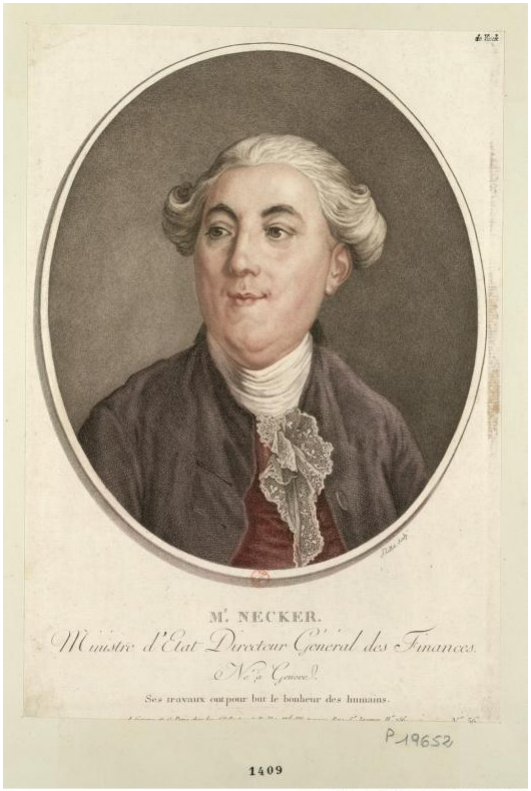
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Jacques Necker (and public opinion)

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Résumé

Jacques Necker, finance minister of France under the Old Regime (1777-1781) and then the revolution (1788-1790), was known for much more than his keen ability to mobilise credit. Thought to be an unwavering symbol of ministerial virtue by his supporters, and a fraudulent charlatan by his enemies, Necker well understood the importance of public opinion in affairs of state. Under the Old Regime, he worked hard to defend both his reputation and that of his ministry. But when the revolution came, Necker's reputation took on a life of its own. This entry explores Necker's changing image in revolutionary opinion to show how the revolution ultimately shifted the terms of public opinion as a form of political sociability in French politics.

Jacques Necker, a protestant banker from the city-state of Geneva, was best known for his role as director general of finances to the French Crown under Louis XVI, serving first from 1777 to 1781 and then again from 1788 to 1790.1 But alongside the world of high finance and state credit, Necker's career also tells us much about the changing nature of public opinion in the transition from Old Regime to revolution. A skilled manipulator of politics and opinions under the Old Regime, by 1788, Necker had cultivated for himself an image of public probity and virtue through a series of publications defending both his personal and ministerial reputation. By the end of 1789, however, the revolution had completely transformed the political sociability of public opinion. As well as opening the public sphere to new voices through the collapse of pre-publication censorship, the revolution also created new idealised authorities to which public men like Necker had to appeal, whether it be the Third Estate, the nation, or the people. Throughout the course of 1789, Necker's public image was wrested from his control and evolved with the changing nature of revolutionary politics. As such, this entry takes Necker's fortunes in the revolutionary public sphere as a case study to show how the revolution transformed the political sociability of public opinion as it existed under the Old Regime.

Necker, Public Opinion, and the Old Regime

Under the Old Regime, the public sphere not only comprised the literary activities of salons, cafes, or the exchange of enlightened ideas through printed works like the *encyclopédie*, but also the discursive space for a new form of political authority apart from the Crown: public opinion.2 Characterised as rational and uniform, appealing to and gaining authority from *l'opinion publique* involved a certain form of political sociability. Philosophers, government administrators, and men of letters would explicitly appeal to the public in their works, depicting it as an enlightened judge or rational sphere of authority that justified their own political designs.3 Perhaps none were as keenly aware of the piercing gaze of 'the public' and the importance of its support - particularly regarding matters of government finance - as Necker, who welcomed public opinion as a new means to check the abuses of authority in French politics, terming it 'a tribunal where all the men who attract attention to themselves are obliged to appear: there, public opinion, as from the height of a throne, awards prizes and crowns, makes and unmakes reputations'.4

On the influence and popularity one could expect from appealing to public opinion, Necker could speak with some experience since he forged his own reputation through publishing his ministerial achievements in a litany of works in the 1780s. In 1781, for example, Necker published the *compte rendu au roi*, an extraordinary document that for the first time in French history laid bare the King's finances to the reading public. Selling tens of thousands of copies within weeks and being translated into several languages, the *compte rendu* famously projected a 10 million livre surplus in the monarchy's accounts despite France being at war. Although Necker's accounting has been queried ever since the *compte rendu*'s publication - and today remains a matter of historiographical controversy - Necker's projected surplus

helped build his image as a sound financial operator, whilst the *compte rendu* also put forward his ideas for reform of provincial government and taxation (Harris, *Reform Stateman*, 218).5 At a time when much of the French court and government administration resisted political and fiscal reform, Necker's *compte rendu* appealed to public opinion as an alternative source of legitimacy that the Crown found increasingly difficult to ignore.

Public opinion, however, could cut both ways. As much as the *compte rendu* elevated Necker's reputation amongst the enlightened public and like-minded reformers, breaking the secrecy of absolute monarchy also rallied reactionary interests at court against him. Following the *compte rendu*'s publication, a series of anonymous pamphlets soon appeared not only attacking Necker's accounting, but also claiming that he had betrayed the monarchy and should be tried for treason (Hardman, *Louis* XVI, 65; Harris, *Reform Statesman*, 236). The King's brothers, the Comte de Provence and d'Artois, meanwhile, leaked a letter written by Necker to the King in which he denigrated both the noble magistrates and provincial intendants who dominated the Crown's political and fiscal administration. Now facing the resistance of much of the royal establishment, Necker lost the confidence of the King, and resigned his post in May 1781.

Despite his resignation, Necker maintained his reputation for public virtue and sound finance in the 1780s through a series of publications defending his premiership, cultivating for himself a popularity that would see him recalled to government. First, Necker outlined the achievements of his ministry in a three-tome epic, his *De l'administration des finances de la France* of 1784.Ibid., 'De l'administration des finances de la France, Book 1', 1784 in Internet Archive: Newberry French Pamphlet Collection ; ibid., 'De l'administration des finances de la France, Book 2', Internet Archive: Newberry French Pamphlet Collection; ibid., 'De l'administration des finances de la France, Book 3', Internet Archive: Newberry French Pamphlet Collection, He then defended the veracity of his *compte rendu*, the accuracy of which not only symbolized his personal credibility, but also, Necker believed, the public's faith in the state's finances and therein the credibility of the state itself. This meant that when the *compte rendu* was again publicly queried by the acting finance minister, Charles Alexandre de Calonne, in April 1787, Necker publicly responded to Calonne's accusations despite the King's orders not to intervene. By the summer of 1788, Necker had had the last word in a protracted public debate with his *Nouveaux éclaircissements sur le compte rendu* as Calonne was dismissed from his post and fled to London (Harris, *Reform Statesman*, 232-234).Ibid., 'Sur le compte rendu au roi en 1781. Nouveaux éclaircissements.', 1788. Newberry French Pamphlet Collection. Calonne, for his part, was disparaged for enveloping the state in another financial crisis, whilst Necker not only maintained his reputation as a genie of credit, but also managed to cultivate a public persona as a minister of enlightened government. As depicted in the illustration below, 'The Recall of M. Necker', Necker's return signalled not just the promise of sound credit, but also the return of French government to the ways of reason and virtue.



Gaucher, Charles-Étienne, 'Le Rappel de Monsieur Necker', *BnF Gallica*, 1788.

The King, supported by Necker's works, is being brought from the treacherous shadows to Necker's enlightened stewardship, much to the nation's approval.

Necker, the Third Estate, and the Revolution

Bringing with him the promise of public support for the Crown at a time when it was perceived as despotic, irrational, and immoral, Necker returned to his post as finance minister in August 1788. Despite Necker's guiding hand in matters of credit, however, the Crown very quickly lost control of the political situation. As the Crown's censorship regime collapsed against a tidal wave of new publications coming from all quarters of society, 'public opinion' was no longer circumscribed to an elite coterie of enlightened pamphleteers, but increasingly involved more radical voices calling for bolder reforms. In this environment,

Necker's image tracked the shifting locus of political legitimacy as it transitioned from the enlightened public to revolutionary bodies like the Third Estate and new concepts of national sovereignty. Although never a complete fabrication of Necker's politics, Necker's perceived involvement in revolutionary events conjured up images of an informal alliance between Necker and the Third Estate that would transform the minister's reputation from a savant in the ways of credit to a veritable champion of moderate constitutional revolution.

We can see this, for example, through Necker's involvement in the events of the summer of 1789. After the Third Estate broke away from the Estates General and congregated itself as the revolutionary National Assembly on 17 June 1789, the Crown, looking to mediate the political situation, called a royal session for 23 June. In the session, Louis agreed to a partial acceptance of the Third Estate's reforms, but in return expected the deputies to return to an Estates General with the Nobility and Clergy voting by order, which would mean the privileged orders holding sway in the assembly.8 Necker, not wishing to associate himself with such a move, did not attend the session, conspicuously leaving his seat in the King's congregation empty. The Third Estate, meanwhile, boldly persisted as the National Assembly, declaring that they would only disband 'by the power of bayonets' (AP8, 146). Despite their intransigence, however, it was not the victory of the Third Estate that the revolutionary newspaper, the *Moniteur Universel*, reported on in their issue of 27 June:

> The royal session, from which the majority of the Nobles and a large part of the Clergy expected the triumph of their cause, seemed by a singular fatality to accelerate their defeat by increasing the credit of M. Necker.9

Necker, it turns out, had been petitioned at his home after the Royal Session by a swathe of Parisians who begged him to remain 'faithful to the nation and the King, and to remain in the ministry' (*Ibid*.). Necker's wife, the salonist Suzanne Curchod or 'Madame Necker', soon emerged announcing Necker had handed in his resignation the day before, but the King had refused (*Ibid*.). The crowd broke out in dismay at the thought of Necker's departure but was soon intrigued as the Queen called Necker to the royal palace in Versailles. The news spread fast, and an 'immense multitude' gathered at the palace to hear the results (*Ibid*). After half an hour, Necker emerged and, turning towards the baying public, announced that he would remain in his post to cries of '*vive le roi, vive M. Necker!*' (*Ibid*.). The crowd followed Necker triumphantly home, in some depictions carrying him there (see illustration below), where it termed him 'our father and our guide', and Necker promised to remain as minister of finances even facing death, asking in return that the people 'employ all the gentleness, all the courage, [and] all the virtue' that it possibly could (*Ibid*.).



Pezant, 'Monsieur Necker redemandé par le Tiers-Etat', *Gallica BnF*, 1789.

Celebrations of Necker's persistence carried on into the night, and overall the royal session signalled Necker's standing as no longer just a man of the public, but now a man of the people. Under the Old Regime, Necker's character and principles had garnered the respect of liberal nobles, reformers, enlightened magistrates and other 'men of reason' in the public sphere (Harris, *Necker and the Revolution*, 524). During the revolution, however, his attempts to mediate the dispute between Third Estate, the privileged orders, and the Crown, had won

him favour amongst the popular classes, particularly the people of Paris. Necker, as well as the deputies of the Third Estate, were keenly aware of this popular association, and it would come to shape subsequent revolutionary moments in the summer of 1789.

Indeed, if the royal session outlines Necker's newfound popular, not just public, support and his perceived importance to the Third Estate's cause, subsequent events would further associate Necker with the revolutionary project. On 23 June, Necker had told the crowd the King was 'happy to receive' his word to remain in post, but barely a month would pass before Necker's position was once again in jeopardy. On 11 July, Louis struck a new blow at the National Assembly by dismissing their greatest ally from his council, Necker. Amidst the presence of royal troops in and around the capital, the news of Necker's dismissal sent the people of Paris into uproar, culminating in the infamous taking of the Bastille on the 14 July.

Necker's dismissal posed a series of problems to the National Assembly. On one level, the loss of Necker meant losing a key ally in the King's immediate sphere of influence, with Louis now more likely to fall prey to the conservative faction at court. On another, Necker's dismissal shook public confidence and sparked chaos in Paris, threatening both the Crown and Assembly alike. To restore public order, the deputies knew Necker would have to be recalled, but they struggled to put this demand before the executive power without overstepping their bounds as the legislative. After much consternation, it was, in the end, the imperious presence of public opinion, and Necker's favourability within it, that swayed the Assembly to petition the King for his return. Since, the Comte de Mirabeau declared, 'the blessings any curses of the people' had always formed 'the judgement of good and bad ministers', the Assembly should 'surrender without fear to the impulse of public opinion', the 'incorruptible sentinel of the country; the first auxiliary instrument of any good constitution […] the sacred guarantor of social peace, against which no individual, no interest, no consideration can enter into balance' (AP8, 243). And where abstract, lofty proclamations of the public's authority failed, Lally-Tollendal reminded the deputies of the very real clamor in Paris:

> Gentlemen, we have seen it, we have heard it, in the streets, in the crossroads, on the quays, in the squares, there was only one cry, the recall of M. Necker. All that this immense people prayed for us to do is to ask the King for M. Necker again. The prayers of a people are orders; we must therefore ask for the recall of M. Necker (AP8, 244).

Following Mirabeau and Lally-Tollendal, the Assembly petitioned the King for Necker's return, and on 16 July, the King relented. For the second time in a year he recalled Necker to the post of finance minister and, for the very first time, personally recognised the deputies under the title of 'National Assembly' (Blackman 176). Necker, meanwhile, emerged in the eyes of the nation's deputies, and the patriotic public, as a true ally and figure synonymous with the revolution itself.

As we can see in the illustration below, Necker is held aloft by the Marquis de Lafayette and the King's cousin, the Duke of Orléans, who, together with the Parisian crowd, have laid waste to the Bastille, an 'instrument of slavery' that recedes into the smoky background.



Hennin, Michel, 'Constitution de la France', *Gallica BnF*, 1789.

With Lafayette and Orléans both former nobles who came to be major proponents of the revolution, this idealisation of Necker shows how he came to embody the alliance between moderate revolutionary deputies and the more radically disposed people of Paris, an alliance

that protected the National Assembly from the King's attempts to dismiss Necker and withhold the constitution in the days of July and October 1789. Entitled 'the constitution of France', it also depicts Necker simultaneously supporting the Crown and the cap of liberty, further projecting the desire of moderates to reconcile the King to revolutionary ideals. Necker, as an agent of the Crown and the nation, was thought to be the man best suited to the task.

Necker's Fall

Of course, these idealisations of Necker were of their particular historical moment. The realm of public opinion, tracing the transition from reform to revolution, had transformed Necker from a master of credit and symbol of public virtue in the 1780s into the Third Estate's ministerial ally and ultimately, a proponent of moderate constitutional revolution in the summer of 1789. Although it is true that Necker largely supported the cause of the Third Estate and sought to broker a rapprochement between the Crown and National Assembly based upon a moderate constitutional settlement, these renditions of Necker were as much the projections of new authorities in France's public sphere – whether it be the Third Estate, or moderate revolutionaries who began to organise themselves into political assemblies and clubs – as they were accurate reflections of Necker's politics.

As these new political authorities became more radical and polarised, however, Necker's newfound image as a moderate would become increasingly problematic, and his influence over the Assembly would diminish. Indeed, after the abolition of feudalism on the night of 4 August, the October Days of 1789 and requisitioning of the Church lands on 2 November, the revolution Necker now confronted no longer seemed moderate and compromising, but increasingly bold and radical. In December 1789, Necker's plans to turn a Parisian bank, the *caisse d'escompte*, into a national bank mired him in accusations of emboldening private interests at the heart of the state, a principle that revolutionary national sovereignty could not accept. Instead, the revolution bet on itself, issuing a new paper money, the *assignats*, backed by the Church lands it had seized in November. As Necker became superseded as minister of finance by the Assembly's own committee of finances, he found himself less and less favoured by the men of the Assembly, particularly as he publicly opposed the *assignats*, which, to revolutionary idealogues, became the material symbol of trust and faith in the revolution. Still respected by some for his role in the summer of 1789, Necker came to be distrusted and maligned by others who were either his long-standing enemies or radicals who now saw him either as too close to the Crown, out of step with revolutionary ideals, or both.

On 3 September 1790, Necker resigned his position as finance minister citing ill health and the burden of his work. A public man to the last, Necker published, just as he had in the 1780s, not only a defence of his administration during the revolution, but also advice on revolutionary finance and other reflections that tried to broker a path between the radical turn of the revolution, the position of the monarchy, and the hostilities of counter-revolutionaries and *émigrés* (Harris, *Necker and the Revolution*, 764).10 Necker clearly still believed in public opinion as the ultimate political tribunal and particularly in the capacity of individuals

to construct and shape it. This political sociability, however, had succumbed to the maelstrom of revolution.11 A prime example himself of the shift in the locus of political legitimacy, the people as much as the public now shaped the political agenda, just as Necker experienced in the transformation of his own image. Public opinion, which was regarded as universal, rational, and consistent under the Old Regime, became intemperate, polarised, and everchanging under the revolution, quickly casting those aside who it had once elevated. Necker's reputation profited, and then suffered, from this transition as his politics failed to live up to the revolution's increasingly radical ideals.

1. Marcel Marion, Histoire Financière de la France depuis 1715, vol. 1 (Paris: A. Rousseau, 1914); Herbert Luethy, La Banque protestante en France de la révocation de l'édit de Nantes à la révolution, 2 vols. (Paris: SEVPEN, 1961); John Bosher, French Finances 1770-1795: From Business to Bureaucracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Robert Harris, Necker: Reform Statesman of the Ancien Régime (London: University of California Press, 1979); Robert Harris, Necker and the Revolution of 1789 (London: University Press of America, 1986).

2. In French Revolutionary historiography, interest in the public sphere and public opinion took leave from the re-discovery of Jürgen Habermas' essay, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, in the late-1980s. See Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989); Sara Maza, 'The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution', ed. Peter McPhee, A Companion to the French Revolution (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 42-56.

3. See Keith Baker, Inventing the French Revolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 190-199; Roger Chartier, Cultural Origins of the French Revolution (Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 20-37.

4. Jacques Necker, 'De l'administration des finances de la France, Book 1', 1784 in Internet Archive: Newberry French Pamphlet Collection, p. 58.

5. Jacques Necker, 'Compte rendu au roi', 1781. Internet Archive: Newberry French Pamphlet Collection, 15 September 2020. On the controversy over Necker's accounts, see John Hardman, Louis XVI (London: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 65-67; Robert Harris, Necker: Reform Statesman of the Ancien Régime (London: University of California Press, 1979), pp. xii-x, 217-235.

6. J. Mavidal, E. Laurent and E. Clavel (eds.), Archives parlementaires de 1787– 1860, première série (Paris: Librairie Administrative, 1867– 1913), vol. 8, p. 143. Henceforth referred to as AP.

7. Réimpression de l'ancien moniteur, le moniteur universel, tome 1 (Paris, 1858), p. 97.

8. See Jacques Necker, Sur l'administration de M. Necker, par lui-même (1791); ibid., Du pouvoir exécutif dans les grands états, (1792) ; ibid., Réflexions présentes la nation française, sur le procès intenté Louis XVI (1792); ibid., De la Révolution Françoise, 3 vols., (1797); ibid., Dernières vues de politique et de finance (1802).

9. See Charles Walton, Policing Public Opinion in the French Revolution: The Culture of Calumny and the Problem of Free Speech (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Citer cet article

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