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Becoming Timothy Tackett: An Appreciation

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In September 2017, scholars from three continents gathered at the home of Timothy Tackett and Helen Chenut to close a two-day tribute to Tackett's work, hosted by the University of California, Irvine. Around them, the geological samples, masks, books and photographs traced Tackett's unstoppable travels, his curiosity, his fascination with landscape, his extensive reading, and above all his inclusive humanity and respect for the dignity and complexity of others. They recalled too his hesitation between paleontology, literature and history as a young Californian studying abroad in late 1960s France. As he wrote later of his great predecessor, Georges Lefebvre, all interpretations of the French Revolution are "colored by the problems and perspectives prominent in each generation."¹ For Tackett, those colors came from the turbulent events of May '68: first as the general strike and demonstrations by students and workers across France pushed him out of the city into the countryside, arousing a lifelong passion for local landscape and culture, and then through the lived experience of a revolution—even a failed one—that set down his path to becoming a revolutionary historian.

Tackett graduated from the Stanford PhD program in 1973, alongside Lynn Hunt—also to become one of the great revolutionary scholars—at a heady moment for the study of the French Revolution. The "classical" framework for understanding the Revolution as a manifestation of the rise of the bourgeoisie was already crumbling, as historians fanned out into provincial archives seeking the broader evidence of revolutionary transformation, and discovered a more complex set of shifts that did not easily map onto the economic and class-based model of historical change. As Soviet tanks rolled into Prague and the Chinese Cultural Revolution degenerated into violence, faith in the slow but inevitable production of a better world out of the "long revolution" was waning fast. When Tackett arrived in France in 1970 to research his dissertation, scholars were furiously debating the bombshell claim by François Furet that the French Revolution was "over," a question of the past rather than the future. It might have taken a century, Furet argued, but the essentially political crisis opened by the Revolution had been resolved.² For Furet, the story of the Revolution was not one of a thwarted but ultimately inevitable step forward, but rather of a regime collapse and slide into violence and terror. This controversial thesis—denounced by historians such as Albert Soboul and

¹ Timothy Tackett, introduction to Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, trans. R.R. Palmer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), viii.

² See François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), translated as *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). Furet's denunciation of the "Marxist catechism" dated back to 1971, in the wake of his 1965 "revisionist" history of the Revolution.

Claude Mazauric—effectively dragged the Revolution back to center stage in the drama of political ideas. Such conflicts made historical colloquia more lively, and even rambunctious, as partisans battled furiously for one side or the other.

Tackett's voice was rarely raised in these noisy wars over what became known as "revisionism": a rather misleading term, since, as his close collaborator Claude Langlois observed, the divergence of perspectives was more apparent than real.³ Few of the inheritors of the "classical" tradition clove mindlessly to economic determinism, and few "revisionists" went so far as to deny altogether either the economic dimensions of the Revolution or its significance in French and world history. Langlois lamented instead a widening gap between "the dazzling and brilliant rereading of the historian-philosophers of the nineteenth century" and the "groping and disjointed understanding of the latest historical research": a contradiction between "doing history" and "reflecting on history." A key reason for Tackett's enduring influence is his unrelenting opposition to any such contradiction: his commitment from the first to meticulous, original archival research was not "sitting out the war" but rather a *prise de position* that sought to restore the unity of historical production and interpretation. His way of doing this—gentle, measured and always compelling—has gripped students, colleagues and readers alike, as he brought the most granular archival work to life with human insights and emotions.

Concern for the grain of the archive did not lead Tackett to consider the Revolution as a "magnificent irrelevance" in the lives of ordinary people, like the British historian Richard Cobb (although there is certainly something Cobbian in Tackett's respect for the timbre of individual voices).⁴ Instead, he approached more closely the ambition of the French Annales School for a kind of "total history" that would bring multiple perspectives to bear, restoring the dimensionality lost in overly schematizing interpretations. This did not mean abandoning "events" for *longue durée* structural changes, or individuals for categories and systems. Instead, Tackett brought that desire for "objective" analysis to bear on smaller and more local configurations, and in the process demonstrated that this kind of scholarly and archival history could still speak to the big questions about the Revolution.

Appearing in 1977, Tackett's prizewinning first book, *Priest and Parish in Eighteenth-Century France* was a potent and pragmatic rejoinder to the conceptual fragmentation decried by Langlois.⁵ Tackett undertook a "social biography" of the curés in one diocese of southeastern France in the period leading up to the Revolution, in order to gain greater insight into the lives of rural people who left few written traces of their own. Narrowing the field of focus in this way made it possible to exercise a different and more plural analysis, providing not just "data" on the priests, but a holistic picture of their origins, lives, career paths and relationships with the larger society around

³ Claude Langlois, "The French Revolution and "Revisionism"" trans. Timothy Tackett, *The History Teacher*, 23:4 (Aug., 1990), 395–404.

⁴ Richard Cobb, *Reactions to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 125.

⁵ Timothy Tackett, *Priest and Parish in Eighteenth-Century France: A Social and Political Study of the Curés in a Diocese of Dauphiné*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977): winner of the Shea Prize for best book in religious history, and the Phi Alpha Theta Award for best first book.

them. The consideration of parish clergy illuminated in a new way the less documented lives of rural communities, but went further to shed light on a larger dynamic around the politicization of the clergy across this period: a process at once driven by ideas, shaped by events, and conditioned by economic interests. Rather than leaping into the fray over the “bourgeoisie,” Tackett was broadening our understanding of the actors who made the Revolution, confronting key assumptions of the Marxian interpretation, but also unsettling the neo-Tocquevillian “revisionist” thesis of centralization and secularization.

In the battle between political and economic interpretations, religion had been thrust into a secondary position, often subsumed as a manifestation of class consciousness or a vehicle of court intrigues and political factionalism. Alongside colleagues like Michel Vovelle, Charles Tilly and Dale Van Kley, Tackett expanded the basis for understanding the complexities of religious culture in society, commanding the subtleties of Catholic theology without needing to take up a “for” or “against” position.⁶ This was a “cultural turn”—not in the discursive sense, but in the more expansive, ethnographic sense of culture, running from Durkheim through to Clifford Geertz. Without explicitly invoking “thick description,” Tackett certainly developed a way of seeing how priests and their parishioners “represented themselves to themselves,” not only in language but in other symbolic practices. Tackett emphasized quantification to break through the subjective frames of interpretation brought by the observer: but numbers never led him to occlude the lives of parish priests themselves, nor did a concern for the “typical” homogenize the diverse emotional experiences and choices within a group. Possibilities that were atypical in the world of the *ancien régime* were precisely those that would take on new meaning and force as revolutionary changes began to unfold.

Individual, local and regional differences moved even closer to the center of Tackett’s focus in his second book, *Religion, Revolution and Regional Culture*, published in 1986.⁷ Where *Priest and Parish* was geographically narrow and chronologically wide, this book broadened its vision across France while limiting its gaze to “a few brief weeks at the beginning of 1791” when parish clergymen across France were faced with the requirement to swear an oath of loyalty to the French Constitution. Tackett had already followed up *Priest and Parish* with a highly awarded article on the “other side” of France—both geographically and politically—in the West, where the politicization of the clergy led to counter-revolution.⁸ Like his friend and colleague Ted Margadant—whose paper on the judicial repression of counter-revolution is included in this

⁶ Michel Vovelle, *Piété baroque et déchristianisation en Provence au XVIIIe siècle: les attitudes devant la mort d'après les clauses des testaments* (Paris: Plon, 1973); Charles Tilly, *The Vendée*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560–1791* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996). See also the crucial reference work Timothy Tackett, Claude Langlois and Michel Vovelle (eds), *Atlas de la Révolution française*. Vol. 9, Religion (EHESS: Paris, 1996).

⁷ Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-Century France: The Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986).

⁸ Timothy Tackett, “The West in France in 1789: The Religious Factor in the Origins of the Counterrevolution,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 54:4 (1982), 715–45. Winner of the Koren Prize and the Chester Higby Prize.

Salon—Tackett saw regional differences as crucial to the process of politicization.⁹ His new work suggested that the social and political consequences of regional variations in religious cultures could offer new insights into broader dynamics of revolution and reaction.

Religion, Revolution and Regional Culture appeared almost simultaneously in English and French, a recognition of its groundbreaking importance. It was greeted in France, as Jacques Godechot suggested, not just as an indispensable work on the religious history of the Revolution, but as a crucial work for the general understanding of revolutionary history.¹⁰ Over the decades to follow, Tackett would become a frequent presence in seminars and colloquia across France and Europe and an increasingly public name through extensive newspaper and radio interviews, and as historical adviser on films.¹¹ Tackett attracted French readers with the rigor and originality of his analysis, but also through his intimate knowledge of France, its diversity of *terroir* and population, parsing regional differences with acuteness and affection. He was always eager to wander through provincial towns and rural hamlets, to see the landscape at eye-level and converse with local *villageois*, when he was not in the departmental archives combing through records and collections of correspondence.

It was this keenly-observed regional variation—rather than individual religiosity or doctrinal quarrels—that proved central to the book’s answer to the long-debated question of why some priests swore the oath while others refused. A tight focus on the oath of 1791 threw a new light on the *longue durée* of French history, challenging the fiction of unitary secularization with a better understanding of the emergence and persistence of the “two Frances” of anticlericalism and religiosity. But accounting for the choices of 60,000 parish clergy across such a vast and diverse space would present an intimidating challenge, not only for collecting data but in making sense of it. These were not gentle variations of a pious nation, but profound and sometimes violent differences, carrying with them the legacy of terrible internecine conflicts, as Tackett would show in his article on the violence in the town of Sommières in 1791.¹² As Peter McPhee shows in his paper for this Salon, historians continue to engage with these vital questions of “the place of religious attachment in the choices men and women had to make after 1789” and their explanatory force in accounting for revolutionary violence.

Religion, Revolution and Regional Culture is much admired, yet hard to emulate: its elegant analysis and exposition belie the prodigious labor that lay behind it. As Angela Haas acknowledges here in her study of the familial impact of struggles over the oath, it remains *the* authoritative work of reference on religious culture and revolutionary transformation. The book appeared in the moment when worldwide interest in the events and repercussions of the French Revolution was rising in anticipation of the bicentenary in 1989. Tackett did not rush to produce a bicentennial volume: instead in a key 1989 article for the *American Historical Review*, he heralded a

⁹ See Ted W. Margadant, *Urban Rivalries in the French Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

¹⁰ Jacques Godechot, ‘Review of “La Révolution, l’Église, la France”,’ *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, 65:4 (1987): 865.

¹¹ Most recently as advisor to Pierre Schoeller’s 2018 *Un peuple et son roi*.

¹² Timothy Tackett, “Women and Men in Counterrevolution: The Sommières Riot of 1791,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 59:4 (1987), 680–704.

reconsideration of the early revolutionary dynamic that would test a central pillar of the “revisionist” interpretation many had come to view as a near-consensus.

Examining the relatively less-studied period after the declaration of the National Assembly, the fall of the Bastille and the popular march to Versailles in October, Tackett turned his complex mapping to the regional groupings and political factions of the Estates General and the National Assembly.¹³ He contested the claim that mid-1789 saw a rapid and total collapse of the aristocratic-clerical party and that what followed were essentially internal struggles between revolutionary factions. Instead, he saw a much longer and more drawn-out conflict stretching well into the middle of 1790. He acknowledged that the old class-based analysis could not serve to parse these conflicts: instead, a variety of factors, including wealth, status, education, and previous political experience, needed to be taken into account: Alan Forrest reminds us in his paper here that we might also consider the concerns around slavery and the colonies.

This new line of questioning led to Tackett’s most renowned work, *Becoming a Revolutionary* (1996), for which he was awarded the Leo Gershoy Prize of the American Historical Association.¹⁴ As Robert Blackman notes in his essay here on the debates of the Assembly in 1789, Tackett split decisively from the revisionist analysis of political culture, which had largely attributed the responses of revolutionary deputies “to the inner workings of pre-revolutionary discourses.” Instead Tackett’s investigation revealed how the 1,200 deputies elected in 1789 by the decidedly unrevolutionary processes of the Estates General “became” the deputies of a National Assembly that enacted radical and previously unimaginable changes in the centuries-old systems of French government, taxation and status. From the evidence he collected, Tackett largely discounted any prior radical influence on the majority of those elected, whether through political engagement or Enlightenment ideas.

The book adapted the prosopographical method of Tackett’s earlier works, but extended it into a larger field of questioning, making, as Mette Harder notes here in her congruent approach to the Thermidoreans, “exhaustive use of parliamentary records and deputies’ correspondence to allow insights into backgrounds and financial status, political formation and factionalism at the assembly.” Tackett did not use these sources to construct an “objective” account of the events themselves outside the subjectivity of individual accounts: he was primarily interested in the “experience” itself and how it shaped the course of the Revolution. He charted the strong collective emotional experiences—“exuberance and terror, optimism and trauma”—the private individual reactions of deputies to friends or spouses, the draining emotions of long-running and exhausting

¹³ Timothy Tackett, “Nobles and Third Estate in the Revolutionary Dynamic of the National Assembly, 1789–1790,” *The American Historical Review*, 94:2 (Apr., 1989), 271–301. See also his chapter of the previous year, “Les députés du premier ordre: Le Clergé aux États généraux et à l'Assemblée constituante, 1789–1791,” in Michel Cassan, Jean Soutier et Nicole Lemaitre (éd.) *Croyances, pouvoirs et sociétés: Des Limousins aux Français: Études offertes à Louis Perouas* (Treignac : Ed. les Monédières, 1988), 85–99.

¹⁴ Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789–1790)* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

conflicts, and the precipitous changes from fear to hope and from joy to disappointment.¹⁵ Tackett did not seek to purge these emotive and subjective elements to illuminate “what was really happening” but rather to argue that the course of events was itself shaped by what deputies *felt* was happening.

For French historians, a large part of the excitement of *Becoming a Revolutionary* was its proof that the explosion of interest around 1989 had not exhausted the historiographical possibilities of the Revolution. Where bicentenary colloquia had so frequently configured around the world-historical importance of the Revolution, and its impact outside of France, Tackett was a crucial figure in a counter-movement paying renewed attention to the internal dynamics of revolutionary politics. Broadly articulated within the new interest in political culture shared by his contemporaries Lynn Hunt and Keith Baker, Tackett nonetheless differed in his focus on deputies rather than discourses.¹⁶ Along with Michel Biard in France—whose essay on the “Terror” is included here—he illuminated the lives and trajectories of the political leaders who most directly “made” the Revolution through their choices. Other scholars in this Salon, such as Jeremy Popkin and David Garrioch, have illuminated the different choices made by other actors who “became revolutionaries” across this period.

Becoming a Revolutionary was followed by *When the King Took Flight* (2003), a book that offered a more panoramic perspective on the course of the Revolution from the viewpoint of a single event.¹⁷ If the “Federation” of July 14, 1790 suggested to optimistic deputies that, a year after the fall of the Bastille, the Revolution was over, far greater struggles and changes were still to come: conflict over the constitution and the civic oath of the clergy, war with much of Europe, the king’s trial and execution, the descent into violence. If one event in this great onrush could be chosen as the turning point, it was, for Tackett, the moment in June 1791, when the king sought to flee with his family toward the border with Austria, and was arrested at the town of Varennes, a small provincial town that most would have considered “a commercial and cultural dead end where very little happened.” Propelled out of obscurity when Louis was arrested, Varennes served Tackett as an ideal canvas for examining the changes that had taken place in the two years of revolution before the arrival of the royal family. But events also revealed how much of the revolution’s dynamic was powered from below, by such delightfully unremarkable figures as the manager of the relay post, Drouet, the town official Sauce, and the thousands of volunteers sent by neighboring villages to prevent the king from leaving France. In a larger frame, the choice of this moment responded implicitly to those who had presented the violence of 1794 as the inevitable consummation of discursive structures put in place in 1789. For Tackett, the reality—like the king’s bumbling flight—was far more contingent, although not accidental, hinging on circumstances that certainly had deep roots, but also had their peculiar, almost burlesque qualities. The book opened up new questions that were darker but crucial to the larger understanding of the

¹⁵ Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary*, 301.

¹⁶ Lynn Avery Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁷ Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

Revolution that Tackett was taking on: not just how individuals made choices in a revolutionary context, but how those choices could lead to violence and bloodshed.

Revolutionary violence, and particularly the period that became known as the “Terror,” had long been entangled in debates over the role of “circumstances.” Where the classical historians, eager to defend the Revolution, pointed to the immediate impact of war, insurgency and the threat of invasion, “revisionists” insisted that a political culture of violence was evident from the first, attributing it to the Enlightenment sources of revolutionary thought. Tackett argued instead for “middle-term” origins of the Terror: the emergence of a paranoid mentality in the wake of the real plot to whisk the royal family out of France. “The Terrorists,” Tackett argued, “were themselves terrorized—at once by the threat of real conspiracies and the amplification of those threats through their own *imaginaire*.”¹⁸ Rather than seeing heroes or villains in the figures who drove the Revolution in the period after 1792, Tackett identified very human and fallible individuals who made choices driven by emotions, both collective and personal. For Tackett, revolutionary political culture was not an autonomous realm with its own inbuilt dynamic, but rather a shifting and often contradictory set of emotional responses to events, a “liminal experience” that gradually shifted larger worldviews from hope to fear, and gave rise to “a quasi-permanent obsession with grand conspiracy.”¹⁹ Using the new tools becoming available as vast numbers of texts were digitized by such databases as ARTFL and Google Books, Tackett was able to trace the changing occurrence of terms such as “conspiracy” and compare them to his own quantifications of usage in the correspondence of deputies.

After 2001, and the attack on the World Trade Center in New York, the word “Terror” was projected as a new interpretive paradigm for current events, as the US and its allies declared a “War on Terror”—a development with a long history, as Michel Biard notes in his critical history of the term in this Salon. In an article for *French Historical Studies*, Tackett addressed the theses of Arno Mayer’s *The Furies*, a book that examined together the uses of violence in the French and Russian Revolutions, and emphasized the complex interweaving of “real” conspiracy and counter-revolution with the emotional responses of fear, vengeance and the force of religious and anti-religious reaction.²⁰ While cautioning against a reliance on outdated scholarship, Tackett nonetheless embraced the larger project of “interpreting the Terror” rooted in a careful analysis of events and phases of the Revolution, and drawing on the most current historical practice.

This is the project that Tackett took on for his next monograph, invoking the dynamic of Georges Lefebvre’s classic study, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, in his title *The Coming of the Terror*. Tackett offered a kind of “total history” of the turn to violence: concentrating not on the famous months of the “Year 2” in 1793–4 (which forms only the final chapter), but rather on the period leading up to it, as the mentality of conspiracy began to shape how deputies responded to events around them. Drawing on a vast bank of correspondence, diaries and memoirs by deputies,

¹⁸ Timothy Tackett, “The Flight to Varennes and the Coming of the Terror,” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques*, 29:3, Violence and the French Revolution (2003): 469–93.

¹⁹ Timothy Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789–1792,” *The American Historical Review*, 105:3, (2000): 691–713.

²⁰ Arno J. Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

but also on a multi-disciplinary body of work on the study of emotions, he skillfully analyzed the ways in which emotional responses changed over this vital period. “As French revolutionary historians,” Marisa Linton notes in her paper, “want a more rounded and three-dimensional history; we are no longer content to confine our investigations of revolutionary politics to ideologies, tactics, events; we want to know how politics *felt* to the people who were there.” Tackett showed that “interpreting” the Terror did not mean sitting in judgement over the men and women of the 1790s or projecting later ideological struggles onto their difficult choices. At the same time, he was not compelled to strip them of their flaws, their paranoid fears, their petty score-settling, their intimate friendships and enmities.

As Jeremy Popkin observes in his essay, such insights into the past also offer “a way of gaining some perspective on our own political predicament.” By charting the impact of the breakdown of trust in one another and even in truth itself, Tackett demonstrated conclusively in *The Coming of the Terror* how such fragmentations can give way to extreme, almost unbridgeable polarization, and ultimately to violence. Although written before the current breakdown of trust in contemporary political culture became evident, the book has gained new urgency for understanding the present moment.

The essays in this volume, offered not only by Tackett’s contemporaries, but also by former students and emerging scholars, give a rich picture of his legacy and the continuing impact of his ongoing work. If he has shaped our historical practice it has been above all by bringing human choice back to the center in a way that preserves the structural insights of the work that preceded him. He has never located himself in any “school” or sought to build one, as the diversity of these papers reveals. Drawing on the best of the *Annales* approach, he has consistently emphasized the need to place the choices of individuals in a larger social context. Like the great proponents of the “classical” interpretation, he has been finely attuned to regional particularities, and the responses “from below” as well as those of elites. Responding to the linguistic and cultural “turn,” he has paid close attention to the ways in which people represent their experience, uncovering a wealth of largely neglected sources. Yet at the heart of Tackett’s work is the question—not so much “why,” but *how* historical actors make choices that in their aggregate make revolutions, civil wars, social advances and episodes of violence.

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