

H-France Salon
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Plus ça change

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The field of French history has gone through endless permutations since the mid-twentieth century. In the first issue of *French Historical Studies* published in 1958, David Pinkney laid out the dilemmas then facing American historians of France. Despite their ambition to contribute original research and interpretations, they had to face the fact, he maintained, that French historians in France, “the ultimate judges of what is new, original, and significant in French history,” rarely reviewed books by Americans on French history and hardly ever found them of much originality or significance. This judgment did not reflect prejudice on their part but rather the difficulties Americans faced when undertaking research in France: “An unmarried, independently wealthy man might get to France every summer for two or three months of research, but few are in that mobile situation.” After the doctoral dissertation, he concluded, American historians should focus on broad synthetic reinterpretations combining reading in secondary sources with a modicum of original research.¹

My point is not to complain about Pinkney’s assumption that American historians of France were by definition male, an observation overlooked by his many critics, not all of them men, or to contest his view of the field. He was beloved as a mentor by young women as well as men, and he constantly revised his views. In 1975 he granted that rising academic salaries, Fulbright fellowships, and transatlantic jet travel were making French archives more accessible and photocopying was reducing the time required to complete a major study. In 1991, finally, he declared it was time to bury the Pinkney thesis; American historians of France had been thoroughly integrated into the French community of historians of France, the French had been the ones to turn to synthesis, and, if anything, he worried more about the “disarray” in French universities and the possible consequences for historical study.²

Despite his initial concern to explain the limitations of French history in the U.S., Pinkney’s various iterations actually traced the rising arc of French history as a field. Nearly three decades later, it looks as if that field is in decline in terms of enrollments and the number of graduate students and teaching positions. The authors of the Tallahassee Report are right to recognize the

¹ David H. Pinkney, “The Dilemma of the American Historian of Modern France,” *French Historical Studies*, 1:1 (1958): 11–25, quotations pp. 12 and 16.

² David H. Pinkney, “The Dilemma of the American Historian of Modern France Reconsidered,” *French Historical Studies*, 9:1 (1975): 170–181. David H. Pinkney, “Time to Bury the Pinkney Thesis?” *French Historical Studies*, 17:1 (1991): 219–23, especially p. 223.

worries of students and their teachers and to suggest solutions to the problems that have emerged, but it is also important to keep in view what we have gained. History departments only appeared in the 1870s and the teaching of post-medieval French history followed 30 years or more later, for the most part only in the elite institutions. Specialists in our period of Old Regime, Enlightenment, and Revolutionary France were not common before the 1950s, and even then, and ever after, we have tended to be utility infielders. When I arrived at Berkeley in 1974 with training in early modern European and French history, I was immediately asked to teach nineteenth-century Europe because there was no one else available (now many must teach world history of some sort). In forty years of teaching graduate students, I hardly ever taught a research seminar on eighteenth-century or Revolutionary France. Now there are French historians and specialists in our period in many colleges and universities, often teaching courses based on their specific interests, in part because the rigors of the job market have brought wonderfully talented, research-oriented historians to a greater range of institutions than ever before. Many more of them are women and some, though still regrettably few, are minorities. French historians who focus on the eighteenth century have the advantage of working in a field that was introduced to the relevance of the Atlantic very early on and for obvious reasons have found congenial the rising interests in the significance of colonial, imperial, and global contexts. French historians are well-placed to participate in world and global history.

Pinkney's attention to the conditions of scholarship is still pertinent. Travel to France is now routine and not very expensive but living there is another matter. When I went on a SSRC fellowship in 1970–71 my stipend allowed me to share an apartment in Paris, commute to Troyes and Reims for research and stay in hotels, eat in cafés and restaurants, and travel to visit fellow graduate students in Serbia, Russia, southern France, and England because the stipend was high compared to the standard of living in France. Even with a fellowship, students now have to be very careful about their finances, and that increases the pressure to take digital photographs and spend less rather than more time in France. Everything is easier, thanks to the internet, but more expensive. When I arrived in September 1970, I had never been to Europe, had no place to stay, and knew no one in Paris. I eventually found an apartment when a young Tunisian man overheard me talking with fellow students from Stanford. He knew one of our professors and had a cousin with an apartment. It was convenient and affordable but had no telephone; the waiting list for a phone was years long. To contact a professor I wanted to consult, I first mailed a letter and then went to the café and got a *jeton* and made the call (trembling with anxiety). Now history graduate students in Paris find apartments ahead of time and once there can meet regularly with their counterparts for drinks, thanks to an email list. The archives and libraries are much easier to access, and their staffs are friendly and helpful, but the new ones, including in the provinces, are not in the most interesting locations. A departmental archive is less fun to visit when the best place to eat nearby is the cafeteria of a *hypermarché*.

Because of these changes in the conditions of work, and the shifting pressures of the job market, there is no one clear path to success and satisfaction in French history. But there never was only one path. Some will continue to fall in love with France, as I did, and throw themselves into improving their French and learning as much as possible about French culture, in the eighteenth century and now. Others will make shorter trips or one longish one followed by shorter ones, as many did in the past. Some will choose to broaden their purview to the colonies or transnational topics, and others will work on places or themes that concern the metropole. Almost everyone will

take digital photographs of archival material, and many of us will discover, as I have, that you actually have to read some of it in order to figure out which photos to take. What will definitely remain the same is our need to consult each other for advice, whether about apartments, archives, topics, or cafés. My friends in other fields of history have always felt a bit jealous about French history, and it wasn't just because of the wine, cheese, restaurants, or Paris. It was the sociability, and in that regard, the Tallahassee Report will keep a tradition going of us helping each other make the most of the experience.

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