

*H-France Salon*  
Volume 10 Issue, 11, #1

**The Tallahassee Report:  
Rethinking Graduate Education in Old Regime, Enlightenment, and Revolutionary French  
History**

On April 13 and 14, 2018, a number of doctoral advisors and advisees working on Old Regime, Enlightenment, and Revolutionary French history met at Florida State University to examine how doctoral education in this broad field has changed in the U.S. in recent years and to identify ways teaching, research, and the job search might be reconfigured in light of these changes. There were about 25 faculty and 35 graduate students present. Together they represented 20 of the American universities currently granting doctoral degrees in this area of French history. Also present were an observer from France and one from the United Kingdom, both also experts in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French history. The meeting offered an exciting opportunity for graduate students and doctoral advisors from different universities to exchange ideas with each other, particularly about ongoing dissertation projects and career issues. Although we identified some challenges, we also believe that there are creative ways of addressing them.

The meeting was originally arranged to discuss the difficult state of the academic job market in the field. The overall number of new tenure-track lines available to history PhDs has fallen, and within the discipline of history, both European history and pre-twentieth-century history have suffered disproportionately. Needless to say, these problems are beyond the scope of the participants to solve. But in the two days of discussion, we agreed that there are ways that the field as a whole can be mobilized more effectively to support doctoral students. We also felt that we came to a better understanding of changes in the field, and we discussed a variety of initiatives that may allow doctoral students to deal more productively with the resulting challenges. In particular, we spent considerable time discussing the ways that a particular trend – what could be described as “de-specialization” — has been reshaping teaching, research, and the job search alike. For one thing, an analysis of job postings and hires since 2010 suggested that while recent PhDs in Old Regime, Enlightenment, and Revolutionary French history are eventually getting tenure-track jobs, they are usually doing so in thematically-defined or early modern or modern European positions. Very few receive jobs specifically advertised as French history positions, and indeed fewer and fewer such jobs exist. In addition, students increasingly land these jobs after years as adjuncts, visiting assistant professors, and/or postdocs. This is a major problem in itself, especially for students without the means to traverse the inevitable lean years, and is an obstacle to diversity in our field.

This evaporation of jobs in the academy explicitly defined as French in focus, coupled with the decline in European positions in general, has coincided with the move in the discipline towards various sorts of transnational history, with profound effects on doctoral teaching and research. It has led professors to replace field-specific graduate seminars with transnational or thematic

courses more suited to preparing students for the broadly defined courses they will likely be expected to teach once they finish their degrees. This trend has been reinforced by the fact that fewer and fewer departments have enough doctoral students specifically interested in French history (or any specific national field) to fill seminars defined in those terms. Doctoral students in French history must master the French-language historiography of their field on their own.

While acknowledging that it would be foolish to lament the passing of a supposed golden age of doctoral education in French history centered on highly-specialized graduate seminars that probably never really existed, a sense did emerge from the discussion that the de-specialization of graduate seminars has affected graduate student morale. Some doctoral students stated that they felt overwhelmed at having to master the literature in both broadly-defined teaching fields and in the substantial historiographical corpus of Old Regime, Enlightenment, and Revolutionary France. In response, some have narrowed their main-field reading lists to focus on the themes with which their dissertations will engage. Others have created lists that are broad and thematic and likely to serve teaching needs, but are less oriented towards their dissertation topics. As in their coursework, in their reading for exams students feel the lack of a solid grounding in the field and faculty are frustrated in not being able to offer it in seminars. In the end, many doctoral students are left with the sense that they are not as conversant with the scholarship in their own field of Old Regime, Enlightenment, and Revolutionary France as they believe they should be.

In the choice of dissertation topics, too, the disciplinary trend is away from exclusively “French” subjects and towards topics with geographical range and chronological sweep, which engage with themes (for example, Atlantic, medical, new-economic, etc.) that will make them attractive on the job market. Of the dissertations being pursued by the 25 doctoral students in attendance, topics on metropolitan France did account for more than half of the total, but the rest are combining transnational and thematic approaches in innovative ways.

In one sense this is heartening. The new original research in the field seems more diverse, imaginative, and boundary-crossing than ever before. But this encouraging development may also reflect a feeling of unease among the rising generation of French historians. Some graduate students expressed concern that they had to craft chronologically, thematically, and theoretically eclectic dissertations if they were to be competitive on the job market. In many cases, this pressure has yielded real benefits, as students have pushed the boundaries of French history in salutary and exciting ways. At the same time, there remains real concern about how this diffuse perception of professional pressure to be transnational and thematic in one’s research and how a program of doctoral coursework consisting principally in broadly-framed seminars will affect our field of French history in years to come.

Another important aspect of doctoral training that is changing is dissertation research. Transnational or colonial projects often require research in multiple countries. Even doctoral students whose topics center on France are less likely to do what most of their own advisors did: spend one or two years living and researching in France, immersed not only in French archives and libraries, but in French life more broadly. The availability of so many print sources online, and the ability of students to take thousands of digital photos of manuscript sources quickly, only increases the temptation to undertake short, intensive research trips as opposed to long, immersive

stays in the country. But this, too, sometimes comes at a cost. Students often feel less of a connection to France, have more trouble mastering a near-native command of the language, and do not establish contacts as easily with French scholars. At the same time, technology has offered students with limited funds or familial commitments new research possibilities by enabling shorter research trips. Long- and short-term approaches to dissertation research have high stakes and important tradeoffs with which we are still grappling as a field.

On the second day of the meeting, one response to the problems of de-specialization was proposed and embraced by the entire group. This was to create a summer seminar in which a rotation of professors of Old Regime, Enlightenment and Revolutionary French history from a variety of institutions would offer intensive training in both the English-language and French-language historiography of the field to interested doctoral students. This would not only help fill the gaps in specialized historiographical training caused by the de-specialization of seminars and the job market, but also help build a sense of cohesion and common purpose among the new generation of scholars from both sides of the Atlantic working in this particular field. A three-person committee was formed to seek funding for this initiative.

Steps were also taken to form regional inter-university seminars (Great Lakes/Midwest, Southern, West, Northeast, etc.) which would take advantage of relative proximity, existing institutional relationships, and new technology to mount virtual seminars during the academic year. As with the summer seminar, faculty from non-doctoral programs could have an important role to play in these meetings.

At the same time, the doctoral student participants decided to establish a caucus to serve as a forum in which to articulate their concerns, share ideas and materials (syllabi, reading lists, successful lesson plans, audiovisual teaching material, etc.), and generally solidify the sense of cohort cohesion that had begun to develop from the meeting. Ideally, this forum will also combat the isolation that some doctoral students face at their home institutions as history graduate programs shrink and reduce the number of French history students at any given university. Membership in the forum will not be limited to Tallahassee participants.

In summary, the following initiatives were adopted:

- An international summer doctoral seminar
- Regional academic-year virtual doctoral seminars
- A graduate student caucus and forum

In addition to de-specialization and its effects, two other major issues were discussed. The first was the growing diversity of the student body in American colleges and universities, a diversity that is not typically mirrored in French history course enrollments or in the faculty who teach Old Regime, Enlightenment, and Revolutionary France. In regards to the first issue, it was suggested that innovations in course design, theoretical perspectives, and classroom pedagogy could foster greater interest and inclusiveness for undergraduates. This could in turn strengthen the pipeline of students of diverse backgrounds who might choose to pursue doctoral study and thereafter faculty careers. This systemic issue will require further, sustained attention. Also, trends in hiring across disciplines show an increasing demand for faculty who are actively engaged in issues of equity

and inclusion vis-à-vis diverse undergraduate populations. Doctoral students of Old Regime, Enlightenment, and Revolutionary France therefore need training and mentoring in these areas as well as guidance in preparing diversity statements that many universities require in faculty job applications. This will better prepare doctoral students for faculty careers in a variety of institutions and help them to strengthen the pipeline leading from undergraduate classrooms to graduate ones, and hence to the faculty.

The second issue concerned the subject of career diversity and the need to take a more systematic approach to it. Two suggestions to address this issue drew on the AHA's Career Diversity for Historians Initiative. First, it was suggested that professors reach out to former students in our field who have built satisfying careers outside the professoriate who might be willing to record their experiences and make them available to current students and recent PhDs, in order to expand their horizons. Second, we discussed how we might build skills into our doctoral training that would be useful for a variety of careers, including academic ones. Other programming, such as doctoral co-op work-study and experiential learning programs, were discussed, as was the need to create a culture of support and encouragement for students who pursue careers other than traditional faculty positions. It was also suggested that the main French historical bodies be asked to devote more effort to professional development for career diversity.

We welcome the participation and input of all scholars in the field in these initiatives, and look forward to working with the broader community of American historians of early modern and Revolutionary France as we move forward.

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*H-France Salon*

ISSN 2150-4873

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