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The French Revolution: One American Historian's View

Rafe Blaufarb
Florida State University

How I Became a French Historian and Why I Chose to Focus on the Revolution

I became a French historian for two simple reasons: I had always loved history (albeit, not French history in particular) and I wanted to be able to spend time in France. I began my undergraduate studies in 1985 and graduated in 1989. After a brief, unsatisfying experience as a political science major, which I perceived as the natural precursor to law school, I became a double major in history and French. However, I still assumed that I would become a lawyer. I assumed that is what one did if one was good with words, but bad at math. I had already started learning French and planned on spending a junior semester abroad in France, but I saw this as preparation for a career as an international lawyer (whatever that was) based in France. It had never occurred to me that "history professor" was even a career, although I had already taken several elective history courses that were being taught by such a being.

This changed in my sophomore year, when I took an inspirational class on eighteenth-century and revolutionary France taught by Professor Robert Bezucha, a specialist in nineteenth-century workers' movements. Entitled "Bread, Coffee, and Cafes," it reached me on many levels. Most obviously, the class sessions spent not only learning about how coffee arrived from colony to cup, but also sampling different varieties was, to me, an entirely new way to approach history. The class also engaged with some of the cutting-edge historiographical issues of the day (1987) such as the sugar/slavery/plantation complex, the rise of the bourgeois public sphere, the salon, and cultural history. But what most caught my attention was the white-hot debate over the origins of the French Revolution. We read some Lefebvre, Soboul, and Vovelle, but it was Furet's *Interpreting the French Revolution* that struck me most sharply (although I did not understand much of it). Bezucha's course made me want to become an academic specializing in the French Revolution.

When the time came, I applied to a number of leading graduate programs in the field, some of which accepted me, some of which did not. Of those which accepted me, I chose to attend the University of Michigan because François Furet, whom I cold-called at his University of Chicago office and miraculously reached on the first try, told me to do so. I know now that Michigan had been a powerhouse in French history, for some time in the 1980s featuring David Bien, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Bill Sewell, and Charles Tilly on the faculty. By the time I arrived in September 1989, Eisenstein and Tilly had moved on; Bill Sewell would move to Chicago the following year. Bien would be my advisor, I would be his last student, and I would witness the decline of French Revolutionary history at Michigan.

Historiographical Developments

That French Revolutionary history was on the cusp of a major decline was anything but obvious when I started graduate school. Within a few months, the *American Historical Review* had published a special issue (vol. 94, no. 5, December 1989) on the Revolution, and it seemed to me (perhaps incorrectly) that even professors and fellow graduate students in other fields recognized the primacy of the subject. It also seemed to me (again, perhaps incorrectly) that the importance of the Revolution was being accentuated and, in turn, accentuating the concurrent explosion of interest in "deconstructionism," the blanket label doctoral students in history, anthropology, sociology, and other disciplines at Michigan were then calling the intellectual sea-change altering all these disciplines.[1] Many of the leading "deconstructionists" (as the graduate students then referred to them, in some cases inexactly) – Foucault, Derrida, and others – were French. And many of the historians who were taking the lead in applying their insights to the practice of history – Darnton, Davis, Hunt, Sewell – were French historians. All these currents – the bicentennial interest in the Revolution, "deconstruction," the "new cultural history," and the "linguistic turn" – all seemed to be related, mutually reinforcing, and together consecrating the central importance of the French Revolution to the historical discipline.[2]

With hindsight, it seems to me that these intellectual developments were both symptom and cause of a deep shift in historical thinking – the decline of the grand, unifying narrative – which would topple the French Revolution from the throne which, as a graduate student, I thought it occupied naturally and by common consent of the entire historical profession. The burst of bicentennial interest in 1789, coupled with the exciting intellectual trends that were subverting old-fashioned history, felt euphoric at the time, but were soon followed – by the time I defended my dissertation in 1996 – by a serious hangover. I wanted to keep partying, but it seemed that all but a few of us – the French Revolutionists – had left.[3]

The effects of this moment on the historiography of the French Revolution in United States academia were profound. Since they have been discussed insightfully and at length in a number of review articles, I will only summarize what seems to me to have happened. First, the post-1989 petering-out of the long-running debate between "Marxist" and "Revisionist" interpretations – a debate which had tended to channel most research into deeply-worn grooves – opened up the field. Second, the explosion of new theoretical approaches, cultural and linguistic, made all sorts of new subjects (restaurants, fashion, friendship, and animals, to name a few) fair game for historical scholarship. Third, the rise of Atlantic and post-colonial perspectives made people, places, and events which had previously been ignored a central part of our field. These changes dramatically opened up and expanded our field.

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[1] By the time I left Michigan in 1996, the word "deconstructionism" had all but disappeared to be replaced by terms like "postmodernism," "the linguistic turn," etc.

[2] In comments on an earlier draft of this essay, Patrick Bray has pointed out that, at the same time, "culturalists" and "theorists" were at each other's throats in French literature departments.

[3] In the preface to his book *The Price of Literature: The French Novel's Theoretical Turn* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press: 2019), Patrick Bray discusses a parallel development in the scholarship on French literature.

However, this flowering of new approaches and subjects has been accompanied by fragmentation. This fragmentation, I would add, has brought a measure of self-imposed ghettoization. Because there is no longer a common center of discussion, as there was when we all had to frame our work in terms of the Marxist/Revisionist debate, we tend to talk mainly to people in our own sub-field. Thus, historians interested in gender and the French Revolution talk amongst themselves, those interested in the Revolution and political economy to themselves, the intellectual historians and political-culturalists to themselves, and those concerned with Saint-Domingue/Haiti with themselves. My sense of this may be wrong, but it feels to me that this tendency toward self-segregation by specialty has increased since 2000.

Beneath their fragmentation by subject, however, many of the works of the past twenty years share a common approach – one that, I fear, is partly responsible for the shrinking importance of the French Revolution within academic history. Research questions are often framed in terms of "the effects of the French Revolution on ________." This way of posing questions draws the scholarly gaze toward the ________, while deflecting it from the French Revolution itself. The effect of this approach is to make the French Revolution the context rather than the object of research. In these studies, we learn much about how capitalism, medicine, family structure, gender roles, and more changed during the Revolution, but hear less about the nature and meaning of the Revolution itself. There are a few exceptions which try to make broad claims about the fundamental sense of the Revolution, for example Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights*, but these are rare. This is a pity because it is the question of the nature of the Revolution itself that is our common ground. Without it, we are military historians, gender historians, economic historians, etc., rather than French Revolutionary historians. This is not an attack on those fields, nor on historians who identify themselves primarily in thematic terms. Rather, it is a plea for us to think more directly about what our specific, thematic studies say about the French Revolution in general – what it was and why it mattered.

The Future of the French Revolution in Academia

French Revolutionists were always only a small, relatively marginal presence in American history departments, but several phenomena have converged to reduce our numbers further and render the future of our field precarious. For decades, there has been a relative decline in public funding for state colleges and universities (where most jobs are located). When I received my undergraduate degree in the late 1980s and contemplated a career as an academic historian, it was widely reported that, with the coming retirement of baby-boom-generation professors and the arrival in college of their children, the 1990s and 2000s would be a great time to embark on an academic career. Neither demographic trends nor state legislatures played along. Mandatory retirement was ended, and professors chose to stay on long after they had been expected to step down. State legislatures began to slash funding for public education, a development that has transformed some of America's leading "public" universities (including my alma mater, Michigan) into de facto private institutions. Naturally, declining funding translated into declining hiring of faculty. So the expected jobs never materialized. Whatever slow recovery there may have been in the early 2000s was scuttled by the Great Recession, whose effects on public higher education were devastating. The recent emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math), and a general tendency to reconceive of the four-year bachelor's degree as

direct career training have made things even worse not only for history, which has seen a significant drop in the number of majors, but for all humanities disciplines.

Already when I was in graduate school, the deleterious effects of these demographic, political, and financial forces on the prospects for French Revolutionary historians were being compounded by shifting priorities within academia itself. Too complicated to discuss at any length, these were grounded in critiques of "Eurocentrism" not only in scholarship, but in departmental hiring decisions as well. An unintended consequence of this shift, occurring as it did during a time of massive funding cuts and retrenchment, was to reduce the total number of European history positions. The critique of "Eurocentrism" should have led to a broadening, expansion, and flourishing of the historical profession; instead, in the context of scarcity, it has led to a fight over crumbs from a shrinking pie. Tenure-track lines that had been held by European historians for decades have been redefined as non-European, and even some of those that had been designated as French Revolutionary positions have been redefined as some other type of European history (for example, my advisor's former position at Michigan) and not replaced. This was not always the case. In the mid-twentieth century, it was common, perhaps even expected, for history departments to have at least one French historian on staff. As students of what was widely considered to be the foundational moment in French history (and a world-historical event in its own right), the French Revolution was well represented. Indeed, many departments had dedicated tenure-track positions in French Revolutionary history. My first two jobs – at Stephen F. Austin State University (1997) and Auburn University (1999) – were of this sort; as more traditional, southern universities staffed by older, more traditional faculty who had not yet abandoned their traditional ways. I probably would not have found academic employment after graduate school had such departments not existed. They are all gone now. I feel that unless we can once again provide our fellow historians with compelling reasons for why the French Revolution matters and why their departments need to offer courses on it, our doctoral students will have a difficult time convincing "Modern Europe" hiring committees why they should be preferred over other candidates.

The French Revolution in the Undergraduate and Graduate Classroom

In the United States, American history takes pride of place. The French Revolution is touched on in general European history surveys, but is only taught in a serious way in upper-level electives traditionally filled by history majors (at least at the public universities at which I have taught). One would predict that the general decline in history majors would reduce enrollment in such courses, but I have not found this to be the case. My upper-level course on "Napoleonic Europe," which I teach one semester each year, has filled up every year since I started teaching it in 2007 – and this despite the fact that it fills none of the university's diversity, writing, or skill-based requirements.[4] In fact, approximately half of the students who take this course are not history majors and have taken few, if any, history courses. They seem to be accounting, business, and other majors who, having finished their principal course requirements, still have to take a few credit hours to graduate and are looking for something interesting. So, rather than

[4] I do not teach the similar, French Revolution course because I have a colleague, Cathy McClive, whose position is specifically dedicated to that subject, does. Her course is also an upper-level elective and also draws significant non-major enrollment.

take extra, optional accounting or business courses, they take courses outside of their major that look interesting to them.

I think "Napoleon" appeals to them in large part because they recognize the name of the man and have a sense that his life and times were both exciting and important. In other words, a rather traditional sense of history (Great White Men Doing Great Things, one might say) seems to fuel their interest. Perhaps at other universities, with more radical student cultures, this might not be so, but at Florida State University, this is the case. To take advantage of this, I have decided not to update the very traditional title of my course to reflect its somewhat non-traditional subject matter. For example, a student in the course will hear a great deal about the reimposition of slavery in the French colonies, the gendered nature of the Civil Code, and popular resistance in Europe to Napoleonic occupation, but very little about the Treaty of Pressburg or the Trachtenberg Plan. But rather than abandon an appealing, legible course label, I have found it effective to retain the traditional packaging, bring the students in, and then expose them to the new material. Enrollments are consistently high (as many as 150 students when no caps are imposed), and no students have complained about having been tricked into the course through false advertising. Since we cannot attract students to our courses with promises of fortune, like our colleagues in the business school, I feel that we may as well use the few *atouts* we have.

The situation at the graduate, and especially the doctoral, level is quite different. Since I was a graduate student in the 1990s, most doctoral-granting departments have dramatically reduced the size of their programs so that they can both fund and place the students they admit. As a result, few programs have enough graduate students studying French Revolutionary (let alone French or even European) history to fill or even justify a focused seminar on the subject. This is common to most other fields as well, with the exception of United States history. As a result, graduate seminars in the "French Revolution" and similarly narrow topics have been replaced by broad thematic seminars like "Capitalism," "The State," "Medicine," and the like. In addition, given that these seminars draw on a wide constituency of graduate students, all the readings they feature must be in English. Doctoral students specializing in the French Revolution are thus left to their own devices when it comes to mastering the specialized – and French-language – literature of their primary field. To address this, a meeting in Tallahassee of doctoral students working in eighteenth-century through Napoleonic France and their dissertation advisors decided to hold a tightly-focused summer seminar for early-stage doctoral students. The first will take place in July 2019 at Princeton. Student interest was robust. If it proves successful, the seminar will hopefully be held annually, rotating between different venues in France and the United States.

Conclusion

The humanities, the discipline of history, and the study of the French Revolution are caught up in a tide of change so powerful and alien that their future is unclear. The prevailing sense among American historians and doctoral students of the French Revolution of how this will affect them is not bright. I have suggested two ways I have tried to adjust to what feels like an unpromising situation. In terms of undergraduate teaching, there is still a degree of "name recognition" and a certain sense among even unprepared undergraduates that things like "The French Revolution" and "Napoleon" mattered (even if they have no idea why). I think we can exploit that to draw

students into our classes and then expose them to other approaches (i.e., the kind of histories we actually do). In terms of research, I think we can do a better job directly addressing questions of the nature, meaning, and significance of the French Revolution. We do not need a new orthodoxy à la Soboul, but I think it would be helpful if our field were more coherent. Given our thematic dispersion, it seems to me that what we have in common is the French Revolution itself.

Rafe Blaufarb
Florida State University

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