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THE TWO GREAT FEARS OF 1789

BY

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I. Introduction

The period between 1914 and 1945, sometimes extended to 1989, is often referred to as that of "the Great European civil war". Nicolas (2008) refers to the period in French history between 1661 and 1789 as the "French rebellion" a class war that approached a low-grade civil war. For some purposes it may be useful to refer to these protracted conflicts as civil wars. Similarly, for some purposes it may be useful to refer to the period in French history from 1793 to 1815 as a civil war, framed by two episodes of terror organized respectively by the revolution and by the counterrevolution. In this paper I consider the summer of 1789 as an *incipient civil war* that was barely averted – or postponed - by elite concessions.

I shall draw heavily on two books: the masterful study of "the great fear of 1789" by Georges Lefebvre (1973)[1] and the exhaustive study by Patrick Kessel (1969) of the night of August 4th 1789, when the National Assembly abolished feudalism in one fell stroke. The first deals with the peasant fears in the countryside, the second with fears among the deputies to the constituent

[1] This English translation is unreliable and has been modified when necessary.

assembly. Indirectly, as we shall see, the first fear triggered the second. The *people's fear of the (alleged) agents of the elite* and the *elite's fear of the people* combined to bring down the old regime. A mediating factor was the *people's anger towards the elite*.

The issues are complicated, and I am not any kind of specialist. My contribution is only intended to be conceptual.

II. The Great Fear in the countryside.

The Great Fear was not one movement, but many. According to Lefebvre, it originated simultaneously and independently in six regions of France in mid-July 1789. Later, a seventh panic has been identified (Ramsay 1992, pp. xviii, 254). Although Lefebvre carefully distinguished the July Fear and the actions it inspired from effects of the hunger in March through June 1789 (no region saw the occurrence of both), the two movements exhibited many of the same mechanisms.[2]

In the spring, the dearth of grain after a bad harvest in 1788 increased the number of vagabonds, beggars and "brigands" in the countryside. Whereas individual wanderers and beggars had always been a regular (and often intimidating) presence, the famine increased their numbers to form larger bands. Their actions against the peasantry took different forms, from simple protection rackets to cutting the grain before harvest time. The farmer refused to sell grain to the day laborers on the grounds that he was obliged to sell it in the market of the local town. Since as non-residents these laborers were not admitted into the towns, "there was only one course left to them – to stop the wagons in transit and seize the sacks of corn and flour, paying either the appropriate price or none at all" (Lefebvre 1973, p. 26). At the same time, the peasants feared the "sudden and apparently spontaneous expeditions which

[2] It may be worth noting that French word for riot, *émeute,* has the same root as "emotion".

came out from the towns and went from farm to farm buying corn – or, more accurately, forcing the farmers to sell their stocks" (*ibid*, p. 28). The effect of these actions was to create a climate of generalized fear and suspicion, where not only town and countryside were in a state of reciprocal terror, but "peasants in rebellion became objects of fear for one another. Those who revolted rarely accepted a refusal to join them. […] Every revolt made the peasant want to join it, while at the same time scaring him. The people frightened itself (*se faisait peur à lui-même*)" (*ibid*. p. 55-56).

To illustrate this mechanism, Lefebvre cites an example from 1703 that was "exactly like the Great Fear: the tocsin would sound; each village would send a runner to warn their neighbors and ask for help; detachment arriving to help would be taken for enemies and announcements made that the incident feared had actually taken place" (*ibid*., p. 53). The tocsin was a major trigger and amplifier of the fear. Unlike the ordinary peaceful and regular ringing of the church bells, the tocsin was violent, irregular and insistent. It was used mainly as a fire alarm, but also to signal inundations and bad weather. The following remarks on the use of the tocsin in 19th century France are also valid for the prerevolutionary era (see Nicolas 2008, p. 166-69):

> The tocsin is an instrument for contagion of alert and fear. […] It transmits the message by the mode of propagation of the rumor, to which it is partially linked. […] The ambiguity of the tocsin in signaling a human threat has often been stressed. It has its own logic. Many insurrectional movements are responses to a reflex of fear and defense; the bell that announces the threat and triggers the defensive gathering turns quite naturally into a signal for insurrection. In these circumstances, the *emotional power* of the tocsin surpasses that of any other mode of information. As a signal of a threat, the alarm ringing suggests conspiracy , denounces treason, and incites to armed gathering.

> It "moves" (*émeut*) the people. [...] The tocsin unites announcement, alarm, and injunction to act. […] In short, as the most polysemous of bells, the tocsin plays on a register of emotions that combines fear, surge (*élan*), panic and horror (Corbin 1994, pp. 185-88).

Hence the tocsin illustrates what Roger Petersen has emphasized in many contexts, viz. that emotions triggered by *cognition* can be vastly magnified by *perception*. The tocsin also has the property of instant transmission, since the bells could usually be heard in adjoining villages. Following the insistent ringing from many spires, often for hours and hours (Lefebvre 1972, p. 156), some of the inhabitants fled the village after burying their valuables and releasing their beasts[3], whereas others organized for defense (*ibid*.). As in other cases, fear induced the action tendencies both of *flight* and of *fight*.

The dearth of grain in the spring triggered suspicions that it was a result of hoarding by speculators. [4] "The people were never willing to admit that the forces of nature alone might be responsible for their poverty and distress" (Lefebvre 1973, p. 24). Every famine triggered a conspiratorial explanation, which, although it might be false in any given case, was not necessarily unfounded (Kaplan 1982). The suspicion might take the virulent form of believing that the elites were deliberately trying to starve the people[5], or the somewhat less incendiary form of believing that profit-seeking by the elite

[3] Below, we shall see how fearful elites behaved in the same way.

[4] Given that the elasticity of demand for grain was almost certainly greater than 1, hoarding was often a rational strategy. Arrow (1982) argues that "when situations of scarcity arise, hoarding is always blamed. But the evidence for the degree and effects of hoarding is usually difficult to come by. […] If the famine is prolonged, then hoarding at the beginning means greater stores will be available later on." There is no reason to believe, however, that hoarders would act on this benign motive.

[5] Kaplan (1982, p. 1) makes this into a *defining* feature of the famine plot: "a secret machination to starve the people in order to achieve certain ends". In most cases, the evidence only seems to support a weaker notion: the belief in a secret machination to realize high profits at the expense of the people. The starvation of the people was a (no doubt foreseen) by-product of action, not a malign goal of action.

caused the famine. In the spring of 1789, the second form seems to have predominated. This fact may be part of the explanation why "subsistence events" dominated "anti-seigneurial events" in this period (Markoff 1996, p. 276). [6]

According to La Fontaine, "Each believes easily what he fears and what he hopes". According to Lefebvre (1988, p. 257), "The most striking emotional and moral features of the revolutionary mentality were apprehension (*inquiétude*) and hope". Although my focus here is on fear, it is important also to understand the role of hope in the genesis of the Great Fear. For the peasantry, the mere convocation of the Estates-General was a sign that the King intended to alleviate their misery. "But as hope sprang in the people's breast, so did hatred for the nobility: in the certainty of royal support, the peasants, invited to speak their minds [in the grievance books], reiterated with growing bitterness their *present* miseries and from the depths of their memory the stifled remembrance of *past* injuries" (Lefebvre 1973, p. 38; my italics).[7] At the same time, the convocation inspired fears about the *future*: "The peasants […] had seen some prospects of their own deliverance in the king's appeal and not for a moment did they believe that the seigneurs would submit without a fight: it would have been against nature" (*ibid*., p. 93).

Lefebvre (1973, p. 26) writes that "there was a short period of calm from the end of May and through June because there was a general expectation that the Estates-General would offer some relief". When this expectation was frustrated, peasant furies redoubled. The privileged orders, among their numerous other mistakes, failed to understand that their deliberate delay of the

[6] "By an 'event', I [mean] an instance of twenty or more people of the countryside, acting publicly and as a group, directly engaged in seizing or damaging the resources of another party, or defending themselves against another party's claim upon them" (Markoff 1996, p. 205).

[7] This is a pure Tocquevillian analysis (see below). Although Lefebvre does not cite Tocqueville here, we know that he had read his work on the Revolution carefully (he prefaced an edition of the *Ancien régime*).

Estates-General over the trivial issue of the verification of credentials would have an incendiary effect (*ibid*., p. 59). The people were confident that the King had issued orders for their relief that were systematically thwarted by the nobles and the priests, and felt justified in taking matters into their own hands, by refusing to pay rent or the tithe and by burning the charters.

Yet, to repeat, the peasants did not believe that the seigneurs would submit without a fight. They were mentally primed for the "aristocratic plot" and for the Great Fear in the second half of July. Compared to the spring events, there were several salient differences. In the spring, the fear of brigands was endemic but local: there was no thought that the plundering was orchestrated at a national level. Also, the assumption was that the brigands were acting, like the peasants themselves, out of hunger. In July, the peasants feared that the aristocrats would enlist the brigands to cut the unripe corn, for the purpose of creating chaos and anarchy that would undermine the Revolution. Mixed with this was a fear of foreign invasion, organized by the King's reactionary brother Comte d'Artois from his exile in Savoy. Moreover, "until this moment in time, the appearance of the brigands was possible and much dreaded: with the Great Fear it became a certainty" (*ibid*., p. 137).

The Great Fear was completely groundless. There was no conspiracy to ruin the countryside. In July 1789, there was, to be sure, an aristocratic plot to disband the National Assembly, which would have succeeded had its instigators been more competent or the people of Paris less alert. To believe in this conspiracy was rational. Yet the belief in a nationwide conspiracy to ruin the countryside and create general anarchy was intrinsically implausible, supported only by the virulent version of the famine plot and the flimsiest of evidence.[8] True, the Revolution was to show that the counterrevolutionaries,

[8] Rumors of conspiracies to poison or to starve the people out of the non-instrumental motives of malice or revenge existed throughout the 19th century (Ploux 2003). In the Great Fear, however, the alleged motive was instrumental.

beginning with the King, often did adopt the strategy of crisis maximization (*la politique du pire*), deliberately fostering chaos to weaken the new regime. Yet although the belief that the elite would engage in such tactics was not in itself irrational, the specific fear of brigands hired on short notice to cut the unripe corn verges on the hallucinatory.

There were also beliefs of a plot within the plot:

> The currents of fear were not numerous, but most of France was affected: whence the impression that the Great Fear was universal; the currents moved with great speed: whence the impression that the Great Fear broke out everywhere simultaneously. […] Both these ideas are wrong. They represent contemporary opinion and have been passed on without question. Once it had been decided that the Great Fear broke out everywhere at the same time, it followed logically that it was the work of accomplices in a general conspiracy. The revolutionaries instantly interpreted it as proof of the aristocrats' plot: they were frightening the people deliberately so as to bring them back to the *ancien régime* or else thrust them into total disorder." (*ibid*., p. 137-38).

In other words: the rumors of a conspiracy were seen as the fruit – and the proof – of another conspiracy. "The revolutionaries never dreamt for a moment that by denouncing the aristocrats' plot they themselves made unknowing preparation for the Great Fear" (*ibid*.. p. 138). This argument is somewhat puzzling. According to Ploux (2003, p. 109), in the 19th century "most contemporary observers interpreted the synchronic explosion of more or less similar rumors as a sign of concerted action by the adversaries of power, who by the same token were supposed to be very well organized". It does make sense that opponents of a regime might try to weaken it by spreading rumors that it is about to increase taxes or otherwise oppress the people. It is more difficult to imagine that the defenders of a regime might try to *strengthen*

it by spreading similar rumors. The argument makes sense only on the assumption that the defenders of the regime would propagate rumors about brigands, but *not* the rumor that the brigands were in the service of the regime itself. Yet the latter rumor was at the core of the Great Fear and of the actions it inspired.

Among these actions were a great number of "anti-seigneurial events", which included violence against persons or property, invasion of castles with varying degrees of damage, destruction (rather than seizure) of food sources, coerced renunciation of rights, seizures of land charters, damage to seigneurial mills, ovens and winepresses, refusal to pay rent, and numerous others (Markoff 1996, p. 221). Lefebvre (1973, Ch. II.5) cites refusal to pay rent, renunciation of rights, destruction of seigneurial pigeons, burning of archives, sacking or looting of castles, arson, and many others. Personal violence against the lords, on some occasions resulting in their death, occurred in 3% of anti-seigneurial events, as against 53 % that involved property damage (Markoff 1996, p.221). Although small in relative terms, the number and gruesome detail of the massacres was large enough to focus the attention of contemporaries (Ferrières 1880, p.120-21).

These actions were motivated partly by the peasants' belief that they were only doing what the King had authorized them to do and partly by their belief that the nobility had organized a plot to ruin them. The motives were partly instrumental, partly not:

> Some might think that [the peasants] were naïve to believe that they had […] got rid of tithes and feudal dues because they had forced formal disclaimers and burnt charters. Events were to show, however, that the peasants had not calculated so badly, and that is not always easy to restore what has been destroyed. Moreover, it is clear that the desire to

> avenge past injustices influenced them as much as, or more than, sheer calculation (Lefebvre 1973, p. 119).

The anger towards the seigneurs was thus largely fueled by fear of the (non-existent) brigands that they believed the lords had organized against them. Hence *anything that could strengthen the fear would strengthen the anger*.

As in the spring, the people frightened itself (*ibid*., pp. 116, 123). Let me briefly cite some of the mechanisms. Many peasants may have been *afraid of expressing their disbelief* in the rumors, thereby creating a situation of pluralistic ignorance (few people believe that **p** but most people believe that most people believe that **p**). "There was a risk in revealing one's skepticism. Those who made too obviously a play of it and refused to take defensive measures might perhaps be seeking to lull the people's suspicion. […] The danger arose all the more rapidly because the people who brought the news felt their amour-propre damaged if they were not taken seriously and they were very likely to spread malignant gossip about those who refused to believe them." (*ibid*., p. 153.). Refugees tended to exaggerate the danger lest they be accused of cowardice for having run away (*ibid*. p.148). In many towns "authorities were delighted to be able to shift the blame [for violence] from local people to unknown brigands […]; the intendants accepted these versions without batting an eyelid and contributed to spread them" (*ibid*., p. 128). Misinterpretations of accidents and natural phenomena also contributed to the general panic (*ibid*., pp. 94, 131, 144, 145, 164, 166, 168, 189).

As I have tried to indicate and illustrate, the Great Fear involved *three emotions*: fear, hope and anger. The fear was endemic in the countryside, but strengthened and focused through the belief in an aristocratic plot to starve the peasantry. The hope was triggered by the convocation of the Estates-General and by the invitation to the peasants to write up their grievances. By a familiar

mechanism of wishful thinking, reforms that were possible and desirable came to be seen as certain. The anger was caused by the frustration of the hope and, once again, by the belief in the plot. The peasant belief that the aristocrats had enlisted the brigands to cut their unripe grain would simultaneously trigger *fear of the proximate cause* of destruction and *anger towards the ultimate cause*; the greater the fear, the greater the anger.

III. The night of August 4th 1789.[9]

The Great Fear was triggered in large part by the stream of information *from Paris to the rest of France.* The convocation of the Estates-General, the dismissal of the King's minister Necker on July 11, and the fall of the Bastille on July 14 – all these events triggered strong reactions in the provinces, with a lag of several days. In 1789, news from Paris took two days to reach Lyon and four days to reach Marseilles; smaller towns were even more slowly informed (*ibid*., pp. 67-68).

The events on the night of August 4th were triggered by information *from the provinces to Paris.* Taking account of the time lag and the time pattern of anti-seigneurial actions, Markoff (1996, p.437) calculates that the reception of bad news from the provinces had two sharp spikes around July 28 and August 2. Many of the deputies were personally affected or threatened. In addition to the nobles, many members of the third estate held important landed properties (Kessel 1966, pp. 19-21; Tackett 1996, p. 38-39). It took the deputies a few days to absorb the shock and start debating and enacting countermeasures.

Generally speaking, in the face of actual or potential rebellion a government has the choice of four responses: preemption, concession, moderate repression, and severe repression. (It may also use *diversion*, for instance by undertaking a war of aggression, but this option was obviously unfeasible in 1789.)

[9] The following draws heavily on Elster (2007, 2009 a).

Wisdom dictates preemption - meeting popular demands before they are formulated, or granting more than is demanded. In a letter from May 26 1848, Tocqueville (2003, p. 630) asserts that “the only way to attenuate and postpone [the] revolution, is to do, *before one is forced to do it,* all one can to improve the situation of the people” (my italics). Similarly, Alexander II of Russia also asserted that “the only means of avoiding revolution – and what Louis XVI failed to do – was to preempt and prevent it” (Carrère d’Encausse 2008, p. 454).

After July 14 1789, preemption was not on the table. Jaurès (1968, p. 443) was probably right in asserting that “one had the choice between organizing a very difficult and very dangerous repression throughout the countryside, and giving in to the demands from the rebellious peasantry”. Moderate repression was unlikely to work. Although the government had used this strategy in the decades prior to the Revolution, its targets “were hobbled in a way that provoked resistance, but not subjected to the heavy yoke that might quell it” (Tocqueville 2004, p. 181-2). In other words, the hatred-inducing effects of repression dominated the fear-inducing effects.

Severe repression might seem more promising, and in fact “the first motions made in the Assembly all went in the direction of repression” (Jaurès 1968, p. 443). The statement refers mainly to a motion that the deputy Solomon presented on August 3, on behalf of the Committee on Reports (AP 8, p. 336). The first paragraph of the motion describes the violence in the countryside; the second affirms that the Assembly cannot take time off from its main task to deal with particular matters; and the third states in intransigent terms that no pretext whatsoever could justify the refusal to pay taxes or feudal dues. The Assembly refused, however, to go down that road:

> If the motion had been adopted, the Revolution would have been in peril. How, in fact, could one repress the almost universal uprising of the

> peasantry? If one had recourse to the executive force of the King, one would hand him France on a platter (*on lui livrait la France*). If one armed the bourgeois militia against the peasantry, one would create a civil war between the two main forces of the Revolution, the bourgeoisie and the peasants, and this division would perpetuate the ancien régime. The Assembly recoiled instinctively before the motion, and decided only that some statement would be made (Jaurès 1968, p. 445-47).

The proposal was sent to a committee, which reported back in almost equally intransigent terms the next evening. After the report had been read, the first speaker, the Vicomte de Noailles, argued that the peasantry had to be met with concessions, not with repression. His speech was the first event in "the night of August 4". At the end of the night, the Assembly had in effect abolished not only the feudal regime, but virtually the whole system of privileges and exemptions that constituted the ancien régime, the courts (*parlements)* being the only, and temporary, exception. The question to which I shall devote the rest of the Section concerns the motivations behind the unanimous vote of the deputies.

Some deputies probably made up their mind for one of the two reasons cited by Jaurès: the fear of a return to the absolute monarchy and the fear of a civil war. Now, these fears are *prudential fears*, not – or not necessarily – *visceral fears*. Whereas the latter are genuine emotions, caused by the cognition (and sometimes perception) of an imminent danger to the agent, the former do not amount to more than a simple belief-desire complex. As an example, "I fear that it will rain" *means* "I believe it will rain and I do not want it to rain". There is no reason to imagine that this mental state is accompanied by increased blood pressure, sleeplessness, heightened skin conductivity, or any of the other physiological changes detailed by Frijda (1986). Some deputies may indeed have viewed the situation in this detached

perspective. They may have believed that a repression would cause a return to the absolute monarchy or a civil war, and they did not want any of these outcomes to happen.

By contrast, a deputy who knew that his property and his family were under an imminent threat from the peasantry could easily experience visceral fear. Although they would not themselves be targets of attacks, personal danger is not a necessary condition for the triggering of visceral fear, as any parent knows. In several letters from August 7 onwards by the Comte de Ferrières (1932, pp. 109 seq.) a deputy from the nobility, to his wife, one can easily read his anxiety between the lines. The first letter contains very detailed instructions that she is to sell his sheep and his oxen, at any price, for cash; to gather all the money and documents in his castle in Mirebeau and transfer them to their house in Poitiers, making sure nobody observes her doing so; to ship their mattresses, bed covers and sheet to Poitiers ("in case of an event, at least something will be saved"). Three days later, he tells her to go with their daughters to Poitiers, even if the harvest should suffer: "do not consider the costs, and do not ask for [the protection of] soldiers, which would cause alarm in the countryside". He does not care if after these precautions his castle is burned, as he is never going to live there again. Later (letters of August 14 and 16), he reverses some of these instructions.

His behavior conforms very well to the pattern of visceral emotions (Elster 2009 b). Initially, the urgency of the fear triggers immediate action. Later, due to the "short half-life" of emotions, some of these measures are reversed. It seems plausible that his votes in the Assembly may also have been dictated by fears. In a letter of August 12 he asserts that "the inhabitants of Mirebeau, who had so many good reasons to treat me well and who even, because of the way I have always behaved towards them, ought to have special consideration for me, have acted with such insolence and fury that I cannot count on their good will". He may well have thought that their fury would

abate when the news of the decrees of August 4 reached them. His fear would, on that hypothesis, have spurred him to act on two fronts: to reduce his *vulnerability to invasion* of his castle by transferring or selling his most valuable possessions, and to reduce the *likelihood of an invasion* by voting for measures that might satisfy and pacify the peasantry.

From this case study I now turn to some general accounts by actors, observers and historians of the motivations that animated the deputies. There are many references to fear, as well as to other motivations. Duquesnoy (1894, p.285) claimed that the main motives were "fear and vengeance".[10] Tocqueville (2004, p.593) asserted that "the night of August 4 was the combined result, in doses that are impossible to determine, of fear and enthusiasm". Citing numerous contemporary statements, Kessel (1969, p.189-90) affirms that "of all the themes that emerge from an examination of the opinion of the privileged orders, the one that dominates all others, is fear".

Tocqueville (2004, p. 202) claimed that concessions are as likely to be ineffective as is moderate repression. "The evil that one endures patiently because it appears inevitable seems unbearable the moment its elimination becomes conceivable. Then, any abuse that is ended seems only to call attention to those that remain and to make their sting more painful: the ill has diminished, to be sure, but sensitivity to it has increased". Along similar lines, Jaurès (1968, p. 469) wrote that

> Not only did the nobles think that the abolition of the tithe without compensation would increase their income from land, but they believed above all that this immediate satisfaction obtained at the expense of the clergy would make the peasantry less eager to pursue the abolition of the

[10] When Fitzsimmons (1994, p.53) and Tackett (1996, p.175) cite Duquesnoy (1894, p.267) in support of their benign interpretation of the motives of the deputies, they refer to an enthusiastic entry on August 5, not to the disillusioned entry from August 11 that I cite in the text. Presumably calm testimony about false enthusiasm is more credible than enthusiastic testimony about true enthusiasm.

> feudal dues: they hoped to divert the storm towards the goods of the church. What a poor calculation! Quite to the contrary, the peasants were all the more unlikely to accept the need for compensation with regard to the feudal dues as they had been dispensed with compensation for the tithe.[11]

From this general argument it ought to follow that when news about the decrees adopted on August 4th reached the provinces, anti-seigneurial actions ought to become *more* rather than less frequent, as was asserted by (Rivarol (1824, p.152) and Dumont (1832, p.104). Markoff (1996 p.443) claims, however, that the opposite effect was observed: "No sooner did [the deputies] complete their legislators work on the eleventh [of August] than the countryside, almost instantly, subsided into something which if not quite peace was at least far less dramatically threatening than for a long several weeks. Their own words must have seemed to possess magical powers". They would indeed have needed magical retroactive powers, as the diagram on p.437 of Markoff (1996) shows that the troubles subsided *before* news about the decrees of the 4th and a fortiori those of the 11th could possibly have reached the provinces. Nevertheless, they did not resume when the news arrived. By that time, however, the Great Fear had by and large subsided (Lefebvre 1973, p. 198-99). Yet Jaurès's argument may still help us understand the abolition of feudal rent without indemnification on July 17 1793.

Moving beyond visceral fear, let me consider some other emotions that may have animated the deputies.

Mirabeau's organ the *Courrier de Provence*, refers to "reciprocal challenge and combat in generosity" (No. XXIII) and to "the seduction of applause, the emulation of outdoing one's colleagues, the honor of personal

[11] The decrees adopted on August 4th (and in more elaborate form on August 5th) said that the tithe and the rents were redeemable against indemnification rather than abolished. On August 11th, the tithe was abolished outright, while rents remained redeemable.

disinterestedness, and to the kind of noble intoxication which accompanies the effervescence of generosity" (No. XXIV). This is not exactly a disinterested motivation, but an egocentric desire to be *seen* as disinterested (Elster 2009 a, Ch. 9). Kessel (1969, p.247) also cites a contemporary document that refers to "the heat of the moment that electrified each individual and made him fear being left behind" in the competition to appear generous. For shorthand, we may refer to this as the emotion of *enthusiasm.*

Oelsner (a German follower of Abbé Sieyes) classified the motives as follows: "Some were motivated by the general utility, but many made a virtue of necessity. Some thought they would trap their adversaries, others aspired to praise by newspapers or a group without concern for the consequences; a third was swept up in the general intoxication; and a fourth tried to spoil things by pushing them into extravagance" (Kessel 1969, p.132). The last motive is that of the *politique du pire*. The second, making a virtue out of necessity, can be illustrated by two examples. Buzot (AP 8, p.354) said menacingly that "the clergy should at least appear to make on its own initiative (*de lui-même*) all the sacrifices which the force of circumstances would force it to make". After enactment of the decrees, a deputy wrote to his constituents that he had sacrificed the privileges of his city because it was going to happen anyway and it "would be very advantageous for you to be cited among those who ceded voluntarily" (Kessel 1969, p.246). The first motive, general utility, may certainly have animated some deputies. It could be based either on the desire to avoid a civil war or on the desire to abolish a profoundly unjust system.

The Abbé Chevallier, a deputy from Nantes, said that "one does not know what is most astonishing, the audacious imposture of those who offer what is not theirs to give, or the ineptitude of the deputies who, on their instigation, gave sincerely what they ought to have kept" (Kessel 1969, p.148). Dumont (1832, p.101-2) describes how "Those who felt themselves ruined by a decree that had just been adopted by unanimity proposed another so that they would

not be the only ones to suffer". Ferrières (1880, p.126) describes the process in terms of dueling: "each party wants to touch ('atteindre') its adversary, to aim a blow at him, without worrying about those he receives by exposing himself". These writers may have had in mind the following famous anecdote: After the bishop of Chartres had proposed the abolition of exclusive hunting rights, the Duc du Châtelet said to his neighbors, "Ah! he takes our hunting, I'll take his tithe", and proposed the abolition of the tithe (Droz 1860, vol.II, p.308). Cottin, a secretary in the *parlements*, demanded the abolition of seigneurial justice, whereupon Richier, a noble, proposed the administration of the justice of the *parlements* free of charge (AP 8, p.346). That the latter proposal was meant as a retaliation is made likely by the ironic introduction in which he refers to "the relief the people can expect from the extinction of seigniorial justice". The Vicomte de Noailles demanded the abolition of feudal rights, from which he derived no income, but not of the royal pensions, which he depended on. The Marquis de Foucauld, who had no pension, proposed that pensions be abolished. The motives operating here are *spite* and *vindictiveness*.

Some deputies may have based their vote on the general utility. Others may have voted on the basis of prudential fear. Still others may have cast their vote on an emotional impulse: visceral fear, enthusiasm, spite, or vindictiveness. To the extent that one of these last motivations was operating, two predictions follow. First, because of the short half-life of the emotions we might expect to see a preference reversal after a cooling-down period. In his chapter "The time for regrets", Kessel (1969) cites numerous instances of Monday-morning blues. Second, when they adopted the decrees the deputies did not, because of the "hot-cold empathy gap" (Loewenstein 1966), imagine that they would ever change their minds. More specifically, they felt justified in ignoring the rules of the Assembly which required constitutional matters to be discussed on three different days. Those who wanted immediate action said that "an élan of patriotism does not need three days" and "since one cannot

vary in such sentiments, the three days would be a pointless waste of time" (Beaumetz and Liancourt, cited in the *Courrier de Provence* XXIV, p.11).

IV. Conclusion

Because the Assembly climbed down in the face of peasant insurrections, France did not experience a civil war in 1789. This stark sentence hides a vastly complex reality about which I have no claim to expertise. My purpose in engaging with "the two great fears of 1789" was mainly to illustrate various emotional mechanisms that almost certainly had *some* causal role in the events. Historians will debate *how* important they were until the end of time.

The cognitive antecedent of fear (sometimes reinforced by a perceptual one) is the belief in an impending danger. The fear, in turn, can strengthen the belief, in an *emotional wildfire* (Ekman 1992, p.172). Features of the environment that would normally have gone unnoticed – "trifles as light as air" - receive an ominous interpretation that causes the fear to escalate. There exist, however, *circuit-breakers*. There may have been fewer panics in densely populated villages: «Could it have been that the pattern of information-diffusion in a densely clustered village provided a reality check as one or another neighbor might well have doubted the fantastic rumors? » (Markoff, p. 388- 89) Also, there may have been fewer panics in more literate areas: « It is as if the politics of mistaken rumor were weakened by the presence of people with access to the written word or with intellectual habits formed by contact with documents » (*ibid*. p. 383).

The action tendencies of fear are to *flee*, to *fight*, or to *freeze* (Gray 1991). The last is presumably irrelevant in the present context, but the others are important. In the countryside, both flight and fight were observed. In the Assembly, flight was illustrated in the instructions of Marquis de Ferrières to his wife. On August 3, the initial tendency of the Assembly, or of some of its members, was to fight. The action ultimately chosen was neither to fight nor

to flee, but to try to *defuse the danger* by acting on its causes. Although not one of the *spontaneous* action tendencies of fear, I believe the action was to a large extent an emotional rather than a rational response. Had it been simply the latter, there is no reason why the deputies (or some of them) should have regretted their reactions or why they should not have given themselves more time to deliberate.

In the Great Fear in the countryside, fear of the brigands went together with anger towards their supposed aristocratic instigators. Let us distinguish between type 1 anger and type 2 anger. In type 1 anger, A believes that B has acted with reckless indifference to A's welfare, for instance by hoarding grain to drive prices up. In type 1 anger, A believes that B has acted for the express purpose of reducing A's welfare, either as a goal in itself or as a means to some further end. Although both types of anger arise out of starvation, the latter is, as I said, more virulent. Whereas type 1 anger was endemic in the French countryside, type 2 anger was, it seems, a revolutionary or pre-revolutionary phenomenon.

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