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**On the Tallahassee Report
Is It Time for Re-Specialization?**

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As someone who works in a different corner of French history, one that is both decidedly post-1789 and often focused on France's engagement with the non-European world, I read the Tallahassee Report with great interest. There is certainly much that will resonate with all French historians – and likely all historians, full stop – about the shrinking job market. Job descriptions seeking candidates who can teach outside of their primary fields, or offer thematic courses that are global in scope, have become the norm—byproducts of dwindling budgets, receding faculty resources, and (let's face it) smaller enrollments in history courses at many colleges and universities. It is a serious problem that we must discuss with graduate students and, indeed, with undergraduates before they even apply for PhD programs. Whether historians alone can change hiring patterns seems unlikely; but we can definitely advise, encourage, and sympathize more effectively.

In addition to practical concerns, the Tallahassee Report also highlights existential anxieties, most notably about the “de-specialization” that faces scholars in the field. Having initially asserted that the inclusion of thematic and transnational approaches has been “heartening” and innovative, the Tallahassee Report expresses lament for this state of affairs. Somewhat abstract “trends” and “pressures” are pushing graduate students away from “exclusively ‘French’ subjects” and forcing many to feel they must devise “chronologically, thematically, and theoretically eclectic dissertations.” Considering the field's deep connection with both transnational history (from the *Annales* school to recent digital projects to map the global “Republic of Letters”) as well as thematic (gender, labor, sexuality, political culture), these anxieties are somewhat surprising. Historians of early modern France, from Braudel to Hunt, are regulars on graduate reading lists in fields far from Europe, raising the question of whether any of these works were ever “exclusively” about France.

But anxieties, as any therapist will tell you, are real, if not always grounded in reason. So how do we alleviate them? The belief that abstract trends are pushing scholars to be more transnational and thematic will ring familiar to many historians of the modern period. Post-1789 French history has witnessed a significant shift of focus over the last two decades, with research in the colonial empire being the most obvious example. The shift has not been without its tensions. My own PhD advisor, who ultimately directed multiple “colonial” dissertations, regularly bemoaned that fewer and fewer students were interested in the peasant politics of Ariège, silk workers in Lyon, or other topics that had animated her own graduate experience. She was also none too pleased that her students were giving up precious time in France to scour archives in places like Hanoi and

Antananarivo. Her concern came from a good place: a true Francophile, she loved the history, people, language, and culture of France and wanted her students to love them, too. She did not like what she was seeing. While historians are trained to explain change, they are often less comfortable experiencing it in their own profession.

The key is how we interpret such changes. The turn to more transnational or colonial history in the modern field has been what I would call a *re-specialization* rather than a *de-specialization*. Yes, graduate students in the modern field these days read much more about Algeria than Ariège. But they are not losing a sense of their field; rather, fundamental assumptions—regarding politics, economics, culture, and identity—have been reexamined and redefined. Just because a scholar conducts research on French ideas, policies, or activities in lands distant from the Hexagon does not mean that she is not writing about a “French” subject. Most historians of the later modern period, rather, have come to accept that the history of the Caribbean, Africa, and elsewhere is not separate from, but a constituent part of, the history of France. This does not mean that graduate students can now ignore market integration in *la France profonde* or gender relations in interwar Paris. Rather, what denotes graduate training has been recalibrated. The result, I would argue, has been a net gain, not an irretrievable loss: a broader conception of modern France has enriched how myriad themes—religion, race, sex, gender, class, power—are understood.

Historians with transnational topics often do spend time researching outside of France. But my guess is that the need to travel to multiple national archives has had far less of an impact on shortening graduate student forays in France than digital cameras and a lack of research money. After all, the richest archival collections for most subjects on French endeavors abroad are usually still in France. True, shorter stays impact relationships made with French scholars. But with the Internet, email, and increasingly international conferences, making contacts is easier now than it was twenty years ago.

On the flipside, there is much to be gained by expanding the geography of one’s research. Fruitful connections can be made with non-European scholars interested in French history who often don’t have the financial resources to travel. And there are many surprising, intangible things to be learned about the legacy of French influence in places as diverse as Buenos Aires, Nouméa, and Oran. Maybe a similar colonial or transnational “turn” is not what scholars of Old Regime, Enlightenment, and Revolutionary history want or need. Either way, though, embracing work that pours over French borders as an opportunity to reimagine early modern France, rather than a process of “de-specialization,” offers potentially great rewards to individuals and the field.

It is understandable, considering the enormous pressure of the job market, that graduate students might think that they need to craft “eclectic” dissertations. But it is incumbent upon the field to advise them to repress that impulse. There is no data to suggest job candidates are unsuccessful if they don’t have a transnational chapter or an argument connected to a currently hip theme. What students in the early modern period must do is explain why their research is original and why their topics (and field) *matter*—in scholarly, intellectual, and human terms—in the twenty-first century.

For decades, the early modern field was a cornerstone of western civ. courses and a trailblazer in theory and methodology. While the field continues to produce excellent work, times have changed. The Old Regime seems impossibly long ago for many students. The Enlightenment has come under

increased scrutiny on many campuses for its assumed association with a Eurocentric canon. The Revolution is no longer the source of political and romantic inspiration that it was for prior generations of students. Enrollment in courses increasingly lack numbers. If the Tallahassee Report is a sign of a kind of identity crisis or crisis of confidence, perhaps further collective efforts could be made to define why the field is relevant, as well as who its potential audience is. Doing so will not change the structural hurdles that we all face; it will not create jobs. It might, however, alleviate some of the anxieties about what the field is, as well as reveal how to train graduate students more effectively and attract more diverse students.

One thing is certain: there is good reason to be hopeful. The Tallahassee Report demonstrates the commitment of faculty and graduate students to strengthening the field. International summer seminars and regional virtual seminars are outstanding ideas that would enrich students and faculty alike. The success of such seminars could transform graduate education not only in Old Regime, Enlightenment, and Revolutionary history; it could potentially establish new models for intellectual exchange across the humanities. I applaud the scholars who came together in Tallahassee both for creating a forum for voicing concerns, and for taking the initiative to start developing concrete responses to issues that will no doubt continue to shape our lives.

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