was an immediate change of policy. On the 11th he decreed, 'No citizen may interfere with religious freedom for any reason whatever, nor use violence or threats to obstruct, restrain or qualify it'.

Young Marc-Antoine Jullien, special envoy of the Committee of Public Safety and, like Jeanbon, close to Robespierre, made an equally abrupt switch. Up until 25 November there is no sign of disapproval of the dechristianisers in his correspondence. Jullien was in complete agreement with the most advanced revolutionaries. No measure was too bold for him. He seemed convinced that in the départements where fanaticism was entrenched, Morbihan and Finistère, the triumph of the revolution was merely a matter of force and that they had to strike unsparingly. It was only after he had received the news of Robespierre's volte-face, from Paris, that he began to censure the violence of the revolutionary militia.

The Midi was no less a stronghold of fanaticism than Brittany. At the beginning of December, the deputy in the south-west, Pierre Paganel, turned the repression against the dechristianisers. From Toulouse, he wrote on 4 December to the Committee that he had made a speech at the inauguration of the Temple of Reason in which he 'warned his audience of the dangers that counter-revolutionary extremism posed for liberty'. And thus, assured of official protection, fanaticism in the

Midi – which had been briefly put out of action – knew it was free to do as it liked.

8 Fanaticism raises its head again

The so-called policy of religious freedom was interpreted and applied in different ways, not always coherently. Generally speaking, though, the decree of 6 December and the commentaries Robespierre surrounded it with brought hope to priests and the devout all over France.

On 17 December, Pierre Roux-Fazillac wrote from Périgueux (Dordogne) to say that the priests who had left the priesthood seemed to be regretting it. In the Somme and the Pas-de-Calais they were 'confidently practising their profession again'. 'They say they are basing their actions on the decree that has been issued.' Fanatical priests had the churches opened almost everywhere. The deputy, disarmed, had to stand back and let it happen. In the Sedan region the people demanded their religious freedom and the reopening of their churches.

When the people of Montpellier (Hérault) heard of the Convention's decree through letters from Paris, they at once 'set about re-establishing the catholic religion'. In the Orne, the priests, 'taking advantage of religious freedom, nursed . . . in their hearts the treacherous hope of regaining control of people's consciences'. In the Eure, some of the *curés* were forced, still terrified, to return to their jobs and conduct services. Their support was 'the decree which allows religious freedom'.

When some sansculottes at Saint-Dizier (Haute-Marne) removed some statues and effigies of saints from the Temple of Reason at night, the bellringer roused the faubourgs. A crowd of women arrived at the church and nearly tore the dechristianisers apart. The saints were put back in their places and the women sprinkled holy water over an effigy of the Virgin.

In the Ardèche, religious freedom was used as an excuse by the fanatics. A Commune meeting was called to discuss

whether the catholic religion should continue to be practised, presumably meaning whether it should be resumed after its interruption. They decided it should be. In the Basse-Alpes, at Manosque, the *curé* had the decree trumpeted round the town, an event which ended in serious disturbances.

On several occasions, it is true, the scale of the reawakening of fanaticism frightened the public authorities sufficiently for them to have to apply the brakes in the opposite sense to the one Robespierre meant. But correctives and second thoughts did not stop the effects of the initial slowing down of the movement. What we have here is a meeting of two contrary movements, one on the wane and the other on the increase. For a while, dechristianisation maintained the speed it had gathered, made a few leaps forward and had a few bursts of enthusiasm, but it was religious reaction that finally won the day. The steps that had been taken here and there against the most flagrant outbursts of fanaticism, and the sudden renewed severity towards priests in certain places, are less an indication of the persistence of dechristianisation than of the irresistible force of the move towards re-establishing religion that was being carried out under the cover of 'religious freedom'.

The gravest of all the effects produced by the dramatic events of late November 1793 was that Robespierre, by suddenly turning against the dechristianisers, weakened, disorganised and dislocated a mass movement that had impetuously involved itself in the struggle against the priests and the church. His personal prestige was immense. His least word awoke an echo among the masses. Furthermore, the sans-culottes were patriots, and for them the defence of the revolution was bound up with winning the war. So it is hardly surprising that when they learnt, from the lips of the Incorruptible himself, that the men who were so boldly attacking time-honoured superstitions were in the pay of Pitt, and acting for kings, they were worried and confused. A minority, the vanguard, remained loyal to the dechristianisers, but they were overcome with a despondency which, in Antoine Lanot's words, was a 'public calamity'. As for the majority, they

hesitated, stopped and allowed the old prejudices to reassert themselves.

The oppressive ancestral heritage rose to the surface again, and the revolution never recovered from the blow that had been struck to it, as Gustave Tridon, the communard, clearly understood.

> 'When Robespierre,' he wrote, 'rapidly approaching a kind of papacy, performed his variations on the theme of religious freedom, when the atheists and blasphemers were excommunicated, the attack confused those people who were pledged to the Festival of Reason. If we are to believe the prophet of the great Allah, fanaticism was on the point of yielding up its last breath when agents in the pay of Pitt and Coburg tried to revive it by persecution. That treacherous tune rarely fails to work.' (*The Hébertists, a complaint against a slander of history*, 1864.)

It was not only dechristianisation that was hard hit, it was the revolution itself. The government's sudden volte-face extended beyond the religious question; that was timely, but it was the revolution as a whole that began the retreat. Tridon locates the fateful period that it happened very precisely, as *28 November to 12 December*. 'Between these dates', he wrote, 'occurred the struggle that marks the crisis of the revolution.' The revolution's progress was halted and reaction began, not, as is generally believed on the 9th of Thermidor (27 July), nor as others imagine, in Germinal, at the end of March 1794. It happened in the evening of 21 November 1793, when Robespierre stood high up on the rostrum at the Jacobin Club and, with Danton's support, and behind-the-scenes help from the 'technocrats', declared war on the dechristianisers.

7.
Strengthening the State

1 Two separate kinds of coercion, not to be confused

From the moment the bourgeoisie set themselves against the popular stream they were in need of a weapon that could enable them to resist pressure from the bras nus; they forged one by strengthening the central power. Once again, there is a striking synchronism between events: the decree on religious freedom was passed on 6 December, and the great decree that once and for all laid down the main elements of strong central power was passed on 4 December.

This was a stage in the formation of the state machinery through which the bourgeoisie was going to enslave the proletariat. Here is the centralised state, with its bureaucracy and police, 'this appalling parasitic body which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores', as Marx puts it (*Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852), the state the nineteenth-century anarchists from Proudhon onwards exposed as the main enemy, emerging in its infancy.

The Montagnard leaders had to justify the step by saying it was necessary to curb the counter-revolution. This was certainly one of their worries, but it was not the only one. Some of the moves they made were aimed at thwarting the activities of the revolution's enemies, but others can only be explained as a conscious attempt to reduce the second power, the power of the people. If all they wanted was to crush the Girondins and aristocrats, why did they need to emasculate all the local organisations of popular power that had been instrumental in stamping out the 'federalist' revolt?

The atmosphere in which the decree of 4 December was

passed casts further light on some of its authors' intentions. It is surely remarkable that the strengthening of central power should have coincided with a relaxation rather than an increase in the severity with which counter-revolutionaries were treated, and that it should happen just at the moment when Robespierre, in alliance with Danton, showed he was prepared to be receptive to ideas of clemency and 'indulgence'. And disturbing, that the man who urged the Montagnard leaders to set up a strong government, Danton, was spokesman for those who wanted to reach a compromise with the revolution's enemies, at home and abroad.

Thus one of the motives behind the process that began on 4 December 1793 was the revolutionary bourgeoisie's desire to reduce the power of the masses, until such time as they could break it altogether.

One of the reasons why this development has been so little understood is because, as far as the 1793 regime is concerned, various terms like 'dictatorship of public safety', 'Montagnard dictatorship', 'Jacobin dictatorship' and 'revolutionary government' have led to confusion between two different types of coercion: on one hand there was popular power, democratic, decentralised and controlled from below, the power of the armed sansculottes organised in their sections, revolutionary committees, clubs and communes, demanding merciless punishment for the enemy at home whenever things went badly abroad; and on the other, a bourgeois authoritarian, centralised dictatorship, controlled from above, and directed, it is true, against the remnants of the Ancien Régime, but also and increasingly against the bras nus. It is an antinomy that has survived into the present in the opposition between libertarian and authoritarian socialism.

In the decree of 4 December there is actually one last echo of the people's aspirations, where the text strengthens and codifies the emergency laws used against the right-wing during the preceding months. 'Those who will not be ruled by justice must be ruled by the sword', declared Saint-Just. But the dominant tendency is the move towards bourgeois dictatorship,

the strengthening of the central power against the masses. Between April and December the Committee of Public Safety, originally created to deal with counter-revolutionaries, had extended, almost imperceptibly, its powers. It had broken its links with the bras nus, and now they were taking advantage of the need to check the counter-revolution to attack anyone on the left who offended them, and all the organs that made up the embryo of popular power. So the decree of 4 December, far from being the outcome, the culmination, of a movement towards popular control and coercion, represented for the most part a stifling of it.

And the Committee of Public Safety publicly made its intentions quite clear. On 26 January 1794 they wrote to deputy Jacques Laplanche, on mission in the Calvados, 'We are less concerned at the moment with revolutionising anything than with setting up revolutionary government.'

2 Danton calls for a strong government

For some time a fraction of the bourgeoisie had been calling for a strong government, to deal with the masses rather than with the counter-revolution. François Noël, the republic's diplomatic representative in Venice, in his letters to his friend Danton, vied with them in reiterating the impossibility of peace unless France could establish a stable government, powerful enough to control 'anarchy'. At Danton's instigation, the first Committee of Public Safety tried to establish a firm hold over the masses, as is quite clear from the instructions Robert Lindet drafted for deputies on mission on 7 May. But irresistible pressure from the bras nus upset their calculations; there was a strong power, but it was strong at the base, strong against royalists and 'federalists'. And the first Committee of Public Safety had to give way before it, and Danton had to stand aside.

However, at the beginning of October the first signs of a reversal appeared. On the 10th, Saint-Just had the Convention decree that 'France's provisional government will be revolutionary until peace'. All 'revolutionary' could mean in that

context was emergency powers and dictatorship. The decree placed all official bodies 'under the surveillance of the Committee of Public Safety', which meant that centralised power was able to keep all local authorities under control. On the 26th Barère persuaded the Convention to postpone the new round of municipal elections that had been planned, until further notice.

Hardly was Danton back in Paris before he proposed, on 23 November, that local administrators (rechristened 'national agents') should become agents of central power, centrally nominated and controlled. But the Convention and the Committee of Public Safety flinched at the idea at first, and the proposal was adjourned.

But the Dantonists were not discouraged and they made a number of fresh attempts. The Convention finally accepted Danton's proposal in their decree of 4 December, though they put it in a slightly more discreet form. They proclaimed that the offices of *procureur syndic* of a district, and *procureurs* of communes, would no longer exist; in their place would be 'national agents, with special responsibility for invoking the laws and putting them into practice'. National agents attached to districts were to report in writing to the Committee of Public Safety and the Committee of General Security every ten days.

How were they to be chosen? The Convention did not dare break completely with the elective principle, and so they produced an arduous compromise. The authorities in the localities, the communes and the districts, would carry out their own purges and put forward the names of candidates. But the Convention would be free to reject the nominations and appoint whoever they chose. What was more, the Committee of Public Safety had effective control over the appointments, as all they had to do was submit the names to the Assembly for automatic approval. But the most serious thing about the Convention's decision was that the local administrators were no longer mandated from below, drawing their power from a local base, but became the executive agents of central government.

The decree of 4 December was a first step. The return to centralisation took a long time to achieve completely. In the spring of 1794 the local authorities still enjoyed considerable autonomy and maintained a life of their own. The constitution of the Year III (1795) was to mark a second stage in the establishment of centralisation. And only in the constitution of the Year VIII (1799) would Bonaparte complete the process Robespierre had begun.

3 Decline of the Commune

In pursuance of the decree of 4 December, the *procureur syndic* of the Paris Commune, Chaumette, had to take the title of national agent. This did not simply involve substituting one word for another; Chaumette was no longer the elected representative of the Paris sansculottes, he was the servant of central power. This marked the decline of popular power in Paris, and with it the old rivalry between the central power and the Commune came to an end. The Commune's subordination to central power particularly increased the power of the Committee of Public Safety, because the Commune had had control over the only organised armed force in Paris, the National Guard; maintenance of order in the capital had been entirely in their hands, and central government had thus been kept at their mercy.

A further stipulation of the 4 December decree made the revolutionary committees directly responsible to the Committee of General Security, without any intermediary. They became subordinate organs of government control, cogs in the state machine.

All direct contact between communes, and any so-called 'central' meeting that covered several localities or départements, was forbidden throughout France, and the same applied to their *sociétés populaires* and their revolutionary committees. The bourgeoisie was haunted by the spectre of federation. Such central meetings dimly foreshadowed a free union of people's councils, they were the embryo of a new power

that could compete with centralised bourgeois power. It was a double-edged weapon, it is true, which could be used by the 'federalist' counter-revolution as well as provide a source of support for the popular vanguard. But the bourgeoisie dishonestly affected not to see the difference between the 'federalism' of the Girondins and popular federalism, and used the first as an excuse for attacking the second. In actual fact, of course, the two federalisms were poles apart. The Girondins were not federalists at all, in the proper sense of the word; their only 'federalism' lay in their hatred of the Paris sans-culottes; they were even more in favour of centralisation than the Montagnards, and even more committed to a strong central power. And anyway the 'federalist' revolt was far more effectively checked by the spontaneous revolutionary energy of the popular councils in the localities than it could ever have been by the strengthening central power.

Also the attempts at federation which displeased those in power seem to have stemmed from ultra-revolutionary attitudes rather than counter-revolutionary ones. Like the *Congrès des sociétés populaires du Midi,* which met early in October and boldly demanded the nationalisation of all the republic's productive forces as a cure for the food crisis. Or the central meetings held in the north in November and December, and the *Société centrale* that was formed at Strasbourg, all at the instigation of the most advanced deputies on mission, or as a result of pressure from Hébertist plebeians. A whole article of the decree of 4 December was devoted to them: 'All congresses or central meetings, whether organised by the people's representatives or by *sociétés populaires,* under any appellation whatsoever . . . are revoked and expressly forbidden by this decree, as being subversive of the government's unity of action and as being federalist in tendency.'

4 The end of the revolutionary militia

The leaders of the revolutionary militia wanted to make it an autonomous body of men, with emergency means of

terror at its disposal, self-reliant, free of ordinary military regulations, privileged, and enjoying special material benefits; they even had the audacious idea, which they justified by the need to put a stop to counter-revolutionary activities, of substantially expanding its staff and its fighting complement, with the aim of taking units of the regular army under their command.

These ideas had already come up against the Committee of Public Safety's veto, though. The Convention had entrusted the commander-in-chief of the regular army with the job of organising the new force. The Assembly had adopted Carnot's regulations for the revolutionary militia, which were closely modelled on the ordinary military regulations. The regulations stipulated specifically that battalion *état-majors*, that is, the superior officers, were not to be elected by the men, but would be appointed by the Provisional Executive Council, and the appointments confirmed by the Committee of Public Safety.

On 30 October, the Convention made it clear, by decree, that the revolutionary militia was subject to military law, and that any member refusing to accept it would be struck off the roll. The revolutionary militia was not increased, nor even allowed to reach its expected numbers. The infantry never rose above 4,500 men, although the official complement was 6,000.

One article in particular in the decree of 4 December was directed against the central revolutionary militia – that 'army of Tartars', as Robert Lindet called them later:

> 'It is expressly forbidden for any armed force, whatever its standing or denomination, and for any commander of such a force, to carry out actions that are the proper responsibility of the civil authorities, including domiciliary searches, without a written order from those authorities.'

5 Hue and cry against the Executive Council

There was one other agency capable, to a lesser extent, of being used as an instrument of popular power, by virtue of

the fact that it was controlled by plebeians: the official government, christened the Provisional Executive Council.

When, on 1 August 1793, Danton made the proposal that the Committee of Public Safety should be raised to the status of Provisional Government, there was the unspoken implication in what he was saying that the Executive Council would be abolished. Since the creation of the Committee of Public Safety there had been so much duplication that the Executive Council had no real reason to exist. Sooner or later one or other body would have to step down. The Hébertist plebeians, who controlled the Executive Council through the War Minister, demanded the abolition of the Committee of Public Safety. While the Dantonists, who had hopes of exercising their influence through the Committee of Public Safety, called for an end to the Executive Council.

In putting forward this proposal, Danton was acting as spokesman for the fraction of the bourgeoisie most hostile to the plebeians and most terrified by the power of the masses. But at the same time he and his friends were pursuing concerns of their own. An old quarrel set the Dantonists against Pache's followers, a quarrel that was motivated more by sordid self-interest than considerations of high politics. Danton and his associates had made large profits out of equipping the army, supply administration and their functions as commissariat officers. They hated Pache's men as a rival gang, with equally sharp teeth. The two cliques were at daggers drawn.

Danton's hatred of Pache was long-standing. It was Danton who had got the portfolio for War given to the short-lived and maleficent Beurnonville in place of Pache, who had held the position since October 1792. Then the Dantonists harrassed Bouchotte, when he became Minister of War, and the sansculotte generals, without respite. Robespierre had to come to their defence on a number of occasions.

But the public collusion of Robespierre and Danton, and the dramatic turn of events on 21 November 1793, encouraged Danton's supporters to intensify their attacks on Pache's clique and the Executive Council. What the Dantonists were really

accusing them of was being under the plebeians' influence. On 4 December, and in the days following, Francois Bourdon (de l'Oise) demanded time and again that the Executive Council, 'those vermin', should simply be abolished.

Meanwhile, the Dantonists gained their first, important advantage, the imprisonment of François Vincent, secretary-general to the War Minister. This success, with its promise of greater success to come, intoxicated them. On the 19th, Bourdon told the Jacobin Club that 'the counter-revolutionary faction in the War offices' would 'soon be crushed'. And on the 21st, Danton in person made a thunderous speech against Bouchotte.

It was not only the Dantonists though who harrassed the plebeians of the War Ministry. They had powerful opponents on the Committee of Public Safety itself. Carnot, whom Barère had brought on to the Committee on 14 August, and who had taken over supreme command of military operations, was shrewd enough to use the services of Pache's men, but he was basically thoroughly hostile to them, and had been for a long time. As he surrounded himself with a staff of former aristocrats, he could not put up with Bouchotte's preference for leaders with no military experience but dedicated to the revolution over professional officers always ready to betray it. He waited for his opportunity. The attacks of the Dantonists had prepared the way for him, although he did not always agree with their excessive form, especially when they risked paralysing war operations. On 22 December, the Committee of Public Safety, in a document signed by him, explained the meaning of the decree of 4 December to the Executive Council: the Executive Council was no longer the government, the Committee was; the Committee would take the decisions and the Council would be restricted to carrying them out.

Nor was it long before the Committee of Public Safety showed the rest of their hand; they were aiming for the complete abolition of the Executive Council. They were to achieve it after the fall of the Hébertists.

6 The deputies on mission had been given unlimited powers

The deputies on mission also provoked the anger of central power, no longer willing to see a part of its authority contested by all-powerful, uncontrolled proconsuls, especially when the deputies were plebeian and receptive to pressure from the popular vanguard.

The creation of the deputies on mission had been a makeshift expedient which in a time of extreme danger had enabled the most pressing needs to be dealt with by galvanising the people's energies, on the spot, to oppose counter-revolution at home and abroad. The men sent out on missions were given carte blanche by an impotent government overwhelmed with work. The decree of 30 April 1793 gave them 'unlimited powers'. They were constantly encouraged to show no mercy. On 8 September Jean-Baptiste Carrier, the deputy in Brittany, asked for the deportation of the Bishop of Ille-et-Vilaine; immediately the Committee wrote back: 'The powers conferred on you by the Convention are quite adequate for you to authorise whatever measures of public safety you deem necessary.' On the 15th, the same Carrier reported that, apart from a few communes who were with the revolution, the whole of the rest of Brittany was in 'open counter-revolution'; the Committee's reply was, 'Purge the gangrenous bodies without delay, and let the guilty feel the blade of the law . . . The Committee is relying on your zeal.' On the 29th, the Committee sent Carrier to Nantes to dismiss the authorities from office and take all measures of public safety. On the same day, Marie-Jean Hérault de Séchelles, a member of the Committee of Public Safety, wrote to him on behalf of his colleagues, 'We can only afford to be humane when we are certain of victory.'

We know that Carrier carried out this advice to the letter. Counter-revolutionaries sent out into the Loire in boats fitted with valves to let in the water drowned in enormous numbers. On 21 January, after these massive executions, the Committee was urging him to be harsher in his application of Terror; he

was criticised for sending 110 prisoners to Paris to be tried in the proper way by the Revoluntary Tribunal.

The cruel repression that took place at Lyons was ordered, commanded, by the Committee of Public Safety. On 30 September they complained of dilatoriness in the siege of the town, and urged Edmond Dubois-Crancé and his colleagues to 'show the sword' in the 'criminal city'. On 12 October the deputies received a letter written and signed by Robespierre, accusing them of giving in 'to the first impulses of an insufficiently political sensibility' and concluding: 'Traitors must be exposed and ruthlessly dealt with . . . Have the salutary decrees we send you carried out with inexorable severity.' One of those decrees is still famous:

> 'The city of Lyons will be destroyed. Every part inhabited by the rich will be demolished . . . A column will be raised on the ruins of Lyons to bear witness to posterity of the crimes and punishments of the city's royalists, and it will bear this inscription: Lyons made war on liberty; Lyons is no more.'

On the 30th, the Committee sent Collot d'Herbois and Fouché on mission to Lyons with a section of the revolutionary militia, and gave Fouché instructions to 'crush' the last supporters of the aristocracy. Collot and Fouché set about it in no uncertain terms. Counter-revolutionaries were shot on a massive scale on the plain of Brotteaux (4 and 5 December). On the 5th, proud of having had 230 conspirators executed that day, Collot wrote to Maurice Duplay, Robespierre's friend and host,* 'We have given new life to republican justice, that is, justice as immediate and terrible as the will of the people'. Robespierre was thus kept informed of everything. On 8 January 1794 the Committee told Claude Petitjean, who was about to be sent to l'Allier and la Creuse, to take inspiration from the energy of Fouché. Again, the letter was in Robespierre's handwriting.

In the same way, the Committee urged the deputies

* And, by the way, my ancestor.

Claude Ysabeau and Jean Tallien (on 13 October) to enter Bordeaux and punish the rebel town. Robespierre added this postscript, in his own handwriting: 'Have traitors and royalists punished promptly and severely.'

Jacques Laplanche, about to set things in motion in le Loiret and le Cher, decided it would be as well to ask for instructions before he began; the Committee replied on 12 September, 'The unlimited powers vested in you authorise all the measures of public safety that you consider necessary.' And to show their satisfaction, the Committee sent him to Caen and Calvados with the following instructions (14 October): 'We need those brilliant acts of severity which do not spare the guilty and which make a profound impression on everybody.' The letter, in Collot d'Herbois' handwriting, bore the signatures of Robespierre and Barère.

7 The deputies' powers are limited

But on 25 November (four days after Robespierre's dramatic speech) a decree drily called the deputies to order. 'The people's deputies sent on mission must act strictly in accordance with the decision of the Committee of Public Safety.' On the 29th, Billaud-Varenne, outlining to the Convention the decree they were to adopt on 4 December, made a sharp attack on these deputies: 'In their zeal, the people's deputies who have been sent out into the départements have created institutions which because of their lack of planning could be fatal to liberty.' And he enumerated a whole series of errors or abuses which he claimed the deputies were guilty of.

Part of the 4 December decree was directed against them. As soon as it was issued the Committee of Public Safety sent them a circular that was more of a reprimand than a commentary and which emphasised the limited nature of the powers they had been given. On 24 December, the Committee let them know they were to 'keep religiously' within those limits.

Increasingly, the deputies on mission lost prerogatives to

the national agents. While they were waiting for their mission to be ended 'in the shortest possible time' they saw their authority substantially diminished. They could no longer make any moves without coming up against an interdiction.

They were forbidden to delegate their powers to local agents. (The most radical of them had entrusted the job of 'sansculottising' a locality to plebeians, or even ordinary sans-culottes; the delegation of such extensive powers to 'men of the people' or plebeians in direct contact with the masses terrified the central power.)

They were forbidden to raise or levy taxes on their own authority. The 4 December decree stipulated: 'No tax, nor voluntary or enforced loan, is to be levied except by decree.' The rich, the property-owners, whom the zeal of the plebeians had made rather uneasy, were able to breathe again.

They were forbidden to use the emergency tribunals in their own ways. The Convention decreed, on 16 February 1794: 'Revolutionary tribunals or extraordinary commissions set up in the départements . . . can only try those accused of offenses, knowledge of which could be explicitly attributed to them'.

They were forbidden to pronounce the death penalty.

They were forbidden to requisition. One of their most widely used prerogatives was withdrawn. By a decree of 12 February 1794, that right was conferred on the Supply Commission, and on it alone; they could no longer carry out requisitions without the consent of the Committee of Public Safety, except in cases of extreme urgency, when their orders would be carried out provisionally and they would be held answerable for them.

Lastly, they were forbidden to raise revolutionary militias. All the departmental revolutionary militias were disbanded under the decree of 4 December.

Most of the deputies obediently carried out the orders that came from Paris, except Claude Javogues, who got round the decree by converting his Loire revolutionary militia into a 'national guard conscripted for the detention of conspirators'. The revolutionary soldiers, though, did not all regard them-

selves as disbanded. A fortnight after the decree was published the revolutionary militia in the Haute-Garonne was still spreading terror wherever they went. Denis Fabre (de l'Hérault) and Jean-Baptiste Clauzel reported their 'excesses' to the Convention on 27 December, as a result of which the Assembly passed the following decree:

> 'Any citizens belonging to so-called revolutionary militias, disbanded by the law of the 17th of this month, who have not dispersed and handed in their arms . . . within 24 hours of the publication of this decree, will be punished by ten years in irons. Any officers, of whatever rank, to whom the same applies will receive the death penalty.'

8 The deputies brought to heel by special envoys

The central power did more than just issue interdictions and reprimands to the deputies. They despatched special envoys to the most radical of them whose job it was to oversee their actions and oppose them. These *missi dominici* were all confidential agents of Robespierre's.

Saint-Just and Joseph Lebas were sent to Strasbourg at the beginning of October, where a violent conflict was taking place between moderates and radicals which to some extent reflected the class struggle between bourgeois and bras nus. The official deputies took their stand beside the sansculottes, who were mostly from outside the town, and who were grouped in a *société centrale*, called the *Propagande*. Saint-Just and Lebas gave their support to the moderates, the well-to-do property owners of Strasbourg, who gathered around the purged *société populaire*. The leader of the *Propagande* was a man of great ability, the public prosecutor for the Revolutionary Tribunal, Euloge Schneider. Intoxicated by the exercise of power, Schneider had definitely gone a bit too far. Saint-Just and Lebas, to the delight of the well-off Strasburghers, exhibited him bound to the foot of the guillotine, then sent him under heavy guard to Paris. Lebas wrote to the Committee of Public Safety on 14 December explaining that Schneider's

punishment had been ordered, among other reasons, 'because of the need to keep down the foreigners'. 'We do not believe the cosmopolitan charlatans', he added, 'and we trust nobody but ourselves'. Schneider was guillotined later, on 31 March 1794, for 'activities likely to encourage the hostile plans of both internal and external enemies'.

The privileged and the counter-revolutionaries of Alsace raised their heads again. The writer Charles Nodier who, still in his teens, was in Strasbourg at the time, describes in his *Souvenirs* the impression produced by Schneider's downfall. A 'Propagandist' called Monnet (in fact, the mayor of Strasbourg) clasped his hands and told him, 'Saint-Just has triumphed, and liberty is lost.'

Marc-Antoine Jullien was sent to Nantes in December to put a stop to the cruelty Carrier had been incited to commit. In his letters to Robespierre and others Jullien made the deputy out to be a satrap and despot, and had him recalled. When much later, in November 1794, the Thermidorean Convention decided to summon Carrier before the Revolutionary Tribunal, it was Jullien's letters to Robespierre that the prosecution invoked. And when the trial came before the Tribunal, Jullien was a prosecution witness. He had opened the way to counter-revolution.

The Committee of Public Safety gave Robespierre's brother Augustin a special mission to the Haute-Saône in January 1794. Like Jullien, the younger Robespierre was given instructions to oppose the activities of the deputies, and present himself as the redresser of wrongs. He was well-known for his moderate opinions, which were to the right of his brother's, or more accurately, which gave public expression to ideas and intentions that Maximilien did not yet dare risk formulating himself.

Augustin Robespierre arrived at Vesoul on 22 January 1794, and met the deputy he was meant to be bringing under control, André Bernard (de Saintes). There he performed a provincial version of the drama his brother had pulled off in Paris on 21 November. He appeared at the *société populaire*, where he

talked about conciliation, indulgence and universal amnesty, and freed eight hundred people who had been detained.

André Bernard (de Saintes) was rather taken aback by the unexpected arrival of this emissary from his masters, come to keep an eye on the départements he was responsible for, and thought he had better appear to be persuaded by Augustin Robespierre's ideas of clemency; so he put his signature alongside the envoy's, and the two men got on very well. But after a while popular pressure was brought to bear on him, and made him ashamed of his weakness. The *société populaire* at Besançon, more progressive than the one at Vesoul, was furious at the way the suspects had been released en masse at Vesoul and Montbéliard. Deputy Sylvain Lejeune, recently appointed to Besançon and open to the influence of its *société populaire*, met Bernard there and took him to task. On 31 January the two deputies went to the *société populaire* where Bernard, stung by criticism from the sansculottes, admitted his weakness. On 5 February, he sent the Convention a touching mea culpa from Dijon in which he confessed 'before all France' to having co-operated with his colleague, the younger Robespierre, in setting free administrators who had been jailed for being in league with the Girondins.

Deputy Javogues had been operating a fearless policy in Saône-et-Loire and l'Ain, where with the support of *comités de surveillance* made up of bras nus, he set a revolutionary militia on to suspects and established popular commissions to deal out summary justice to them, ordered the houses of the rich to be demolished, put the harvests of confiscated lands up for sale, etc. His supporters were even rash enough to denounce the about turn Robespierre had executed in Paris.

The Incorruptible was not slow to respond. He sent out one of his confidential agents, deputy Marie Gouly, to replace Javogues in l'Ain. Gouly arrived at Bourg on 12 December and without wasting any time he suspended the execution of all his predecessor's orders, quashed the popular commission and disbanded the revolutionary militia. But Gouly was overzealous. It was not yet time for open reaction. Robespierre had

to sacrifice his special envoy. Gouly was recalled on 15 January.

Javogues then made a direct attack on Robespierre's supporters, and on Cambon in particular, who he said had tried to 'set the revolution into reverse' at Lyons. A few days later, on 4 February, he sent Collot d'Herbois an unusually violent letter. Taking the argument back from personalities to principles, he put dictatorship on trial and posed the question of class. He attacked the recent laws sanctioned by the revolutionary government.

> 'There is no longer any doubt that a counter-revolution exists . . . This counter-revolution is to be found in the majority of members of the Committee of Public Safety who have sworn to ruin me . . . It is war to the death between them and me, and I freely accept the challenge.'

On 6 February, the Convention decided that Javogue's conduct should be examined by the government committees, and ordered him to Paris immediately. Javogues obeyed, but commented, 'People are dying of hunger everywhere. The rich have powerful support in the Convention.' On 25 February the Bourg *société populaire* protested to the Convention about the way the deputy had been treated. It was a bold move, which cost the authors of the petition dear; on 18 April the Committee of Public Safety summoned the councillors of Bourg to Paris, where they remained under lock and key for several months.

9 Enragés and Hébertists against the strong state

The vanguard militants were not mistaken about the meaning of the strengthening of central power, the first signs of which were appearing in summer 1793. They knew that the strong government which was gradually being established was in large part a weapon levelled against the popular vanguard.

The enragés were the first to speak out against the development as its shape became clear. Théophile Leclerc

commented in these terms on Danton's proposal to raise the Committee of Public Safety to being the ruling government committee. 'I can see nothing in this mass of combined powers that the Committee of Public Safety is, but a terrifying dictatorship.' The enragés realised with amazement that the terror, which they had so often called for, was no longer terror controlled from below, but a terror from above, crushing the counter-revolution and the militant revolution without distinction.

The Hébertists, who watched the Executive Council, where they were influential, reduced to a minor role by the dictatorship, also saw the danger and denounced it. In August 1793 Hébert put these words into the mouth of Marat, who had appeared to him in a dream: 'Montagnards, as long as the Committee usurp all your power, we shall never have a government, or what we do have will be detestable. When complete power is given over to men whose positions are unassailable, it's the end of liberty.'

But they were all trapped in an equivocal situation. The powers they were attacking were directed in an increasingly open way against the popular vanguard, but they were also, to a lesser extent, helping to keep the counter-revolutionaries in check. All they could find to put forward against the establishment of the 'revolutionary government' were the proposals that the 1793 democratic constitution should be brought into force immediately, that new elections should be held and that the Provisional Executive Council should take up its duties as the permanent government: and this at a time when the Montagnards were still a minority in the country, and when new elections would risk creating an Assembly even more reactionary than the Convention.

If objective conditions had permitted the enragés and the Hébertists to be consistent, they would not have put up a programme of bourgeois democracy against the dictatorship of the revolutionary government. They would have gone back to the idea of revolutionary coercion exercised by the people themselves and put it forward for their own purposes. They

would have opposed the power of the bourgeoisie, as it was directed against the masses, with the power of the armed sans-culottes, democratically organised in their revolutionary organs in the localities. To concentrate on an opposition between the Executive Council and the Committee of Public Safety was to pose the wrong question: the real rivalry was not so much between those two bodies as between central power (Convention and Committee of Public Safety) and the Commune, between bourgeois and popular power. If they wanted to crush the royalists successfully, at home and abroad, and at the same time ensure that the coercive forces were not used against the masses, they had to free themselves for good from the myth of 'national representation' and revive the insurrectionary Commune of 10 August 1792 to 31 May 1793. But too many of the conditions were still lacking; to achieve those ends they would have needed, apart from anything else – and not just in Paris but throughout the country – a sufficiently large, distinct, educated and class-conscious vanguard.

8.
The Fall of the Hébertists

1 From masked reaction to open reaction

From December 1793 to February 1794, reaction had appeared in a still disguised form. While bourgeois power was gradually being strengthened, the organs of popular power were progressively diminished; they had not yet been suppressed. But from March 1794 onwards we enter a phase of quite overt reaction. The central powers no longer even tried to disguise what they were doing. They unmasked themselves, and they struck. The revolutionary bourgeoisie's intention was no longer merely to contain the mass movement; they wanted to paralyse it and decapitate it. The second stage was present in embryo in the first. But all the same the process happened faster than could have been anticipated. Why?

First because the popular vanguard, far from being forced back, were radicalised (as we would put it today) and the bourgeoisie began to be alarmed by the unrest. The vanguard – the elite of the sansculottes in the capital and a number of towns in the provinces – had not given up the fight. The mass movement had narrowed, but what it had lost in size it had gained in depth. It had been diverted away from the struggle against the men in black and nothing, no safety valve, had been offered to put in its place, so it returned to its natural direction, the course it had followed from February to September 1793 and which it had never entirely abandoned; once again it became a primarily economic movement, protesting against scarcity and high prices.

Another reason for this renewed agitation over supplies was a very marked deterioration in the availability of food-

stuffs. From the end of December 1793 when controls were relaxed, the provisioning of the capital worsened and price controls stopped being observed. The sansculottes started 'shouting for bread' again, as they had from February to September 1793, moving into direct action.

As the Montagnard bourgeoisie sensed the rising popular discontent, they turned to the summary methods which had already been successful once. They tried to smash the movement by depriving it of those it considered its leaders. On the excuse of a vague conspiracy which hardly existed, they liquidated the Hébertists just as they had liquidated the enragés.

By an odd twist of events, the Héberts and Chaumettes who had helped the bourgeoisie do away with Jacques Roux, Leclerc, Varlet and the rest, were now, in their turn, treated like enragés, confused with enragés and liquidated like enragés. Hébert wrote gloomily in his paper 'The world is full of unreliable people who take a jaundiced view of everything . . . Mention an honest republican in front of them . . . and they'll call him a demagogue, an enragé, and a faction-monger.'

As the revolutionary bourgeoisie silenced the Hébertists they made the same desperate protest as the enragés. Ronsin, imprisoned, told his companions in misfortune: 'You must realise that sooner or later the instruments of revolution are crushed.'

All the same, it was a great compliment to the Hébertists to confuse them with the enragés. If they did rashly let slip the word insurrection, all they envisaged was a *journée* like 5 September, that would open the way to power to the plebeians, to themselves. And they did not even seem seriously prepared for that. They were torn between ambition and fear. They wanted positions but at the same time they were afraid of Robespierre's anathema. As was their wont, they made a lot of noise, then gave in.

They were beaten without even joining battle, without having made a single real gesture of resistance. Their ill-timed protests and indiscreet remarks gave the authorities enough of an excuse to justify their arrest, and then their execution, to

the public. They had given ammunition to their adversaries, but they had not armed themselves. It was relatively easy to eliminate them as they had never managed – or wanted – to forge links with the masses, who saw the quarrel between the Hébertists and the authorities, between Cordeliers and Jacobins, as something foreign to them, above their heads, and felt that what was at stake was not so much the improvement of the starving people's lot as much as the distribution of public offices. Hébert and his supporters did not do a great deal to dispel this despondency and mistrust or to make closer contact with the masses. Reading the speeches and motions they drafted just before they vanished, one finds nothing but a very faint echo of the immediate popular demands.

And even if they had been able to make links with the faubourgs, even if they had been serious about fighting, could they have been successful in leading the bras nus in a new 31 May, and a new purge of the Convention? Only a minority thought they could. They tried in vain to push the Hébertists into action, and stuck with them after they had been arrested. They understood that the quarrel, superficially one between Jacobins and Cordeliers, was in fact between bourgeois and bras nus. Although they were not under many illusions about Hébert's cowardice, they realised that the fall of the Hébertists would bring with it the risk of a reversal in the balance of forces between the Montagnard bourgeoisie and the sans-culottes and that defeat for the Hébertists meant defeat for them. They gave their solidarity to the accused men, and supported them to the end. But they were only a minority and they were unable to save them. The reverse, in fact; first by pushing them into action and then by taking their defence they gave the authorities the impression that there was far more popular support for the Hébertists than there actually was, which awoke their fear and thus strengthened their desire to clamp down.

There was one other factor that hastened the pattern of reaction. It was spring again. The summer months would soon come, and with them, military campaigns. The bourgeoisie was

soon to reap the fruits of an enormous technical effort, and return to the Girondin strategy of marching on Antwerp and Amsterdam, which had been so annoyingly interrupted by invasion and the period of plebeian terror. A war of conquest and expansion such as this could not be conducted without order and discipline, in the bourgeois sense of the terms. The time for revolutionary war was passed. It was no longer a matter of spurring ragged volunteers into action. The final reckoning with the British required a strong power, relieved of the daily pressure of the masses and free from faction fighting. The dawn of victory would not break for the Hébertists.

2 Denunciation of the sociétés sectionnaires

After September 1793 the activities of the Paris sans-culottes were centred on new organs of popular power, the *sociétés populaires* of the sections. They were not, in fact, a total innovation, just a metamorphosis of the sections themselves. Up until September 1793, we saw the class activities of the sections co-ordinated by committees made up of commissioners delegated from the various sections. From September, the movement acquired another structure, based on the *sociétés populaires* in the sections, and co-ordinated by a Central Committee of *sociétés populaires.*

What was the reason for the change in form? It was forced on the vanguard by the revolutionary bourgeoisie as, frightened by the amount of revolutionary feeling among the masses, they tried to limit the bras nus' participation in public life. Danton used the deceptive pretext that there was a threat of counter-revolutionary plots in the capital similar to the ones which had been mounted in some provincial cities, to propose to the 5 September session that thenceforth there should be a special meeting of each section every Thursday and Sunday. The sanctimonious hypocrite claimed that this would allow the workers, who hardly went out the other evenings, to frustrate the plans of the counter-revolutionaries in their sections. On the 9th, Barère astutely transformed this proposal by having it

agreed that, quite simply, there should be no more than two section meetings a week.

The sections got together and, on the 17th, sent a deputation to the Convention with a petition. Their orator (Jean Varlet himself) accused the Assembly on their behalf of wanting to 'close the people's eyes and reduce their vigilance'. Robespierre saw the danger and tried to avert it:

> 'Is it not true that while the sections were in permanent session the people did not discuss their own welfare? Who were the people, in fact, who could sacrifice their time to go to meetings? . . . It was the rich, the plotters and the royalist "muscadins". Artisans and honest working people cannot spend all their time at meetings.'

The argument was unfounded. The Paris sansculottes, despite their day-to-day occupations, did take a very active part in the life of their sections.

Having failed to persuade the Convention to revoke their decision, the sections decided, by common consent, to sidestep the difficulty: for the days that they were forbidden to hold general meetings, they turned themselves into *sociétés populaires*, from which the idea of a federation of *sociétés* followed quite naturally. Early in October they each delegated two commissioners to a central committee of the *sociétés populaires.* On 20 October the Central Committee published its constitution. There it said, 'The principal aim of the Committee is to undertake close correspondence with all the *sociétés populaires* in the republic, and to serve as a means of communication between them.' So the new body was not only concerned with providing co-ordination for the *sociétés populaires* in Paris: it meant to link the centres of popular activity throughout the country.

This new form of organisation offered real advantages and it was retained. All citizens who had the right to vote were grouped in the sections. Their composition meant they could not be combat organisations. They were too unwieldy. But the *sociétés populaires* of the sections were composed only of the

most revolutionary and active elements of the sections and required a password for admittance. The *société populaire* was the nucleus of the section – what we might nowadays call the fraction.

The *société populaire* broke the back of the section's work, drew up its agenda, imposed its wishes on it, took over nominations to vacant positions and issued certificates of citizenship. Time and again, the *sociétés populaires* proved more radical than the sections.

They also drew women fully into public life. In the sections they were not allowed to speak or vote, but in the *sociétés populaires* women had absolute equality with men. And as most of them were in the forefront of the struggle, they contributed to the radicalisation of the *sociétés sectionnaires*, (as they were also called).

The result was that the *sociétés populaires* in the sections constituted a separate rival organisation to the Jacobins, and one that was also more radical. The members of this sort of party had their distinguishing features.

Gradually the threat of a new form of popular power that would rival the Convention was growing, and the bourgeoisie in general, and the Jacobins in particular, were clearly frightened. The spectre of direct democracy and federation, so often beaten down and equally often resurgent, rose again.

The Montagnard bourgeoisie reacted sharply to the threat hanging over them from the *sociétés populaires.* A prolonged struggle brought the *sociétés populaires* of the sections and their Central Committee into conflict with the Jacobin Club.

Robespierre opened the attack himself. In his 21 November speech against the dechristianisers, he treacherously used the fact that a shady character called Pierre Proly, the black sheep of Hébertism, had managed to get himself on to the Central Committee of *sociétés populaires*, although he was not involved in setting it up, nor did he monopolise it. Through Proly, the Incorruptible tried to discredit the *sociétés populaires.* 'This character', he declared, 'has founded about fifty popular clubs to overthrow and ruin the Jacobins'. He returned to his

attack on the *sociétés sectionnaires* at the Jacobin club on 26 December, insinuating that they were 'in the pay of foreigners'.

The 'moderantist' course initiated by Robespierre awoke considerable discontent among the sansculottes. In mid-January police reports recorded that agitation was being fostered by the *sociétés populaires* of the sections. And on 27 January the *sociétés sectionnaires* were once again on the carpet at the Jacobin Club.

At Robespierre's section, the Section des Piques, one of the commissioners declared on 10 February: 'The great number of *sociétés populaires* could perhaps become a threat to order and the salutary progress of the Jacobin Club.' But the authorities waited until the balance of forces between bourgeois and bras nus changed before they risked dissolving the *sociétés populaires* in Paris. That decision was not taken until after the Hébertists had been liquidated.

3 First brushes between Robespierre and Hébertism

Robespierre had to put on a brave face and make use of the plebeians to stamp out counter-revolution, but he did not like them; he was afraid of them, and he waited patiently for the time when he would be free of their bothersome protection. On the eve of his death Ronsin told his companions in prison: 'Long ago I realised you were being closely watched and followed in the senate by a frightened, cunning and dangerous man . . . He took you by surprise because you were not sufficiently distrustful.'

In his paper *Le Père Duchesne,* Hébert attacked Robespierre directly, presumably in the belief that loud, hard talk would frighten him, and levelled against him the grave and dangerous accusation of ambition: 'Woe betide the man who rises too high, when one false step can plunge him into the abyss . . . So much the worse for those who recognise themselves in the portraits I've drawn.' Robespierre never forgot, nor forgave, crimes of lèse-majesté, and he soon retaliated. At

the Jacobin Club on 28 November he challenged the Hébertists to put their own ambitious plans into action. 'If you are dissatisfied with the Committee of Public Safety, come and take over from us. Come on, we'll give way to you with pleasure . . . Then we'll see how you handle the reins of government.' And he ended by threatening the Hébertist faction with a declaration of war.

On 17 November pressure from the now powerful Dantonists secured an order for the arrest of Vincent, secretary-general to the Minister of War, and Ronsin, the general commanding the revolutionary militia, who at that very moment was playing an active part in putting down the insurrection at Lyons. At the Jacobin Club, Fabre d'Eglantine took Ronsin to task for the relentlessness with which he had pursued the reactionary General Custine, and claimed that in doing thus he had acted on behalf of England. Dismissing Custine and sending him to the Revolutionary Tribunal was one of the claims to glory of Vincent and the Hébertist plebeians. The simple fact that somebody could now stand up at the Jacobin Club and describe such a praiseworthy act as a crime, without arousing a storm of indignation, provides some measure of how far the balance of forces had swung towards reaction.

The arrests obviously could not have been decided on without Robespierre's consent. They bore his stamp. It was in vain that he tried to exonerate himself some days later. His denial sounded like an admission.

The recall and arrest of Ronsin filled the sansculottes of Lyons with dismay. The next day, 18 December, one of them, Gaillard, committed suicide. Gaillard was not just anybody. He had been a friend of Chalier, the martyr of the Lyons commune, executed by the Girondins in July. He knew Leclerc the enragé well. He had spent months in the jails of the counter-revolution. After the liberation of Lyons he had come to Paris and brought the Jacobin Club a proud relic, Chalier's head. He was a member of the 'temporary commission' which organised repression in the Rhône. Why did Gaillard kill himself? The temporary commission sent some of its members to the dead

man's town to investigate: 'From what we have been able to discover, and from the last words he uttered, he was afraid the cause of liberty might not triumph, and that completely deranged his mind.'

Deputy Javogues denounced Couthon and, through him, Robespierre in a proclamation of 1 February 1794, criticising him for the moderantism he had displayed at Lyons and, among others, included this accusation:

> 'Courageous Gaillard, who held the key to this criminal intrigue, knew how close you were to Gouly, Gauthier and all the rest of that gang of moderantists, and afraid for the safety of his country, committed suicide, and it's you who are the cause of his death.'

Robespierre and the Dantonists had gone too far. They had covered too much ground at one step. The bras nus were astounded at the arrest of Vincent and Ronsin, which they saw as provocation. Their reply was immediate and vigorous. Under pressure from them, Collot d'Herbois, the demagogue, hastily returned from Lyons to make a vehement protest.

Over the preceding days, Hébert had begun to weaken under the combined attacks of the Dantonists and the Robespierrists; now he regained his self-possession. The most advanced sections of the capital, the working-class sections of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, suddenly raised their voices, and demanded in a petition that Ronsin should be freed.

The discontent of the plebeians and the bras nus' sudden entry on the scene frightened Robespierre. It seems that from then on he was expecting a Hébertist uprising. At the Jacobin Club session on 23 December he declared: 'If ever a section of the people, misled by one or two men, want to dictate to the Convention . . . we shall display the courage of republicans . . . and await death on our curule chairs.' Camille Desmoulins commented in his paper: 'We know the villains are planning a 31 May against the most active men of the Mountain. Robespierre has already expressed his foreboding to the Jacobins.'

In the circular explaining the decree of 4 December which he had sent to the military tribunals, Billaud-Varenne denounced the 'base men . . . who see the revolution as nothing but a means to build up their own power or fortune'. 'They are only waiting for a leader and an opportunity.'

Throughout January the Hébertists called for the release of Vincent and Ronsin – still imprisoned by the authorities – and for the Dantonists who had denounced them to be imprisoned. On the 20th, Robespierre, forced to make some concessions, was willing to admit that Vincent and Ronsin were not guilty, but all the same he kept 'oppressed innocence' in prison.

Yet popular pressure grew daily in support of the prisoners and against the Dantonists. The Cordeliers Club decided, as a mark of protest, to place a veil over the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

The two men were finally freed on 2 February. Popular pressure forced Robespierre to release his prey for a while. The plebeians were overjoyed by the victory, and thought they could now attack their adversaries openly. At the Jacobin Club on the 4th, Brichet, who worked for the Minister of War, opened the offensive. But then Robespierre went to the rostrum and threw cold water over the plebians' plans. Be quite clear, he told them in effect, there will be no turn to the left, no new 31 May. And having eulogised the right wing of the Convention, he asked for Brichet, who had attacked the 'Marsh', to be expelled from the Jacobins.

The Hébertists responded to Robespierre's attack by raising the flag of revolt. They abandoned the club in the rue Saint-Honoré, where the 'despotism of opinion' denounced by Brichet was rife, to meet at the Cordeliers, which became the centre of resistance. In a display of anger on the 12th, Momoro exclaimed: 'Every worn-out republican and every casualty of the revolution calls us *exagérés* because we are patriots, which is something they no longer want to be.' After he had finished, Hébert attacked openly: 'Some people have dared to say that the men who sent Brissot to the scaffold were paid by Pitt', he declared.

> 'But what sort of people spread such slanders? . . . Those who, greedily amassing power but always insatiable for more, have invented the term ultra-revolutionary and pompously use it again and again in grand speeches to destroy those friends of the people who keep a close eye on their plans.'

This was aimed directly at Robespierre.

This split between Jacobins and Cordeliers heralded an open conflict between the Hébertists and those in power. But neither side was yet ready for the decisive clash, and there was an outward reconciliation. The Cordeliers went en masse to the Jacobin Club at the end of February to assure them of their fraternal feelings. Robespierre pretended to be ill. For nearly a month he kept out of the public eye, waiting like a cat crouched before it springs, claws out, on its victim. But those in the know had already worked out what the master's intentions were.

4 The food crisis worsens

Popular unrest at the beginning of March precipitated the political crisis. The availability of foodstuffs had grown markedly worse in the capital. Food was not being sent in from the country. Supplies of meat, particularly, were down to a minimum and it could no longer be bought except at black-market prices.

In the midst of all this want, the profiteers of the revolution were short of nothing. While the small traders' windows were empty, the luxury shops of the former Palais-Royal displayed, if we are to believe a police report, 'all the choicest gourmet items'. And the people were saying 'For the rich there is still an abundance of partridge, truffled turkey, *pré salé* lamb, pâtés from Amiens and Rouen.' With unerring class interest the sansculottes moved to direct action. Anonymous posters appeared on walls – 'Better to die fighting for glory for our country than to die of starvation . . . Civil war is brewing.'

The food crisis reached its climax during the first fort-

night in March. It strained relations between the authorities and Hébertism as far as they would go, and provoked the break. Robespierre, frightened by the prospect of a popular revolt, saw no solution execpt preventive repression. Where and when to strike was the problem, though. He could not have all the sansculottes and housewives in the capital arrested – the only people he could seriously deal with were those leaders able to co-ordinate the mass discontent and transpose it on to a political level. But the only popular movement that reflected popular pressure, however weakly and indirectly, was Hébert's. They would have to control Hébertism if they wanted to keep the bras nus in check.

Just as the economic crisis reached a head, the political crisis broke. Here again, the coincidence of the dates is remarkable. On 2 March Ronsin told the Cordeliers there had to be an insurrection, another 31 May. Hébert still advised them to wait. But then on the 4th, still at the Cordeliers, he could no longer resist the pressure from his supporters, which itself stemmed from pressure from the popular vanguard. He was visibly unenthusiastic. But his supporters literally pushed him into making irrevocable remarks, for the second time, about the man it was mortally dangerous to wound.

> 'It is not thieves we should fear most,' he cried, 'it is ambitious men, men of ambition! Men who push everyone else forward while they stay behind the scenes. The more power they have, the more they want. They want to rule. But the Cordeliers will not allow it. [*Several voices*: No, no, no!] I shall name the men who have silenced the patriots in the *sociétés populaires*. For two months I have made a point of being circumspect, and I've said nothing, but now I must speak out.'

The Hébertist left wing spurred him on and reproached him for being over-cautious. Momoro shouted 'I repeat your own self-reproach, Hébert, that for months you have been afraid to tell the truth. Now speak, we'll back you up.' And Vincent: 'In my pocket I have a copy of *Père Duchesne*, written four months ago; to compare the tone of truth that per-

vades it with those of today you would think Père Duchesne was dead.' Thus spurred on, Hébert reminded them that at the Jacobin Club, Camille Desmoulins had been

> 'expelled, struck off, by the patriots, and that there was one man there, obviously misguided . . . else I wouldn't know what to call him, who strongly urged that he should be readmitted, despite the fact that the people had made it abundantly clear what they wanted done with the traitor.'

And Hébert concluded, lumping Robespierrists and Dantonists together, 'Are you still in any doubt that there is a faction that wants to stamp out the rights of the people? Of course not. Well then, since it exists . . . how are we to escape it? Insurrection, yes, insurrection.' The willingness of Hébert's supporters to fight reached its highest pitch at this memorable session.

5 But the lines have not all been cut

Yet despite the noisy advance warning of the insurrection, no preparations were made, nor was it carried through. Why not? Within the Hébertists there was a left and a right wing, and to understand what they were up to, we must distinguish between the two.

The right wing was made up of ambitious leaders who were not serious about the insurrection. They had absolutely no desire to let the popular vanguard loose. Throughout that session on 4 March, all they had wanted was to threaten the authorities and put pressure on them, but they had not cut the umbilical cord that bound them to the Montagnard bourgeoisie. Chaumette and the other leaders of the Commune thought the initiatives taken had been inopportune.

It soon became clear that not all the links between Jacobins and Cordeliers had been cut. Collot d'Herbois, a member of the Committee of Public Safety, and the Hébertists' official patron, remained the uniting factor. At the last moment he tried to play the part of mediator.

On the 7th, a deputation from the Jacobin Club, led by Collot, was received at the Cordeliers. The success they scored was made easier by the fact that the platform had been 'arranged' in advance and purged of extremist elements. Hébert grovelled. He explained that the press reports of the notorious session had been inaccurate. 'By the word insurrection, he had merely meant the unity which must exist among true patriots', and so on. The two *sociétés* swore indissoluble unity. The next day, in the account of the mission he gave to the Jacobins, Collot declared, 'A number I saw were worried at having been in disagreement, others were remorseful.'

The Cordeliers, in their turn, had promised to send a delegation to the Jacobins with the minutes of the meeting Collot had attended. Jacobins and Cordeliers exchanged vows of friendship and fraternal embraces.

At the Cordelier Club on the 12th, Hébert completed the retreat. He said 'that the proposal for an insurrection, although of course hypothetical, could look irresponsible' and asked for 'their formal denial that he had ever spoken against Robespierre in the way the papers had insinuated'. The Cordeliers, unwillingly, gave it.

But Hébertism also had its contacts with the popular vanguard. Their left wing was under constant pressure from the bras nus. At the same time as the leaders were recanting, and swearing vows of friendship with the Jacobins, a brave minority of their supporters were continuing to agitate, and making preparations for action. This left wing had been pushed forward by pressure from a number of sections and *sociétés sectionnaires.*

At the session of the Cordelier Club on 9 March, the differences between left and right were clear to see. After Hébert's moderate speech, Vincent made a furious attack on the faction that wanted to establish a 'system of pernicious moderantism': 'There are still some individuals', he cried, 'who will have to be named sooner or later.' The public in the galleries, mostly women, acclaimed Vincent, and censured Hébert's strategic retreat. With the pressure of the popular vanguard, the left wing was victorious.

Hébert was torn between two opposing feelings: on the one hand, fear (fear of the activity of the masses and fear of government repression); and on the other, his desire to succeed to the post of Minister of the Interior, replacing Jules Paré, who with the backing of Danton and Robespierre, had done him out of the job the previous summer. Wavering between ambition and fear, he contradicted himself between one day and the next. In issue 354 of *Le Père Duchesne* he expressed his pleasure at the embraces that had been exchanged between Jacobins and Cordeliers. But in issue 355 – the last – he burnt his boats: 'There is no going back. The revolution must be completed . . . One step back could spell the republic's ruin.'

The left wing had made some preparations for the fast-approaching *journée.* Some of the *sociétés populaires* spent several days seeking out ammunition, so they would be ready at a moment's notice. The right wing, though, had made no preparations at all. When, later, the authorities put the conspirators in jail, in order to justify their execution they ascribed social and political intentions to them which were far too large-scale, and attributed to them a technique for a coup d'état which was certainly beyond their capabilities. They were said to have planned to get into the prisons, butcher the aristocrats, seize Pont-Neuf and the Arsenal, burn down the Convention Committees, appoint a dictator, a 'Grand Judge', and distribute all the money in the mint and the Treasury among the people, as well as the sequestrated property of bankers, big businessmen, etc. But the whole thing was a piece of sensationalism. Hébert did not want to go that far. If the doors of the Executive Council had been opened to him, and to Vincent and Ronsin, he would no doubt have made his peace with Robespierre. These great revolutionaries were fighting for a few ministerial offices. But the impatience of their supporters, themselves spurred on by the popular vanguard, was their downfall. They were not deeply enough committed to carry out a coup d'état successfully, yet they were deeply enough involved to call down the wrath of those in power on their heads. The day after their arrest, one of them, Ronsin, said to his fellow-prisoners:

'You spoke at the Cordelier Club when what was really needed was action. That indiscreet openness ruined your chances.'

Fear of the popular vanguard, and the desire to crush a mass movement whose importance they actually overestimated, made the authorities decide on severity. But they were careful not to cut the umbilical cord that connected them and Hébertism. While the most conspicuous plebeians or the most deeply implicated–Hébert, Vincent, Ronsin, etc–were liquidated, some eminent right-wingers – Jean Pache, Jean-Baptiste Bouchotte, François Hanriot, Claude Santerre (the plebeian general in the Vendée) – were, to widespread surprise, provisionally spared. They saved their necks by simply making due apology to Hébert's executioners. It was only on 10 May that it was decided to dismiss Pache, and have him arrested, without bringing him to trial. Yet if one is to believe the rumour, it was Pache himself who was going to be appointed 'Grand Judge'.

Bouchotte went even further. He had already left Vincent in the lurch on 13 March, only a few hours before his arrest, by withdrawing him from his duties as secretary-general to the Minister of War. On 24 May he did it again, sending Robespierre a long note repudiating his former collaborator and humbly begging forgiveness for having fallen into the trap of Hébertism. He was not arrested until 21 July.

Pache and his associates perhaps owed their reprieve to another circumstance; they were excluded from the 'conspiracy' to save more important people: Billaud-Varenne and Collot d'Herbois. Did not the two men owe their positions on the Committee of Public Safety to Hébertism? The second, especially, had long been a supporter of the Hébertists. Perhaps he was even approached to take part in the 'conspiracy'. Speaking at the Jacobin Club on 12 April, he made an allusion to some 'terrible proposals' which had been put to some members of the Convention. 'They were promised prominent positions if they agreed to carry out the plans of our enemies.' As for Billaud-Varenne, he was on mission at Saint-Malo when the arrest of the 'conspirators' was decided on. He returned in haste to Paris, saying he knew nothing about the conspiracy at all, and that

'when he heard about it he had been absolutely dumbfounded with amazement'. The prospect of the guillotine made Billaud-Varenne tremble for a moment, and Collot d'Herbois tremble even more.

6 The dénouement

On the night of 13 March, Hébert and his supporters allowed themselves to be taken without trying to put up any resistance. Yet this was not because it was unexpected. Barère had asked the Convention, on behalf of the Committee of Public Safety, to open judicial proceedings on the 6th. By the 9th, the rumour was going round that the Hébertists were about to be arrested. At the same time harsh instructions had been given in an attempt to prevent the popular vanguard giving the Hébertist leaders any support; on the 14th, the Committee of Public Safety asked the mayor of Paris to take all necessary steps to suppress the efforts of the troublemakers, and to give the necessary order to that effect to the military commander.

Chaumette was arrested three days later on 17 March. While Hébert and his associates were tried from 21 to 24 March, and executed on the 24th, the *procureur* of the Commune did not appear before the Revolutionary Tribunal until 10 April, along with Hébert's widow, ex-Bishop Gobel, etc. and was not executed until the 13th.

'Père Duchesne' had been enormously popular. How would the people react to the news of his downfall? Popular opinion was very divided. One part, the majority it seems, turned against Hébert and his companions in misfortune, deceived by the slanders put about by Robespierre and Saint-Just. Why? First, because of the prestige the sovereign assembly, and by extension the Committee of Public Safety, still retained in the eyes of the sansculottes; and also because of Robespierre's 'colossal reputation', which his volte-face in late November 1793 had shaken but not destroyed: the great man's 'illness' in February had aroused deep concern among the masses.

Again, popular opinion for the most part looked unfavourably on the violent quarrel that had set the Hébertists and Dantonists against each other during the preceding months. They could not understand its class content. All they saw was the repulsive superficial aspect of it, the struggle for positions; it upset them to see patriots squandering their energies and their talents fighting each other. Robespierre held the trump card. He symbolised unity, a facade of unity. Against him, the Hébertists and the Dantonists looked like splitters.

Another, more down-to-earth factor contributed to isolate the 'conspirators' from the majority of popular opinion. While the Hébertists had not always linked their political agitation sufficiently with the immediate demands of the people, those in power had been more realistic. For several days they improved the capital's supply of provisions, thereby achieving two things: they quelled the popular agitation, thus depriving Hébertism of the bras nus' support at the critical moment, and they managed to imply that the Hébertists had been responsible for the earlier scarcity.

But the most active, the most class-conscious fraction of the sansculottes expressed their whole-hearted support for the victims. The popular vanguard understood the real meaning of the incident. They realised that despite Hébertism's weaknesses and inconsistencies, its downfall reversed the balance of forces between bourgeois and bras nus. Beyond the plebeians, it was the working class and the revolution itself that had been hit. After the first dazed moments, they fought back.

There was a lot of agitation in the *sociétés populaires*, and large numbers of workers vociferously proclaimed their sympathy with the prisoners. The women, particularly, stayed faithful to 'Père Duchesne', just as some months earlier they had to Jacques Roux and Théophile Leclerc.

Hébert's supporters had some hope that the accused might be absolved by the Revolutionary Tribunal. But the way the trial was conducted aroused the indignation of the more class-conscious sansculottes. In their opinion, 'Père Duchesne' defended himself well, and they refused to admit the charges

that had been fabricated against him and his co-defendants.

The barbarity with which Hébert was treated on the scaffold revolted more than one sansculotte. Not content with having him present at the guillotine as his companions were executed, and leaving him to last, the assistants held the blade suspended above his neck for several seconds while they waved their red caps under his nose. A police agent, in a bar frequented by 'coalmen, carters and other such men' the following day, reported their anger and indignation.

7 Direct democracy wiped out

The Hébertists had supporters in a number of provincial towns and the news of their arrest, then of their execution, was angrily received.

On 8 April, deputy Francis Mallarmé wrote in his report from Sedan to the Committee of Public Safety: 'May one not suspect the Hébertist faction of having ramifications in almost every corner of the republic?' Similar reports came in from deputies on mission to Bayonne, Le Mans, Nancy, Jura, la Manche, and Calvados.

The popular vanguard were only too right to be alarmed and indignant: the execution of the Hébertists was the defeat not only of a political faction but also and more crucially of the bras nus. And above all, 24 March sounded the knell of popular democracy. One of the principal complaints made against Chaumette during his trial (10–13 April) was that he had awoken the idea of popular democracy among the people. One witness, Louis Roulx, a member of the Commune and in Robespierre's pocket, accused him, among other things, of saying: 'It is up to us to do what the Convention does not do.' 'Thus', commented the witness, 'Chaumette wanted to persuade the people that his plans were much wiser and more far-reaching than the Convention's, and thus he could allow the comparison to be made.' And omitting nothing, he recalled that the *procureur* of the Commune had toyed with the idea – however diffidently – of federating all the communes of France

around the Paris Commune. 'I am in a position to prove that Chaumette's correspondence with the départements had no other purpose than to federate them.'

The same day (13 April) deputy Claude Prost, in the Jura, formulated the same complaints: 'There has been afoot, throughout the republic, a plot to degrade the National Convention in the person of its deputies . . . to mislead the *sociétés populaires* about the extent of their power, and to make each section a sovereign authority.'

The revolutionary bourgeoisie took advantage of the fall of the Hébertists to put a permanent end to the spectre of direct democracy. One by one the organs of popular power were purged, castrated and brought into line.

First of all the sections. There were large numbers of arrests in the Marat section, Antoine Momoro's constituency, in the Bonne-Nouvelle, the Révolutionnaire, etc. The sections' revolutionary committees were particularly badly affected. The Commune that followed Hébert's and Chaumette's submitted them to rigorous purges. To this end they had the section delegates to the General Council provide lists of members on their respective revolutionary committees. More than ten thousand people were harassed or imprisoned in Paris, and twice as many as that in the provinces.

The *sociétés populaires* of the sections were still more deeply implicated in the 'Hébertist conspiracy' than the sections themselves. Once Hébert and his friends had been liquidated, their goose was cooked too. They got a few weeks' reprieve. The authorities, the Jacobin leaders, hesitated before openly attacking organs that were so directly the creation of the people. Yet an end had to be made of them. On 12 May, Collot d'Herbois denounced the *sociétés sectionnaires* as the centres of opposition. On the 15th, the Jacobin Club decided no longer to admit deputations from *sociétés sectionnaires*, and that all members who were also members of *sociétés sectionnaires* were to leave them within ten days or be expelled from the Jacobin Club. The *sociétés populaires* realised that they were being asked to suppress themselves. And either for fear of repression, or

because the liquidation of Hébertism had robbed them of their leading spirits, they obeyed. One after another, between 15 and 22 May, they announced their dissolution.

The last autonomous centre of the popular vanguard disappeared. Deprived of the basic organ of popular power, the revolution was powerless from then on. In the provinces, the *sociétés populaires* on the whole continued, but they saw their influence considerably reduced.

8 The second power decapitated

For a long time the Paris Commune had offended central power, and the bourgeoisie had been looking for a way to win the Hôtel de Ville away from plebeian influence. The time now seemed ripe to put an end to the duality of power between Commune and Convention. Through their attack on the Hébertists they were able to attack the Commune, and by arresting the Hébertist leaders they prevented the Hôtel de Ville from resisting. The Convention merely passed a decree on 13 March that allowed the central power to dismiss section delegates to the General Council, thenceforth considered public officials, and to appoint their own replacements.

On 28 March, Claude Payan, one of Robespierre's handymen, was appointed national agent. The day after he took office he began a purge of the police administration. Four administrators were dismissed and arrested, men who had all given outstanding service to the revolution and who had been active in putting down counter-revolutionary plots. After they had languished in prison for two months, they were thrown in with a batch of forty-nine individuals accused of trying to kill Robespierre and Collot d'Herbois, and executed wearing the scarlet shirt of traitors.

The guillotine had already made inroads into the General Council. In mid-May two members, Antoine Descombes, the grocer's boy from Section des Droits de l'Homme, and Georges Follope, an apothecary from the Section des Tuileries, were handed over to the executioner. Altogether, fifteen or sixteen

members of the General Council (out of 144, if we take the list drawn up on 13 July 1793) were dismissed between 24 March and the beginning of June. To take their place, the Committee of Public Safety appointed twenty-four new members on 3 June, on a proposal from Payan. The Commune became nothing more than a cog in the machinery of central government. The bras nus no longer saw it as anything to do with them.

The revolutionary militia provided another constituency for Hébertism. After the execution of its general, Ronsin, there was nothing for it to do but disappear. To begin with, the authorities thought it best that the detachments of revolutionary militia that were in Paris or within a six-league radius should be moved further away. On 19 March, the Minister of War received the order to send those detachments off to Laval, Fougères and other distant places 'within twenty-four hours'. The men with long moustaches set off at daybreak on 20 March. On the 27th Barère asked the Convention for the revolutionary militia to be simply disbanded, and the Convention agreed. A few days later, Robespierre the younger pronounced its funeral oration in a letter to his elder brother.

Another consequence of the fall of the Hébertists was the liquidation of the plebeians in the War Ministry. They had known for some months that they were threatened. At the Cordelier Club session on 4 March, Hébert exposed Carnot's plans, which were to dismiss Bouchotte from the War Ministry and replace him with his own brother. A few days after the fall of the Hébertists Carnot got the Convention to agree to 'the total abolition of the Executive Council'. Twelve three-member commissions, under the strict control of the Committee of Public Safety, took the place of the defunct ministries. In charge of one of them, the Commission on the organisation and movement of the armies, Carnot put one of his creatures, named Louis Pille. That was the end of the War Ministry.

Jean Rossignol, the sansculotte general par excellence, the embodiment of plebeian promotion, the man Prieur (de la

Marne) had not long before called 'the darling of the revolution' and the 'eldest son of the Committee of Public Safety', was dismissed on 27 April.

Even the dead were included in the general mistrust. Marat, who had been the object of a cult, was desacralised. It was suddenly realised he had been quite closely connected with the Hébertists during the last days of his life. His portrait was dragged in the mud. There was talk of removing his remains from the Panthéon. If Charlotte Corday's victim had been a traitor, then who on earth could be trusted? People in the communes round Paris said that if Marat really had misled them they would never be able to trust anybody again.

Alive as well as dead Marat had always given offence to his rival Robespierre. Now he was having his revenge. Rashly. Would his own reputation survive the universal wave of doubt? On the 16th a police agent reported a citizen as saying, 'Alas, who can one trust now?' Somebody had suggested Robespierre, to which with a strange look he replied mysteriously, 'Wait a bit longer.' The royalist counter-revolution used the opportunity to exploit thoroughly the mood of disheartenment. Troublemakers went round whispering 'They're all the same.'

The indecent joy manifested by the counter-revolution dismayed the sansculottes. A man called Louis Chenaux, who had chaired the meeting of the Cordeliers on 14 March, declared at Chaumette's trial, where he was also one of the accused, 'I have seen the joy among the aristocrats, and when those people are happy a patriot like myself cannot help but be sad.' The most clear-headed among the bras nus foresaw a gloomy future. 'I don't know what will come of it all', said one of them in a café. 'They've complained about the revolutionary committees and succeeded in making them suspect; they've complained about the revolutionary militia, and now it's disbanded. It looks as if they're after everything with "revolutionary" in its name.' 'If they go on like that', exclaimed one of the National Guard, 'then it's goodbye to liberty and to everything else.'

9.
Economic Retreat

1 The end of coercion

The policy of coercion and of fixing the price of basic commodities had been wrung from the bourgeoisie against their will by the sansculottes in their sections. With the fall of Hébertism, conditions were right for its abolition, and a gradual return to economic liberalism. Yet again, there is a striking synchronism in the dates here. The Hébertist leaders were guillotined on 24 March. On the afternoon of the same day, the first lists were posted up in Paris, showing the new maximum, revised and made more flexible, to the detriment of the sansculottes.

The retreat began at the financial level, then spread to the economic level. The measures that had been introduced during the Terror to strengthen the assignat were revoked. There were two sorts of measures, as we have seen: one set aimed at rooting coin out of the various hiding places where people had buried it; and the other aimed at withdrawing metal currency from circulation. Both these were relaxed or repealed.

With gold and silver reinstated, paper money could once again be set against coin. And as soon as the controls were relaxed, the assignat suffered from the comparison. The 100 livre assignat had risen to 51 in December. In January it fell back to 48, in February to 41, in March to 38, in April to 37, in May to 36, and in June and July to 34. It was not yet the vertiginous headlong crash that was to come under the Thermidorean reaction. But it was the first stage.

The gradual decline in the currency contributed to the rise in prices, which was something that only strict price controls could regulate. But from the end of 1793 we see a gradual

relaxation in the way the maximum is observed. Robespierre's sudden change of policy was bearing fruit. Everybody realised that the policy of coercion was at an end, that terror was no longer to be used against commerce. The shopkeepers grew rapacious again. The maximum price list, which for a number of weeks had been strictly applied, was now openly flouted. The public authorities did nothing to interfere, and in some cases even sided with those who were starving the people (the *affameurs*).

It was the same in the provinces. The reports from the deputies on mission were unanimous: the maximum was no longer being observed. As in Paris, the authorities, drawn mostly from the bourgeoisie, were on the side of the traders.

Relaxation of control did not only mean that the application of the Law of the Maximum was endangered. It also exacerbated the scarcity of commodities. As long as the revolutionary militia had been free to deal with merchants and rich country-dwellers, their goods, the fruits of the earth, had been brought out of their hiding places, and the towns had been adequately supplied. But now the revolutionary militia had been disbanded, and the département militias dissolved. As the relaxation of control and coercive measures was accompanied by the disappearance of goods, the people, with their class-instinct, realised that there was a relationship of cause and effect.

The sansculottes called in vain for the houses of rich hoarders to be searched. The sanctuary of private property was not to be violated. It is true there was a law, passed on 26 July 1793, authorising hoarding commissioners to carry out thorough searches. But with every backward step the revolution took, the powers of the hoarding commissioners – described as 'oppressive' – were increasingly eroded. On 29 March, with Hébert out of the way, the Convention suppressed them.

The law of 26 July decreed a single penalty for the crime of hoarding: death. The Dantonists persuaded the Convention to suspend the application of the death penalty on 22 December. And on 29 March, the day after the purge of the extreme left, the Convention passed a new law, inspired by their anxiety not to interfere with commercial freedoms. Dealers had now

simply to declare their stocks, and in the event of an infringement, were no longer liable to the death penalty, only to confiscation of their goods and two years in irons. And that only applied to wholesalers. Only they were obliged to declare their stocks and stick to the listed price: retailers were exempt.

The audacity of the *affameurs* no longer knew any bounds. The shopkeepers, assured of the authorities' indulgence, started to remove items from display, preferring to sell them under the counter to the rich at black market prices than to let the first comer have them, even at a price slightly above the maximum. On 13 April, the Supply Commission wrote to the national agent of the Paris Commune:

> 'We can no longer disguise our amazement at the scarcity which is constantly swelling the crowds who gather outside shops that sell butter, eggs, soap and sugar; and yet the quantity of goods that have reached us and been delivered for Paris should be enough to fully satisfy all needs, or at least reduce most of them substantially'.

Paris was adequately provisioned. And yet Paris was starving.

As soon as it was agreed that there would no longer be controls and coercion, there was no cure for scarcity except a return to the free play of economic laws. There was nothing to do but peg prices at a higher level in the hope that the desire for gain would bring goods out of their hiding places, promise traders a 'fair' remuneration for their activities, and re-establish the channels of exchange that had been interrupted. Now the first maximum fixed a price which was the same for producer, or wholesaler, and retailer; it did not take into account the need to ensure the middle-man's profit, nor did it allow for the cost of transportation. There were two ways this anomaly could have been corrected; they could have passed the cost of the retailer's profits on to either the producer or the consumer. They chose the latter.

On 24 February 1794 the Supply Commission sent local authorities *Instructions for the general scale of the maximum.* This explained to them that the wholesaler had to add to the

initial price (the 1790 price plus a third) the transport costs per hundredweight in proportion to the distance, and then his profit of 5 per cent. The retailer in his turn was to add his profit of 10 per cent to the price thus arrived at. Yet the circular specified that the 5 per cent profit was to be calculated on the initial price, not including the transport costs.

But the wholesalers demanded more. And once the Hébertists were out of the way there was no reason to refuse them. On 20 March, Barère brought their grievances to the attention of the Assembly. As if the Supply Commission had not already settled the question, he asked whether the wholesaler's 5 per cent profit should be calculated on the price of the materials alone, or on the total cost of materials and transport. The Convention, easily persuaded, ruled that the wholesaler's 5 per cent profit should be calculated on the two together, on the total price of materials plus transport costs. On the 22nd, the Supply Commission sent out a new circular in which they informed the district national agents of the important modification that had been decided on. In addition, the national agent for Paris decided to calculate the cost of transport on gross weight, including packaging, thus giving the merchant an additional advantage, to be borne as ever on the backs of the consumers.

Thus, finally, the new maximum price-lists were posted in Paris. It was time they were, as for several weeks the traders had withdrawn their goods from sale in anticipation of them. The new prices were noticeably higher than the old ones.

The posters got a cold reception from the bras nus. But they did not take to the streets to protest against the new maximum. First, because for several days there was the illusion that the higher cost of goods would be compensated for by greater abundance; next because the increase in the controlled price, although significant, was not that large: people complained and resigned themselves to paying it; and finally, most importantly, because the popular vanguard had had their Hébertist spokesmen removed, and were in serious disarray.

The move towards liberalism was marked by changes

among the leading personnel. The plebeian Jean-Marie Goujon, who had been the driving force behind economic controls, had to resign. The farmers and merchants were no longer to be held in check but given encouragement.

Making the maximum more flexible harmed the consumer without bringing with it any of the attendant compensations its supporters had announced. It did nothing to remedy the scarcity of goods. It did not persuade the retailers to observe the new prices, even though they were more favourable to them. On the contrary, by letting it be known that the firmness of the public authorities was to be relaxed, it encouraged producers and retailers to demand more, and at the same time to continue trading on the black market. The more the maximum was relaxed, the less it was respected. By the eve of Thermidor it was only a memory. At the same time, the scarcity of basic commodities, far from diminishing, increased. They had wanted to remedy the scarcity with higher prices. Now they had both.

2 A new phenomenon: strikes

The relaxation of the maximum and the higher prices that followed provoked sharp reactions among wage-earners, who demanded cost-of-living adjustments. When the public authorities introduced flexibility into price controls they also kept a stricter watch on the application of the wages maximum: so the working class lost on both counts. They tried to fight back, and their attempts at resistance were brutally suppressed.

One consequence of the economic retreat was thus a new kind of protest movement which no longer only attacked the level of prices but also, more importantly, the level of wages. The unforeseen growth of war industries and the creation of huge armaments-works had brought about the beginnings of industrial concentration and brought thousands of workers together in common workshops. A number of independent artisans became proletarians. Given the opportunity to join together, these workers began to struggle for an improvement in their rate of pay. But they were up against a state employer

who imposed military discipline in the workshops and who had powerful means of coercion at his disposal. This is why conflicts happened more frequently and were more violent there than in other branches of industry.

After the change of course in November 1793, the attitude of the public authorities altered abruptly. On 1 December the Supply Commission produced a circular addressed to official bodies and all citizens. The workers had been induced to demand 'excessive prices' for their labours. This was immediately followed by angry disturbances in one of the armaments workshops in Paris, the Capucin works. On 12 December, the Committee of Public Safety proclaimed:

> 'All combinations or meetings of workers are forbidden; any communication between workers in different workshops which their work may render desirable or necessary may only take . . . place through the medium of, or with the express permission of, the administration in charge of each workshop . . . Work is not to be stopped under any pretext . . . In no case may workers meet together to deliver their complaints. Any such gatherings will be dispersed, and their authors and instigators arrested and punished in accordance with the law.'

The movement grew. On 27 December, the Committee learnt 'that there has been a sort of insurrection in the workshop des Carmes in the Place Maubert', and had the workers 'who had been most conspicuous in the disturbances' arrested. When there was trouble in the armaments workshop de la maison Doiron, rue Saint-Dominique, the Committee had the movement's five instigators arrested.

There were similar disturbances in the various paper factories in the provinces. These concerns made assignats, weapons of war which were as indispensable as rifles and cannon. They too were under state control and subjected to the same military discipline as the armaments workshops. In November and December 1793 they demanded pay increases, one after another, and came out on strike.

The Convention decreed:

> 'The contractors and workers in all the paper factories in the republic are conscripted to carry out their trades and serve the said factories . . . Combinations of workers from different shops, whether effected by writing or by messenger, with the purpose of provoking stoppages of work, will be regarded as breaches of the peace which ought to reign in the workshops.'

During the winter and spring of 1794 labour disputes were incessant, and they met with increasingly harsh repression. On 1 February the Convention decreed that anyone who hindered or slowed down production of saltpetre or explosives would be treated as a suspect and detained until the peace. Woodcutters joined with workers in different communes in the Joigny district (Yonne) with the aim of getting a wage increase. On 17 February the Committee of Public Safety decreed that those who persisted in demanding wages higher than the maximum would be regarded as suspects and treated accordingly. They sent a detachment of the revolutionary militia to the spot: the Terror was turned against the workers.

There was further agitation in the armaments workshops at the end of February. On 3 March, Barère burst out in unrestrained indignation to the Convention, 'You are concerned with speeding up arms production. Well, then, they're getting up rebellions in the workshops of l'Indivisibilité, les Invalides, and the Luxembourg.' Barère's attack incensed the workers, whose reaction has survived to this day. Members of the revolutionary committee of l'Indivisibilité on duty during the night of 5 March stated

> 'that at the bottom of a Committee of Public Safety decree posted on an armaments-workshop door . . . certain words likely to bring patriotic members of the Committee into disrepute had been written in red and black pencil . . . Under Barère's name somebody had written *Cannibal*, and under those of Prieur and Lindet "*deceivers of the people, always idiotic and stupid*".'

Some time later, the armaments workers in the factory that had been set up where the Capucins used to be, were get-

ting themselves talked about again. On 26 March they sent a delegation to the bar of the Convention to protest at the 'tyranny of the administration'. To economise on candles, they had made them start work two hours earlier each morning at six o'clock, in order to finish at seven in the evening. They had accepted the new timetable. But now the administration wanted to make them work until the old time in the evening for no extra pay; and as work was paid by the day, this in fact meant a disguised wage-cut. 'It is an additional two hours' work which we cannot cope with', said the speaker. 'For a long time now all we have had to eat is bread and cheese.'

Despite the fairly substantial nominal increase in wages, the condition of the workers remained precarious. Either they were unable to exchange their pay for the goods they needed, or else they had to pay exorbitant prices for them. Hence the increased energy with which they demanded higher wages.

3 The purged Commune attacks wages

But the Commune could not make an assault on wages until it had liquidated Hébertism, and thus dislocated the mass movement. On 21 April two hundred workers from the Robillard tobacco works presented a petition to the Commune General Council begging for an increase in their daily wage. Payan, the new national agent, demanded that the petitioners should be brought before the police administration so that those responsible could be punished.

At the same time (22 April) the Committee of Public Safety issued a decree changing the composition of the sixty-member commission which met in the Evêché and, since November 1793, fixed the rates of pay for piece-work and day-work in the armaments industry. Until then, the commission had comprised an equal number of workers and representatives of the administration, but from the date of this decree the workers were to be in a minority.

At the beginning of May there was agitation among some of the Paris guilds. On the 2nd Payan decreed, 'Any baker's

boy demanding a wage higher than the one fixed by law shall be regarded as a suspect and treated accordingly.'

The Commune had already, on 28 April, quashed attempts by the port workers to unite to get their wages raised and prevent competition from workers outside the trade. The decree saw their venture as a threat to the freedom of labour. Any form of union would be regarded as a violation of the law. The port inspectors received orders to arrest the leaders.

The agitation must have continued, because on 5 May Payan issued an angry proclamation in the name of the Commune:

> 'Almost simultaneously, we have seen snuff-grinders, bakers, and workers employed in hauling, carrying and piling drift-wood, demanding more money per day from those who give them work than the law allows, forming illegal associations, threatening to discontinue work, and finally even stopping work entirely; worst of all we have seen the port workers absolutely refuse to go to work . . . We declare to all workers that the agencies of the law will prove as inflexible as they; everybody who defies the law and abandons their work will be brought immediately before a competent tribunal, especially in cases where that work should be the more precious to them for being necessary for the public good.'

A personal note was discovered among Payan's papers which he must have drafted about this period. Its aggressive brevity is eloquent. 'To the workers: you say you are not being paid enough. Yet you can go for several days without doing anything!' François Hanriot, for his part, took up a clear position in his orders to the National Guard on the same day. He tried to set the non-wage-earning sansculottes against the strikers in the ports. In the Convention on the 4th, Barère successfully moved a decree which threatened workers involved in handling, transporting and selling essential goods with the Revolutionary Tribunal, if their 'inertia' constituted 'a criminal combination against the people's food supplies'.

4 Labour disputes in the provinces

Labour disputes were no less common in the provinces. On 9 April deputy Antoine Moltedo, on mission to Toulon, wrote to the Committee that combinations had appeared in the Arsenal, and complaints had been brought by the workers; he announced that heterogeneous elements would be dismissed. The miners proved particularly combative. On 14 April, the Committee of Public Safety decreed that all workers employed in the coal mines contracted to supply Paris were from that moment permanently conscripted.

The contagion reached agricultural day-labourers, who also agitated for higher wages. On 24 May the Soissons district decreed that citizens conscripted to work on the next grain harvest would be paid the wages laid down by the scale of the maximum. If they refused they would be dealt with as suspects under the law of 16 September 1793, and imprisoned for three days, or three months for a second offence. Any who combined together to refuse to work would be regarded as enemies of the state, arrested, exposed to the Tribunal and punished as counter-revolutionaries. If anyone made an agreement likely to infringe the maximum, he would be liable, on a first offence, to a fine of ten times the value of the sum or object.

On 30 May Barère got the Convention to decree that all citizens 'who are usually employed for the harvest' would be conscripted and their wage fixed by the authorities. Draconian measures were threatened against the recalcitrant: any strike would be 'punished as a counter-revolutionary crime', rendering them liable to the Revolutionary Tribunal. Further decrees, dated 1 and 25 June and 8 July strengthened the application of the wages maximum in agriculture.

5 The anti-working-class offensive takes shape (June–July)

It became increasingly clear, from June onwards, that the central power's policy was to force down wages and put down strikes.

On the 1st of the month the Committee of Public Safety passed a decree forbidding administrators, sections, and public works contractors to pay any of their employees and day-labourers wages higher than those fixed by law. On the 2nd, they threatened watermen that if they refused to work, or demanded wages higher than the maximum, they would be prosecuted in a court of summary jurisdiction (*correctionnelle*) if it was their first offence, and treated as suspects if they did it a second time.

The workers took up the challenge and redoubled their combativity. On 10 June, on a report from Barère, the Convention instructed the 'public prosecutor of the Revolutionary Tribunal to proceed against the counter-revolutionaries who have employed criminal workers in the workshops manufacturing assignats, arms, explosives and saltpetre'.

At Rochefort, in compliance with written instructions from Paris, the wages of port workers were reduced by a quarter (from 3 livres to 44 sous) and in addition the workers had to pay for their own tools. On 11 June, deputy Jean-Baptiste Topsent read the decision out to the workers, as a result of which they held a general meeting. The deputy appeared and asked them what the disturbance was about. They replied 'that on that pay it was impossible for them to pay for food and lodging, support their families and pay for their tools'.

In Paris on 27 June the département administrators wrote to the Commission for Agriculture and the Arts that the workers employed on jobs in the département were refusing to work for the wages laid down in the maximum. They wanted an increase in pay and a reduction in the working day.

The working-class agitation reached its peak in July 1794. On the 6th, the Paris faience manufacturers sent a report to the Committee of Public Safety, revealing that their workers had just decreed that they would do no more work 'until they were granted double the 1790 wage, threatening those who did not comply with the decree'. Saint-Just, who was responsible at that stage for the Committee's *Bureau de Police générale*, coldly

noted in the margin of his report: 'Send to the Revolutionary Tribunal's public prosecutor.'

It was in the armaments workshops above all, though, that the disturbances continued to grow. On 12 July the small-arms agency sent a startling report to the Commission for Arms and Explosives. It was high time 'to put a stop to this insubordination, which heralds the approach of an insurrection'. There had been some incidents, notably at the factory at le Bouchet, where the workers threatened a strike. A member of the agency had to go down there and 'remind them what the law said'.

6 The wages maximum of 21 July

On 5 July the Paris municipal authority adopted the principle of a new wages maximum. The new scale was published on 21 July (the 5th of Thermidor) in all forty-eight sections. It reduced wages considerably.

The Paris workers reacted angrily to the publication of the decree. The same evening the revolutionary committee of the Section de l'Unité informed the Committee of General Security and the Committee of Public Safety that there was 'a kind of uproar among the masons and stonecutters, as a result of the maximum the Commune had just published'. A few days later the civic committee of the Section de la Cité sent Barras a report on the *journée* of the 9th of Thermidor, in which they pointed out, 'Around 4 o'clock in the afternoon a crowd gathered in the Place de la Commune, apparently because of the maximum on workers' wages.' The Robespierrist Commune was worried by the discontent its scale of wages had aroused, which also threatened to split them from the workers at a critical moment. They tried to shift the responsibility on to the technocrats. In the proclamation addressed to all Parisians that they issued on the 9th of Thermidor at about 8 o'clock in the evening, they slipped in the following phrase: 'Barère, who belongs to each faction in turn and who has fixed the wage for a day's work so as to make the workers die of hunger.'

Robespierre and his supporters reaped what they had sown. In the final crisis which set them against the Convention and the majority of the Committees, the support of the bras nus was by and large lacking. One evening paper recounted that, as the municipal Robespierrists were led to the Place de la Révolution to be guillotined, the workers showed 'some humour' by jokingly shouting 'foutu maximum'.

7 They make things nice for the merchants

Since Robert Lindet had taken charge of the Supply Commission (on 2 November 1793) business had found in him a protector, discreet at first, but increasingly active as the Hébertists' influence waned. However, the public authorities had to wait until the fall of Hébertism before they could offer business their protection openly. With Hébert dead, his supporters' diatribes against 'dealer-ism' were officially repudiated, and they made things nice for the merchants.

In his orders of the day to the national guard, Hanriot set out to reassure the businessmen. On 12 April he treated people spreading rumours that merchants were not safe in Paris as imposters. On the 18th, some men and women who had robbed a cheesemonger or two became 'traitors' and 'enemies of the state', and he strengthened the patrols on duty at the market of les Halles. On the 13th, the Supply Commission told the national agent of the Paris Commune 'that they should stop discouraging those who supply our provisions and disheartening them with unnecessary formalities; and the liberties the law has left commerce and industry must be guaranteed'.

Payan hastened to follow these instructions. On 28 April the Commune told Parisians that there was no law or regulation forbidding them to order foodstuffs from outside their own city. On the 18th the Commune issued a proclamation to the people living in Paris which contained extremely reassuring remarks for shopkeepers. On the 25th they had a bill posted: 'Commerce, freed from interference, must at last return to full

activity and work ceaselessly to restore abundance to this vast city.'

It was not only Paris that gave lavish encouragement to commerce. The central power did too. Materials from works in Sens (Yonne) had been omitted from the new maximum list and on 9 April the Committee of Public Safety fixed a price which benefited the producers. On the 16th they decided to encourage factories, mining and manufacture by offering compensation and rewards, to protect industry and foster trust between traders, to make loans to patriotic dealers who offered provisions at the official maximum; and to give indemnity papers to anyone sending goods to Paris so that they would have no trouble on the way.

At the same time foreign trade received a boost. The central concern of the previous period had been to provide the starving sansculottes with all basic foodstuffs and other essentials available as quickly as possible. So the public authorities had put an embargo on the export of essential goods. But the result of prohibiting goods from leaving the country was that it became impossible to import some products, particularly things used in war production for which France relied on other countries. It fairly rapidly became clear that some flexibility was necessary.

As long as the people applied powerful pressure on the central authorities the export ban was, with rare exceptions, strictly observed. But since the power of the masses had begun to diminish the central authorities had taken some retrograde steps. On 11 March, Barère told the Convention of the drawbacks of not being able to export any goods classified as essential. The Assembly decided that the Supply Commission should thenceforth grant export authorisations.

On the 13th, the Committee decreed that all goods made in the republic which were not essential for army and citizens could be freely exported to other countries. Export authorisations followed thick and fast. On the 27th the embargo that had been laid on foreign ships held in the port of Bordeaux was finally lifted.

An agency was created by a decree of the 31st at Bordeaux and all other ports and commercial centres, with the aim of 'recalling all businessmen and capitalists to their normal occupations, to resume their commercial ventures' and particularly to 'urge citizens to involve themselves in the export trade'.

The prodigious rise of capitalist industry which followed the revolutionary period was contained in embryo in these measures. At the same time as their Girondin spokesmen were solemnly readmitted to the Convention, the big exporters at Bordeaux, Nantes and Marseilles regained their former prosperity.

Robespierre supported the return to economic liberalism openly and wholeheartedly. In his last speech, on 26 July 1794, he declared, casting the blame on the Hébertists,

> 'The conspirators forced us to take violent measures despite ourselves; they were only necessary because of their crimes, and they plunged the republic into a terrible state of scarcity . . . Now we need to use all our skills to restore the republic to the natural, peaceful conditions which alone can sustain abundance.'

And Saint-Just noted in his *Institutions*:

> 'The foreigners . . . drove us to these extremities . . . The idea of price control originally came from outside . . . Foreign influence was so terrible and so intolerable eight months ago that anyone putting forward a sound economic idea would have been smashed. Today . . . nature and wisdom have regained their rightful place.'

As Robespierre and Saint-Just became less and less answerable to popular pressure, they became daily more subject to pressure from the rich property-owners. The Incorruptible was a close friend of a Montpellier banker called Aigoin, whom on 1 January 1794 he had made one of the government representatives at the National Treasury. François Aigoin sent the Committee of Public Safety memoranda in which he argued for the repeal of the maximum and the restoration of commercial activity.

The economic retreat of early 1794 contained the seeds of the Thermidorean reaction. The reintroduction of gold was the first step towards the bankruptcy of the assignat and its withdrawal from circulation, and the relaxation of the maximum the first step towards the return to laissez-faire and laissez-passer.

Robespierre and the revolutionary bourgeoisie had set a fatal machine in motion. Fatal, that is, for the bras nus, not for the bourgeoisie, who reaped huge profits from the general misery.

10.
The Fall of Danton, and its Reverberations

1 Two dangers beset the revolutionary bourgeoisie

Since the change of direction at the end of November 1793, there had been a steady swing to the right, with the bourgeoisie winning back more and more of the concessions they had made to the bras nus. Then this straightforward development was suddenly called into question by Danton's execution and the political liquidation of his supporters. Did that mean the revolution, and with it, Robespierre, had stopped its slide to the right, and recovered its proper direction? Had his association with Danton just been a temporary lapse, quickly made good? No. Liquidating Danton did not appreciably slow the surge of reaction. At best, it camouflaged its progress for a few weeks.

During these early months of 1794, the republic was torn between two powerful and contrary forces: on one side, the class pressure of the sansculottes, suffering under high prices and chronic food shortages, and wanting, albeit confusedly, to push the revolution further forward; and on the other, pressure, that grew stronger every day that it was fed and encouraged by the retreat of the revolution, from all those whose interests were being harmed by prolonged economic and political dictatorship, a heterogeneous mass ranging from the remnants of the aristocracy and the clergy through to a section of the bourgeoisie and rich peasantry: bringing together, that is, counter-revolution and reaction.

So the government of public safety was caught between two upsurges of feeling, whose roots ran far deeper than their superficial manifestations in Hébertism and Dantonism: they

had to face a threat from the right as well as the left. Of the two, the left was the danger the revolutionary bourgeoisie feared more. In his *Mémoires,* the Convention member René Levasseur expressed the opinion that the enemy to be feared most were the ultra-revolutionaries, and Levasseur was very close to Robespierre. But while the Montagnard bourgeoisie wanted to quell the popular vanguard and take back the concessions they had made to the sansculottes, they did not want thereby to open the gates to royalist counter-revolution. The conquests of the revolution which had brought them power and wealth were, as far as they were concerned, sacrosanct. They wanted to drive the bras nus off the political stage, not be pushed off it themselves.

Which is why they had to control the pace of the revolution's retreat so that it could not degenerate into counter-revolution. It was not so much Dantonism itself that was disturbing them as the fearsome reactionary and counter-revolutionary upsurge that Danton was drawing his support from, and which was in danger of overwhelming him.

The men in power were afraid that the tribune might become, in Billaud-Varenne's own words, a 'rallying point for all the counter-revolutionaries'. The American government representative, Gouverneur Morris, echoed this disquiet when he wrote to Randolph, the Secretary of State, on 15 April, that the Dantonists were the royalist faction, whereas, in fact, this was still only a potential development. On 31 May 1793, the Girondins, generally speaking, had not been in the royalist camp either, but their opposition to the Mountain moved then rapidly in that direction. Danton was taking over the historic role of the Girondins. By resisting mass pressure and attacking the popular vanguard he was tending to rally all the heterogeneous forces of reaction and counter-revolution around himself.

Then again, although the danger from abroad had been averted, the war was not yet won at home or abroad. The Vendée was still not all under control. The British enemy were still unbeaten, on land as well as at sea. The enormous military

effort involved in raising and equipping an army of one and a half million men and creating a powerful fleet had not yet had time to yield all its results. With the coming of spring the campaign would open up again, and the victor's laurels were visible on the horizon; but they still had to be won.

And as long as the war continued unwon, the revolutionary bourgeoisie had to move extremely cautiously, and any reactionary steps had to be slow and silent. For two reasons: first, because they still needed the sansculottes' support – less than they had needed it in the summer of 1793, it is true, but to a certain extent, nonetheless. They had not yet reached the point when they could disperse them with clubs and cudgels: the time had not yet come for open reaction. The liquidation of the Hébertist leaders was the furthest they could allow themselves to go. And even that had its risks, as it revealed a little too much of its authors' intentions.

And also because counter-revolution was still a threat, although less so now than the year before, as it was in a position to compromise the security of military operations. The counter-revolutionaries were quite capable of stabbing the republic in the back just when it was in the process of sorting out the external enemy. In April 1794, the first thing the Montagnard bourgeoisie had to do was to win the war. Liquidating the Hébertists had upset the balance of forces rather too abruptly. The sansculottes were shattered and paralysed by it, whereas it had filled the aristocrats with delight, and given new life to their audacity. Were they going to be allowed to flaunt their overbearing triumph? The revolutionary bourgeoisie realised that they had to minimise the damage and re-establish equilibrium. So they refused to extend the repression by sending Pache and the others to the guillotine, as the Dantonists were demanding; and at the same time they moved against the right-wingers who were planning to make political capital out of Hébert's downfall, by sending Danton and his clique to the scaffold instead.

Danton's crime, in short, as the revolutionary bourgeoisie saw it, was that he had gone too fast and closed his options too

soon; he had been 'right' a few months too early. In Barère's view, Camille Desmoulin's paper had done 'a lot of harm by its precocity'. Before one can be 'clement', one has to 'be the victor'.

But that he had anticipated the moment of victory was not the revolutionary bourgeoisie's only complaint against Danton. They also accused him of conspiring against that victory, of having an eye to a compromise peace with the external enemy. Barère raged against those who had 'dared to speak of peace'. Danton also died because he wasn't a 'diehard', because of his reluctance to pursue the life and death struggle against the British for commercial, maritime and colonial supremacy to a final, triumphant, outcome.

2 The Dantonists think they can do whatever they like

The Dantonists did everything they could to exploit the repression of Hébertism. Robespierre became aware of this within a few days of joining forces with Danton, and was forced to disengage himself somewhat from the clutches of the venal tribune, and give the left some guarantees. If the Dantonists did not want the withdrawal from the revolution to proceed at the pace he determined, and their overhastiness started playing into the hands of the counter-revolution, then harsh measures would have to be taken against them. And, by way of warning, a preliminary attack was launched against their black sheep. In the same way as Proly had been singled out before the move against Hébert, Philippe Fabre d'Eglantine was attacked before any hands were laid on Danton. For the good of the cause, the scandal of the India Company was brought out into the open, and Fabre was imprisoned.

But, for a time, that was as far as things went. Neither Danton nor Camille Desmoulins was harassed. By keeping Fabre d'Eglantine in jail, Robespierre had a hold over Danton. With the tribune thus neutralised, he could turn against the left with reasonable safety, and prepare his final attack on the main enemy, Hébertism. When, from time to time, he needed to remind the Dantonists to toe the line, all he had to do was give

a slight jerk to the sword of Damocles hanging over their heads. Thus, for example, Saint-Just read a statement to the Convention on 26 February that was full of pointed allusions to the 'indulgents'. It was a clever tactic, because it misled the Hébertists about the authorities' true intentions, and at the same time gave them the impression that their hostility was primarily directed against the right.

But the liquidation of Hébertism literally made the Dantonists lose their heads. They were intoxicated by it, as they had been after the volte-face at the end of November 1793, and believed themselves masters of the situation. They spoke and acted like victors. The lives of the arrested Hébertists were not enough to satisfy the camarilla that surrounded Danton, who still had old scores to settle with Pache and Bouchotte. They wanted to remove the ruling group in the Ministry of War for good and all, and put themselves in its place.

On 19 March, François Bourdon (de l'Oise) 'burst into the Committee of Public Safety, and with indescribable fury demanded the heads of three men', doubtless those of Pache, Bouchotte and Hanriot. Collot d'Herbois 'spoke so vehemently' against this demand, 'and received so much support from Carnot', that Bourdon thought 'that he would receive the warrant for his arrest during the night' (*Le Moniteur*).

The following day, the 20th, ignoring these warnings, the Dantonists made another attempt at the move they had tried on 17 December, and which then had ended in confusion. For a second time they dared to attack the Committee of General Security, in the person of an all-powerful police official by the name of François Héron. It was Bourdon (de l'Oise) – again – who started the attack, and the Convention followed his initiative. Héron's arrest was decreed. For a moment it looked as if Dantonism was in control of the Assembly. But the invalid Georges Couthon had himself carried hastily to the rostrum, closely followed by Robespierre, who declared:

> 'One faction that wanted to tear the country apart is now breathing its last; but the other shows no sign of dishearten-

> ment. They want to see the downfall of the first as some kind of triumph for them . . . If the Convention . . . is willing to use its power to quell one faction after crushing another, the country will be safe'.

The order for Héron's arrest was rescinded, and the lives of Pache and his comrades were assured.

The disturbing self-confidence of the Dantonists was not confined to Paris, but was to be found in the provinces as well.

At the beginning of April, Robespierre had to send the young Marc-Antoine Jullien to Bordeaux, to rescue a situation that had become severely jeopardised when the deputies on mission there, Jean Tallien and Claude Ysabeau, had moved to the right. As soon as he arrived, on the 10th, the lad got the local club to endorse a speech threatening the 'moderantists' with the 'rigour of revolutionary measures'.

The situation was even more alarming at Lyons. There, Joseph Fouché, a shrewd and subtle politician, had been in the forefront of the revolution as long as it was being borne irresistibly forwards by the masses. The day he felt that the upsurge of the reactionaries was going to win, he turned his coat without a moment's hesitation. But he made the mistake of changing course too abruptly. A day or two earlier, he had been dangerously in advance of Robespierre; after his volte-face, he was perilously far the other side of him. Robespierre did not forgive him for being so badly out of step.

With the announcement of the arrest of the Hébertist leaders on 16 March, Fouché swooped without any warning on the Jacobins of Lyons. He issued a decree, reducing the thirty-two committees he had set up to nine, calling them an 'oppressive burden' and the 'political cancer that is devouring our people'. He had the departmental administration and the criminal tribunal moved out of the city so that they would be out of the reach of pressure from the more advanced citizens.

With the announcement of the Hébertists' execution, on 26 March, came another attack. Fouché and his two colleagues used the excuse of the Paris 'conspiracy' to crush the working people of Lyons. They declared the dissolution of the city's

société populaire, calling it 'a half-starved centre of anarchy and sedition'.

The authorities in Paris saw the spectre of counter-revolution rising over Lyons, and were quick to react. On the 27th, the Committee of Public Safety ordered the proceedings against the popular society to be stopped, and had Fouché recalled to Paris, and replaced. At the Jacobin Club, on 31 March, Robespierre angrily exposed Fouché's treachery. Much later, at the Jacobin Club on 11 July, he accused him of 'crime'.

The liquidation of Hébertism gave a boost to counter-revolution, not just in Lyons, but throughout the whole of France. Reports describing the danger came in from deputies on mission at Chaumont, Lons-le-Saunier, and Angers. Hébert's death had created a crack in the revolution, and the danger that counter-revolution might surge in through it: the ruling section of the bourgeoisie tried to bung up the leak with Danton's head.

3 'Who dares to speak of peace?'

But another, more serious reason for the revolutionary bourgeoisie's anger with Danton was his agitation for peace. They had no intention of ending the war with a patched-up compromise, nor of putting down their weapons before they had achieved a clear superiority over the enemy across the channel. They were fed up with sansculotte egalitarianism and less and less in favour of the Terror and a controlled economy, but they would put up with the disadvantage of the 'public' safety' regime as long as it prevented a premature peace being concluded.

On 22 January, Barère had given a speech on the theme 'Who dares to speak of peace?', and he returned to the offensive on 1 February, speaking angrily against 'this peace we hear so much about these days from our political philanthropists': 'Friends of peace, have the republic's enemies laid down their arms then?'

The Incorruptible had to reverse his ideas. He could not

turn his back on both the revolutionary wing of the bourgeoisie and the sansculotte vanguard. And the movement in favour of peace was made up of people whose commitment to the revolution was dubious. In addition, British intransigence, and the failure of Prussia's peace soundings, had brought him to the conclusion that a compromise peace was not yet possible. So at the end of January, he parted company abruptly with Danton's pacifism and joined the 'diehard' Barère. As well as everything else, he felt somewhat compromised and wanted to remove the traces of various steps they had made towards achieving peace. Marie-Antoine Baudot, a Convention member, claimed, in his *Notes Historiques*, that 'Danton was put to death so that only Robespierre would know the secret of the meetings' in which the two men had discussed proposals of peace from Britain. To the great surprise of some of his supporters, Maximilien made a vehement speech on the 30th in which he attacked the British people, refusing thenceforth to distinguish between them and their government, and hating both equally. One further contribution to the triumph of those who supported the war came from Pitt. In the course of a special council meeting at Saint James's, in the presence of the king, he 'had concluded in favour of the total destruction' of France, which in his view had to be 'wiped off the face of the globe'. When this decision was reported in *Le Moniteur* on 10 March it finally hardened the attitude of most members of the Committee of Public Safety towards England.

The question of peace, therefore, was decisive in the revolutionary bourgeoisie's break with Danton. There can be no doubt that if the tribune had seized power after the fall of Hébert – as he was not far from doing – the policy of war to the death that had been pursued since Danton's eviction from the Committee of Public Safety in July 1793 would have been completely revised.

4 Hesitation about liquidating Danton

The liquidation of Danton, though, was not something to

be undertaken lightly. Despite his faults, and the erosion of his prestige, the stentorian-voiced giant was still a powerful natural and political force. And a force, for all his demagogy, for order. To remove him would mean losing a considerable source of leverage against the masses and an upholder of 'moderation' who could prove useful. Faced with such a conflict of interest, the men in power were torn. But their determination to see the war through to its end and their fear of counter-revolution outweighed all other considerations. Danton was sacrificed.

On this occasion, as on so many others, Robespierre acted on behalf of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, but personal motives are also discernible in his attitude. He was, at heart, much closer to Danton than the other members of the Committee of Public Safety. But both men wanted to do things exclusively on their own account. Since the dramatic events at the end of November 1793, Robespierre had begun to believe that he was the only man in France who could bring about the restoration of order without opening the way to counter-revolution and, imbued with the importance of his predestined mission, he was quick to take offence at anyone who showed signs of wanting to challenge it.

But there were other equally personal reasons against his being involved in the tribune's liquidation. For all their dissimilarity, there was a powerful bond between the two men, a bond of conviction. Danton and Robespierre had embarked on the same route and it was in their interest to support each other. They were men of a different breed from the Carnots, Cambons and Lindets. And confronted by the technicians of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, the two great political figures of the revolution had to stand fast.

Both men had a clear understanding of the forced solidarity that bound them so closely together. So for a long time they were reluctant to quarrel irrevocably. Danton tried time and again to control his compromising friends, while Robespierre, for his part, continued to make things as easy as he could for Danton. He had Fabre d'Eglantine arrested, but spared the tribune.

Between January and March the two had numerous meetings. Their mutual friends increased their attempts to bring about a reconciliation. The deals went on up to the last moment. On 22 March, eight days before Danton's arrest, these culminated in a meeting at the house of a ministry official called Claude Humbert. Jean-Louis Villain Daubigny, the War Minister's deputy, has left an eye-witness account of what happened. Danton begged Robespierre to make it up with him. The reconciliation – to all appearances at least – was total. Their meeting ended with an embrace.

When Danton's arrest was proposed at the Committee of Public Safety, Robespierre's first reaction was to oppose it. Less than twenty-four hours before he abandoned him, the two even went for a drive into the country together.

In the end, though, Robespierre's personal and political resentment got the better of his misgivings. It was easy for a man who never forgot anything to call various episodes from Danton's murky career to mind. Recollections that had not stopped him forming an alliance with the tribune a few months earlier he now passed, predigested, to Saint-Just for him to use in drawing up the indictment. But what a painful break it was! The day after the night of the arrest, on 31 March, he spoke, still breathless, to the Convention about 'heroic sacrifices among which these acts of distressing severity must be numbered'. There was good reason for him to feel distressed. With Danton dead, Robespierre was going to find himself dangerously alone against the 'technocrats' and the coalition of his enemies. In the course of a critical interview Danton is said to have told Robespierre, 'If we split, Robespierre, you will be attacked yourself within six months.' And the tribune is traditionally supposed to have uttered these prophetic words as he died. 'I am taking Robespierre with me. Robespierre is following me.'

5 A strong government that becomes weak

The liquidation of both the Hébertists and the Dantonists,

the 'fall of the factions' as it has been called, strengthened the Committee of Public Safety in outward appearance only. In reality it came out of the bloody business dangerously weakened. They had as it were sawn off the branch they were sitting on. By sending the plebeian leaders of the Commune and the War Ministry to the guillotine, and smashing the organs of the mass movement, they had robbed the revolution of its best support and sown doubt and despondency among the sans-culottes, and at the same time filled the aristocrats with joy. Executing the Dantonists had not succeeded in off-setting these effects. In fact, far from restoring the confidence of the bras nus, it disconcerted them completely. All it achieved was an increase in the number of the government's enemies. It did not deter the counter-revolution from planning its revenge; rather, it had the opposite effect and as the leaders of the revolution disappeared one after another in the orgy of bloodshed their audacity increased enormously. Soon it would be Robespierre's turn, they told each other, and then Jacobinism would be completely finished.

The government was caught between opposition from two sides. On one side, the sansculottes, mistrustful, hostile, withdrawn, assailed by weariness and uncertainty, angered by the continuing shortages and high prices, and with the memory still fresh among the more advanced elements of the coup d'état against the left; and on the other, a counter-revolutionary and reactionary upsurge becoming more overtly in evidence every day. On the surface, at parliamentary level, this two-fold process took the form of intrigues and sideswipes by the survivors of Hébertism – Fouché and Collot d'Herbois – and Dantonism – Bourdon (de l'Oise) – who were anxious to avenge their comrades but avoid the same fate, while the passive deputies of the 'Plain', or 'Marsh', were in a hurry to bring the Terror that had reduced them to a nervous silence to an end. Everyone who had been humiliated or threatened by the Robespierrist dictatorship took advantage of the conflicts in the Committee of Public Safety to prepare their revenge. The government committees thus saw their social base contracting,

their support diminishing, and dangerous obstacles accumulating in front of them on the increasingly narrow road they had to follow.

The Committee tried to reassure themselves and assert their authority by a mixture of brute force and lies. After the fall of the factions, their masked dictatorship became semi-overt. As the threats they had to avoid came from all sides, they lumped left-wing opponents and right-wing enemies together into a shameful amalgam, a ludicrous, sinister scenario that was later to inspire Vyshinsky, Stalin's prosecutor. One cannot read the frenzied statement that Robespierre's spokesman Saint-Just read to the Convention on 10 March 1794 against the 'traitors' he was condemning to death, without blushing and smiling. And that was only a foretaste. Government repression struck out blindly, hitting at popular vanguard and counter-revolution without distinction, at the remnants of Hébertism and Dantonism, as well as taking in a whole host of quite harmless individuals, either poor or vague suspects, along the way. At Bayonne, for instance, a transport foreman was sent to the guillotine because he had had the deputy's box at the theatre opened and installed himself and his wife in it 'in the name of equality'. On 25 June in Paris the Revolutionary Tribunal condemned a housewife to death, among other things for having 'made a disturbance outside butchers' shops'. Fifty-three people, including women and adolescents, went to the scaffold on 17 June, wearing the scarlet shirts of traitors, because Robespierre and Collot d'Herbois had 'almost' been assassinated. In the Convention, on the 14th, the *rapporteur*, Élie Lacoste, had linked all the accused, using the same sort of amalgam as Saint-Just had done, with a single 'conspiracy', that of Baron de Batz, a royalist spy. Repression that had originally been intended solely for aristocrats was now being used increasingly against the vanguard militants; a law of 10 June condemned those to the guillotine, among others, who 'furthered the designs of France's enemies . . . by abusing the principles of the revolution, laws, or government measures, through wrong and treacherous application of them'.

In the few weeks between 11 June and 27 July the Revolutionary Tribunal pronounced 1,285 death sentences. The Great Terror instituted by the dictatorship at bay had nothing in common with the popular Terror of 1793, which had sprung from the will of the sansculottes and been controlled by them. Faced with the spectacle of it, the future communard Gustav Tridon, a champion of revolutionary violence, was unable to restrain his repugnance.

> 'The Terror reaches its height only after the death of the ultra-revolutionaries. With them died the stirring, open Terror . . . that attacks the powerful, and only strikes in defence of humanitarian principle. Now . . . the Terror is dismal, shady and cold, an endless priestlike, hypocritical Terror that sacrifices tipsy water-carriers, drunken footmen, and women and children, at the feet of Moloch.'

The government, already dangerously weakened, decayed from within. The members of the two committees had so far managed to maintain an appearance of unity amongst themselves, but now their long-suppressed differences burst out into the open. The political crisis latent in the country came to a head in the Committee of Public Safety. The agreement linking the 'technocrats' to Robespierre broke down. No personal feeling, beyond what was necessary, cemented it. Robespierre could not forgive his colleagues the specialised knowledge that made each of them an authority in his own sphere, and they in turn could not stand the interference of this technically unqualified politician whose support lay in the clubs. Old resentments were smouldering between Barère, and Cambon, and Robespierre. In November 1792, Cambon made an attack on people who aspired to play the part of Cromwell when a suitable opportunity arose. Robespierre, who never forgot anything, did not forget that. 'Robespierre hated me', Barère later declared.

Carnot and Robespierre were on no better terms. Carnot had been admitted to the Committee of Public Safety at Barère's insistence, and Robespierre had grudgingly acceded because a military specialist was indispensable to the govern-

ment committees. For almost a year the two men put up with each other, sitting side by side and loathing each other more and more each day. Relations between Robespierre and Lindet were equally jaundiced.

But these personal antipathies could not shake the community of interest that linked such dissimilar men. They served the same section of the bourgeoisie, they were threatened by the same enemies. They had to conquer or die together. But the day their interests diverged, the old animosities surfaced again and burst out into the light.

6 Two conceptions of the re-establishment of order

Behind the petit-bourgeois Robespierre, the accommodating mediator between classes, the supreme conciliator, adept at minimising the conflicts between bourgeois and bras nus, there lurked another persona that nursed a longing to be an *homme fort*, a statesman, a man of order, with long-term perspectives, looking down on the fray from high above, always conscious of the superior interests of the bourgeois class, the makings of a Cromwell or a Bonaparte. For some years this second persona had been overshadowed by the first. Occasionally it had been revealed, though, and his opponents had sensed the apprentice Cromwell, the candidate for dictatorship, in him.

In the spring of 1794 the vein of power in Robespierre's character, repressed for so long, gradually began to separate itself from its petit-bourgeois ore. His great plan was beginning to emerge. What did he want? He died without fully revealing what was at the back of his mind, but he did leave us a glimpse of it: in a speech to the Convention on 26 May 1794 he let slip some telling remarks about re-establishing the 'harmony of the moral and political world'. 'The moment at which we find ourselves is favourable, but it is perhaps unique. In the present state of equilibrium it is easy to consolidate liberty and it is easy to lose it.'

Robespierre saw how the revolutionary government was caught between the upsurge of reaction and pressure from the

popular vanguard, and tried to balance one against the other. After the fall of the factions, he thought he had succeeded. But there was an ephemeral, insecure feel to that artificially achieved neutralisation, and his dream was to consolidate it, to rise above the classes and become an authoritative arbiter between them, to stop the bourgeois revolution at a point equally far from royalist counter-revolution and the revolution of the sansculottes. A delicate process, and one that called for virtuoso handling. In his view, he was the only one who could attempt it with any hope of success. And furthermore, he felt confident that he could achieve such a concentration of power with the Convention's agreement, without damaging the fiction of the sovereign Assembly.

Robespierre's role in the liquidation of the factions, and the advantage he had turned it to, helped 'raise him apart' from his colleagues, as Courtois, a Convention member, put it. Levasseur stressed the uncharacteristic nature of his speech on 31 March. 'It is the first speech in which Robespierre adopted a tone of authority and arrogance, giving one the impression that his success in dealing with the factions had gone to his head, and that he was aspiring to a Marius-like popular dictatorship.' And Barère wrote in his *Mémoires*, 'After March 1794, I noticed a change come over the way Robespierre behaved.'

The first disagreements between Robespierre and Carnot seem to date from this period. On 1 April, Carnot made a statement to the Convention on a plan for governmental re-organisation which did away with the Executive Council and strengthened his own power. It was a measure that angered Robespierre, and hostility ran deep between the two men.

These subjective reactions do not, however, provide an adequate explanation of the drama that was in the making. If Robespierre and his colleagues had held absolutely identical views, if there had been strict agreement between them on the central political questions, then they would not have torn each other to pieces. But attributing the split simply to personal rivalry is not enough to explain the coup d'état of Thermidor, which, as we shall see, had quite specific causes.

11.
Thermidor *(27 July 1794)*

At the root of the confrontation were two different conceptions of the re-establishment of order. The members of the governing committees were at one with Robespierre on the general aim to be achieved, but they disagreed over the way to achieve it. Robespierre wanted to base his attempt at stabilisation on the twin pillars of an official reintroduction of religion, the establishment of a state religion; and the search for an 'honourable' compromise with the external enemy. He was looking for compromise without capitulation both at home and abroad. The revolutionary bourgeoisie wanted to re-establish order, but in other ways. They disagreed with Robespierre over the Cult of the Supreme Being, and over the conduct of the war.

1 The Cult of the Supreme Being

We know why the Montagnard bourgeoisie gave Robespierre the task of braking the dechristianisation campaign in December 1793. But at the same time they were afraid of offering encouragement to fanaticism, and trembled at the idea of the church taking revenge and ecclesiastical properties being recovered by their former owners. So it was not without some hesitation and resistance that they gave their support to the policy of so-called freedom of worship. Cambon was relieved and pleased at the way it hit the mass movement, but he also tried to limit the extent of the swing towards religion.

After the fall of the factions, Robespierre felt he could pluck up the courage to make his move. After all, the way was

open. The instigators of the dechristianisation campaign were dead and the mass movement was near to dying. For a long time he had cherished a great plan. His work would not be complete until the day religion was officially re-established, when belief in God was written in the law, an ineluctable obligation of every citizen, and when atheism would be liable to legal censure.

This was the 'civil religion' preached by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, adapted by Robespierre to suit his purposes. It presented numerous political advantages. The consecration of the Cult of the Supreme Being would complete the defeat of the dechristianisers. It would alienate the mass of the people from them, cleverly diverting them from the Cult of Reason to that of Divinity. It would put morality (the morality of the property-owners) on a solid foundation again, a foundation without which no (bourgeois) society could survive. Looked at from another point of view, the Cult of the Supreme Being was a new religion, as yet without clergy or profiteers. There was a vacant place for a high priest. By taking it, Robespierre would put both 'morality' and his own position on an indestructible foundation, and also check those of his rivals, like Carnot, who might be tempted to put themselves on a pedestal for their military victories. He could not base his power on the clash of arms, so he founded a religion. And finally, the Cult of the Supreme Being would provide solid reassurance to Europe and allow him to negotiate with them at last.

A few hours after the death of Danton on 6 April, Robespierre put forward the idea of a 'projected *décadi* festival dedicated to the Eternal' to the Convention. On 7 May the Assembly decreed: 'The French people acknowledges the existence of the Supreme Being and the Immortality of the Soul.' On the 12th, they decreed that the words 'Temple of Reason' should be removed from places of worship and replaced by 'To the Supreme Being'.

Opponents of religion were threatened with the wrath of the law. The decree of 7 May included a clause aimed at people who provoked religious disturbances 'by unjust and gratuitous

violence'. Thus one Rousselin, who had led a brisk campaign of dechristianisation at Troyes, was summoned before the Revolutionary Tribunal.

The festival of 8 June in honour of the Supreme Being looked like a demonstration against the dechristianisers. Fanaticism was no longer the monster they were fighting against: it was anti-religiousness now. They had erected a statue of Wisdom in the Tuileries and shrouded it in a veil. The veil symbolised the 'terrible cloak of atheism': 'On the forehead of this hideous image were the words "the foreigner's only hope".' Robespierre set light to the veil and declared, 'This monstrosity, spewed on to France by the spirit of kings, has now returned to the void whence it came.'

Not only was the Cult of the Supreme Being obligatory, but everybody also had to revere the pontiff and profess that he was blessed with special protection from Providence. Imperceptibly, Robespierre was raised above ordinary mortals, becoming a sort of mediator between man and the divinity. The festival of 8 June was his personal apotheosis. As he had had himself appointed President of the Convention, the honour of conducting the new religion's ceremony fell to him. He began by making the Assembly and the crowd wait, before he appeared carrying a bunch of flowers interwoven with ears of corn and wearing, for the first time, the full costume of the people's deputy, with a tricolour sash and plumes shading his head. He took up his position alone at the head of the procession, slightly in front of the Convention. There were shouts of 'Vive Robespierre!' from the crowd. And fulsome praise of the new 'Orpheus' spread to almost all parts.

The sansculotte vanguard – where it still existed, for the proscription of Hébertism and the demoralisation of periods of defeat had thinned its ranks – did not join in with them. The Paris sections practised the new cult rather coldly. They saw it as nothing but an opportunity for facetious parodies of christianity. During a Festival of the Eternal at Grand-Charonne, somebody put a bottle on top of a sort of mountain, and lower down, a stoop. The national agent, Payan, had to

forbid the festival to be celebrated in the various arrondissements.

At Nevers, the decree of 7 May was trampled under foot. And there was so much discontent at Le Havre that the national agent had to declare participation in the Festival of the Supreme Being voluntary.

The clericalists, on the other hand, could not contain their delight. The church saw the use they could make of the Supreme Being and in its name they demanded the restoration of their own religion. It was easy for them to transform the government festival into a catholic one. June 8 was Pentecost, after all. They had the *Veni creator* intoned. Robespierre was even to have made contact, through an intermediary, with the former cardinal Loménie de Brienne, head of the constitutional church.

The revolutionary bourgeoisie began to get alarmed. They had not interfered at first, because the new religion had been useful in filling the political vacuum left by the fall of the factions. But their coldness was already apparent, and the clearer the outline of the business became, the more it increased. On 8 June, they lifted the mask. They organised, or allowed others to organise, a really noisy demonstration against the pontiff. And while it is true that most of the participants were former Dantonists avenging the death of their leader, they would not have been able to take part in a demonstration like that without danger to themselves if members of the Committees had not offered some behind-the-scenes encouragement.

One of Robespierre's most heated opponents was Cambon. In his dual role as acquirer of ecclesiastical properties and financial dictator, an offensive from the priests was what he feared most of all, and he proposed cutting the religious budget down to a minimum. The Supreme Being aroused his muted but tenacious opposition. Barère was more outspoken when, on 27 June, he told the Convention of his worries about the reawakening of fanaticism, and did not hesitate to blame the decree that had instituted the new religion.

There was one final altercation over the Cult of the Supreme Being, which occurred on the very eve of the 9th of Thermidor. The Committee of Public Safety had the statue of Wisdom, which had been erected for the festival on 8 June, taken away. The pontiff declared it an outrage.

2 Robespierre against military victories

Another point of friction between Robespierre and his colleagues just before Thermidor was their disagreement over the conduct of the war. The time was ripe for a war of expansion. Except for the usual amount of pillaging by the occupying armies, the conquest of the two 'Low Countries' was an excellent undertaking from the financial point of view. In Belgium the riches of the church and everything belonging to the Austrian tax authorities were proclaimed national property, and sold for cash. Holland, when it was conquered (Pichegru entered Amsterdam on 20 January 1795), had to pay a heavy war indemnity (100 million florins) and provide a levy of 10 million florins. In addition to that, a forced loan of 100 million florins was imposed.

After considering nothing less than an attack on Britain from the Channel Islands, Carnot decided on a raid on the Dutch coast, beginning with the island of Walcheren. He saw this as another way of making London tremble. But he had to give up this risky plan on 10 July. In fact, Robespierre thwarted it. The Incorruptible had never been a supporter of wars of expansion or the world of military heroics. Victory made him bad-tempered, afraid that somebody else might benefit from it politically. To anger him, the 'technocrats' gave the military successes loud, showy publicity. Bertrand Barère trumpeted some new feat of arms from the height of the rostrum in the Convention every day. These 'Carmagnoles', as he called them, had a knack of exasperating Maximilien.

In his last speech, on the 8th of Thermidor, he spoke against the 'dangers of victory'. As he saw it, there was only one way to escape them and that was to re-establish peace. An

honourable settlement with other nations seemed to him the indispensable complement to an honourable settlement at home. So he returned to the plan he had tentatively put forward during his alliance with Danton, and which for a time he had had to give up. Now circumstances seemed more propitious. Throughout the country, in fact, there was a deep desire, among those who had grown rich during the revolution, for order, stability and peacefulness.

The same weariness was to be seen in the other camp. The Belgian defeats, and the anxieties felt by the Austrians and Prussians over the Polish question, disposed the Coalition towards a settlement. In the man who had restored divine worship, they thought they saw the powerful figure they could negotiate with. From where they were, they could not see how much the revolutionary government had been weakened since the fall of the factions, nor how unstable Robespierre's position was among the rest. His apparent apotheosis on 8 June misled all the chancelleries.

One of the other reasons, of course, why the Coalition were only prepared to negotiate with Robespierre, was because they knew he was opposed to the conquests and in favour of a compromise peace. Discreet soundings and secret contacts took place between them. But Carnot did not intend to be robbed of the laurels of the war; and it was he who was the real architect of Robespierre's fall.

3 Towards a coup d'état

From mid-June 1794 the battle was on between Robespierre and the 'technocrats' galvanised by Carnot. Yet more than a month had to pass before they decided to move into action. What caused the delay?

Robespierre could not think of seizing power by a coup d'état. He could rely neither on the army nor on the popular vanguard. He had nothing but the ordinary means at his disposal. He had to win in the Assembly rather than the street; to command by a skilful mixture of persuasion and terror; to

win over the Convention by the magic of his eloquence, his virtue, and his powers of argument; and at the same time to use police measures and the threat of the guillotine as intimidation. In that way he hoped to eliminate his most dangerous enemies and firmly establish his own power. The guillotine blade would fall one last time. Then, sole master, he would put the machine away in the props cupboard and in a scene of apotheosis far greater than the festival of 8 June, amid universal rejoicing, he would proclaim the end of the Terror and a return to order.

But for this to be successful, he felt his adversaries needed to show their characters beforehand. His standing in the Convention was high, but no more so than Cambon's or Barère's. He could not destroy them until they had betrayed their own 'impure' plans. That was certainly the reason he did nothing during those weeks, contenting himself with needling Barère during their contests of eloquence. 'I shall speak out in due time' was his leitmotiv. It was known that in his diplomatic semi-retirement he was preparing a major speech which would be delivered to the Convention at the appropriate time, and in which he would be demanding blood. Meanwhile, people close to Robespierre were worried by his inaction. His most devoted lieutenant, national agent Payan, wrote on 27 June, urging him to do something.

The men of the two Committees also put off the moment of action. First of all they were afraid that if they started a political crisis lightly it might jeopardise the success of their military operations; then they did not want to play into the hands of the counter-revolution through a fratricidal quarrel, when they could see it growing in strength every day. And also, most importantly, they were acting on a similar impulse to Robespierre. Well aware of the extent of Robespierre's popularity, in fact almost certainly overestimating it, they thought that only the Convention could bring him down. For Robespierre to be ruined they first need to 'rip off his mask of patriotism', and to have 'tangible evidence' against him. The Committee members also decided to wait 'for him to attack

before we attack, and for him to make accusations before we accuse' and to leave him to make 'the mistake of aggression'. They would make him 'catch himself in his own snares'.

In the event of open opposition, the only troops Robespierre and his supporters could rely on were the Paris National Guard, particularly the artillery companies of the sections which had been attached to the revolutionary militia until its disbandment. For a coup d'état against the Robespierrists to succeed, the city garrison would have to be neutralised. Carnot commissioned his deputy, Pille, to make secret preparations for civil war. The Paris troops under Hanriot, and their equipment, were systematically posted some distance from the capital. Were they thinking of concentrating troops of the regular army around Paris? There was a rumour to that effect, but even if the Committees were really thinking about it, they did not dare carry it out. They were afraid to involve the instrument of military conquests in a conflict over internal policy. They began the battle against Robespierre with a very small complement of men, hurriedly raised from among the sections loyal to the Convention.

At a meeting of the two Committees on 22 July, Billaud-Varenne delivered a general indictment of Robespierre and called for him to be put on trial. Barère's and Billaud's attacks were aimed at making him finally enter the fray and show his hand. Maximilien realised he had allowed himself to be forestalled, and that the period of equivocation was over. He had to respond to the challenge or perish. Despite his profound reluctance to reveal his intentions he resigned himself to raising the mask. At a special meeting of the two Committees on 23 July he behaved very aggressively but, if we are to believe subsequent accounts by his colleagues, left it to his young friend Saint-Just to make the astonishing proposal that only Robespierre's brilliance and reputation could 'save the state'. 'I ask that he should be made dictator, and that these two Committees put that as a joint proposal to the Convention tomorrow.' In that way, the fiction of the sovereign assembly would be respected. Robert Lindet is meant to have replied,

significantly, 'We did not make the revolution for the sole benefit of one person.'

Robespierre's opponents had now given definite notice of their intentions and were merely waiting for the first favourable opportunity to ruin him. So he had to act quickly if he was not to be outmanoeuvred. He decided to speak. He had failed to impose his will on the Committees behind closed doors so now he had to call publicly on the Convention itself for support. He made one more attempt to convince and intimidate. He did all he could to rouse them to a major purge which would rid him of his adversaries, particularly Carnot and Cambon. So on 26 July he appeared on the rostrum in the Convention, with a thick sheaf of papers in his hand. A good speech was the only card he had left. He had written it out beforehand, as usual, but this time had taken particular care over it. His attack was predominantly on the 'technocrats', Carnot, Barère and Cambon. In scarcely veiled language, he called for their heads. Thus by the evening of the 26th, the statesmen he had referred to were acutely aware of the threat hanging over them. Some considerable time earlier, Carnot had put forward a plan of battle: forestall Robespierre, indict him in front of the Convention, arrest the commanders of the Paris National Guard and dissolve the Commune. But they did not yet have the means to carry it off. Putting Hanriot behind bars was no easy task.

Cambon did not agree with these tactics of forced temporisation. The fiery southerner's instinct for self-preservation impelled him to do something. At the end of the session on the 26th he woke the Assembly out of their spellbound reaction to the eloquence they had just heard. Dashing, not without courage, to the rostrum, he cried, 'I will speak to France before I am dishonoured!' And his words imparted the stirrings of courage to members who had until then been riveted with fear. 'It is time the whole truth was told. One man has paralysed the will of the National Convention, the man who has just finished speaking. It is Robespierre, judge for yourselves!'

After the session, Cambon wrote on the margin of a

Moniteur, before he put it in a wrapper and addressed it to his family in Montpellier, 'Tomorrow, one of us – Robespierre or me – will be dead.' He spent the night in a state of agitated activity, insisting that drastic measures should be taken without delay.

But the members of the Committee did not at first accept the proposals he was urging. At four o'clock in the morning they summoned the leaders of the Commune, Payan and Fleuriot, and tried vainly to discover their intentions. They had no more success with the commander of the cavalry. Finally, at five o'clock, they decided to present a statement to the Convention demanding the dismissal and arrest of the leaders of the Paris National Guard, as well as its reorganisation, particularly the abolition of the general command and the subordination of the legion commanders to direct orders from the Committee. At the same time they drew up the text of a formal proclamation to be read by the Convention commissioners to the citizens of Paris, in every section.

4 Right and left united against Robespierre

On the morning of Thermidor (27 July), then, the conflict between Robespierre and the majority of the government had reached its final stage, but it was not yet settled. The scales were not tipped in either direction. The outcome of the day was still uncertain. Neither side wanted to risk a coup d'état. Each was relying on being able to persuade the Convention to take decisive action against the other, and consequently was courting public opinion.

Discontent was widespread, but public opinion was nonetheless deeply split. On one side, the property-owning class wanted order, stability, an end to the Terror and economic controls, and the permanent dissolution of the power of the masses; and facing them on the other side was the popular vanguard, full of resentment at the poverty, dearth and high prices they continued to suffer (at the end of May the queues at shop doorways were growing longer), increasingly mistrustful

of the public authorities and still bruised after the liquidation of the Hébertists and the measures carried out against the organs of popular power.

The men on the Committees were as alarmed by this turbid situation as the Robespierrists. Each ran the risk of being caught between the two opposing currents. Neither could hope to win without uniting them against the other side.

The counter-revolutionary grouping was the stronger of the two, and Robespierre tried to capture its support. During his speech on 26 July he did not hesitate to turn to the right of the Assembly, to the 'toads of the Marsh', dyed-in-the-wool conservatives, militant catholics, scarcely disguised royalists whom he had been courting for so long. At the session the next day, he abandoned the Montagnards who were booing him and turned to the right again. 'I am speaking to you upright men, not to those bandits.' His one mistake was in not making clear the plans he had in mind for re-establishing order. In his (undelivered) speech of the 9th of Thermidor, Saint-Just said of Robespierre, 'To be truthful, he does not explain anything very clearly.' But could he, openly, change his opinion completely when, to a certain extent, he still needed to keep on good terms with his left wing?

That is why he spoke to the bras nus at the same time, to solicit their help against his opponents, though he did it without much energy or conviction. His speech on 26 July contained an eloquent apostrophe to the people, but the appeal remained an abstract one. There was no concrete promise of an improvement in their condition, no attempt to allay the dissatisfaction of the Paris workers, who had just been hit by the wages maximum; not a word that might dispel the bitterness and distrust that the sansculotte elite had felt since the destruction of Hébertism. On the contrary, the orator reminded the right that he had been Hébert's executioner. Yet this remarkable political strategy was not a mistake: it was not clumsiness on his part that he did not try very hard to win the bras nus' support, but deliberate policy. It was no part of his plan to breathe new life into the power of the plebs.

For their part, the members of the committees tried to unite right- and left-wing opinion against Robespierre. They falsely portrayed their opponent as the incarnation of the Terror, for which they were equally responsible in fact.

On the eve of the 9th of Thermidor, the conspirators sent emissaries three times to the men of the 'Plain'. They were told that they would be responsible for 'numerous murders by Robespierre' if they refused to co-operate with the measures to put a stop to them, that the political protection they had been granted by Robespierre was only temporary, and that their turn would come. The third time, as Durand de Maillane, a member of the Convention recounts, they submitted. 'It was no longer possible to watch sixty or eighty heads roll each day without feeling horrified.'

Because Robespierre had not explained his plans to them, the 'toads of the Marsh' did not realise that, after one final blood-letting, he too wanted to dismantle the scaffold. They imagined that if they wanted to be rid of the guillotine and the sansculottes, they would have to get rid of him. They imagined that after the master had liquidated all his rivals, he would start demanding their heads as well. Whereas, in actual fact, Maximilien was thinking more in terms of forgetting the events of 31 May, and negotiating with the survivors of the Gironde. One of the reasons for his downfall was that he was not able to find a 'scratch majority', as it is called in parliamentary jargon. He had smashed Hébertism and boasted about it. But nevertheless, in the Commune, on the Revolutionary Tribunal and in the revolutionary committees in the sections, he was still surrounded by plebeian supporters who owed everything to him, and who by defending him were defending their own position and even their lives. And although these supporters were more moderate than the Hébertists, they compromised him by talking about 'another 31 May' and urging him to take to the streets. He did not disown them explicitly enough to reassure the men of the 'Plain'.

The conspirators of Thermidor also managed to use left-

wing opinion against their adversary. They exploited the sans-culottes' discontent by placing the whole responsibility for the wages maximum on to Robespierre. They fostered the spirit of revenge among the survivors of Hébertism, including Collot d'Herbois and Billaud-Varenne. They managed to focus all the pain and fear and pent-up anger on to the head of one man. They could not rouse the bras nus into action against Robespierre, of course, but they did ensure their neutrality, which was a considerable victory in itself; the more so, as some did become openly hostile.

For a day, the parliamentary right and left were allies. The Committees succeeded in getting the Dantonists and the Hébertists, the remnants of the two Montagnard factions that had fought each other for so long, to unite against the 'tyrant'. Robespierre made their task easier, in fact, by threatening not only the 'technocrats' with the guillotine, but also a number of deputies recalled from mission. Some, like Tallien, he criticised for their venality; others, like Carrier and Javogues who were involved with Hébertism, for their 'excesses'; and Fouché, who had switched from the Hébertist camp to the opposing one a little too quickly, both for his former 'excesses' and for his conversion to 'moderantism'.

The members of the government themselves, because of their position, had to be fairly cautious. They could not lead the parliamentary manoeuvre themselves. They needed accomplices in the lobbies of the Assembly. They played on the bitterness of the survivors of Hébertism and Dantonism, inspiring them with the courage of fear. Carnot, in particular, actively used his influence to incite them.

In his speech on 26 July, Robespierre showed his anger at this 'immoral' alliance of two once-hostile factions that were now in league against him. 'By what twist of fate is it that those who once inveighed against Hébert are now defending his accomplices? What has happened to make those who were Danton's enemies become his imitators?'

5 The quid-pro-quo of the 9th of Thermidor

Robespierre had lost the struggle at the parliamentary level by the evening of 26 July. The speech he had so carefully prepared failed to achieve its effect. His last weapon had misfired. Trembling with fear, the Convention had at first voted that the speech should be printed, but Cambon's stormy intervention, and those of others after him, had freed them of their fear and they had rescinded the vote.

This was an outcome that Robespierre had envisaged. In the manuscript of the speech there is one strange sentence that stands out from the rest.

> 'I promised some time ago to leave behind a testament which would be feared by all those who oppress the people. I am going to publish it now, with the independence that befits the situation I am in: I bequeath them the dreadful truth and death.'

The speech was written in such a way as to become his programme if he won, or, if he lost, his testament.

He knew he had played his last card. 'I have thrown down my shield', he said during the debate that followed, 'and offered myself unprotected to my enemies'. Did he still retain any hope, or did he realise that everything was lost? That evening he told his host, Duplay the master-joiner, maybe to reassure him, 'I no longer expect any support from the Mountain. They want to get rid of me as if I were a tyrant. But the mass of the Assembly will give me a hearing.' Yet tradition has it that when he went to the Jacobin Club to read his speech a second time, he declared,

> 'The speech you have just heard is my last will and testament. I saw today that the league of the wicked is so powerful that I cannot hope to escape it. I submit without regret; I leave you my memory; it will be dear to you and you will defend it.'

This is where the quid-pro-quo, the misunderstanding, of the 9th of Thermidor begins. This man, who shrank from

action because he did not control the army and because he did not want to ally himself with the ordinary people, who already thought everything was lost, or that he could only expect to be saved by a right-wing parliamentary majority, was dragged by his supporters into a last-minute insurrection.

The bureaucrats who, since the murders of Chaumette and Hébert, had been installed in the Hôtel de Ville, no longer represented the people of Paris. Since they had been in charge at the Commune building they had behaved more like gendarmes towards the bras nus than representatives. Yet they knew that if Robespierre fell it would also mean the end for them. Their instinct for self-preservation made them decide to act. They looked for ways of defending themselves. And as they controlled the administration of the Commune, and the Paris National Guard, and were therefore in close contact with the officers of the sections, they tried to get the sansculottes up on their feet after they themselves had killed all their enthusiasm. They were dreaming of forcing the Convention to liquidate Robespierre's opponents with a repeat of the old revolutionary *journées.*

As far as Robespierre was concerned, his supporters' turbulent response to events was most inopportune. He did not want to, in fact he could not, do anything except through the legal channels, nor join battle except in the Convention. And at the Jacobin Club he flatly disowned the preparations for insurrection.

But the Robespierrists were more resolute than their leader. That same evening Hanriot was ordering the National Guard and the gendarmerie to take up arms the following morning at seven o'clock. On 27 July (the 9th of Thermidor), very late in the evening, just after Robespierre and his friends had been arrested at the Convention and when he may well have known, too, of the warrant for the arrest of himself and the rest of his command, he ordered each legion commander to send four hundred men from each section. He also called up the companies of artillery.

The Paris National Guard was divided into six legions,

each covering eight sections. The Committee of Public Safety had taken the precaution of abolishing the general command and had placed legion commanders directly under its own orders. As a result, four out of the six commanders refused to obey Hanriot's orders. Only the first and sixth legions followed his command, and placed a total of 3,400 men at his disposal. As for the artillery companies, they were separately organised with their own chief-of-staff for artillery directly under Hanriot, and a loyal supporter of his. Thirty of the forty-eight artillery companies were still in Paris: sixteen of them, plus a seventeenth made up of volunteers recruited by the revolutionary committee of the Section de l'Homme-Armé, obeyed the Commune's orders. The Committees, for their part, forbade sections to follow Hanriot's orders, and ordered citizens to convey the National Guard commander to the Committee, dead or alive. They called up the army and the artillery of various sections around the Convention and the Committee.

But the Robespierrist Commune did not let that intimidate them. They set up the traditional machinery of insurrection. They formed an insurrectionary committee, ceased to recognise the authority of the Committee of Public Safety, decided on the arrest of a number of deputies, including Carnot, closed the gates, sounded the tocsin and convened the sections, asking them at the same time to send their gunners to take up positions in front of the Hôtel de Ville. Finally, they issued an appeal to the people of Paris. 'People, arise! Let us not lose the fruits of 10 August and 31 May!'

At the end of the day, Hanriot and a handful of gendarmes tried to rescue the five who had been imprisoned, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Couthon, the younger Robespierre and Lebas. All he achieved was his own arrest. Late in the evening, Hanriot's second-in-command, Coffinhal, followed by a section of the artillery the Commune had managed to assemble, together with citizens recruited in the streets, marched unhesitatingly on the Committee of General Security, near the Convention hall. They were hoping to find Robespierre and his friends, but they were no longer there. They did at least manage to free Hanriot,

though, who needed only to give the word and Coffinhal's raid would be transformed in to a coup d'état. Given the extreme weakness of the military forces on both sides, victory would go to whichever moved more boldly. Nothing would have been easier than to arrest the members of the Committees and disperse the Convention.

But the revolutionaries of the period were still convinced that the sovereign assembly was sacred. And even if Hanriot had cast off that taboo, there was every likelihood his master would not have followed him. What would Robespierre's response, with all his legalism, have been? Had he not always taught the sansculottes to respect the Convention as the only expression of popular sovereignty? Hanriot and his men, with the Convention at their mercy and trembling with fear, went back to the Hôtel de Ville. At the *mairie* on the Quai des Orfèvres, where Robespierre and his four companions had been taken, the police in charge of them had been won over to the Commune's side, and set the five free. But although he was free, Robespierre stubbornly refused to leave the prison. He showed no desire at all to lead the insurrection his supporters had sparked off for him. Since his defeat in the Assembly, the Commune's action was the only way his heavily compromised position could be retrieved. But he wanted the action to take place well away from him, he wanted to keep it at a distance from himself. If by any chance the Commune did win against the Convention, he did not want to find himself in an illegal position, owing his power to a revolt of the people. The only purpose of a victory by the Commune, as far as he was concerned, would be to induce a repentant frame of mind in the Convention so that they would vote to sanction his personal power. And that vote would not be obtained unless he, personally, had not gone outside the law. He needed a lot of pressing. At the Commune his followers called for him, and sent deputation after deputation to 'point out to him that he is not his own master, but that his duty is wholly towards his country and the people'. It was not until late in the evening that he finally allowed himself to be taken over to the Hôtel de Ville.

The bras nus did not seem any keener to go to the Hôtel de Ville than Robespierre. They had no very clear idea of what was going on or what was expected of them. At the end of the afternoon, Hanriot rode through the streets on horseback, trying to rouse the crowds to action, shouting, 'The people are lost, for Robespierre, their protector, has been taken.' In the Rue Saint-Honoré, he came upon twenty or so workmen, peacefully mending the road, and called on them to leave their work and take up arms 'for their protector, their father is in danger'. The paviours stopped what they were doing for a minute or two to look at the plumed figure and listen to his speech. Then they went back to work.

The sections hesitated, but stayed neutral. The General Council sent them more and more urgent orders, but it was in vain. One or two did respond to the call from the Hôtel de Ville, but without any great conviction, and they were easily dissuaded. When, at midnight, the Assembly outlawed the Commune, they switched their allegiance over to the Convention's camp. One of the two columns of troops that Carnot and Barère had hastily marshalled marched on the Hôtel de Ville and burst into the room where the insurrectionary committee was meeting. The Robespierrists ended up like common outlaws caught in their lair. Robespierre, drawn into this pitiable adventure despite himself, put a pistol to his own head. At least, that is the most likely hypothesis. The next day he was borne to the scaffold with his shattered jaw held in place by a bandage that the executioner, with the same cruelty he had shown to Hébert, ripped off.

Briefly, Robespierre's downfall was the result of his inability to choose between the two sides of his character: the petit-bourgeois, the Jacobin, the conciliatory mediator; and the *homme fort*, the dictatorial arbiter above the classes, the only man capable of stabilising the bourgeois revolution. Before Thermidor he had only shown a few signs of wanting dictatorship. He had let people glimpse enough of his ambition for power for them to be alarmed, but not enough for him to get his way. And then, when he wanted to, he found he could not

just cast off the mantle of Jacobinism. Perhaps, fundamentally, he was not big enough for the role of *homme fort*. He remained entangled in his petit-bourgeois attitudes and prejudices about legality and respect for the fiction of representation.

Moreover, even if he had had the makings of an *homme fort*, he still would not have provided the forcefulness and grip that the bourgeoisie were looking for. When they were ready for dictatorship, much later, their choice could only be a general. They would only choose a military leader who was determined to continue the struggle against the British enemy relentlessly and without respite. Robespierre, the civilian who could only base his power on moral strength rather than force of arms, who wanted to open negotiations with Europe at the very moment the war of acquisition was being victoriously renewed, was no longer the right man for them.

After hesitating between a number of candidates, and after long and frequent political upheavals, the bourgeoisie finally came down in favour of Bonaparte. Barère, who had helped overthrow Robespierre in 1794, rushed, four years later, into the arms of the young general: 'It is in London', he said, 'that Bonaparte shall overthrow the English government.' The sharp-witted Mme de Staël hit on the perfect description, though without perhaps realising its full profundity. She said of Napoleon, trying to disparage him, 'He is a Robespierre on horseback.'

12.
The Veil is Torn

1 Reaction and counter-revolution

Those who instigated the 9th of Thermidor saw it as a simple palace revolution, a purge of the ruling group, leaving the essential machinery of power in the same hands and not entailing any change in the balance of class relations. The great specialists, spokesmen of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, would keep their positions. The symphony was supposed to carry on after the discordant note had been removed. They miscalculated. The fall of Robespierre brought totally unforeseen consequences: it increased the pace of both reaction and counter-revolution. And it upset the balance of political forces.

First, Thermidor permanently stabilised the bourgeois revolution; that is, it destroyed the instrument that had ensured its success: the bras nus. The idea of bringing the revolution to a halt had been in the air for some time. It had preoccupied the government, Robespierre as much as his colleagues. It was greatly desired by 'public opinion', which is to say by the bourgeoisie who had taken enough and were impatient to digest in peace. It had now become possible because the Coalition troops had been driven back over the frontiers.

The Commune's abortive rebellion provided the excuse reaction needed, in the last quid-pro-quo of the revolution. The reactionaries pretended to confuse Payan's Commune with Chaumette's. They cunningly played on the terror that the second power – the power of the masses – had inspired since 10 August 1792. They made a scare out of the old rivalry between the Commune and the Convention, as if dual power had not long been a thing of the past. They reminded people –

helped by the Robespierrists of the Hôtel de Ville – of 31 May, a daunting and humiliating memory for the Convention. By summoning up these spectres from the past, they were creating a favourable atmosphere for the final operation, setting the scene for the last act of the tragedy: brutal repression of the popular vanguard, and the total withdrawal, at economic, political and religious levels, of the concessions granted the bras nus, which they had already been cutting down for months. What came after was just the coup de grâce.

But Thermidor also opened the way for a royalist attempt at counter-revolution. The reactionaries of Thermidor wanted to destroy the sansculottes. But out of self-interest they clung body and soul to the gains of the revolutionary bourgeoisie and were fiercely hostile to any resurgence of the Ancien Régime. They had everything to lose from the revenge of the aristocracy and the clergy. The counter-revolutionaries, on the other hand, remained indomitable. They had everything to gain from the revenge of the aristocracy and the clergy. Nobles and churchmen stripped of their lands and incomes, young men impatient to recover the family heritage and forget the Terror in debauchery, and all the rest of that little world, wanted to smash the power of the people, and they wanted to take the bourgeoisie's conquests back from them as well.

The victors of the 9th of Thermidor gave them their opportunity by throwing the entire responsibility for the Terror on to one man, making Robespierre its incarnation. The fall of the Terrorist was universally taken to mean the end of the Terror. The royalists thought they were not only safe, but in command as well.

The bourgeoisie had never been able to intervene in the streets themselves. They needed henchmen. They had called on the bras nus for support against the aristocrats. Now they used the royalist *jeunesse dorée*, bands of anti-Jacobin youths armed with bludgeons, against the bras nus. They appealed to them to break up the *sociétés populaires*, which put these fascists-before-their-time at an advantage, and allowed them to think they could do anything they liked.

The counter-revolution flooded in through that breach. The ruling clique that had been responsible for the 9th of Thermidor – including Carnot himself for a time – had to give up power. The terrorists (Billaud-Varenne and Collot d'Herbois) who had thoughtlessly allied themselves with the 'technocrats' to get rid of Robespierre were deported. The *jeunesse dorée*, armed with clubs, enjoyed themselves to the full, beating up members of the revolutionary bourgeoisie as well as sans-culottes. The Great Terror was replaced by the White Terror. It was as if the bourgeois revolution had surrendered itself, undefended, to the advancing royalist counter-revolution.

But the looming figure of Restoration, as savage as it was unexpected, was ephemeral. It hardly lasted more than a year. The bourgeoisie remained the ruling class in society and kept the power in their hands. The sources of wealth stayed in their possession. As long as they needed the young royalists to break the bras nus, they did not interfere with them. But they had no intention of giving up the fundamental gains of the revolution. When these were called into question, they pulled themselves together and declared a halt. In Paris, on the 13th of Vendemiaire, Year III (4 October 1795), General Bonaparte routed the royalist fanatics with youthful brutality. The only task left was the stabilisation of bourgeois society. The see-sawing continued for years, with the Directory bashing the revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries alternately, and playing one off against the other. In the end, Bonaparte's iron hand finally immobilised bourgeois society.

After the 9th of Thermidor, the way the bourgeoisie had used the sansculottes as pawns in their own game became very clear. The true relationship between bourgeois and bras nus had largely been disguised during the Terror. The two classes had had to appear united in the struggle for the triumph of the revolution. But after Thermidor there could no longer be any illusion. The brutal way the bourgeoisie treated the bras nus after seducing them with softly whispered promises of liberty, equality and fraternity, the thanks they gave for the immeasurable service they had just been rendered, were too obvious.

The true face of the bourgeoisie was revealed, the same face we see, even now, every time the mask is lifted. At the same time as the assignat was losing its last traces of magic, bourgeois democracy and bourgeois 'fraternity' were being shown up as the counterfeits they too really were.

2 The poor sacrificed

By the autumn of 1794 nobody was observing the maximum and the authorities no longer even tried to enforce it. On 9 December 1794, the Convention decreed its abolition.

But while the freeze on price rises was now permanently lifted, the bankruptcy of the currency was causing the cost of living to rise catastrophically. The inflation that had started under Cambon and Robespierre began to increase at a giddying rate: five hundred million, then one billion, a billion and a half, two billion, then four billion a month. There were eight billion assignats in circulation at the end of 1794, more than 20 billion at the end of 1795, 25 billion in March 1796, 30 billion in November of the same year and about 34 billion in February 1797.

This avalanche of paper meant rapid depreciation of the paper currency. In Paris, the hundred franc assignat's cash value was: in July 1794, 34; December, 22; April 1795, 12; July, 3; November, 0.87; and in March 1796, 0.29.

After this came monetary bankruptcy, the official admission that the revolutionary bourgeoisie had financed their war by picking the pockets of the poor.

The Convention's first step was officially to sanction the depreciation of the currency. On 25 April 1795, they revoked the decree forbidding the assignat to be exchanged for specie. On 21 June they set up a scale of depreciation for the assignat based on an increase in the number of notes issued. The issue was retrospectively divided into blocks of five hundred million, each of which meant an increase of a quarter on debts. One deputy, Jean Rousseau, stressed that this was actually a 'hidden demonetisation'.

On 20 July, the Convention decreed that the land tax should in future be paid half in assignats and half in grain. On 30 November, the Directory ordered the production of gold, silver and copper coinage to be speeded up by law, using all means available. On 10 December, a law was promulgated instituting forced borrowing, payable in gold or in assignats redeemed at one hundredth of their face value. On 19 February, the blocks the banknotes were printed from were symbolically broken in the Place Vendôme in front of a huge, jeering crowd.

As paper money continued to fall faster and faster, there was no alternative but simply to abolish the assignat, which was done on 16 March 1796. It was followed by an attempt to replace it with another form of paper currency, the *mandats territoriaux*. One *mandat territorial* cost thirty assignats. But those depreciated in turn, necessitating a decree that taxes could only be paid in cash or kind. *Mandats* were withdrawn from circulation, and their owners had to content themselves with one per cent of their paper's nominal value. Dealings between private individuals were legalised again. Metal currency made a triumphant reappearance.

Gold took its revenge on paper, and the bourgeoisie on the plebeians. The rich, who had buried their money deep enough in their cellars to prevent sansculotte searchers from finding it, came through the monetary catastrophe safe and sound. Those who had bought national lands in the past were able to pay off the remaining instalments very cheaply. As for the big holders of paper money, they could turn their *mandats* into real assets by using them to buy national lands without bidding for it at auction. The holders of small quantities, on the other hand, those whose annuities or pensions or salaries were paid in *mandats,* were sacrificed.

The cost of living rocketed. Bread that cost three sous a pound in Paris in the Year II was being sold for 35 francs on 5 May 1796. Meat, sold at 20 to 30 sous a pound in the winter of 1794 (the official price was 16 sous) rose to 40 sous by 20 January 1795, and to 7 livres 10 sous on 1 April. In October it

was fetching 20 francs, and at the beginning of January 1796, 60 francs.

In the report he gave to the Convention on 20 September 1794, Robert Lindet, who had originally imposed economic controls out of necessity not for doctrinal preference, came out resoundingly in favour of freedom. Cambon, the man responsible for the introduction of controls in the financial sphere, also called for a return to economic liberalism.

On 6 January 1795, the Convention voted to abolish the Commission for Trade and Supplies, thus showing their condemnation of the occasional – albeit timid – inclinations the previous regime had shown towards nationalisation.

The last vestiges of state control were similarly banished from the arms industry. The Committee of Public Safety decided on 6 December 1794 that all rifle manufacture and repair in Paris would thenceforth be carried out under contract and that day-labourers in the workshops would no longer be paid by the republic. The thousands of workers were sent to factories in the provinces which either were or became private enterprises too. That was how the foundry at Toulouse, then the one at Maubeuge, were turned over to private ownership. The gun-foundry at Avignon was closed down. And work on the construction of new national factories at Tulle, Saint-Denis and Saint-Cloud, among other places, was stopped.

The same sequence of events applied to the organisation of transport. On 22 February 1795, a decree forbade the sale of horses and goods to the Convoys and Military Transport Commission, and on 30 May the Transport Commission was abolished. The horses and rolling stock needed for military transport were to be provided by private companies. The provisioning of the forces was likewise given over to private suppliers. The supply officers of the Ancien Régime reappeared.

Foreign trade regained its freedom too. After 17 October 1794, manufacturers were allowed to import freely, and anything they needed for their workshops and sent for from abroad was exempt from requisition. On 26 November all restrictions on the import of non-prohibited goods and commodities were

lifted. The only duty levied on essential goods was reduced to a simple clearance duty [*droit de statistique*, a small duty levied to pay for the cost of preparing trade statistics]. The decree of 31 January listed all the goods on which duty had been reduced, and on the 22nd the Committee of Public Safety discontinued the requisitioning of foreign currency and bills.

The poor were deliberately sacrificed.

3 The coup de grâce for popular power

While the bread was being stolen from the sansculottes' mouths, they were also being cheated of the political liberty that was one of their fundamental gains. One after another, the organs of popular power were destroyed.

On 20 August 1794, the revolutionary committees (or *comités de surveillance*) were effectively abolished. They allowed one per district to remain, which could be replaced every three months.

On 16 October the axe fell on the *sociétés populaires* for the first time. The Convention decreed that all affiliations, admissions and federations, and all correspondence between societies under a collective name, whatever their denomination, are prohibited, as subversive of the government and contrary to the Unity of the Republic'. The prohibition of any affiliation between *sociétés populaires* was no longer just aimed at spontaneous attempts at federation such as had already been censured by the decree of 4 December 1793; what they wanted to prevent now was the relationship whereby *sociétés populaires* affiliated to their respectable parent society, the Jacobin Club, and corresponded with it, although this had always been allowed and considered quite normal. This decree was a death sentence for both of them.

The Thermidoreans used large-scale measures to get rid of the Jacobins. A punitive expedition was organised. On 9 and 11 November, the royalist muscadins invaded the meeting room of the Club in the Rue Saint-Honoré with their cudgels, clubbed the men senseless, and whipped the women. The police

put the responsibility for the outrage on to the attacked and the government committees decided to suspend the Club's meetings and close the hall down. On the 12th, the Convention ratified the measure.

The reputation of the 'Friend of the People', which had already been undermined under Robespierre, came in for a final onslaught; 21 January 1795 was the anniversary of the king's death, and the following day the muscadins smashed every bust of Marat in Paris, attacking the sansculottes of the faubourgs who protested.

On 10 April, the Convention ordered 'men known in their sections as having taken part in the horrors committed under the tyranny that preceded the 8th of Thermidor' to be disarmed. On 29 May a decree removed the bras nus from the National Guard. To be excused 'giving service' were 'the least well-off citizens among the class of artisans, day-labourers and manual workers'. On the 31st, the Revolutionary Tribunal was abolished.

On 23 August, without discussion, the Convention decreed that all clubs and popular societies were dissolved. On 9 October, section assemblies were forbidden.

The Constitution of the Year III, published on 22 August, replaced universal suffrage with a property qualification. From then on, only property owners could vote. The bourgeoisie abandoned the fictions Robespierre had been so fond of. The 'representative' Assembly was no longer supposed to embody the sovereignty of the people. It now embodied the sovereignty of a class. 'After this constitution', wrote Babeuf, 'everybody with no land of his own and everybody who cannot write, which means most Frenchmen, will lose even the right to vote in public assemblies. The nation, so-called, will be just the rich and the educated.'

The power of the Commune, too, was permanently broken in Paris. After the 9th of Thermidor, the capital's administration was run by central government, and the National Guard was removed from the control of the sections and placed under the command of a staff office which in turn was directly answerable to the Convention.

4 The resurrection of the church

The victories the bras nus had wrung from the church were gradually torn away from them again. They had dared to scale heaven, and heaven's spokesmen were taking their revenge.

To some extent this process was hindered by the bourgeoisie's reluctance to restore any of their former privileges to the 'men in black', and the fear of those who had acquired church lands that one day they might be robbed of their booty. But their fear and reluctance were easily overcome by their hatred of the sansculottes and their fear of the popular vanguard, a fear that bloody riots and insurrection attempts might lead to a crisis. The bourgeoisie approached the church and asked for its help in re-establishing order. The crooks of the cloth, who knew their priorities, abandoned all claim to the former ecclesiastical lands, and with that sacrifice bought the right to rule over men's souls again.

The moment the storm of dechristianisation had subsided, the revolutionary bourgeoisie stabilised relations between church and state. The church's demands were that religious freedom should become a reality, and that the protection given the catholic church should be made effective. Bishop Grégoire argued this case skilfully in the Convention on 21 December 1794. For the good of the cause the official spokesman of the intolerant church became a defender of toleration. He shed tears over the poor protestants forced by the revocation of the Edict of Nantes 'to tear themselves away from a country' they loved, and who had been the 'victims of terrible persecution'. The direct spiritual descendant of those persecutors called for 'total unlimited freedom for all religions' in the name of the persecuted. But he was using the pretext of defending toleration to start proselytising and the bourgeoisie in the Convention balked at that. The Convention ignored him and proceeded with the business of the day.

Grégoire and the 'men in black' did not admit defeat, though. They hammered away at the restoration of worship until the upsurge of religion almost everywhere became irresistible.

The bourgeoisie gave in. On 21 February 1795, Boissy d'Anglas won acceptance for a permanent solution: no state religion; no external signs or other evidence of religion; no one religion to be especially privileged; and 'religion (to be looked upon) solely as a personal opinion'. But once the separation of church and state was complete, religions were given full and complete state protection.

A further decree of 30 May 1795 restored all the churches to religious use. In Paris twelve, then fifteen, churches were reopened. On 11 August Notre Dame, deserted by the goddess of Reason, had its keys returned to a catholic society which celebrated the feast of the assumption there four days later.

It was not only the juring priests, [those who had taken the oath of loyalty], who had their old prerogatives restored to them. The refractory priests returned from exile en masse and started making intensive counter-revolutionary propaganda. By September 1796 the church had regained its former place in the life of the society. Corpus Christi was celebrated with great pomp and ceremony on 26 May.

5 The bras nus lose their temper

The Thermidorean reaction pulled the sansculottes out of their gloomy, sullen passivity and transformed their defensiveness into open hostility. It finally dawned on them how far they had been the pawns of the bourgeoisie. But the way they expressed their mortification was rather confused and impotent, as the objective conditions of the period prevented them from drawing all the lessons of their defeat. From 1795 they expressed their bitter sense of disillusion: 'We are soon going to regret all the sacrifices we have made for the revolution', declared the delegate from the Finistère and Observatoire sections at the bar of the Convention on 27 March. In the autumn of 1795, Babeuf described popular public opinion in these terms:

> 'They told us the republic was a magnificent thing. We believed them. We believed them so strongly that we made supernatural efforts to bring it into being. Those wonderful promises are not borne out by our experience'.

And the future communist added,

> 'The people were trusting and open and to begin with took the sublime terms liberty and equality at their face value. But villains . . . since you seized control of the sublime revolutionary movement you have made it quite clear to the people that you give these words meanings completely opposite to their dictionary definitions. The enthusiasm that they quite reasonably inspired' has turned 'to indifference and even hatred'.

The bras nus showed their anger in sudden brutal and primitive outbursts. They took the form of hunger riots. People were maddened by the feeling of emptiness in their stomachs. On 27 March 1795 a deputation of women was admitted before the Convention. One of them spoke. 'Nobody can afford to buy the basic things that make up for the lack of meat on 40 sous a day.' The president made a reply that missed the point, which was not at all what the housewives were there for. They punctuated the president's sentences with shouts of 'Bread! Bread!'

On 1 April (the 12th of Germinal) all the Paris sansculottes moved into action. The crowd invaded sessions of the Convention while orators from the sections followed each other at the bar. The speaker from the Quinze-Vingts section expressed himself in the following terms.

> 'Ever since the 9th of Thermidor we have been worse and worse off. The 9th of Thermidor was meant to save the people, and at every turn the people have been its victims. We were promised that when the maximum was lifted there would be abundance, and there is famine everywhere . . . Why have the *sociétés populaires* been closed down? What has happened to our harvests? Why are the assignats worth less and less all the time? . . . We demand that every possible measure should be used to relieve the terrible misery of the people and give them back their rights.'

After him it was the turn of Jean-Baptiste Vaneck, lieutenant to Dobsen, one of the leaders of 31 May. He declared, on behalf of the Section de la Cité,

> 'What has happened to all the grain from last year's abundant harvest? . . . People distrust assignats because you have issued decrees that destroy their trust . . . They [the citizens] are tired of spending their nights outside the doors of bakeries. It is time the people who produce the food and made the revolution had the means to live.'

The members of the Convention, and the president, tried to swamp the people's anger with nice phrases. But at every moment they were interrupted by the rough voice of the crowd shouting 'Bread! Bread!' like the chorus in a classical play.

The disturbances reached a climax on 20 May (1st of Prairial). The bras nus took over the Assembly, and a speaker from the Bon Conseil section took the bar and said,

> 'Most goods are as plentiful this year as they have been in the past and yet unbridled greed has forced prices up a hundred times. Every kind of foodstuff is displayed to the people's eyes each day while our basic necessities cost their weight in gold . . . If they can find the flour to make the enormous number of cakes, biscuits and brioches that are displayed in every street and square before the eyes of the poor as an insult to the hunger devouring them, why can they not find a way to increase the quantity or improve the quality of the bread of equality? If they can get bread from the farmers, by dint of cash or assignats, why does the price go up so exorbitantly every day?'

'Bread! Bread!' shouted the women in the galleries.

A dialogue then began between the president and the chorus:

President: All this shouting won't make the consignments come any faster.

Women: We've been waiting long enough, sod it!

President: I ask you to allow one of our colleagues to report on some satisfactory news. He has just been speeding up the consignments of foodstuffs and he will tell you . . .

Women: No, no. We want bread.

President: Let me tell you in the galleries that I would rather

die than not have the Convention respected. (*The women laugh and shout.*)

At that point the demonstration became violent. The door of the Convention hall was broken in and the deputies, who at first took refuge on the higher benches, had to give up their places to the people. It was then that deputy Jean-Baptiste Féraud – mistaken by the crowd for the Thermidorean, Stanislas Fréron – was killed by a pistol shot. Soon afterwards his head was stuck on the end of a pike. And the demonstration became an insurrection.

The bourgeoisie were aghast. 'Never', Carnot wrote, 'not in the worst *journées* of the revolution, have I seen the people so incensed; this is the only time they have struck me as ferocious. There was hunger and despair in their faces.'

The insurgents showed a fairly developed level of consciousness. Their proclamation of 20 May linked the question of subsistence with a revolutionary libertarian issue.

> 'The people, deeming that the government is inhumanly making them die of hunger . . . decrees the following: . . . Today, without further delay, the citizens of Paris, men and women alike, will proceed en masse to the National Convention to demand: First, bread; second, the abolition of the "revolutionary government" which each faction in turn abuses to starve, ruin and enslave the people; third, the proclamation and immediate implementation of the democratic constitution of 1793; fourth, the dismissal of the present government . . . and the arrest of its members.'

In opposition to bourgeois power and bourgeois democracy, the fighters of Prairial put forward direct democracy, the real sovereignty of the people.

The demonstrators had lost all respect for the Convention. The fiction of the sovereign assembly aroused nothing but their laughter and sarcasm. As early as 1 April, a woman had replied to one of the deputies who was urging her more forcefully than the others to give up her place to him, 'This is our place'. The Prairial insurgents' proclamation stripped the Assembly of its sovereignty. 'All power not derived from the

people is suspended.' In the Convention on 20 May, the president tried in vain to breathe some life into the dead fiction. Thinking that his words would check the invaders, he pompously declared, 'You are among the representatives of the nation.' But the chorus replied, 'What have you done with our money, you crook?' And one man shouted, 'Get out, the lot of you, we are going to form the National Convention ourselves!' Which was what happened; until midnight, the extreme left deputies and the bras nus sat side by side on the benches of the Assembly, deserted by the majority, and legislated.

When the Thermidorean troops had ejected them from the Convention, the insurgents made the Commune their centre. The next day, the 21st, a deputy told the Convention that a sacrilegious gathering of rebels was in progress there and that they were calling themselves the 'National Convention of the Sovereign People'.

Even the extreme left wing of the Assembly, the men who had been called the 'last Montagnards', like Gilbert Romme, Jean-Marie Goujon and Pierre Soubrany, aroused the mistrust and irony of the bras nus. There was a clear illustration of this when Romme wanted to deal with the question of political liberties before the question of food. He proposed that the Convention, which for a few hours was Montagnard again as a result of the right's retreat, should first of all agree to free all imprisoned patriots.

'After this decree', he cried, 'we must turn to the provision of bread for the people.'

'And about time, too!' the crowd sneered derisively.

These progressive Jacobins and the Prairial insurgents did not have much in common. Only the scaffold brought them together. The former were merely the parliamentary opposition, drawn into the storm despite themselves. The others, Pierre Lime, the engraver, Etienne Chebrier the storekeeper, François Duval the shoemaker, the *dégraisseur* Pierre Dorisse and their anonymous comrades, were men of a different sort. The execution of the 'last Montagnards' the day after Prairial and the heroic suicide of three of them, has conferred a kind of

martyrdom on them. They have been confused with the insurrection whose incidental victims they were. The name they have been given, though, indicates clearly what they were: the last spokesmen of the bourgeois revolution. Whereas the Prairial insurgents, the ancestors of the insurgents of June 1848 and 1871, were the precursors of the proletarian revolution.

However, after the rioters had proclaimed the deposition of bourgeois power, they fell into the traps their opponents set for them like children, so powerful was the influence of the other class, and so weak and unhomogeneous the class in the process of being born.

The insurgents of Germinal (1 April) did nothing beyond invading the hall, when it only needed them to disperse the deputies and appoint an insurrectionary government, and with a bit more cohesion they could have won control of the capital. Instead of which they were prepared to leave peacefully when the Thermidoreans recovered from their shock and took the offensive. The bourgeois National Guard which had been massed outside the Convention welcomed the people, as they came out of the Assembly, with their bayonets. After a while the insurgents took refuge in Notre Dame. But Pichegru's troops burnt down the doors of the cathedral and the massacre of the workers began.

The insurgents of Prairial repeated the mistake of the earlier uprising, even exacerbated it, as this time they held some of the power in their hands: they legislated, but they never thought of seizing executive power. It was in vain that a more resolute man, the black, Guillaume Delorme, gave the order to fire the cannon that were trained on the Tuileries. The gunners hesitated to raise impious hands against the sacrosanct Convention. Afterwards, Delorme blamed them bitterly for their hesitation. 'If you cowards had let me do what I wanted', he told them, 'Paris would be ours.'

The Thermidoreans had assembled the battalions from the sections that had remained loyal. It was these who, towards midnight, expelled the insurgents from the Convention hall. When the Assembly was 'free' again, deputy Antoine

Thibaudeau sounded the horn for the kill. 'You have only taken half-measures so far; there is no longer any hope of conciliation between you and a factional, unruly minority.' The insurrection gained new impetus from that provocation. The following day (21 May) the three sections of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, the most working-class in Paris, took up arms. The battalions thus raised, much more significant than their opponents' in terms of numbers, easily drove back the Convention troops that had been sent out to meet them, won through to the Place du Carrousel and were deployed in battle order with their cannon pointing at the Assembly.

A preference for legal methods was still deeply rooted in the hearts of these men, though. Illusions reappeared which one might have thought had been banished. An unexpected event happened that took the wind out of their sails. The gunners from the sections loyal to the Convention suddenly went over to join the insurgents, bringing their guns and fraternising. It was a repetition of 31 May 1793. The contours of the class struggle grew blurred, just as they had two years earlier. Instead of two enemies facing each other, there was a confused mass of people in which tomorrow's murderers clasped hands with their future victims.

When their gunners defected, the Thermidoreans thought they were lost, then suddenly saw how the embraces could be turned to their advantage. They pretended to come to terms with the crowd. One of them, Jacques Rabaud-Pomier, suggested 'All the citizens seem to want to fraternise with each other. Would it not be desirable for the Convention to appoint ten of its members to go over and sort things out with the citizens, to avoid bloodshed?' His proposal was agreed.

A little while later, Charles Delacroix, one of the ten appointed delegates, came back into the hall escorted by six delegates from the sections, sent by the insurgents to explain their feelings at the bar. One of them, Saint-Geniez, spoke. He spoke loudly and unfalteringly. Was the hypocritical attempt at reconciliation between the classes going to fail? But one deputy, Constant Gossuin, one of the ten Convention delegates,

now back in the hall, decided to make sure the trap closed on the bras nus. 'Since all the good citizens', he simpered, 'have come together to fraternise and protect the Convention, I ask the president to give the petitioners the fraternal embrace.' At which Théodore Vernier, the president, clasped Saint-Geniez, the sansculotte, in his arms. It was the last time a kiss was exchanged between bourgeois and bras nus.

Then the Convention held out all sorts of bait to them. They revoked the decree that declared money a commodity. They decreed that the organic laws of the 1793 Constitution would be introduced 'at once'. That was enough to persuade the sansculotte delegates to withdraw. Yet the more politically conscious among them sensed the trap, and by the following day (22 May) began to realise that they had been 'shamefully misled'. The agitation began again. In the street people were heard shouting things like, 'We must support our brothers in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, settle accounts with the deputies, and show no mercy to the merchants and muscadins.'

The Thermidoreans, for their part, coolly prepared to fight. They managed to assemble an armed unit of about 1200 men, mostly *jeunesse dorée,* and that column forced its way into the Faubourg Saint-Antoine very early in the morning of the 23rd (4th of Prairial) without meeting any serious resistance.

The people, still paralysed by their respect for the law, and also by chivalrous scruples – it was twenty against one – were once more reluctant to start civil war. One by one the barricades opened for the Thermidoreans, and no blood was shed.

But when the detachment, led by General Charles Kilmaine, reached the gate, the *barrière du Trône*, they suddenly felt they had walked into a trap. And again the insurgents were unable to take advantage of the situation. They let the *jeunesse dorée* leave the cul-de-sac without injury, restricting themselves to hurling boos and jeers at them. The muscadins retreated in confusion, like fascists nowadays, passing one by one through an opening which had been specially made in the barricade blocking the faubourg's main street.

But the Thermidoreans did not place much confidence in

the *jeunesse dorée*. They were relying far more on the regular army. When General Jacques de Menou had brought together a hastily assembled force of 30,000 men, made up of regiments from the Paris garrison and neighbouring garrisons, and with a large artillery section, ferocious repression began. Menou appeared with his troops around the Faubourg Saint-Antoine at about four o'clock in the afternoon, and ordered the insurgents to lay down their guns and weapons. If they did not, they would be declared in a state of rebellion and bombarded. That was the end. Ten thousand sansculottes were arrested, imprisoned or deported. The obscure leaders the uprising had thrown up died on the scaffold.

But among the prisoners in jail at Plessis (in Paris), then at Arras, were some far more politically conscious militants: Gracchus Babeuf and his friends. There they made direct contact with the survivors of the Germinal and Prairial insurrections. They could admire the plans for popular power the insurgents had outlined, with the documents actually in their hands, while at the same time they could criticise the weaknesses of the two insurrections.

6 Babeuf draws the lesson of the French revolution

No defeat is fruitless. It is in defeat that revolutionaries educate themselves, and the revolution comes to a greater self-awareness.

What is defeat, after all, but a break in the veil that prevents us seeing class relations in their true light? As long as an error has not led to a defeat, the mass movement does not see it as an error. The illusion is only dispelled when the error ends in the popular movement being crushed, and the blood of revolutionaries being spilt. That is when the truth shines out.

Defeat is just the end of a cycle. Until events have fully developed and mistakes have produced their final consequences, it is too early to draw conclusions. Once the cycle is complete, there can no longer be any doubt; the truth shines out.

And what does defeat mean for the revolutionary elite,

except prison? At least, for those of them who escape death. In prison, militants meet up, discuss and go over their experiences. Cut off for a time from the broad mass of the people, and temporarily freed from the burden of the day-to-day struggle, they can allow their thought to extend beyond its normal horizons and range over things, unlimited by constraints of time and space. At last they have time to think and read and examine problems in depth, and to get right inside themselves, all things that are indispensable for revolutionaries but which are difficult to fit in with militant action. In this solitude, this enforced meditation, the truth shines out.

But it is only a small minority who see this truth. The masses are still stunned by the terrible blow of defeat, their organisation has been broken by repression, they have lost their nucleus of activists and they fall into a state of demoralisation and despair that for the time being prevents all thought. Or, if they do react, it is in a confused way. The truth which will allow them to take up the struggle again in the future – and take it up at a far more advanced point than before – is at the moment possessed only by a few individuals. But the truth will be written down and printed, and the books will be read by the next generation. In that way, despite defeat – or rather, thanks to the lessons of defeat – the oppressed class, and, in turn, the whole of society, will continue to advance.

The mass movement was crushed for a long time after Prairial. While the despairing bras nus, leaderless, were engulfed in uncertainty and potentially retrograde apathy, Babeuf and his friends, in the jails where they had been thrown by the bourgeoisie, tried to draw the lesson of the long, tragic events that had just ended, to take stock of more than five years of revolution. Why had the revolution failed? Because it had not been forced to its conclusion, because it had not been total. 'What are political revolutions in general?' asked the *Tribun du peuple*. 'What is the French revolution in particular? It is open war between patricians and plebeians, between rich and poor.' This revolution, stopped in mid-course, had to be taken

on to its proper conclusion. 'The French revolution', the *Manifeste des Egaux* (Manifesto of the Equals) stated prophetically, 'is only the forerunner of another greater, more serious and impressive revolution, which will be the last.'

Babouvism discovered what the masses had been vainly groping towards throughout the French revolution, an economic and social platform that went beyond the bourgeois revolution. It caught a glimpse of the fact that the people had been beaten because they had not opposed the bourgeoisie on the basis of a class programme of their own.

The communism of the Equals was not utopian. It came from – scientific – analysis of economic phenomena. Babeuf was the first to lift a corner of the veil that modern socialism would eventually tear off completely. He wrote the first chapter of *Capital.* He went deeply into the mystery of surplus-value. He denounced 'the barbaric law that capitals dictate', was 'scandalised' by a system of production and exchange 'in which somebody can make a multitude of hands work without the hands ever receiving the fruits of their labour'.

His collectivism was founded in the development of mechanisation and the progress of technology. With the realism and precision of an engineer, he demonstrated the advantages an organised economy has over an unorganised one. He was the first to conceive the idea of planning.

The conflict between direct democracy and parliamentary representation, between Convention and Commune, between the people and their leaders, over which the popular vanguard and the bourgeoisie had been fighting constantly, from 10 August 1792, to the *journées* of Prairial, provided the Equals with lessons and, at the same time, solutions for the future. In a letter to his friend Babeuf, the artist-engraver Joseph Bodson laid most blame on the 'revolutionary government' for having 'robbed' the people 'of all sovereignty'; and, rejecting what we would nowadays call the cult of the personality, he added, 'I agree with you that hero-worship, infatuation and adulation were some of the main reasons the revolution was hampered, but what better example is there of that sort of thing being

taken to excess than the monstrous celebrity of Robespierre?' According to their one survivor, Philippe Buonarroti, the Babouvists proclaimed, 'the right to bring down tyrannous power being, in the nature of things, delegated to local sections of the people, it is to them too, that the right . . . of provisionally replacing it is delegated'.

Thus in one jump the Babouvists went beyond the bourgeois revolution and proposed the solution that Robespierre had always condemned and fought against, on 10 August and 31 May as much as on the 9th of Thermidor; it was the solution the combatants of Prairial had seen in a more or less confused fashion, and one which was the bourgeoisie's constant nightmare: they located sovereignty exclusively in local assemblies of the people, which they called 'assemblies of sovereignty'. There would be a central assembly which would have the job of co-ordinating the wishes expressed by the various parts of the 'sovereignty', but it would not be sovereign itself in the way bourgeois parliament is today and the Convention had been. Every law would first have to be fully discussed and agreed in the local assemblies of sovereignty.

Finally, they stopped posing the question of democracy in the abstract and looked at it in relation to the class struggle and social inequality. 'If a class grew up in the state', wrote Buonarroti, '. . . which had a monopoly of its principles, social accomplishment, laws and administration, they would soon discover . . . the secret of creating distinctions and privileges for themselves.' Thus, there was to be no revolutionary bureaucracy; and there would be no real democracy without the abolition of social inequalities. At the same time the Equals began to realise that true communism would lead to the withering away of the state. 'A people who had no property, and none of the vices and crimes it engenders . . . would have no need of the large number of laws which the civilised societies of Europe groan under.' And so, before the end of the eighteenth century the Babouvists had reached the threshold of direct, communal or council, democracy, and were on the verge of libertarian communism.

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