H-France Salon
Volume 11, Issue 19, #3

Whose Revolution? Rights and the French Revolution Today: A Perspective from the Classroom*

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One of the central arenas in which questions of rights and the French Revolution today connect is in the classroom. Students gravitate toward the study of the French Revolution regardless of their declared majors or minors, knowing that the Revolution was a watershed in the longer history of democratization, nation-state formation, and human rights. Equipped with some awareness of 1789, they also enter the classroom caught up in some of the most urgent struggles over racial, economic, and social inequality today. Class discussions about revolutionary rights are easily infused by references to present-day concerns, be it Occupy Wall Street, indigenous rights, #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo, immigrants', sexual, or gender rights, profound issues that invariably influence students' reading of the past. As history teachers, we of course try not to flatten historical experience or encourage facile leaps between the past and the present, but to lead students to understand the crucial relationship between the two. How we structure our courses, however, directly influences the possibility of these conversations. In my experience, the broadening of the study of the French Revolution to a large global theater fosters connections to the past and the present in important new ways. The history of the French Revolution is inherently about the question of rights, and scholars have long shed light on its relationship to political, economic, religious, and women's rights. The global, imperial, or transnational turns – turns that reflect scholars' receptivity to the present and our political, economic, cultural preoccupations – allow us to teach the history of the Revolution from new perspectives and as a part of much broader regional and global historical processes. Situating the French Revolution within this expanded global space, in turn, opens the door to discussions of how the attainment of rights for some was accompanied not just by the barring of rights for women or the poor, but also by racial exclusion, mass migration, and imperial suppression. It highlights the ways in which the economy of rights was never one of equal distribution, to a group of students who know very well that it still isn't today.

Developing a syllabus of the French Revolution in Global Context

Teaching the history of the French Revolution in a global context has stimulated conversations about rights in my classroom that I did not foresee but have since come to appreciate. The structure of my course was initially dictated by my research interests and in dialogue with the

* I am grateful to Ian Coller and Jennifer Heuer for their comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this piece.

global, transnational, and imperial turns. Instead of exploring the unfolding of the French Revolution in France from the collapse of the Old Regime to the rise of Napoleon as I had been introduced to it in an undergraduate course, my embrace of global and world histories and research in graduate school fueled my eagerness to teach an upper-level undergraduate course on the French Revolution in a way that expanded the geography of the Revolution. I wanted to take my students on a journey, not just to the past, but to various locations that molded how people from different socio-economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds could and did experience, understand, and act upon the French Revolution. I wanted students to move from Versailles, Paris and the French provinces into Europe and across the Atlantic and Indian oceans to the French colonies, and further out into the world beyond the French colonial empire. Because it was an upper-level course, I also wanted to introduce students to the rich historiographical tradition that accompanies the French Revolution, interlacing my lectures with references to Marxist interpretations, political culture, and the global turn to stimulate debate on how the present always conditions historical interpretation.[1]

The availability of source materials necessarily influenced the feasibility of this initial design. When I started developing the course in 2011, there was a wealth of discussion pieces on the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution, ample examples of the cultural turn, and budding materials on the global turn (a theme that has only continued to grow in recent years). It was harder to come up with a rich and diverse set of primary sources translated into English that could illuminate the global context in a comprehensive manner. While the French, European, North American, and Caribbean theaters of the French Revolution had a number of translated primary source collections I could use, it was difficult to find examples from Africa and Asia. Initially, I therefore brought in trade statistics from the trans-Atlantic slave trade database between 1787 and 1815 to explore with my students what these statistics might tell us. I also started looking for examples from archival sources I was working with in my own research on Senegambia which I could translate and bring to class. For the Indian Ocean, I was able to bring in a secondary source but no primary sources, whereas my search for sources from East Asia came to naught.[2] Still, I felt I had enough material to teach the history of the Revolution in a way

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[1] When engaging with historiography, students read Albert Soboul, *Understanding the French Revolution* (London: The Merlin Press, 1988), Chapter 2 on “Classes and Class Struggle during the French Revolution”; Keith Michael Baker, “Political languages of the French Revolution”, in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, eds. Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 626-659; Lynn Hunt, “The French Revolution in Global Context”, in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840*, eds. David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 20-36; David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Introduction: The Age of Revolutions, c. 1760-1840 – Global Causation, Connection, and Comparison”, in *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840*, eds. David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), xii-xxxii.

[2] For primary sources on France and Europe, I use Keith Michael Baker (ed.), *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); John Hardman, *The French Revolution Sourcebook* (London: Arnold, 1999); A. Lentin, *Enlightened Absolutism (1760-1790) A Documentary Sourcebook* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Avero, 1985). For the Caribbean, I used Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus (eds), *Slave Revolution in the*

that was not about the rise of a male bourgeoisie seizing power or one of discursive practices alone, but introduced the history of the Revolution as a multiplex process whose *raison-d'être* shifted as different people and peoples invested in its promise or resisted the Revolution as a threatening imperial force that set out to undermine cultures, political systems, and understandings of rights.

Encountering the Classroom

Students in the US are usually prepared to engage actively in class discussions. When I first entered the classroom at the University of Pittsburgh in the fall semester of 2012, my hope was therefore to prompt reflection and debate. And debate we did and still do every time I teach the course. But discussions rarely follow the lines I imagine during preparations, nor do they ever repeat themselves from one term to the next. Students have their own appetites, expectations, and concerns that bear upon their interest in the Revolution and which help them unlock the door to the foreign land that is history. Their investments in today's battles serve as interpretive and analytic guides to understand and interrogate rights and the French Revolution 230 years ago. This means that a course on the history of the French Revolution can equip students with a deeper historical sense of the long tortuous struggle over rights. In my experience, however, it also prompts them to use the French Revolution as a "safe zone" – hundreds of years in the past – in which they can discuss and explore some of the deeper forces that influence rights and revolution today but can be difficult to address head on.

The first time I taught the course, these complex connections between the past and the present in the minds of the students came out after a lecture on the Estates General. I had assigned sections from Abbé Sieyès's "What is the Third Estate?" and asked students to submit a brief paragraph discussing Sieyès' piece, and end the paragraph with a question that we could use for class discussion. My instructions were to think historically – to engage the text on its own terms. Instead, most questions touched on the Occupy Movement and the slogan "We are the 99%" that had gained force in the preceding months. One student drew a direct analogy between Sieyès's pamphlet and the Joseph Stiglitz's article "Of the 1%, by the 1%, for the 1%" in Vanity Fair of May 2011. If in France, over 200 years ago, wealth, land, and power were in the hands of the few and this was still the case today within the world's largest economy, then had anything really changed? *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose,* said a French major who took the class. After she explained that the more things change, the more they stay the same, she received nods from her peers. But things have changed, I insisted, and wondered aloud if we could even compare modern United States to ancien régime France? What was the world Abbé Sieyès described like? What did he hope to obtain and for whom? We decided to split up into smaller groups to discuss these questions before returning to the class forum to share our perspectives. When we came together, conversations remained centered on Sieyès. It bothered me a little

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Caribbean, 1789-1804: A Brief History with Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006). For India, I used Adrian Carton, 'Shades of Fraternity: Creolization and the Making of Citizenship in French India, 1790-1792', *French Historical Studies*, 31, 4 (Fall 2008), 581-607. Most recently, I have also drawn on Nathan Marvin, 'The "Ambroise Affair": White Women, Black Men, and the Limits of Métissage in Revolution-era Réunion', *French History*, 32, 4 (2018), 493-510.

because I felt I might have shut down prematurely an important discussion about inequality and economic justice today.

During the weeks in which we focused on the French Revolution in a European context, a few students tip-toed toward a critique of imperialism that broached contemporary U.S. foreign policy. The connection evolved from our discussion of the treaties between France and two of its sister republics: the treaty with the Cisalpine Republic of February 1798 and the treaty with the Helvetic Republic of August 19, 1798. A student noted that what the French Directory was doing was not far from what the US was doing in Afghanistan or Iraq, imposing a political system on a seemingly not very eager local population. I smiled but was again unsure how to tackle this debate. Some of the students may have had brothers or sisters, relatives or friends who were or had been engaged in battle. I was also very self-aware, knowing that my status as a 'resident alien' from Denmark may not invite blunt criticism of U.S. foreign policy. I decided to respond by referring to the Coalition of the Willing that had included Denmark. I emphasize that justifications for the invasion of Iraq in Denmark had evolved to insist on the need to spread democracy and protect particularly women's rights. And then I asked if students felt that anything in our readings on the creation of the sister republics suggested that it was not France alone that initiated their creation? One student immediately pointed out that self-declared patriots within the invaded areas had actively called upon the French to liberate them from what they considered the yoke of despotism.[3] With that response, we were back in the past.

I did not teach the course again until spring 2015. By that time, the Occupy Movement had lost steam and the reading of Sieyès' pamphlet did not generate a similarly 'presentist' focus. Nor did the weeks on Europe bring up discussions of U.S. foreign policy. Instead, the new cohort of students seemed ready to disconnect from the present and follow the outbreak and radicalization of the French Revolution from Versailles to Paris to the provinces and through Europe. Or so it seemed. Instead, the truth was that they were preoccupied with what was becoming a powerful movement. Many students on campus were protesting police violence and systemic racism toward African American people in the United States and the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was gaining currency. Even those who did not participate personally could not but notice demonstrations on Shenley Plaza that connected the various university buildings at Pitt. Some students were directly involved and showed their support by wearing t-shirts to class with the hashtag. When we started focusing on the French colonies in the Caribbean, the present therefore entered the classroom in powerful ways.

In the course, we reflected on how our understanding of the French Revolution altered when viewed from the perspective of free people of color or the enslaved in the French Caribbean colonies. Why were free people of color, some of whom owned plantations and slaves themselves, excluded from participating in the National Assembly when white plantation owners were not? Why did French Revolutionaries, who embraced the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, allow slavery to continue in their colonies? Why did the abolition of slavery or the slave trade only feature on the agenda of a relatively small sample of *cahiers de doléances*? Why was it only when thousands of slaves were up in arms on Saint-Domingue, and

[3] The student referenced our reading of Marc H. Lerner, 'The Helvetic Republic: An Ambivalent Reception of French Revolutionary Liberty', *French History*, 18, 1 (2004), 50-75.

the First Republic was at war, that the abolition of slavery could happen? Tackling these questions through the writings of Vincent Ogé, Julien Raimond, Léger Félicité Sonthonax, Victor Hugues, Jean-Baptiste Belley, and Toussaint Louverture, students often shifted their initial position on the liberating qualities of the French Revolution towards an assessment of the Revolution as catering to a white male middle class. Once, this interpretation was underlined by a student who noted that the exclusion of the free colored "bourgeois" in 1789 reminded him of efforts to exclude African Americans in the US today.

Bringing in present-day systemic racism in the United States unsettled the classroom. One student dared to point out that the class itself was illustrative of such racism since it was not very diverse. In this class of thirty-five students, there were a few students from China and one African-American student, while the rest were white Americans.[4] "Yeah… one student said, it is pretty bad, although I am not sure how many of us would qualify as bourgeois." At this point, one of the students noted that it would be interesting to discuss how Soboul, whose chapter on "Classes and Class Struggle during the French Revolution" we had read earlier in the course, might have come up with a different interpretation if he had incorporated race as a factor into his analytic framework as much as he did class. We should discuss this, I said, but I also wanted to hear why they thought that Soboul had excluded race and the French Caribbean colonies in the first place? A student responded that perhaps Soboul was writing for an audience composed of other Marxist scholars. Perhaps he was not writing with the descendants of French Caribbean colonies in mind, another suggested. A third ventured that perhaps the French Revolution was not seen as being a part of Caribbean history. Another suggested, that the slaves on Saint-Domingue were certainly a part of the French Revolution, but they had also built their own revolution. Does this mean that the French Revolution should not be seen as part of the Haitian Revolution, I asked? Are they separate or connected? While they pondered this question, I let them know that they had hit on an ongoing debate among historians. "Yes", one student said, "I bet that Haitians do not want to see their own Revolution as an outgrowth of the French Revolution and I also bet the French do not really like to hear about how their Revolution failed to suppress slavery in 1789. Just like we do not like to speak of systemic racism today."

These discussions about racism and rights then and now are not always easy to have. But I am heartened by comments in student evaluations in which students have stressed the importance of the conversations on the past and the present that the expanded framework – the global context – help foster. Yet my own view is that I have not expanded the framework enough. I would still like to include more on Africa and Asia. There are good pieces on Egypt that I have used, but still very little on the French *comptoirs* in West Africa, the Indian Ocean, and East and South East Asia.[5] My hope is that we will continue to expand the global framework, so we can offer

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[4] Categories such as "white" and "African American" are among the categories with which Americans were asked to self-identify in the United States Census of 2010.

[5] On Egypt, I have used Juan Cole, 'Playing Muslim: Bonaparte's Army of the Orient and Euro-Muslim Creolization', in David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds), *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840*, 125-143; and Ian Coller, "Egypt in the French Revolution," in Lynn Hunt, Suzanne Desan & William Nelson (eds), *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2013), 115-131. I also use articles in Alan Forrest and Matthias Middell, *The Routledge Companion to the French Revolution in World*

our students both primary and secondary sources on the French Revolution that reach well beyond the geographical space already folded into R. R. Palmer's *Age of Democratic Revolution* sixty years ago. Yet, to me, there are also profound problems with placing the French Revolution in global context, one of which I have been alerted to by my students. It concerns the voices that tend to drop out once we go beyond France. In my class, students always read Olympe de Gourge's Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen and discuss her subsequent guillotining. Until recently, this discussion did not encourage students to jump into the present – not until Trump's presidential campaign helped ignite the #metoo movement that sheds light on women's rights. As the #metoo movement gained momentum, some of my students sought the opportunity to write about the exclusion of women in the French Revolution in France and in Caribbean colonies. Whereas I could draw on a deeper historical literature on women and the Revolution in France and in Europe, I could find a lot less on women's voices in the Caribbean. In fact, it is only after reading Françoise Verges' entry in the most recent H-France salon edited by Emily Marker and Christy Pichichero on "Race, Racism, and the Study of France and the Francophone World Today", that I learnt about Sanité Belair who was executed by the Napoleonic army in 1802 or Solitude who participated in the insurrection against Napoleon in Guadeloupe, and I have not yet been able to find any translated primary sources about these women.[6]

The particularity of the French Revolution?

The history of the French Revolution is not the only course that leads students to make leaps to the present. Of the five undergraduate courses I regularly teach, it is, however, the one course that seems to systematically propel such discussions. So, 230 years after the French Revolution, one thing the Revolution means today is that its history in a global context allows students and scholars to confront complicated questions of economic, political, and racial justice and rights not just in the past but today. The principal goal of historical studies is to help students situate their awareness of the present into broader historical contexts and to obtain tools and skills to think critically about the sources used to construct local, national and global narratives. But to me, it has become an added bonus if students use the past as a safe space through which they can also feel more at ease while grappling with sensitive questions of rights today. The study of the history of the French Revolution has been able to generate discussions about rights since its inception, but the larger global context within which we can now place it expands the kinds of rights we are able to include. Depending on how we structure our courses, we can open a door to current issues of socio-economic disparities, systemic racism, gender inequality, and civil rights for people of all sexual orientations, just like we can prevent such discussions from taking place.

History (London & New York: Routledge, 2015). On Africa, I have sometimes used Joseph C. Miller, 'The Dynamics of History in Africa and the Atlantic 'Age of Revolutions', in David Armitage and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds), *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840*, 101-124. I have tried to discuss the changing view of Africa and Africans during the Age of Revolutions in Pernille Røge, "Rethinking Africa in the Age of revolution The evolution of Jean-Baptiste-Léonard Durand's *Voyage au Sénégal*, in *Atlantic Studies*, 13, 3 (2016), 389-406.
[6] Françoise Vergès, "Toutes les féministes ne sont pas blanches – Pour un féminisme décolonial et de marronage," *H-France Salon*, vol. 11, issue 2, number 6, page 2. https://h-france.net/Salon/SalonVol11no2.6.Verges.pdf

I did not see it this way when I first started teaching a course on the French Revolution in global context. Initially, my research interests shaped the design of the course. They still do, but I have become much more alert to the curiosities and needs of my students along the way, just as every semester I see new ways in which we – whether scholars or students – ask novel questions of the past or come back to older scholarly preoccupations to better satisfy our understanding of rights and revolution in the evolving present.

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ISSN 2150-4873
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