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## The Power of Emotions: New Light on the *Conventionnels* and the Process of the Terror

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In recent years historians have been taking a growing interest in the history of emotions. This line of historiographical enquiry has spread to (sceptical observers might say *infected*) historians of the French Revolution, and a number of them are starting to explore the emotional dimensions of revolutionary politics.<sup>1</sup> Several historians have been working to illuminate aspects of the history of emotions in the French Revolution. There is the work of Lynn Hunt on the nature of emotion, and the representation of emotions in literature.<sup>2</sup> Individual lives, where there are sufficient personal sources, lend themselves to the study of emotions, thus recent works by Peter McPhee, Hervé Leuwers and Jean-Clément Martin have shown insights into the mind of Robespierre.<sup>3</sup> Then there is the study of specific emotional regimes, of which a good example is William Reddy's work on sentimentalism in the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup> There is also the study of trauma in a revolutionary context, on which we have work by Barry Shapiro and Ronen Steinberg. The history of emotions in the Revolution is not without its controversies, but that is a good thing. It makes us rethink what we thought we knew and opens up new lines of enquiry. Not all those lines may prove fruitful, but it is good to have those conversations. As French revolutionary historians we want a more rounded and three-dimensional history; we are no longer content to confine our investigations of revolutionary politics to ideologies, tactics, and events; we want to know how politics *felt* to the people who were there. Revolutions are profoundly emotional occasions, both for the people who take part, and for those who oppose

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<sup>1</sup> Among the growing literature exploring emotions in the context of the French Revolution, see: Sophia Rosenfeld, 'Thinking About Feeling, 1789-1799', *French Historical Studies*, 32,4 (Fall, 2009): 697-706; William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015). A recent panel, in which Tackett, Ian Coller, and Rebecca Spang participated, on 'Revolutionary Emotions: Panic, Frustration and Enthusiasm, 1789-1799', at the 64<sup>th</sup> French Historical Studies conference at Pittsburgh, March 2018, can be seen online via *H-France Salon*, Volume 10 (2018), Issue 5, #1-4.

<sup>2</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: Norton, 2007), ch. 1 "'Torrents of Emotions": Reading Novels and Imagining Equality'.

<sup>3</sup> Peter McPhee, *Robespierre—a Revolutionary Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Hervé Leuwers, *Robespierre* (Paris: Fayard, 2014); and Jean-Clément Martin, *Robespierre, la fabrication d'un monstre* (Paris: Perrin, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Reddy puts this argument most clearly in *The Navigation of Feeling*.

them. The newfound concern with revolutionary emotions fits alongside a growing desire to explore individual agency and the lived experienced of the Revolution.<sup>5</sup>

The study of emotions in the Revolution is far from straightforward, however; the principal difficulties arise from the shortage of source material, and the problems of how to interpret it. Whilst Revolutionary participants talked tirelessly in public utterances about their cause, their principles, their goals, their opponents, they were rather less forthcoming about their emotions, or the emotions of others. They were more likely to confide their feelings to more personal sources; yet even private letters present considerable problems of analysis, their degree of openness depending in large part on the writer's intentions and degree of trust in the intended recipient. Personal source material becomes increasingly scarce for the years 1793-94, the most interesting for historians since they were the most highly-charged period of the Revolution, but also the least documented since the most active revolutionaries had little leisure to write letters, notes, or memoirs, and were often very cautious about what they committed to paper.

Where source material exists, we have the problem of how to interpret it.<sup>6</sup> When revolutionary participants spoke openly about emotions, in the assemblies, clubs, newspapers, pamphlets, or in open letters to their constituents, how do we know whether they were acting out a trope, a classical reference perhaps, or an episode from a novel, rather than giving voice to their own authentic emotions?<sup>7</sup> Some of the writings where revolutionaries dwelt on their own sensibility may come under that category. How can we know that the emotions expressed in such documents were authentic? We cannot, of course. We can never be sure. Yet the question of how people felt and how their emotions affected their choices and actions is an important one to ask, even if the answers can never be definitive.

Perhaps the most troubling problem with which the French Revolution confronts us is how terror (or, according to some historians, "the Terror") came about.<sup>8</sup> How did a revolution that began

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the individual chapters in David Andress (ed.), *Experiencing the French Revolution* (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> Revolutionaries, too, often wondered how to interpret what letters revealed about genuine emotions, including political loyalties. On this subject, in relation to judicial practices during 1793-94, see Carla Hesse, 'La Preuve par la lettre: pratiques juridiques au tribunal révolutionnaire de Paris (1793-1794),' *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 3 (1996): 629-42; and Laura Mason, 'The "Bosom of Proof": Criminal Justice and the Renewal of Oral Culture during the French Revolution', *Journal of Modern History*, 76, 1 (2004): 29-61.

<sup>7</sup> On the interpretation of classical tropes in revolutionary politics, see Marisa Linton, 'The Man of Virtue: The Role of Antiquity in the Political Trajectory of L. A. Saint-Just', 24,3, *French History* (2010): 393-419.

<sup>8</sup> Some historians have gone so far as to call into question the whole idea of a 'system of terror', arguing that this was invented by the Thermidoreans, and that what we call 'the Terror' was much more chaotic and random than the phrase 'system of terror' would suggest. See Michel Biard, 'Réflexions autour de « la Terreur », in this volume; Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et révolution: essais sur la naissance d'un mythe national* (Paris: Seuil, 2006); Annie Jourdan, 'Les discours de la terreur à l'époque révolutionnaire', *French Historical Studies*, 36, 1 (December 2012): 52-8; and Guillaume Mazeau, 'La "Terreur". Laboratoire de la modernité', in Jean-Luc

with such hope, exaltation, humanitarianism, all those positive feelings, turn to violence? Here I think the study of emotions can help. I want to ask in what ways the study of emotions may enhance our understanding of the process that led to terror in 1793-94.

I want to begin by turning to the work of Timothy Tackett. One of the great merits of Tackett's work on the Revolution's deputies (those of the Constituent Assembly in *Becoming a Revolutionary*, and the *conventionnels* in *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution*) stems from his use of the correspondence and memoirs of many of the lesser known figures in the Assemblies to build up a powerful sense of how it felt to be there, to be part of it, and how the deputies' experiences affected their political choices.

To illustrate this point, I will single out one example in Tackett's *The Coming of the Terror*.<sup>9</sup> On 3 October 1793 Jean-Pierre Amar of the Committee of General Security was in the Convention to read the formal indictment against the Girondin deputies, a list expanded from the original twenty-nine to forty-one, though only twenty-one of those were actually in Paris. As well as the indictment of these men, Amar demanded the arrest of seventy-five Girondin sympathisers, including all who had signed the protest against the initial arrests found in the pocket of one Girondin, Claude Deperret. As Amar began to speak the doors of the Convention were locked, and the accused men were pulled from their seats. Among these unfortunate men was Claude-Antoine Blad who, from his correspondence with his constituents, seems to have had no inkling of his impending arrest. Tackett's account helps us imaginatively reconstruct a sense of how terrible an experience that must have been. Blad was one of those who endured many months of imprisonment, though protected by Robespierre who opposed the Girondin sympathisers being brought to trial. The experience coloured Blad's later views.<sup>10</sup> He would become one of a group of reinstated Girondins whose determination to avenge themselves and their dead comrades, whilst entirely understandable, made the stabilization of politics after Thermidor more difficult.

Fear was one of the dominant emotions in the Convention during the Year II, tightening its hold through the spring and summer of 1794. I want now to turn my attention to the relationship between fear and "the Terror" within the Convention. It is hardly a revelation that the recourse to terror generated fear amongst victims and potential victims. What historians have tended to overlook, however, is the extent to which fear affected the *conventionnels* themselves, influenced their choices, and encouraged them, including deputies in positions of particular responsibility,

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Chappey et al (eds), *Pour quoi faire la Révolution* (Marseilles: Agone, 2012), 83-114, esp. 85-9, 94-6.

<sup>9</sup> Tackett, 307.

<sup>10</sup> After his release in December 1794, Blad became an entrenched reactionary, opposed to conciliation. He opposed a proposal to abolish the death penalty. He became a fairly significant figure and served briefly on the Committee of Public Safety in 1795. Amongst first-hand accounts of the sufferings of the deputies imprisoned on 3 October, see Jean-Dominique Blanqui, *L'Agonie de dix mois, ou Historique des traitements essuyés par les députés détenus, et les dangers qu'ils ont courus pendant leur captivité, avec des anecdotes intéressantes, par D. Blanqui* (s.d.), in which he describes the humiliations, privations, horrible conditions in a succession of cramped prisons, and above all the constant fear that he and his fellow imprisoned deputies would at any time be sent before the Revolutionary Tribunal.

to be ruthless in their treatment of their political opponents in the Convention. Some of the most prominent *conventionnels* became victims of terror, as well as perpetrators.

In a previous book, *Choosing Terror*, I raised the question of how far the choices of the Revolution's leaders, especially those who either were, or had been, members of the Jacobin Club, were affected by their emotions, including fear. Other historians have been working on the ways that laws enabling terror impacted on the *conventionnels* as a whole. I want to mention several historians. There is Tackett, of course, with *The Coming of the Terror*; Michel Biard's *La Liberté ou la mort: mourir en député*, which deals with the deputies who died violent deaths whilst serving on the Convention; and Mette Harder, in her forthcoming *Conventional Terror*, deals with the purging of deputies from the Convention: as she shows, almost a third (220) of the deputies found themselves under arrest at some point during the Convention. That's a staggering figure.<sup>11</sup> Thanks to the work of these historians we now know a lot more about the distressing – in many cases harrowing – experiences undergone by the *conventionnels*.<sup>12</sup> Arrests and even executions of deputies continued after Thermidor, which in itself should make us reconsider the periodization of “the Terror”.

One of the most problematic concepts for revolutionary leaders was that of political virtue.<sup>13</sup> The belief that political leaders should be men of virtue, and thus reject the values of *ancien régime* politics – personal ambition, self-interest and corruption – had been an accepted part of revolutionary ideology from the outset. The “man of virtue” was meant to put the public good beyond everything else. The ideology of political virtue impacted on expectations regarding the conduct of revolutionary politicians. There was a suspicion that men who manipulated politics were doing so for their own benefit, to secure posts or wealth, rather than for the public good. In the Revolution's early stages, a politician who was exposed as financially or politically corrupt risked public disgrace. After the outbreak of war in 1792, and especially after the political and military reversals of spring 1793, the stakes grew; politicians exposed as corrupt and personally ambitious were depicted as “the enemy within”, and risked the death penalty as “traitors to the *patrie*”.

The idea of political virtue played a key role in a specific form of terror which I have termed the “politicians' terror”: the terror that revolutionary leaders meted out to one another, but which is best not subsumed into other general explanations.<sup>14</sup> The revolutionary leaders were themselves

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<sup>11</sup>Mette Harder, ‘Crisis of Representation: The National Convention and the Search for Political Legitimacy, 1792-1795’ (Phd, University of York, July 2010). For the extent to which purges of deputies continued after Thermidor, see Mette Harder, ‘A Second Terror: The Purges of French Revolutionary Legislators after Thermidor’, *French Historical Studies*, 38(2015): 33-60.

<sup>12</sup> Tackett; Michel Biard, *La Liberté ou la mort: mourir en député, 1792-1795* (Paris: Tallendier, 2015); and Harder, ‘Crisis of Representation’.

<sup>13</sup> For an extended discussion of the politics of virtue, both before and during the Revolution, see Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France* (Houndmills: Palgrave Press, 2001); Linton, *Choosing Terror*; and Linton, ‘Les racines de la vertu politique et ses significations au XVIIIe siècle’, in Michel Biard (ed.), *Vertu et politique: les pratiques des législateurs, 1789-2014* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 39-50.

<sup>14</sup> I discuss the politicians' terror in depth in Linton, *Choosing Terror*.

“subject to terror”. This took two forms. Firstly, revolutionary leaders were liable to arrest under the laws that enabled terror, as successive laws removed their parliamentary immunity and criminalized the “wrong” political opinions. Secondly, they were subject to the *emotion* of terror. Fears that they could not openly acknowledge—because innocence was considered fearless and fear itself a sign of guilty consciousness—increased in intensity, above all during the critical period between March 1793 and July 1794; this fear in turn influenced revolutionary leaders’ choices. The vulnerability of politicians to arrest for their opinions made the achievement of political stability very problematic. The politicians’ terror had an impact both on how the Convention passed laws enabling terror, and how “the Terror” has subsequently been perceived.

Leading revolutionaries had much to be fearful about, not least because revolutionary justice was often directed disproportionately against the regime’s own officials. In most cases brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal, people had some chance to mount a legal defense, and overall, just under half the people brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal were acquitted. Even after the Law of Prairial, one in four persons appearing before the Tribunal escaped death.<sup>15</sup> The acquittal rate was much lower, however, for prominent political figures and functionaries. No *conventionnels* brought before the Revolutionary Tribunal during the Year II survived.

Deputies’ immunity from arrest had been removed in the aftermath of General Dumouriez’ treasonous defection in April 1793. Ironically it was a Girondin, Jean Birotteau, who proposed it, and the Girondins first used it against Jean-Paul Marat; *ironically*, because this measure opened the way to the Girondins’ own arrest, and subsequent execution, followed by that of many other deputies who came under suspicion. The deputy Marc-Antoine Baudot listed 86 deputies who ‘met a violent death’ during the life of the Convention, some after Thermidor.<sup>16</sup> A high proportion of those killed were among the most prominent: those who were leaders, who spoke a great deal. Many were either current Jacobin Club members or, like the Girondins, had previously been. This has long been known, but historians have tended to overlook it or to underestimate its significance. As the English historian, J.M. Thompson pointed out long ago, “it is often forgotten that the Terror was mainly directed, not against the people, but against the Government”.<sup>17</sup> As the *conventionnel* Antoine-Claire Thibaudeau argued his memoirs: “The terror was more deadly towards the friends of liberty than towards its enemies”.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For a detailed analysis of the statistics on the verdicts given by the Revolutionary Tribunal, see James Logan Godfrey, *Revolutionary Justice: A Study in the Organisation and Procedures of the Paris Tribunal, 1793-95* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 136-50. For an analysis of why some people escaped death after the Law of Prairial was passed, see Anne Simonin, ‘Les acquittés de la Grande Terreur: Réflexions sur l’amitié dans la République’, in Michel Biard (ed.), *Les Politiques de la Terreur, 1793-1794* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, and the Société des études Robespierristes, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Marc-Antoine Baudot, *Notes historiques sur la Convention nationale, l’Empire et l’exil des votants* (Paris: D. Jouaust, 1893), 202-4.

<sup>17</sup> J.M. Thompson, *Leaders of the French Revolution* (1929: republished, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968), 196-200.

<sup>18</sup> A.C. Thibaudeau, *Mémoires sur la Convention et le Directoire*, 2 vols (Paris: Baudouin, 1824), I: 50.

While male political activists were often reluctant to reveal how much they themselves were influenced by emotions, both positive and negative, some of their female relatives—at least those who took an active interest in revolutionary politics—were more open about the extent to which the Revolution was an activity that was felt as well as thought. Their enforced position on the sidelines did not hinder, and possibly informed, their understanding of the dynamics involved. Manon Roland and Rosalie Jullien, despite being in different political camps in 1793, had some markedly similar views on revolutionary emotions or “passions”, as they were often termed at the time. Both saw “passions” as intrinsic to the revolutionary experience, and both acknowledged how dangerous those untrammelled emotions could be in so unstable a context. According to Roland, revolutions were about passionate engagement, but such feelings, she warned, could be perilous:

It is very difficult to make a revolution without becoming passionate about it; no one has ever made a revolution without that emotion; there are great obstacles to overcome: you can only achieve it by means of a sort of frenzy, a devotion which comes from exaltation or which produces it. But then you avidly seize on anything which can help your cause, and you lose the ability to foresee whether these things could be harmful.<sup>19</sup>

Jullien took the view that the deep passions stirred up by the Revolution could, in the prevailing circumstances, make for a toxic environment. She urged her nineteen-year-old son, Marc-Antoine, protégé of Robespierre, and Committee of Public Safety agent, to exercise extreme caution for his own safety:

The Revolution has aroused such passions that it is impossible to see the truth about anybody. You must be prudent to avoid the traps of designing men. You must keep a lock on your lips and a key to your mouth, and not let a word escape that can be held against you....<sup>20</sup>

A series of denunciations, arrests, trials and executions of deputies in the Convention bore out Madame Jullien’s warning of the risk, even for the most prominent participants, of immersing themselves in the tumultuous sea of revolutionary politics. In illustration of this we can consider the following example’s implications. In November 1793 deputy Pierre Philippeaux, proposed that the *conventionnels* should set an example of “purity” and “virtue” to the people by submitting within ten days a statement of their finances before the Revolution and account for any increase in their wealth since that date. He continued: “For every law there must be a penalty”. Any deputy who failed to satisfy the Convention regarding his financial integrity, “should be declared a traitor to the *patrie*, and pursued as such....”<sup>21</sup> Most deputies accepted this idea. But one, Claude Basire, spoke out against it. Such legislation, he said, could easily be manipulated by people who had a vindictive personal motive to attack a deputy. He continued:

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<sup>19</sup> Madame Roland, *Mémoires*, 134.

<sup>20</sup> Madame Jullien’s letter to her son, Marc-Antoine Jullien, cited by R.R. Palmer, *From Jacobin to Liberal: Marc-Antoine Jullien, 1775-1848* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 4-5.

<sup>21</sup> 20 Brumaire (10<sup>th</sup> November 1793), *Archives parlementaires*, 78: 703.

It is time, citizens, that you return to yourselves, it is time that the life of a public man should no longer be exposed to the will of the intriguers, of the malevolent; it is time that you deliver the patriots from this terror which destroys magnanimous virtues, generous sentiments, and flights of the imagination, that crushes the efforts of patriotism and renders the legislator incapable of making good laws.<sup>22</sup>

Basire finished by characterizing Philippeaux's proposal as part of a "system of terror" that could destroy the patriots.<sup>23</sup> His words met a stony reception. He nevertheless persisted in making his case, adding that he knew that he could "lose his head" for saying such things, but that he was prepared to pay this price. The Convention dropped the proposal on the grounds that a Commission had already been set up to look into the deputies' finances, though at a more leisurely pace, and without the same penalty.

Basire's disclosure of his own fear was risky in itself. A "man of virtue" was meant to be fearless; therefore to draw attention to one's fear was seen as a sign of having something to hide, of corruption. Basire's intervention can be seen as a desperate attempt to defend himself and his friend François Chabot who were both already marked men under suspicion of corruption dating from the period when they had served on the Committee of General Security. Philippeaux himself, the man who made the proposal that deputies should be subject to public scrutiny for possible corruption, was one of the deputies guillotined several months later along with Danton, after a trial in which they were accused of corruption and being part of the "foreign plot". Basire's intervention is significant too for the frankness of his language, notably his recognition that he could "lose his head" for making such a speech. The deputies very rarely referred directly to the guillotine in their public speeches: most used euphemisms, such as "the blade of the law". Basire's words suggest that the fact that deputies avoided mentioning the guillotine publicly—and few seem ever to have attended an execution—does not mean they did not think about it.<sup>24</sup> It is notable too that Basire used the phrase "the system of terror"—specifically referring to a system of terror directed against the deputies themselves. Basire's frantic outburst challenged the façade of unity in the Convention that had been maintained since the arrest of the Girondins.

A powerful undercurrent of fear, whether or not acknowledged, contributed to the denunciation and arrest of successive factions in the Convention, affecting victims, certainly, but also their assailants. Fear went hand in hand with other powerful feelings such as stress, acute anxiety, exhaustion, and depression, which we would readily identify today with people holding positions of responsibility in crisis situations, but which went largely unrecognized in the eighteenth century. We can see the effects of fear at work in some of the most iconic moments of the Revolution, including amidst what became known as the Danton Affair. When, the morning after the night of 30 March, word broke in the Convention that four deputies, including Georges

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 703.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 704.

<sup>24</sup> The deputy, Montaut, was accused of having led members of the Convention to witness an actual guillotining, on 21 January 1794, under the impression that a "mannequin" was to be guillotined, "for form", rather than a person. See entry on Montaut in A. Kuscinski, *Dictionnaire des Conventionnels* (Yvelines: Éditions du Vexin Français, 1973). Montaut had denounced a number of his fellow deputies.

Danton, had been arrested the previous night on the authority of the Committees of Public Safety and General Security, some deputies, including Louis Legendre, a friend of Danton and Desmoulins, spoke out against the arrest, saying it had not been authorized by the Convention. For a moment it looked as though the deputies were on the verge of finding their courage and opposing the arrest of colleagues who had not had a chance to defend themselves before the Convention. It was Robespierre's improvised personal intervention as spokesman for the Committees that swung the deputies into supporting the Committees and upholding the arrests. Robespierre's choice of words at this critical juncture bears close attention. He argued that Danton and the others under arrest should not have a privilege denied to other deputies, including the Girondins. He spoke about the need to put virtue—the public good—before personal ties, such as friendship. And, strikingly, he asserted that he was courageously doing his duty: “What do dangers matter to me! My life is the *patrie*; my heart is without fear; if I die it will be without reproach and without ignominy.”<sup>25</sup> Robespierre's assertion that he felt no fear at that moment, whether true or false, undoubtedly strengthened his message by its implication that any deputy who let fear influence his choices was putting his personal safety before the good of the *patrie*, and therefore could potentially be a traitor. No one was risked arrest by standing against the combined threat of the Committees. In an abject reversal, Legendre and other friends of the Dantonists backed down, undoubtedly terrified.

Fear also helps explain what happened in Thermidor—the moment when the lid finally blew off the pressure cooker of Convention politics. Three members of the Committee of Public Safety, including Robespierre, together with two other deputies and over a hundred members of the Commune died as a direct consequence. In their memoirs, two former *conventionnels*, Baudot and Thibaudeau, agreed that fear played a key role in the decisions that made Robespierre's fellow Montagnards turn so ruthlessly upon him. As Baudot put it, “... in the battle of 9 Thermidor it was not a question of principles, but of killing.”<sup>26</sup> Thibaudeau pointed to the mutual fear behind the ruthlessness: “The terror didn't end because its leaders were weary of bloodletting, but because they were terrified of one another and divided amongst themselves. You had to be the first to attack, because whoever stayed on the defensive was lost.”<sup>27</sup> This mutual fear on the leaders' part, not excepting Robespierre's own fear, does more to explain the events of Thermidor than the traditional view that Robespierre was making a bid for personal power that backfired on him. Even a much-studied event like Thermidor makes little sense if we omit the emotions of the people directly involved. Emotions do not count for everything, certainly, and the source material is often cryptic, presenting us with many interpretive problems. But that is not a reason to leave the emotional dimension out of our studies. We just need to find better ways to integrate emotional histories with other kinds of history.

In place of a lengthy conclusion, I simply want to encourage colleagues to investigate further emotions during the Revolution. Many experts could undoubtedly provide novel insightful perspectives. I am also very aware that I have focussed here on the very negative emotion of fear – because that is closely related to the subject of “the Terror”. But there were many more positive emotions also, and it would be fascinating to hear more about these.

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<sup>25</sup> 11 Germinal (31<sup>st</sup> March 1794), *Archives Parlementaires*, 87: 627- 628.

<sup>26</sup> Baudot, *Notes historiques*, 125.

<sup>27</sup> Thibaudeau, *Mémoires sur la Convention et le Directoire*, I: 58.



Finally, I would like to thank Tim Tackett for being such an inspirational historian. The field of French Revolution studies owes him a great deal, and if he did not know that already, I hope the experience of the *Becoming Revolutionaries* conference and volume will have convinced him.

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