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Whose Rights? The French Revolution and the Present

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Some years ago, Samuel Moyn sparked controversy by describing the idea of universal human rights as a "last utopia" nurtured by liberal elites at the end of the twentieth century.[1] Unlike Lynn Hunt, who saw the fountainhead of human rights in the rise of cultural practices promoting compassion and empathy in eighteenth-century Europe, Moyn identified the origins of human rights talk far more recently, in the liberal turn away from socialism in the 1970s, generating a utopian vision of a world in which the defense of individual freedoms would eliminate violence and oppression.[2] But these visions are closer together than they look. Each explores a moment when the rights envisioned by elite humanitarians were suddenly, astonishingly occupied by groups that had never been imagined as their subject. In Hunt's account of the French Revolution, Enlightenment empathy intersected with accelerating liberationist and egalitarian aspirations from subaltern groups such as women, Jews, people of color, and the enslaved, provoking a counterrevolutionary backlash. The age into which we are arriving may bear some comparison, as the liberal utopianism of rights from the 1970s collides with the brute reality of groups who feel themselves enfranchised in new ways we may celebrate or deplore.

Moyn's latest book, appropriately titled "Not Enough", maps the failures of the champions of universal rights to pursue economic and social equality in the face of neo-liberalism and market fundamentalism[3]. We have held political rights to a high standard: freedoms to articulate dissent, to practice minority religion, to exercise equal participation in democracy; protection from the threat of extrajudicial repression, torture and execution. In contrast economic rights have subsisted in the minimum of sufficiency, promising only that people should have "enough" to avoid starvation, and avoiding the "socialist" promise of equality through redistribution of wealth. As Thomas Picketty's work demonstrates, redistributive taxation mechanisms shrank precisely during the period in which human rights were on the rise.[4] This paradox has made itself uncomfortably felt today in the debate over migration, where liberal politicians defend the right of the "wretched of the earth" to seek asylum, but not to seek a better life. In the United States, in Europe, in Australia, anxieties associated with the arrival of large numbers of undocumented people fleeing combinations of political repression and economic hardship have helped polarize

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[1] Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Harvard University Press, 2010).
[2] Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2007).
[3] Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Harvard University Press, 2018).
[4] Thomas Picketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Harvard University Press, 2014).

politics between the cosmopolitan vision of an open, compassionate society and the new nationalism of the "gated community" where security is prized above other values.

But "not enough" is a more widespread phenomenon, and has emerged in other ways from more diverse voices dissatisfied with white, liberal universalism, yet paradoxically turning that universalism back on itself. New social movements, often prefixed by the hashtag anchoring them to new practices of social media mobilization, have contested color-blind and gender-blind universalist conceptions of rights that have failed to deliver equality or even personal safety to all citizens. #Blacklivesmatter and #Metoo are only the most prominent of new movements of contestation that have come from people of color, women, the disabled, LGBTQ people, champions of animal rights, climate activists and others.[5] At stake in these struggles is the historical weight of structural inequality in the operation of power that has simply been taken for granted. They reach beyond the formal provisions of individual rights on paper to challenge the wider cultural codes that determine how those provisions will be enforced and experienced on the ground. This is no longer the identity politics of empowerment, but a greater confrontation with the existing system of privilege.

But privilege is fighting back. Whether in Trump's America, Brexit Britain, or the Europe of rising right-wing supremacy movements, we are confronted by a brazen riposte to this "Not Enough!"—a stentorian "Too Much!" from the privileged—or from groups who believe that those privileges are their birthright by dint of color, gender, sexual orientation or nationality. In the eyes of this counter-revolution—much as in the eyes of radical conservatives in the Islamic world—the liberal expansive vision of equality and freedom is the enemy. Identity politics has changed hands, and has become a weapon in the hands of the privileged who experience their loss of primary status as a form of victimization. What both "not enough" and "too much" have in common is a shift, driven by the new feedback loops of social media and instantaneous communication, toward epistemologies of feeling: a frustration with traditional elites and conventional forms of argument, an emphasis on experience as evidence. In its best forms, this constitutes a new validation of listening to the silenced and acknowledging the testimony of victims: at its worst it is an echo chamber that can lead to senseless violence in the name of those victims.

What does this swelling revolution in rights—and its associated counter-revolution—have to tell us about the French Revolution of 230 years ago? And what, in turn, if anything, can the French Revolution say to the burning questions around rights today? The essays in this forum set out with a task rather different from those historians who have debated the intellectual genealogies of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen of August 1789 and its sequels. Instead, our aim here has been to put new questions raised by the contemporary climate—whether by political shifts, by our students, or by protests in the street—to the eighteenth century, and to draw new genealogies for understanding the present from a more diverse investigation of the past.

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[5] There is insufficient space here to trace the history of these social movements, stretching back to Occupy and beyond.

Some historians prefer to keep the past quarantined from corrupting "presentist" concerns and dissect it under glass with a lepidopterist's distance. They are right to criticize those who try to make the past speak our own language and mirror the political agenda of the present, without the hard work of historical contextualization and analysis. But the briefest examination of the work done by historians over the past century will reveal that even the most scrupulously "scientific" research has been deeply impregnated by the ideological climate in which it was produced. Equally, we will find that the past—and the French Revolution in particular—has always been mobilized by political movements, both on the Left and on the Right, terms that themselves originated in the divisions of the National Assembly in the 1790s, and which have been at the heart of our political culture for two centuries.

In the cultural shift after 1968, François Furet, a disillusioned former Marxist, declared the French Revolution "over", and with it the role in world history attributed to it by the socialist revolutionary tradition. The "revisionist" historical moment declared the Revolution at heart a political crisis, a failure to manage competing claims, a bumbling re-assertion of authoritarian rule that unleashed a descent into chaos. Yet that apparent dethroning of the Revolution did not lead to the diminution of its importance. New tools of cultural analysis allowed historians to rediscover the political vitality of the period, revisiting fields left fallow in the focus on class and economic conditions. When the Revolution turned a hearty 200 in 1989, its study was not withering but in full bloom: the revolutionary movements of that year in Eastern Europe and China, leading to tragically different outcomes, cannot be understood without some consideration of the meanings of the bicentenary. Since the 1990s, the rethinking of the Revolution as the origin of modern political culture has progressed apace, to become almost a new orthodoxy, even as the pillars of that "modern" political culture have begun to wobble. In a more multipolar world, the diffusionist assumptions at the heart of the political model have come under sustained attack from historians whose intellectual horizons are no longer limited to Europe and North America. The French Revolution has been placed in the wider context of world history, not as the radiating heart of modernity, but in a far more complex and entangled set of relations with shifts and responses elsewhere.

To ask, then, what the French Revolution means after 230 years, and in the current changing climate, is simply to pose in explicit terms a question that already animates the ways we do history. For historians to eschew posing the question of meaning is not to keep history "pure" but rather to abandon the terrain of large-scale interpretation to those who would use it more brazenly for political purposes. Where once the Revolution was the banner of the Left, celebrated by a revolutionary tradition stretching from 1789 through 1917, and the bane of the Right, viscerally rejected by the great conservative tradition following Edmund Burke, today the field of political uses has shifted. We see a cultural re-appropriation of the revolutionary tradition coming from the radical Right, or, perhaps more accurately, from new movements that no longer fit within these traditional political polarities.

Such most notably is the movement of the *gilets jaunes,* a contestation of elite power that mixes elements of extreme left and right with discontent emerging from the French rural fringe, sporting the high-visibility vests mandated by the state as a safety measure for drivers, now loaded with the kind of symbolism that the red bonnet took on in the Paris of 1792. As Enzo Traverso has observed, this peculiarly French form of populism, which has had its echoes all

over the world, "cannot be interpreted with the traditional categories of political analysis."[6] It is, so far at least, a movement *against* rather than *for*, without clear leaders, political manifesto or articulated goals, in a line some have seen running from the riots of the Paris suburbs in 2005 through the *dégagism* (get-out-ism) of the Arab insurrections in 2011. Others have dismissed it as a contemporary equivalent of the Poujadism that mobilized lower middle-class discontent against taxation and business regulations in the 1950s. In the European context, its singularity is that it is an insurrection that no longer inscribes itself in socialist terms, although a number of socialist thinkers have approved of the movement. As Michel Biard has observed, it reaches back directly to the French Revolution as a source for popular mobilization and symbolism.[7] These vague sans-culottist and redistributive claims, however, have also proven appropriable by a rebranded xenophobic right.[8] The "yellow vests" have been claimed by global antipolitical authoritarian populist movements, even by Donald Trump himself.[9] These confusions speak to the wider nature of social revolutionary movements emerging across the world, largely spontaneous and multilocal rather than focused on high-profile leaders. Only time can tell whether these movements will coalesce into something larger, and how that might shape the future.

For the moment, these shifts have not marginalized the French Revolution but brought it back to the center of political concerns. The Revolution has proven itself once again an inexhaustible fund of meanings, symbols, emotions and experiences to be drawn upon in making sense of the moment in which we find ourselves. Historians have a role here, however, in speaking back to the ways in which meaning is made from these events. If the nostalgic conception of the Revolution as a lost paradise of popular struggle seems more congenial to many historians than the old liberal nightmares of tumbrils bumping toward the guillotine, it is also a caricature that can serve other purposes in an era of authoritarian populism.[10] The French Revolution was a moment in which people all over the world participated for the first time in a rapidly exploding political challenge to existing systems of power, exclusion and inequality. The "people" that emerged from this transformation already contained the seeds for global social movements, as well as those of exclusivist nationalism.

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[6] Enzo Traverso, "Understanding the Gilets Jaunes", https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4242-understanding-the-gilets-jaunes, 15 February 2019 (accessed June 1, 2019).
[7] https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/2407643-20190103-pourquoi-gilets-jaunes-revendiquent-revolution-francaise. Interview with Biard in *Le Figaro*, http://www.lefigaro.fr/langue-francaise/actu-des-mots/2018/12/07/37002-20181207ARTFIG00024-gilets-jaunes-assiste-on-a-une-revolte-ou-a-une-revolution.php.
[8] See Sarah Maza's comments in the *Washington Post* https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2018/12/17/yellow-vests-are-tainting-frances-revolutionary-tradition/.
[9] https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2018/12/11/fact-checking-president-trumps-volley-weekend-tweets
[10] The recent film by Pierre Schoeller, *Un Peuple et son roi* (2018), despite its valuable depiction of the Revolution "from below" and its emphasis on the agency of women, unquestioningly reproduces the image of an all-white-French "people": a vision significantly less diverse than that of earlier movies like Ettore Scola's brilliant *La Nuit de Varennes* (1982), which featured Austrians, Italians, and people of color as part of the revolutionary transformation.

The historians who are asking these questions and making these connections are no longer the same, and the French Revolution that they see is changing accordingly. They are excavating the unthought of the Revolution, investigating previously unexamined spaces of "France" from South America to the Indian Ocean, bringing the "Caribbean" questions of slavery and racial violence back to the metropole, tracing political, economic and cultural entanglements with other regions, opening up new questions around religious minorities, women, the poor. Far from an exhausted field of research, the study of the French Revolution is once again exploding with life.

The three essays presented here, as part of the larger forum on the meaning of the French Revolution today, address these entangled questions of rights with a sense of urgency that is fueled both by the troubling shifts in our political environment, and by the new questions posed to us as we seek to bring the French Revolution to our students. They are written as interventions in the present moment, but they speak to larger concerns and wider research projects about the Revolution that are part of the rethinking unfolding around us today. Mita Choudhury's essay addresses an epistemological shift that lies at the heart of movement now known by its association with the hashtag #MeToo, the social-media-driven recognition of the widespread abuse of power to suborn sexual favors from Hollywood studios and the executive offices and boardrooms of major companies to the corridors of political power. In many if not all instances, these were abuses hidden in plain sight, with the confidence that a vast and impersonal system, driven by money, intimidation, and the failures of the justice system, would prevent the culpable from ever being held to account. She asks how a critical understanding of the French Revolution, and in particular the emergence of early feminisms and a "language of empowerment", can help us to navigate the difficult questions that emerge out of the new visibility, and vulnerability, of power and its abuse. The French Revolution also saw an astonishingly rapid shift in understandings of women's bodies and the rights that attached to them, yet the "Rights of Man" remained limited by a patriarchal order that prevented women from becoming full citizens. Choudhury investigates previously unposed questions about the treatment of sexual assault in the new legal system of the Revolution, and the longer genealogies of abuse in the Catholic Church.

In his essay, Pierre Serna reframes women's campaign to articulate a political existence in the larger struggle of those he calls "infra-citizens" to gain rights, alongside religious minorities, enslaved and free people of color, and the young—groups largely neglected in a story once focused around the struggle of classes. He shows very elegantly the connections that men and women of the Revolution made across and between these groups—an intersectionality *avant la lettre*—not simply as analogous political struggles for inclusion, but as parts of the same revolutionary conception of rights inhering in the human body itself rather than conferred by political belonging. But these diverse human bodies proved differentially compatible with rights. Protestants gained enfranchisement at the end of 1789. Jews and people of color were admitted after suspension stretching into 1791. Women never obtained political rights at all, but only improvements in civil status. Enslaved people gained freedom and enfranchisement through their own action as the outcome of a violent rupture with the existing system, a new revolution within the Revolution, never fully accepted or implemented, and ultimately reversed in less than a decade. Serna sees across these struggles, not a series of isolated "exceptions", but a continuity and logic that could generate further radical shifts, anticipating questions over rights extending even beyond the limits of the human. He traces the work of three revolutionary thinkers who proposed broader charters of rights embracing the animal world as well as the human, linking

these to the rehabilitation of the "animal body" of the human in its state denuded of rights and dignity, a shift driven by the political action of revolutionary men and women, not by abstract ideas alone.

Pernille Røge is intimately familiar with these questions from her work on European expansion in Africa through the revolutionary period. Her essay here connects that reflection on the wider contexts of rights to the classroom, and to the ways in which her students, and the questions they ask, reframe her practice as a teacher and a historian. Her dialogues with students in a charged context may lead us to add a vital qualifier to the question of what the French Revolution means today: we must also ask, "to whom?" In the United States, the historical legacies of slavery and racial disenfranchisement create an uneven landscape in which the abstract, disembodied "historical" perspective must be brought to engage with lived realities for history to have any relevance or meaning. At the same time, Røge illustrates very cogently the teacher's efforts to draw upon those pre-existing engagements to move toward a nuanced and historically contextualized view of the past, one that does not "correct" students' assumptions and concerns, but rather builds on them toward new collaborative insights.

All three of these essays show with éclat that the careful study of the past is fully compatible with the passionate reflection on the present. Indeed, they go further to show how new questions and ways of seeing, even new epistemologies, may help us to see the Revolution differently, to identify the significance of previously neglected elements, to draw new lines of force, and to form new modes of historical understanding, without thereby needing to forge a new interpretative paradigm. Each of them takes a very different window on the Revolution, but this by no means renders it less important. Much of the best work on the Revolution in the past decades has been driven by what one historian called "le souci de la complexité"—the concern for complexity. The extraordinary richness of archival and printed sources and secondary studies—a quick keyword search for "French Revolution" in the Library of Congress brings up almost 20,000 items—makes it possible to embark upon studies of ideas, events, individuals at a level of detail many in other areas of history could only dream of. The searchability of digital sources makes visible connections that were once almost impossible to retrace. At the same time, as these essays show, historians can speak in a different register, offering insights into the present without thereby betraying the complexity of the past.

Most importantly, these historians reveal revolutionary rights, not as intellectual debates conducted in the National Assembly, but as living struggles waged by individuals and groups. The "idea" of rights was—and is—immensely powerful because it is not just an idea, but also a practice that transforms those who wield it. However powerful, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen was ultimately just words on paper: for those on the ground, many of whom were illiterate, or simply driven by enthusiastic misinterpretation, the accelerating "idea" in practice often far outpaced the more meager legislative reality. Peasants—already well conditioned by the ongoing insurrections that Jean Nicolas has called the "French Rebellion"—rapidly became a driving force of both the Revolution and, later, the Counter-Revolution, as they seized their rights by force in what became, perhaps misleadingly, known as the "Great Fear".[11]

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[11] Jean Nicolas, *La rébellion française : Mouvements populaires et conscience sociale (1661-1789)* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

Mita Choudhury reminds us that recent investigations of women's revolutionary practice reveal very different forms of participation not contained by the legal structures created by the men of the National Assembly. Serge Aberdam noted that women—and children—sometimes voted in local elections, creatively misunderstanding the letter, but perhaps not the spirit of the new provisions.[12] The volcanic effect of the spreading symbolism of equality in the colonies—where hundreds of thousands of people stripped of rights for the color of their skin lived alongside far smaller groups of whites and free people of mixed descendance—has been charted by historians such as Laurent Dubois, Frédéric Régent and Carolyn Fick.[13]

I close this Introduction with a short reflection of my own. In the early years of the Restoration, two carefully framed engravings of Robespierre and Marat hung on the wall of a narrow room in a back street of the Latin Quarter, appropriately called the Rue Perdue—"Lost Street"— a jumble of slumhouses running down to the Seine. These illustrious martyrs gazed down over the meager furniture of the sole inhabitant, Louis-Benoît Zamor, who earned enough to survive by giving lessons to local children. Zamor was hardly alone in preserving the memory of the French Revolution long after its promises seemed extinguished. But his perspective can tell us something different about the Revolution that has been so endlessly studied, debated, analyzed and interpreted.

Zamor was not his name—his real identity was lost somewhere in his earliest childhood, when he was sold, stolen or kidnapped into slavery. Although very frequently referred to as an "African" or "nègre", his birthplace was said to be somewhere near Chittagong in what is today Bangladesh. At four years old, he was purchased from an English captain, decked out with brightly colored feathers, jewelry and a grass skirt and presented as a toy to the influential mistress of Louis XV, Madame du Barry. Zamor was raised as a plaything in the court, alternately pampered and reviled as a symbol of the power of his mistress. When the Revolution arrived, Zamor—reported to be a keen student of Rousseau—took up a post with the local revolutionary committee in Versailles, and urged the wealthy Du Barry to contribute to the patriotic funds. In 1793, she was accused of staging the theft of her jewels to get them out of the country, and was convicted and executed by the revolutionary tribunal. Zamor's cooperation in the trial did not spare him two months in a revolutionary prison for his association with counter-revolutionaries.

As Du Barry was transformed from reviled courtesan to martyred heroine, her "ungrateful" and "malicious" black servant became the convenient figure to blame, although he played only a minor part in the events leading to her death. In nineteenth-century France, the tragedy became a

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[12] Serge Aberdam, "Whose Revolution?" in Peter McPhee (ed.), *A Companion to the French Revolution* (London: Blackwell, 2012), 179-195.

[13] Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990); Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Frédéric Régent, *La France et ses esclaves : de la colonisation aux abolitions, 1620-1848* (Paris: Grasset, 2007).

veritable fascination, played out in stark, racialized terms, as Lise Schreier has observed.[14] Until very recently, a sign reading *Au Nègre Joyeux*—the Happy Negro—still hung prominently over the Place de la Contrescarpe, thronged with students and tourists, just a few streets from the house where Zamor lived out his final years, a sign said to be an image of Zamor and Du Barry. After criticism and vandalization, it was removed for restoration at the Musée Carnavalet, with no plans for its return. Some historians of slavery have opposed the removal of this rare visible sign of Paris's racial past, and called for its reinstatement along with an explanatory historical plaque, while others consider it a celebration of slavery that has no place in the modern city.

I bring up Zamor here because of the multiple and intersecting questions he raises around race, religion, identity, gender and power in the French Revolution. In studying Muslims and Islam during the Revolution for my recent monograph, Zamor appeared at the interstices of religious identities: he was born in a largely Muslim region, possibly to a Muslim family, but could not be considered himself a Muslim in any meaningful sense.[15] I felt that including his story would confuse the issue: he had not been brought to France because he was a Muslim, but because the color of his skin allowed him to be bought and sold as property. At the same time, he did not easily fit into the more familiar story of Atlantic slavery and abolition: he was a brown metropolitan and notionally free Frenchman. His participation in the French Revolution was real, and by all accounts deeply felt, yet peripheral, as a minor agent of a local revolutionary committee like so many thousands of others. He entered history at the point where that political agency intersected with unwilling entanglements between power and sex, through his association with a wealthy white woman whose privileges—and equally her brutal fate—were linked to her status as sexual favorite. We must ask what it meant for the illegitimate daughter of a seamstress, passing through prostitution to be set up at court by her notional husband, as a sexual servant to the king. Du Barry seems to have showered her affection on Zamor in the way she was pampered by the king, with the same utter asymmetry of power.

Zamor was one of the "people", but his example—like those of others, whether people of color, foreigners, Jews, Muslims, women, enslaved Africans, vagrants, the disabled—comes to trouble the homogenized and whitewashed crowd such a notion once served to project. At the same time, the Revolution offered Zamor a form of inclusion inconceivable under the ancien régime, or under the colonial regimes of the nineteenth century. The local committee of Versailles wrote on January 1, 1794 to protest the detention of "the brave Zamor, Indian and patriot."[16] Patriotism in the French Revolution was not nationalism: it was a force of enthusiasm for change and inclusion that transcended territory, language, religion and ethnicity. At the same time, his arrest

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[14] Lise Schreier, "Zamore 'the African' and the Haunting of France's Collective Consciousness," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 38 (2016): 123-139.

[15] Eric Noël discovered an "Antoine Marie Matoulla called Zamore, son of Chek Felley Oulla", born in Bengal in 1762, and baptised at St-Sulpice in 1773, who later served in the army, but believes this was not the same Zamor. "Zamor, esclave indien et patriote engagé," http://cidif2.go1.cc/index.php/lettres-du-c-i-d-i-f/38-lettre-n-26-27/131-26-253-zamor-esclave-indien-et-patriote-engage

[16] Charles Vatel, *Histoire de Madame Du Barry: d'après ses papiers personnels et les documents des archives publiques* (Versailles: L. Bernard, 1883), 361.

warrant described him as "Zamor, nègre"—a term that still encoded the relation between skin color and slavery. Lest we idealize the forms of political inclusion in the Revolution, we must consider here the gap between the rights of the citizen and the status of those proscribed from the political community, even on suspicion alone.

The struggles of people of color were not peripheral issues affecting the colonies alone, but at the heart of struggles over the meaning of liberty and equality in a French Revolution that must be conceived across a different set of spaces that included not only Paris and the metropolitan provinces of France but Corsica, the Caribbean, North and South America, Africa, Asia and the Indian Ocean. To consider this space is not simply to pursue a fashionable "global turn", but to answer the challenge posed to us as historians by new movements and questions around rights. What would it mean to write the history of the French Revolution on the basis that black lives matter as much as white ones? If abuses of power against women and children were as worthy of our enquiry as those between men? If not only human and social equity but the preservation of all life was the valorizing principle of enquiry? These are some of the questions this forum poses.

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