

'Is It a Rebellion? – No, Your Majesty, It Is Climate!' The Climatic Origins of the French Revolution and Its Historical Approach.

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It is said that, in the beginning of the French Revolution, King Louis XVI, hearing noises in front of his palace on the 14 July 1789, asked the Duke François XII de la Rochefoucauld, 'Is it a rebellion?'. It is also said that the Duke answered, 'No, your Majesty, it is a revolution'. The French political class still use this now famous interaction to claim the heritage of the French Revolution. This event is considered as the foundation of the French people and of the French nation; this is especially true for left-wing politicians, as conservatives prefer to consider the birth of the French nation as the baptism of Clovis, first king of the Franks or refer to the Gauls.¹ I propose in this paper an alternative answer from the Duke de la Rochefoucauld, and another answer to the question of the origins of the French Revolution: 'No, your Majesty, it is climate!'. I argue that climate, as the cause of scarcity in seventeenth and eighteenth century France, was a major factor in the beginning of the French Revolution - considered as the series of events that happened in France since the summoning of the Estates General by King Louis XVI. I do not consider a date for the end of the Revolution, as I am only interested in the causes, and refer to Furet's work for these questions.² I then review the historical approach of

these origins to discuss the place of climate in the numerous historic works on the French Revolution, being the foundation of French nation. Finally, I discuss the method which history should adopt in our present, marked, as it is, by the Anthropocene: a *longue durée* history.

1. How weather led France to Revolution: 'It's the climate, stupid.'

Eighteenth century France obviously already knew the link between likely civil wars and scarcity. An important civil war occurred a century before the French Revolution, during the childhood of King Louis XIV, a troubled era known as the *Fronde* (meaning, the Revolt). The young Sun King discovered then the complexity of ruling, with political and economic instability in the country (especially a revolt of some nobles; princes, dukes and counts that incapacitated the State), and the fear of a deep civil war that could lead to the end of the Bourbon dynasty. The *Fronde* was induced by bad harvests caused by a 'the Little Ice Age', which, as one would rightly presume, irritates the people.³ This is the first affirmation of the influence of climate on harvests (Parker talks about 'blocked climate' that produces prolonged precipitation

¹ Ernest Lavisse, *Histoire de France : cours élémentaire*, (Armand Colin: Paris, 2013); Jean-Luc Mélenchon, 'Ce n'est pas une révolte, Sire, c'est une révolution !', Jean-Luc Mélenchon, (2018), available at: <<https://melenchon.fr/2018/12/03/ce-nest-pas-une-revolte-sire-cest-une-revolution/>> [accessed 15 November 2020].

² François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française*, (Gallimard: Paris, 1985).

³ Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century*, (Yale University Press: New Haven, 2013), . p. 309;
Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, 'Considérations sur le climat', *Annales des Mines - Responsabilité et environnement*, Vol. 56, no. 4, 2009, pp. 9–13.

or drought), and of harvests on the stability of the political regime. French statesmen knew it well, as thirteen famines occurred in the sixteenth century, and eleven in the seventeenth. So, the supply of food to the population was a major condition of the stability of the regime. In order to avoid any starvation that could anger the good people of France and make them think of a small, medium or large gathering, that is a revolt, the State sought to ensure that everyone had enough to eat properly (or at least that people weren’t famished and that they were efficiently controlled by lords).⁴ For example, the food supply of Paris was a concern both of the king, the parliament, the *Châtelet* (i.e. the judiciary power of the *Ancien Régime*) and the town hall that all created laws and regulations on commercial, sanitary, fiscal and customs issues, as Paris’s food supply came from all of France and abroad and trade routes needed to be safe.⁵

Moving forward, I propose to remind the reader of the climatic and farming situation of France in 1788. Since the end of 1787, the weather had been awful, this was followed by heatwaves in the spring and hail on the 13th of July 1788. This explains the terrible national harvest of 1788.⁶ Of course, the situation didn’t markedly improve between 1788 and 1789. The origins of the French Revolution are obviously a matter of academic debate and are multifactorial, but I propose to briefly summarize some here. There is the issue of social and political inequality between the nobility and the third estate (i.e. the people). We should remember the sentiment of the political theorist and

revolutionary politician Abbé Siéyès, “What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been hitherto in the political order? Nothing. What does it desire to be? Something”.⁷ There is also the issue of trust toward the political system and more generally the challenge of the social contract.⁸ Revolution was the heir of the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, the result of an intellectual and moral evolution.⁹ If one allows the expression, the financial crisis of the kingdom could be considered the first trigger of the Revolution; national finances were in a catastrophic situation, with enormous debts due to wars, a scattered budget management and a precarious – if not absent – tax system.¹⁰ This crisis required King Louis XVI (in the first place not supposed to reign, which can explain his ineptitude) to summon the Estates General, the assembly of the three orders; clergy, nobility and the third estate, to get France out of its bankruptcy (with the Estates General also came the opening of list of grievances across the country, *cahiers de doléances*). Evidently, the clergy and nobility didn’t pay taxes, but someone needed to pay some to save France: the third estate. The voting system of the assembly, a vote per order, despite the third estate being more numerous, explains the constitution of the third estate in a National Assembly on 17 June 1789. On 20 June 1789, members of the new National Assembly took the now famous Tennis Court Oath (*Serment du Jeu de Paume*), vowing, “not to separate and to reassemble wherever required, until the Constitution of the Kingdom is established”.¹¹ Consider then a starving population, and the disdain of the

⁴ Fernand Braudel, *L’identité de la France. Les hommes et les choses, tome 2*, (Arthaud: Paris, 1986), p. 259.

⁵ Reynald Abad, *Le Grand Marché : l’approvisionnement alimentaire de Paris sous l’Ancien Régime*, (Fayard: Paris, 2002); Sabine Bognon, Sabine Barles, Gilles Billen, and Josette Garnier, ‘Approvisionnement alimentaire parisien du xviii^e au xxii^e siècle : les flux et leur gouvernance. Récit d’une trajectoire socioécologique’, *Natures Sciences Sociétés*, Vol. 26, no. 1, 2018, pp. 17–32.

⁶ Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Histoire humaine et comparée du climat. Tome 2, Disettes et révolutions (1740-1860)*, (Fayard: Paris, 2006); J. A. Kington, ‘Daily weather mapping from 1781’, *Climatic Change*, Vol. 3, no. 1, December 1990, pp. 7–36.

⁷ Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *What is the Third Estate?*, (London, 1963).

⁸ William Doyle, ‘Les origines de la Révolution française : Remise en cause’, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, Vol. 54, no. 250, 1982, pp. 627–631.

⁹ Alphonse Aulard, *Histoire politique de la Révolution française: Origines et développement de la démocratie et de la République (1789-1804)*, (Armand Colin: Paris, 1901).

¹⁰ Marie-Laure Legay, Joël Félix, Eugene White, and Stephen Clay, ‘Retour sur les origines financières de la Révolution française’, *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 356, (2009), pp. 183–201.

¹¹ National Assembly, ‘The Tennis Court Oath. [Le Serment du Jeu de Paume]’, St. Thomas University, June 1789, available at: <<http://wp.stu.ca/worldhistory/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/07/Tennis-Court-Oath.pdf>> [accessed 15 November 2020].

monarchy – the quote, “If they don’t have bread, let them eat brioche!” is attributed to Queen Marie-Antoinette – and one can understand the storming of the Bastille on 14 July, the abolition of privileges on the night of the 4 August and a relatively large revolt across France during the summer of 1789 which led to the end of the *Ancien Régime*.¹²



Figure 1. David, J., After 1791. Serment Du Jeu De Paume, Le 20 Juin 1789. [Oil on canvas, 0,65x0,887m].

In short, starving was not the only cause of the French Revolution, but it was an important factor in its beginning. Furthermore, there were already precedents of revolt caused by poor agricultural conditions, like the Flour War of May 1775, a farmer uprising caused by a rise in the price of bread.¹³ As the price of bread was directly linked to climate, bad harvest meant a rise in its price.¹⁴ To illustrate this, during a hearing of the National Assembly on the 5 October 1789, three major subjects were brought for the approval of the king: the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, the Constitution, and the request for

executive action for flour to be brought to Paris in order to feed the population – the latter is the only subject to have been approved by the King.¹⁵

To conclude, the French Revolution was also the consequence of a food crisis, an economic and social crisis, a ‘political-substantial crisis’, caused, as Le Roy Ladurie demonstrates, by climate.¹⁶ In short, if one still asks about the cause of the French Revolution, of course there are many valid answers, but to mimic James Carvill and Bill Clinton, saying, ‘It’s the climate, stupid!’ is definitely accurate.¹⁷

2. The Freudian slip of History: the murderer of Louis XVI was climate, and nobody knew.

In this section, I want to highlight a historiographic fact: even if the link between climate and the origins of French Revolution is quite clear, there has been a total disregard of this link in historic studies for a long time, that I consider a ‘Freudian slip’ which reveals the flaws in short-term analyses and the lack of consideration of the impact of environmental factors on historical events.

First of all, I should remind the reader the French Revolution is one of the (if not *the*) basis of French nation and its founding narrative. The number of works on the French Revolution is considerable and every great French historian has written about it. The Revolution has always been pictured as a temporal rupture between the past of the lost people living in the French Kingdom and the future of the community of destiny and the French Republic. Indeed, the Third French Republic launched a substantial invention of tradition in order to create this republican myth of a nation that realized its destiny during this epic fight for liberty, the direct heir of the Enlightenment.¹⁸ They created the nation through heroic

¹² Olivier Coquard, ‘« S’ils n’ont pas de pain, qu’ils mangent de la brioche » Marie-Antoinette, 1789’, *Historia*, Vol. Special 9, 2013.

¹³ Vladimir S Liublinskiĭ, *La guerre des farines: contribution à l’histoire de la lutte des classes en France, à la veille de la Révolution*, (Presses universitaires de Grenoble: Grenoble, 1979).

¹⁴ François Lebrun, *Les hommes et la mort en Anjou aux 17e et 18e siècles: Essai de démographie et de psychologie historiques*, (De Gruyter Mouton: Paris, 2017).

¹⁵ Joseph Ignace Guillotin, ‘Réponse du Roi au sujet de la disette des farines, lors de la séance du 5 octobre 1789’, *Archives Parlementaires de la Révolution Française*, Vol. 9, no. 1, 1877, pp. 347–347.

¹⁶ Ernest Labrousse, *La crise de l’économie française à la fin de l’Ancien Régime et au début de la Révolution*, (Presses universitaires de France: Paris, 1944), Le Roy Ladurie, *Histoire humaine et comparée du climat. t.2*.

¹⁷ Parker, *Global Crisis*, p. 686.

¹⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, March 2012).

figures (the ‘great men’ and the Pantheon, including Napoleon), a common language (French), stories (the age-old fight for freedom against autocracy, spread by historic works and especially Jules Michelet’s, taught in schools) and the Arts (*Bildungsroman*, for example *Le Tour de la France par deux enfants* ‘the little red book of the Republic’, a textbook that narrates the story of two children coming from the then German Alsace-Moselle who discover the magnificence of France. All of this became the new soul of the French people thanks to schools (free, laic, and mandatory since Ferry’s laws in 1881-1882) and its Black Hussars (nickname of republican teachers, these ‘national teachers’), and made the Revolution a tool for being French, even in the world.¹⁹ The French Revolution was truly and fundamentally the beginning of the French nation, long theorized only through this event, and the reason for the French idea of their supremacy in Enlightenment heritage and the liberation of Europe: “Principle of nations is ours, because it is the glory of France, thanks to the Revolution, to declare by itself that a nation exist”, “We are what you were, we will be what you are” or the famous, “The being of a nation is (please forgive me the expression) a plebiscite of everyday (*un plébiscite de tous les jours*)”.²⁰ There has been in French historiography a myth that the French Revolution was exceptional, the ideal-type of the Enlightenment and had no equivalent – recently debunked.²¹

Though, if the French Revolution has been studied multiple times in the French historic discipline, its climatic origins seem to have been

forgotten. I even propose to speak of a Freudian slip, as historians wrote the word ‘climate’ but never explain its relation to the beginning of the Revolution, “There, thanks to climate, our [revolutionary war] operations could go on”, “But while the cruel laws were disappearing, the upper classes were reconstituting themselves and indulging in pleasures, the lower classes were suffering from a dreadful famine, and a cold almost unknown in our climates”.²² It is interesting to see that even today the link isn’t that obvious, even in encyclopedias, as *Figure 2* presents the semantic zone network of Wikipedia pages ‘Climate’, ‘Weather’, and ‘French Revolution’ links between the ‘See also’ parts: there is absolutely no relation between these pages.

Nonetheless, the link is obvious and, if we can’t conclude effectively from theselexicometry graphs on the relationship academia has made between climate and the origins of the French Revolution²³, we observe simultaneous tendencies in the usage of different words in different corpuses, in English and French (between the words ‘climate’ and ‘revolution’, ‘revolution’ and ‘scarcity’, ‘French Revolution’ and ‘scarcity’, and ‘famine’).

We had then to wait for 2006 to finally find a work that makes a clear link between climate and the origins of the French Revolution.²⁴ Is this because of a new twenty-first century paradigm in history that wills us to incorporate the climate in human history? Is this because of a growing awareness about the consequences of human actions on climate, and of climate on human lives as this question is now part of modern thinking? Or is it only

¹⁹ G. Bruno, *Le tour de France par deux enfants : devoir et patrie, Livre de lecture courante... cours moyen...*, (Librairie Classique Belin: Paris, 1889); Nora Pierre, *Les lieux de mémoire*, (Gallimard: Paris, 1997); Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales: Europe, XVIIIe-XXe siècle*, (Seuil: Paris, 2001); Tom Stammers, ‘La mondialisation de la Révolution française (vers 1930-1960): Origines et éclipse d’un paradigme historiographique’, *Annales : Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, Vol. 74, no. 2, June 2019, pp. 297–335.

²⁰ Ernest Renan, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une nation ?’, in ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une nation ?’, (Conférence en Sorbonne, March 1882), available at: <http://www.iheal.univ-paris3.fr/sites/www.iheal.univ-paris3.fr/files/Renan_-_Qu'est-ce_qu'une_Nation.pdf> [accessed 29 September 2020];

Christine Peyrard and Michel Vovelle, ‘Un héritage hors de France : les institutions culturelles italiennes et la Révolution française’, in ‘Un héritage hors de France : les institutions culturelles italiennes et la Révolution française’, *Héritages de la Révolution française à la lumière de Jaurès*, (Presses universitaires de Provence: Aix-en-Provence, August 2017), pp. 131–145.

²¹ Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution, une exception française ?*, (Flammarion: Paris, 2006).

²² Adolphe Thiers, *Histoire de la Révolution Française. Tome Septième*, (The Gutenberg Project, 2004).

²³ François Héran, ‘Intégration : constats et débats’, (unpublished Cours presented at the Migrations et sociétés), Collège de France, December 2019, available at: <<https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/francois-heran/course-2019-12-13-09h00.htm>> [accessed 11 November 2020].

²⁴ Le Roy Ladurie, *Histoire humaine et comparée du climat. t.2*.

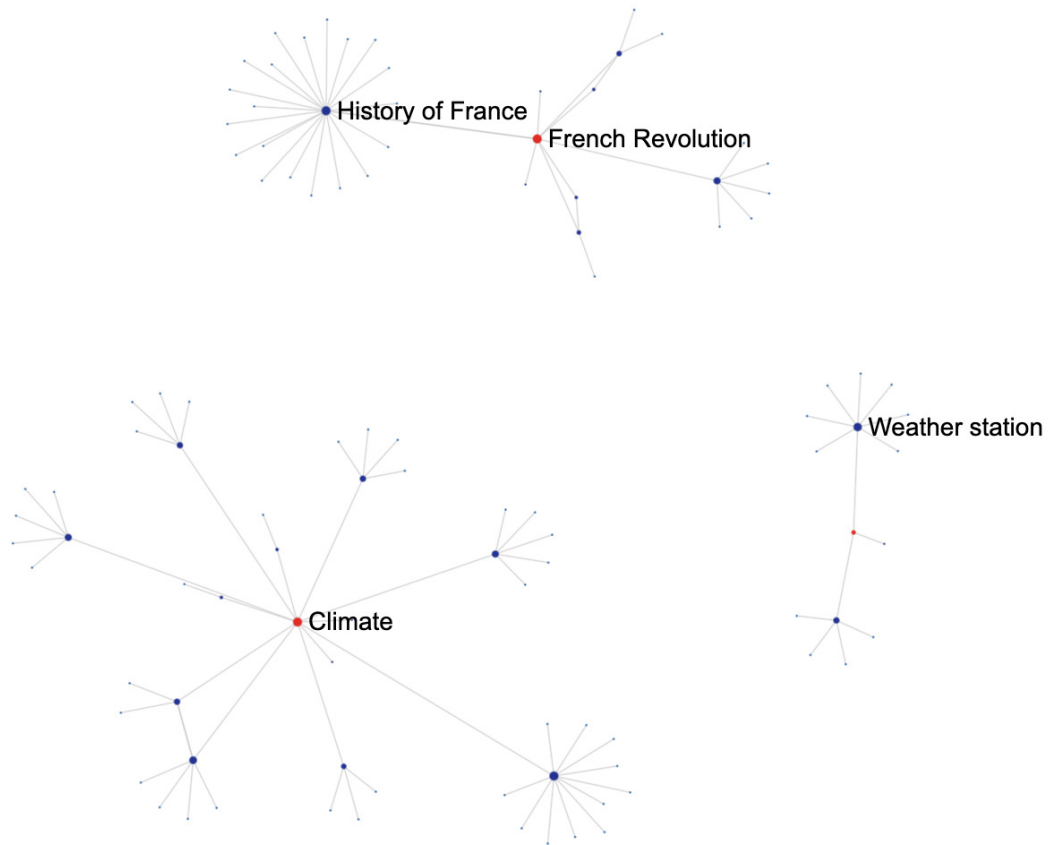


Figure 2. Semantic zone network of Wikipedia pages for 'Climate', 'Weather' and 'French Revolution' (SeeAlsology, médialab Sciences Po)

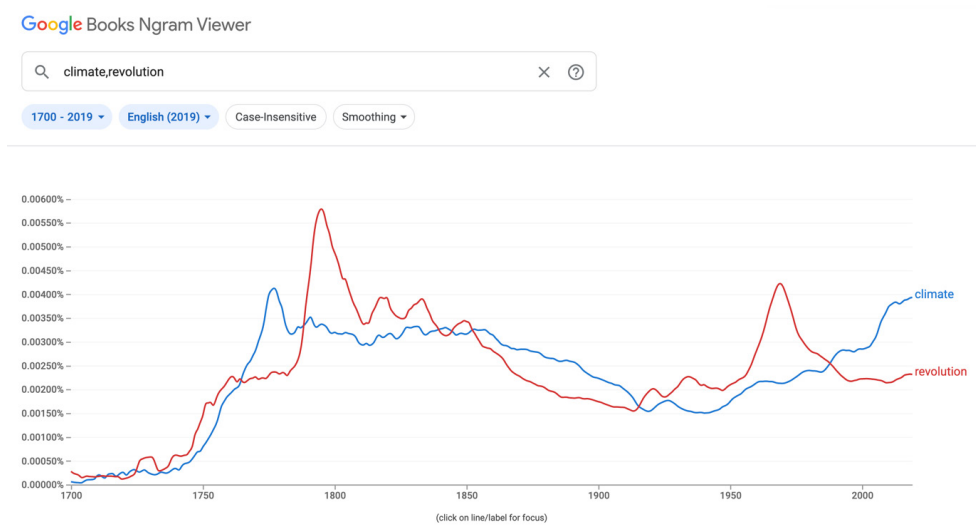


Figure 3. Lexicometry of the words 'climate' and 'revolution' from 1700 in English corpus (Google Ngram)

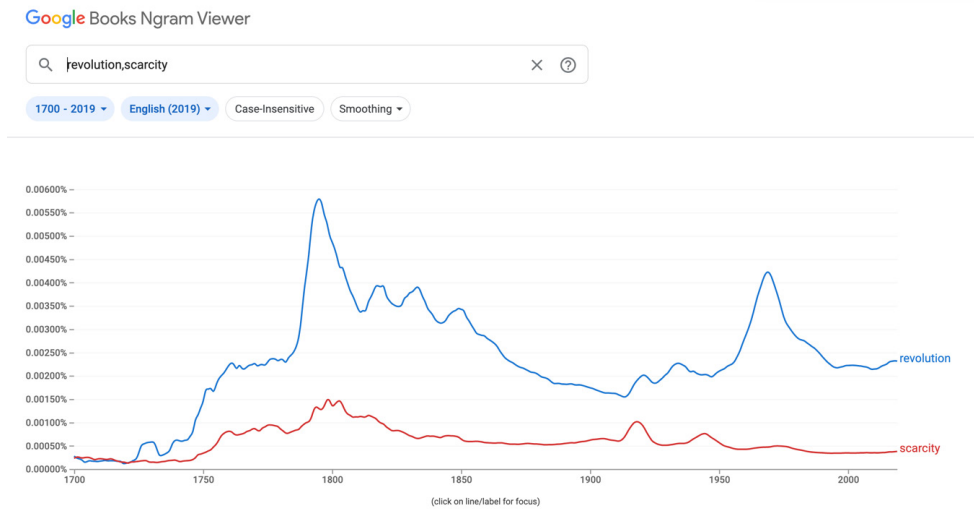


Figure 4. Lexicometry of the words 'scarcity' and 'revolution' from 1700 in English corpus (Google Ngram)

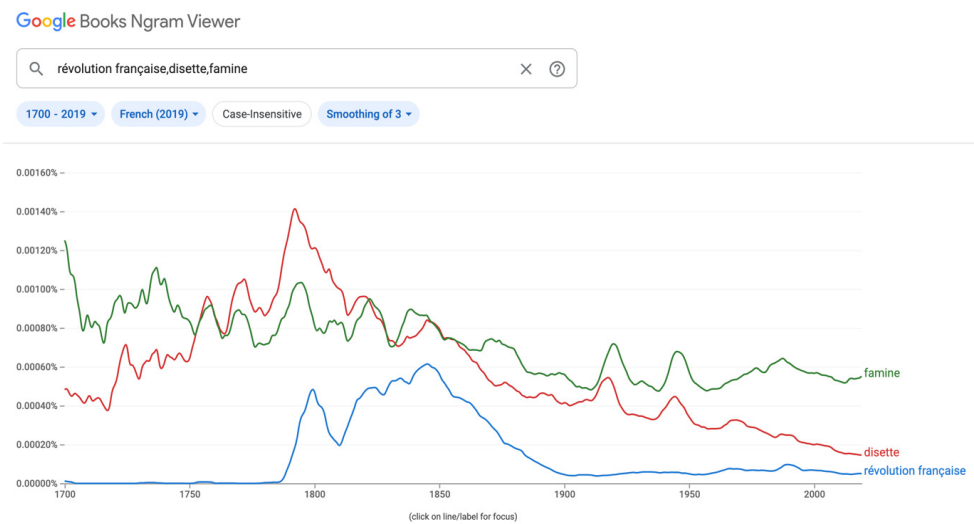


Figure 5. Lexicometry of the expressions 'scarcity/dearth' and 'French revolution' from 1700 in French corpus (Google Ngram)

the progress of presentism (*présentisme*) – an omnipresent past reinterpreted in the light of today’s concerns, here climate – on the breach events of historic regimes, here the rupture of the French Revolution?²⁵

3. (Re)thinking our past, doing history: toward the *longue durée*, toward Anthropocene

The ‘New Climatic Regime’ we have entered is maybe another appeal to think again on our past in the light of the *longue durée* or long-term; to think of history in the long-term and not anymore as a history of events (in the short-term), relativise the place of small events and crises in a broader history that explains much more if we decentre our outlook.²⁶ The most obvious realm of female Finally, the Anthropocene, this new geological period where human actions have significant consequences on the planetary ecosystem invites us (or forces us?) to think once again on all of our human creations – our past, our social and political communities, our philosophies – with a fresh look that can’t be the same as previously, because it has consequences everywhere, at all times, and for everyone.²⁷ We need to think again about where we want to land.²⁸ This particular event, the French Revolution, invites us to do so, to question our subsistence ideas, and to ask ourselves if this political revolution isn’t in the last place a question of abundance and liberty, rather than a question of finances and morality.²⁹

²⁵ François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité: présentisme et expériences du temps*, (Éditions Points: Paris, 2015).

²⁶ Fernand Braudel, ‘Histoire et Sciences sociales : La longue durée’, *Annales*, Vol. 13, no. 4, 1958, pp. 725–753; Bruno Latour and Catherine Porter, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, (Polity Press: Cambridge, juin 2017).

²⁷ Paul J. Crutzen, ‘The “Anthropocene”’, in Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft (eds.), *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene*, (Springer: Berlin, Heidelberg, 2006), pp. 13–18;

François Gemenne, Aleksandar Rankovic, and Atelier de Cartographie de Sciences Po, *Atlas de l'Anthropocène*, (Presses de Sciences Po: Paris, 2019).

²⁸ Bruno Latour, *Où atterrir ?*, (La Découverte: Paris, 2017).

²⁹ Charbonnier Pierre, *Abondance et liberté: une histoire environnementale des idées politiques / Pierre Charbonnier*, (La Découverte: Paris, 2020).

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