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### **Itineraries, Historical and Political**

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[Timothy Tackett gave these concluding remarks at *Becoming Revolutionaries: A Conference in Honor of Timothy Tackett*, held at the University of California, Irvine, on September 22-23, 2017. We reproduce them here in full.]

I want to begin by thanking all of you for your presence and participation over these last two days. I enormously enjoyed listening to your papers and comments. And I look forward to pursuing our discussions and debates in the years to come. But equally important has been the opportunity of getting together with all of you: with colleagues and with former students (who are now in fact colleagues) and with my family. I'm extraordinarily moved by the considerable distances some of you have traveled—in several cases, half way around the world. Many of you have been friends and collaborators for decades. In the case of Lynn Hunt, this amounts to almost half a century. And of course it amounts to even more than that with my brother and sister and other members of my family, here present. I want to add a special word of appreciation to those of you who devoted so much time organizing this conference: especially the co-chairs Micah Alpaugh and Bob Blackman, my two colleagues Ian Collier and Sarah Farmer, and all of my former students who participated in varying ways on the steering committee. And while still in an acknowledgments mode, I also need to point out that I have had the unusual good fortune of living in a family of historians. Both Helen Chenut and Nick Tackett have been companions in arms for many years as friends, as colleagues, and as teachers. I owe them both a special debt of gratitude.

For anyone who has spent long years amassing collective biographies, thinking about how individual lives are constructed, and how people make the social and political and cultural choices they do, it may be inevitable that one sometimes comes to speculate about one's own itinerary.

How I came to be fascinated by the eighteenth century and the French Revolution is not entirely clear. We all know how easy it is to recreate our past. In fact, major life choices often arise from a concatenation of quite unrelated experiences: the decision almost by chance to enroll in French language in high school: or the encounter with particularly charismatic teachers like Burdette Poland at Pomona College or Jean Egret in Poitiers or Michel Vovelle in Aix-en-Provence. But I like to think my presence in France during the "Events" of May 1968 had something to do with it. I was attached to the University of Poitiers at the time, supposedly studying the Middle Ages, when, for a period of almost two months, all classes were canceled and virtually the whole town shut down. With not much else to do and all public transport on strike, I took to hitchhiking around the country to visit friends. In this way I had the opportunity to talk with numerous French citizens about what they thought was happening, and also to witness several major

demonstrations, first in Bordeaux and then in Paris. And I was fascinated by the psychological process of this "révolution manquée": by the curious combination of joy and anguish, enthusiasm and fear which one witnessed both among individuals and within the crowds as a whole; by the potency of suspicion and rumor; and also by the exhilarating power of collective action through popular demonstrations.

In fact, both before and after the Events of May, I long oscillated between an interest in science, on the one hand, and literature and the arts, on the other. As an undergraduate, I had wandered in my major from paleontology to English literature. The final decision to major in history was conceived self-consciously at the time as a kind of "compromise." Surely it would be possible in one's historical methodology, in one's craft as a historian, to study a phenomenon like revolution from both a scientific and a humanistic perspective. And as so many in my generation, influenced in part by the *Annales* school, I was intrigued by the prospect of undertaking some kind of "total history."

Indeed, I continue to maintain that many kinds of history can and should be pursued following a version of the scientific method. We are all aware, of course, of the long debate on the subjectivity of the historical enterprise; and of the inevitable impact of contemporary culture and personal experience in our choice of narrative strategies and our interpretation of the past. But I still believe that in many cases our understanding of history can "advance" toward closer approximations of past reality by posing significant questions and then systematically testing possible solutions through an ongoing dialectic between hypothesis and observation, deduction and induction, conceptual proposition and archival research. At the very least, we can often eliminate certain hypotheses as entirely untenable.

During my own career, a number of such questions have been particularly intriguing to me: Why and how did the French Revolution begin? How are we to understand the subsequent revolutions against the Revolution, the movements of counterrevolution in much of Western France and elsewhere? How can we explain the long-lasting religious and cultural dichotomy between the "two Frances" that seems first to have emerged during the Revolution? And how and why did this Revolution—like so many other revolutions in history—turn violent?

In the formulation of "hypotheses" in response to these and other questions, and in the development of methodological approaches for testing those hypotheses, I have inevitably been influenced by various theoretical approaches drawn from other disciplines. Although, the accusation has been made that my writings are "under-theorized," I do take "theory" seriously. The conceptualizations of certain sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, and social-psychologists have always seemed particularly useful. If compelled to be more specific, I would probably mention the works of Max Weber, Charles Tilly, Natalie Davis, Clifford Geertz, Barbara Rosenwein, and William Sewell. But of course the *Annales* school—at least my understanding of what is most useful in that tradition—has also been important. And I must also acknowledge the influence of the French school of "*sociologie religieuse*"—as exemplified notably in the work of Louis Pérouas, Claude Langlois, and Dominique Julia. Yet I have also learned a great deal from a number of other historians—my friends, colleagues and students—several of whom are present with us today.

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Nevertheless, I must also confess to a certain esthetic aversion against wearing theory on one's sleeve, against loading down one's prose and analysis with overly self-conscious methodological and conceptual considerations. In any case, I have always used such theories in a very eclectic fashion and I have never been attracted to monocausal explanations or monotheoretical approaches—primarily because in practice they seem almost never to work. One must acknowledge, to paraphrase William Sewall, the “messiness,” the “lumpiness,” the “causal heterogeneity” of history. I prefer rather to pick and choose among various theoretical conceptualizations as they are found useful and appropriate. In this sense, theory can best be viewed as a tool box in which the historian selects the most suitable instruments for getting the job done, often through a process of trial and error: and where the ultimate “job” in question is to understand the behavior and beliefs of men and women in the past.

In addition, the enterprise of *social* history can and must be “scientific” in the sense that one must always explore the application of quantitative and statistical analyses to the individuals or phenomena under consideration. If we are to make valid generalizations about substantial groups of people, we must be prepared to seek the means of assessing them in a collective and quantitative fashion. I have spent several decades of my life counting and categorizing things, sorting through a range of variables by which individual social and political behavior might be interpreted. Over the years I have enumerated and analyzed hundreds of the *cahiers de doléances* of 1789; some 60,000 priests in their attitudes towards the ecclesiastical oath of 1791; and over 1,300 deputies to the first national assembly (for each of whom some 80 separate variables were taken into account).

Quantification has made it possible to test interpretive hypotheses, eliminate many, and—at least in some cases—to arrive at viable conclusions. And yet clearly there are limits to this kind of analysis. At one point, during a summer at the University of Pittsburgh and with the help of Gilbert Shapiro and John Markoff, I explored the use of some fairly sophisticated statistical techniques, which I hoped might provide answers to the questions I was posing at the time about the geographic patterns of clerical oath-taking in 1791: regression analysis, cluster analysis, discriminant analysis. Only after a great deal of labor did I realize that, in this case at least, it was all but impossible to interpret the results for the practical needs of historical understanding. Even if one set aside the problem of the unequal reliability of variables, any simple explanations were inevitably disrupted by problems of both geography and chronology. It became clear that within the very heterogeneous cultural configuration that was Old Regime France, the clusters of causative factors might be substantially different from one *region* to another. Variables that closely correlated with oath-taking in Western France, for example, might yield no such correlations in the North or the Northeast or the Southwest. It was also evident that no single array of factors was operative at all periods of the Revolution. It was absolutely essential to take into account the Revolutionary *process* as it developed over time. (And here I pick up a theme emphasized by Lynn Hunt in a somewhat different context.)<sup>1</sup> In my view, the Revolutionary dynamic advanced in a non-linear manner, in fits and starts, passing through a series of successive “phase changes”—to use the language of physics—each of which entailed a distinct realignment of forces, a distinct reconfiguration of cause and consequence. Thus, for example,

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<sup>1</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), esp. 219-20.

the specific factors motivating men and women and propelling the Revolution forward could be rather different in the spring of 1789, in the summer of 1791, or the winter of 1793-94.

In the end, I often found it necessary to fall back on much simpler forms of statistical treatment, such as correlation coefficients or percentage comparisons. And it also soon became apparent that quantification of this sort—even when the data under analysis were sufficiently reliable—that quantification rarely if ever provided simple *answers* to historical questions—as some historians had argued in the hubris of the 1960s and 70s. Rather quantification furnishes new *forms of evidence*. Such evidence, to be sure, is often unavailable from any other source. But it has, nevertheless, to be carefully assessed following the same critical evaluation of one's sources requisite for all forms of historical inquiry.

In any case, I have always attempted to pursue history not just as a science but as a humanistic enterprise as well. As historians, we have the responsibility, it seems to me, to make our account of the past as readable and user-friendly as possible. There is nothing wrong with indulging in story-telling as well as in analysis and interpretation. I have felt an almost esthetic desire to remain in touch with the human content of history. We all need to meditate on the oft-cited observation of Marc Bloch: that like the fairy tale giant of old, the good historian "knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies."<sup>2</sup>

I grew up in a fairly humble, working-class family, and as a student I worked several summers in a wrecking yard and in a steel factory. Perhaps it's for this reason that I have felt a lifelong fascination with "history from below," with the texture of human experience in times past among broad segments of society. The lives and loves, the hatreds and generosity, the passions and fears, the insistent demand to comprehend and, if possible, to control one's fate (political or economic or supernatural): all of this constitutes the inevitable back story and sometimes the main story of history. However we may enumerate and interpret and theorize about those lives, we as historians have the fundamental responsibility of doing our best to understand the subjects of history on their own terms, and of displaying towards them a modicum of humility and deference. After all, they never gave us permission to scrutinize their lives. We should always offer them a fair shake, and listen attentively to their side of the story, before proceeding to our interpretations and hypotheses.

As I noted in the introduction to a recent book, I must confess a great reticence for condemning outright the men and women of the French Revolution for violence—and even for their obvious moral "crimes"—without attempting to understand why they did what they did. How is it that normally good and well-meaning individuals came to commit evil acts? What was going on in their heads? Without exonerating them, we have to ask whether we ourselves would have acted differently, if we had been in their position? These are, in my view, fundamental *historical* questions that need to be asked, before we can hope to come to any conclusions or venture any moral judgments.

In recent years I have moved away from the massive series of quantitative data that once formed the buttress of my research. Partly, this arose no doubt from the sheer exhaustion of counting

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<sup>2</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1961), 26.

things. (Indeed, one sometimes wonders if the broad reaction to quantification after the 1970s did not come about as much from the ennui of a generation faced with the overwhelming drudgery of entering and processing data, as from any profound theoretical considerations.) In my more recent research projects I have relied in particular on the rather more traditional "qualitative" source of personal correspondence. Written from day to day or from month to month, such sources allow us to enter into the experience of the Revolution as it was lived, with all the hopes and fears, the uncertainties and misunderstandings of people who obviously had no foreknowledge of events. Such epistolary sources can be especially valuable when they are treated "in series," when one reads parallel sets of letters produced by individuals who passed through the same experiences, comparing and confronting the various reactions and impressions, following the approach of "non-quantitative serial history," as Antoine de Baecque has described it.<sup>3</sup> In this way, correspondence can provide the means of assessing the evolution of the attitudes of literate elites in the course of the Revolution, and of probing, as it were, the various hypotheses about the causes of Revolution and of Revolutionary violence.

Such correspondence can also give us insight into another element of the Revolutionary experience that has sometimes been underestimated: the impact of emotions. Emotion is of course altogether fashionable these days, not only in history but in a range of disciplines from social science to philosophy, literary analysis, and neurobiology. The flurry of scholarship has led to a proliferation of approaches and conceptual models that, according to one study, involve no less than 92 different definitions of the word "emotion".<sup>4</sup> My own very ad hoc approach to the subject—and here I differ markedly from the work of William Reddy—has been to set aside the abstract definitional problem and the somewhat vague concept of emotion as sentimentalism, and focuses rather on a set of specific emotions as they were described and experienced in the French Revolution: joy and love, as well as fear, anger, and hatred.<sup>5</sup> It is by no means my intention to discount the role of reason in the Revolution and the substantial effects of rational thought in the construction of the new regime and in the foundation declarations on which that regime was grounded. Yet revolutionary times are not the same as normal times, and both the intense enthusiasm which such events aroused and the threats and uncertainties, the rumors and conspiracy theories which they commonly unleashed, could give rise to a range of powerful emotions that measurably influenced belief and behavior. Moreover, if we rely on recent neurological and social science research, it seems clear that there is always a close interconnection between cognition and affect, between reason and emotion; that while emotions

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<sup>3</sup> Antoine de Baecque, *Le corps de l'histoire: Métaphores et politique (1770-1800)* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions. An Introduction*, trans. Keith Tribe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 11.

<sup>5</sup> See my study of the origins of a political culture of violence among the elites: Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015). Note that in deference to the non-specialized reader I generally avoided in this study a systematic consideration of methodology. But it is useful here to explore some of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the book's understanding of the emotional dimension of elite behavior.

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can impact and distort reason, they almost always have rational antecedents.<sup>6</sup> The role of emotions, it seems to me, is a historical problem that must be reconsidered in a more systematic fashion, especially as we attempt to make sense of periods of terror and violence in the French Revolution and in other similar revolutions.

These are some of the more general reflections that passed through my mind as I listened to your fascinating papers and comments. I want to thank you once again for the extraordinary gift you have presented to me over the last two days. *Et bon courage pour toutes vos recherches dans les années à venir.*

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<sup>6</sup> See especially Jon Elster, *Alchemies of the Mind. Rationality and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).