

H-France Forum

Volume 16 (2021), Issue 2 # 2

Jon Elster, *France Before 1789: The Unraveling of an Absolutist Regime*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020. ix + 263 pp. Figures, notes, and index. \$39.95 (hb). ISBN: 9780691149813.

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In the 1989-1992 Collège de France lectures first published in 2012 as *Sur l'État* and translated into English in 2015, Pierre Bourdieu tackles French Revolution historiography in a brief but trenchant aside. Properly written, Bourdieu declares, French Revolutionary histories *ought* to inscribe the actions and dispositions of historical actors in their social trajectories. “Je pense qu’on pourrait faire une sociologie de l’État, du champ du pouvoir à la veille de la Révolution française.... Il y aurait à étudier ce monde d’individus qui sont chacun situés dans un sous-champ, qui ont chacun des propriétés—il faudrait savoir s’ils étaient jansénistes, gallicans, s’ils avaient suivi des études dans un collège jésuite ou ailleurs, s’ils avaient lu Rousseau, s’ils avaient une position au Parlement ou ailleurs.”[1] Such a strategy would counter the tendency of François Furet and others to reduce “l’histoire des stratégies politiques,” he argues, to “l’histoire des idées.” As Bourdieu’s praise for books by Keith Baker (*Inventing the French Revolution*) and Sarah Hanley (*The Lit de Justice of the Kings of France*) suggests, the “cultural approach” to Revolutionary history, already on the rise, would in large measure fulfill this program.[2] But even these works did not adequately ground the dynamics of the Revolution in the social properties of its agents in his view. Histories of the Revolution would not only need to identify these properties and correlate them with the positions staked out by their bearers with greater thoroughness, they would also need to situate the trajectories of their agents within the spaces driving cultural change—“le champ intellectuel, le champ religieux, le champ administratif ou bureaucratique, le champ juridico-parlementaire” and so on.

Jon Elster’s *France Before 1789: The Unraveling of an Absolutist Regime* tackles a project that, perhaps surprisingly, resembles Bourdieu’s program in a few key ways. Like Bourdieu, Elster seeks to understand agents’ actions through the interests of the groups to which they belong, while incorporating the gamut of ancien régime groups. Elster’s book, too, is something more or different than a transdisciplinary cultural history; as an attempt to understand the outbreak of the Revolution through the interactions among these groups, it borrows the lens of “complexity” to imagine social change. “The purpose of this book is to present the main features of this prodigiously complex social system,” Elster writes of the ancien régime in general, and to “see the events as intelligible in the light of widely applicable *mechanisms*” (original italics throughout; pp. 2, 7). In evoking complexity, the book further envisages assembling elements of what we might call a “model” of social change in a way that echoes Bourdieu’s concern for the relationships among diverse fields and subfields, or his descriptions of multi-factorial causality elsewhere.[3] In keeping with the title, moreover, *France Before 1789* extends this ambition beyond Paris to France as a whole, beyond the eve of Revolution to the ancien régime from

Louis XIV on. And it further enlarges its scope in looking beyond the “field of power” to incorporate subordinate groups, particularly peasants, in its interactions.

Given Elster’s means, my comparison with Bourdieu is meant as a provocation. *France Before 1789* applies rational choice theory, anathema to the sociologist, to the case of the ancien régime, leveraging a bevy of cognitive and behavioral concepts to describe the actions and inactions of its groups. [4] The particular brand of rational choice theory Elster has developed through his long career mitigates the thin economism of the basic model by building in agents’ emotions, cognitive mechanisms and beliefs. In their application to history writing, these elements remain boldly heuristic rather than historically or ethnographically specific, bringing with them the universalizing tendency of the grand siècle moralists whom Elster cites throughout (La Bruyère: “Nothing is easier for passion than to overcome reason; its greatest triumph is to conquer interest” [p. 174]). Of the “twenty-odd emotions that can be robustly distinguished from each other,” Elster affirms, negative passions predominated in the ancien régime, “anger, indignation, resentment, hatred, and contempt” regularly provoked “by a violation of a perceived right or by an attempt to claim or enforce a right that was perceived as illegitimate” (pp. 16, 39). Implanted in historical agents, these emotions rejoin cognitive mechanisms (the snowball mechanism, the cross-over effect, pluralistic ignorance, sunk-cost fallacy, recency effect, inaction aversion, etc.) and agents’ beliefs about their own and others’ best interests to mediate interactions among groups.

Despite the scope of its ambitions, *France Before 1789* works best as an account of financial and economic features of ancien régime France. While it claims inspiration in Tocqueville, moreover, it reads less as a look into why the Revolution came to pass (and what did or did not change in its wake), as into why the incremental reforms attempted throughout the ancien régime failed. Some of the book’s strongest moments occur through analyses of economic decision-making. “At both extremes of the social hierarchy—the peasantry and the royal government—life was characterized by extreme scarcity,” we read, “which truncated the time horizon of the agents. Investments and reforms that take time to bear fruit were not undertaken because one could not afford to wait” (p. 217). Peasants were disincentivized to think in the long-term by taxes and tolls, kings by unfavorable loan terms. This economically inflected account of ancien régime temporality contrasts in interesting ways with what is often cast as the “given” quality (Hunt) or “profundity of generational unity” (Koselleck) of pre-Revolutionary time.[5] Moreover, the book’s account of the rationality of seemingly irrational economic behavior yields a compelling insight about the relationship between financial and regal power. The ancien régime kings’ relationships to loans became dysfunctional precisely because of absolutist rule. To that end, Elster concludes that “the *impotence of omnipotence* may be the central paradox of the *ancien régime*” (pp. 230-31).

These means and preoccupations give the book a certain resonance with contemporary trends in Revolutionary historiography. Its focus on emotions could be imagined in conversation with what Sophia Rosenfeld has termed the “affective turn” in Revolutionary studies, bearing on the emotional dynamics that drove the Terror and emerged to cope with its legacy.[6] Its focus on rumor, which interests Elster for its bearing on agents’ beliefs, could easily dialogue with recent books by Lindsey Porter or Tabetha Leigh Ewing.[7] Most importantly, Elster’s book prioritizes economic history in a way that parallels scholarly efforts to incorporate “the rhythms and effects

of economic life” into the cultural study of the Revolution.[8] Generally, the book shifts attention from long-prevalent foci of Revolutionary studies, emphasizing the provinces over Paris, economic decision-making over cultural production, and the points of view of the regime, parliamentarians and peasants over those of philosophers, publics or salons.

The degree to which you find the results stimulating will hinge on how well you tolerate the simplifications of rational choice. The framework remains hegemonic in contemporary intellectual production, investing the study of economics, political science, animal behavior—and history. In *France Before 1789*, rational choice thinking facilitates judgments with all the elliptical, universalizing character of the *grand siècle* writers whom Elster cites as a kind of supplementary critical apparatus. A short section called “Necker Cause of the Revolution?” examines the emotional and cognitive motivations driving Jacques Necker’s decision to raise funds through loans rather than taxes, summarily attributing them to an “extreme vanity and desire for popularity” (p. 175). Another section tackles the very interesting question of how the “psychology” of the Bourbon kings was “shaped, in different ways, by their internalization of the idea of absolute power,” but dispatches it in a series of glancing *portraits* (p. 145). Elsewhere, the book focuses heavily on peasant subsistence; citing an estimate of 1,497 insurrections (of 8,525) that occurred between 1660 and 1789 as an effect of food shortages, it cautions: “Now, hunger is not an emotion. Its immediate action tendency is to obtain food, if necessary by force, but violence against persons is not a primary aim. Yet a subsistence crisis can also, as a secondary effect, induce emotions, which can trigger attack on persons over and above what is needed to get at food” (p. 67). This passage is not alone in raising scruples about the distortions of rational choice, or lavishing a great deal of science on a point of common sense. The framework could certainly be debated on its merits. But given its prevalence, it feels more pertinent to ask, in a Nietzschean or sociological vein, *who* finds it useful to think with, and why.

In *France Before 1789*, the theory’s elliptical qualities stand out because they shape not only the way elements of the model are treated but also which elements are selected. Perhaps most momentous are the book’s selection of social groups. The model it sets in motion imagines the interactions among the nobility of the robe and of the sword, the peasantry, the clergy and “urban populations”, along with the royal administration. As a representation of ancien régime society, this is an arch-classical array, heavily informed by the conceptual resources and limitations of political science. And though the classification of groups is itself an intellectually and ideologically powerful act, the book omits to justify this particular choice of divisions. Its disinclination to explore the problem of grouping emerges explicitly in its account of urban populations. These included “beggars, criminals, police informants, day laborers, servants, artisans (masters, journeymen, and apprentices), merchants, troops, gendarmerie, paralegals and sundry legal clerks (*la basoche*), lawyers, magistrates, clergy, and the world of finance,” we learn. “In addition, there were many retiree bondholders. The mere enumeration of these heterogeneous groups tells us that no generalizations can be made about them” (p. 92). In the end, the book just drops these groups from its story, foreclosing any attempt to address such trends as the rise of civil society or the bourgeoisie.

Tellingly, writers and philosophers are absent from the enumeration of urban groups, as they generally are from the book’s picture of ancien régime interactions. Though rational choice can presumably be applied to the dynamics of intellectual groups as well as any other, the basic

materialism of the theory translates here into an extreme skepticism about the power of ideas and language. As Elster asserts early on, “discourse” has no place in causation. We can “follow the semantic transformations of terms like “credit’ from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth, reflecting the changing relations between the monarchs and the nobles,” he writes. “Yet it is only these relations that have causal efficacy, not their verbal expressions” (p. 10). This skepticism also finds its way into the grounds on which the book dismisses the relevance of the Enlightenment to Revolutionary historiography. “The influence of the Enlightenment on political events and social movements was possibly strong,” we read, “but it was certainly diffuse, often too diffuse to provide a causal, individual-level explanation of specific choices and decisions. Although, as I said, desacralization of the king and decline in religious fervor coincided with the Enlightenment, the causal relations are opaque. Depending on one’s definitions, desacralization and decline in religious fervor may even be *constitutive* of the Enlightenment” (p. 9). This is no ordinary materialism. The assertion is all the more strange in that Elster’s iteration of rational choice theory might well make room for intellectual activity under the rubric of “beliefs.” And it begs the question of just what the book means by Enlightenment, given that Turgot and Malesherbes, generally considered among its representatives, recur as agents of administrative reform.

It’s possible to lay greater or lesser emphasis on intellectual production in the lead-up to Revolution, but casting its effects as unknowable is a very odd proposition, particularly in the absence of dialogue with relevant historical work. This dearth of dialogue is the book’s biggest problem. It draws on an extraordinarily lean, idiosyncratic historiographical apparatus, weighted toward early twentieth-century scholarship and more recent works that speak to subject matter specifics regarding taxation, *privilèges* and so on. That means it engages with very little historical scholarship from the past fifty or sixty years. This awkward relationship between theory and historical material leads to a profusion of hedges (“to my knowledge”) and speculations that could be verified (e.g., “Although I cannot provide any examples, I assume that the kings, too, sometimes acted on impulses, in spite of efforts by their ministers to delay their decisions, either for the motion to abate or for more information to be gathered” [p. 218].) Elster praises historians for their diligence (“As a non-specialist, I am awed by the efforts of historians to mine the archives and triangulate the sources . . .” [p. 214].), but while the model the book proposes could certainly be enriched by more empirical inputs, what historians really have to offer it is the historiographical sophistication against which its normative or predictive qualities could be tested.

If the book is proposing, in the form of a model, something different than conventional historical interpretation, the integration of plausible interpretation nonetheless conditions the viability of the model. I don’t know of existing works that attempt to model ancien régime complexity in the way *France Before 1789* does, though Jean-Luc Chappey’s accounts of the imbrication of social, scientific, literary and administrative trajectories during the Revolutionary period exemplify history writing that brings cultural change to life in complex spaces.[9] In their different ways, moreover, both Bruno Latour and Pierre Bourdieu offer alternative frameworks for trying. I am thinking of Latour’s account of how congeries of networks snarl to produce “modes of existence.”[10] Or Bourdieu’s account of how Manet’s rich and contradictory habitus combined with technical innovations in paints and canvases and institutional shifts in the art world to bring

about a shift in the meaning of art—an account that well and truly eludes any tired dichotomy about the priority of action versus structure.[11]

In the passage I cited earlier from *On the State*, Bourdieu addresses the tension between historical and theoretical work. “Quand les historiens se mettent à faire de la philosophie,” he quips at Furet’s expense, “c’est vraiment la fin de tout.” Strictly speaking, this is no more true than the inverse—that philosophers ruin history. But in the case of *France Before 1789*, the application of philosophy to history proves, if not the end of the world, at least an obstacle to plausible historical writing.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur l’État: Cours au Collège de France, 1989-1992* (Paris: Éditions Raisons d’agir/Seuil, 2012), pp. 490-492. Translated as *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989-1992*, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015). All quotes are taken from the French edition.

[2] Sophia Rosenfeld, “The French Revolution in Cultural History,” *Journal of Social History* 52/3 (2019): 555-565.

[3] *On the State* positions State formation as a question of complexity. The question of multi-factorial models of causation crops up in Bourdieu’s *Manet: Une révolution symbolique* (Paris: Éditions Raisons d’Agir/Seuil, 2013), translated as *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution*, trans. Peter Collier and Margaret Rigaud-Drayton (Polity Press: Cambridge, 2017). See in particular the Lecture of 9 February 2000.

[4] Bourdieu addresses Elster’s rational choice framework in *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990): 46-51.

[5] Lynn Hunt, “The World We Have Gained: The Future of the French Revolution,” Presidential Address, American Historical Association, January 3, 2003, <https://www.historians.org/about-aha-and-membership/aha-history-and-archives/presidential-addresses/lynn-hunt#58>, accessed March 25, 2021; Reinhart Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity,” in *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, translated by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004): 9-25.

[6] Rosenfeld, “The French Revolution in Cultural History.”

[7] Lindsey Porter, *Popular Rumour in Revolutionary Paris, 1792-1794* (Palgrave, 2017); Tabetta Leigh Ewing, *Rumour, Diplomacy and War in Enlightenment Paris* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2014).

[8] William Sewell, “The Empire of Fashion and the Rise of Capitalism in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Past and Present* 206/1 (2010): 81-120. Cited in Rosenfeld, “The French Revolution in Cultural History.”

[9] Jean-Luc Chappey, *La Société des observateurs de l'homme, 1799-1804: Des anthropologues au temps de Bonaparte* (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 2002). Of Chappey's many articles, see for instance, "Enjeux sociaux et politiques de la 'vulgarisation scientifique' en révolution (1780-1810)," *Annales historiques de la révolution française* 338 (2004): 11-51.

[10]. Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[11] Pierre Bourdieu, *Manet: Une révolution symbolique*.

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