One of the most important changes introduced by the French Revolution was the codification of civic equality as a fundamental right. In the profoundly hierarchical society that was eighteenth-century France, establishing a norm of abstract equality among citizens was an extremely radical act, one that undermined existing assumptions about how politics and everyday social relations should be structured. Yet the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen was passed virtually without dissent by a National Assembly that included many aristocrats and clerics, whose privileges it abolished. Dr. Sewell argues that the widespread acceptance in 1789 of this abstract civic equality had experiential roots in the transformations introduced by early capitalism’s growing commodification of social relations. In this talk, and in the forthcoming book on which it is based, Dr. Sewell traces out such tendential abstraction in three distinct spheres of eighteenth-century French social experience: the burgeoning commercial relations in French cities, the social world of the philosophes, and the royal administration’s widespread adoption of political-economic reasoning. It was, Dr. Sewell argues, the concrete experience of increasingly abstract social relations in the decades before the Revolution that made civic equality thinkable and so widely acceptable in 1789.

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