

Is It Really Over? The French Revolution Twenty Years after the Bicentennial

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In 1992 a young (at least in his mind) graduate student arrived at Stanford University to begin a doctoral program in French history under the direction of Keith Michael Baker. The student's research interests gravitated more toward the French Enlightenment than toward the French Revolution, but the imperatives of graduate school funding placed him in the role of principal graduate student assistant for a conference held at Stanford titled "The French Revolution and the Making of Modern Political Culture," the last of the four major international conferences devoted to this subject between 1986 and 1992. As is well known, these conferences, held at the University of Chicago, the University of Oxford, Paris, and Stanford, together with similar conferences held in France during the same period, played a key role in shaping the bicentennial moment in Revolution historiography. In France these academic gatherings were also linked to broader public discussions in the television and print media among politicians, pundits, and other talking heads in a way that transformed French history around 1989 into an unprecedented public media event. For a few days in 1992 this intellectual and political tempest touched down at Stanford in the guise of an international academic conference, and for an American newcomer to the professional study of French history, participation in these events, admittedly as little more than an auditor and a gofer, afforded a rich introduction into the whirlwind that was Revolution scholarship at this time.

The precise topic of that final conference at Stanford was the Terror, a category that served to end the four-part program because it had implicitly framed the other three in the conceptualization of the conference organizers. "Why was there to be no further bicentennial conference on the Directory or on Bonaparte?" the graduate student

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remembers wondering naively. Yet as he listened to the debates about whether *the Terror* was the right label for the events under consideration, or whether the terms *revolutionary* or *emergency* government better captured the dynamics of French history in the early 1790s, and as he considered whether the historical events of these years, no matter what their proper nomenclature, were to be understood as determined outcomes structured by prior conceptual and historical developments or as the result of a messy stew of indeterminate contingencies, he came to understand why these conferences would not, or could not, continue. For what this graduate student came to realize in 1992 was that the bicentennial marked a historiographical climax, one that has left a puzzling historiographical situation in its wake.

What has happened to the history of the French Revolution since the bicentennial? In what directions has scholarship moved since the superheated years around 1989? What, for example, is left of the great “Marxist” versus “revisionist” (or was it “Jacobin” versus “neocon”?) divide that so shaped discussion at this moment? Has the Revolution fallen into oblivion in the wake of these climactic confrontations, as some have suggested, or has the scholarship taken historiographical turns that are only now bearing fruit and generating new research trends? Having moved since 1992 from graduate student gofer to tenured Gopher in the Department of History at the University of Minnesota, and from this position into an editor’s chair at *French Historical Studies*, I along with Patricia M. E. Lorcin decided to pose these questions to the field as we crossed the threshold of the twentieth anniversary of the bicentennial moment. What follows is the result of these queries, and it comes in two forms. First, four pieces of original French Revolution scholarship are offered as evidence of the kind of new historical work being done on the Revolution today. The articles are then followed by a forum in which a diverse array of voices representing the broad spectrum of Revolution historians today are heard in response to the guiding questions of this special issue.

What general patterns does this issue illuminate? Little evidence is to be found here that the French Revolution has disappeared as a major site of historical research and writing. Yet the contributors to the forum confirm that 1989 was a watershed that has left a new historiographical terrain in its wake. Several note the historical convergence that allowed the bicentennial reflections on the Revolution to be framed by such contemporary events as the massacres in Tiananmen Square, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the general disintegration of the Cold War global political order, both nationally in the realignment of national political parties and internationally in the reconfiguration of geopolitical solidarities. While adding intensity to the already ideologi-

cally charged historiographical battles that were coming to a head for their own reasons in the 1990s, this historico-historiographical synergy also resulted in a double chain reaction that exploded the old field of Revolution scholarship. Yet in the wake of this nova, the Revolution has once again risen phoenixlike from the ashes, and our contributors, admittedly in very different ways, all speak to the renaissance of revolutionary scholarship that the bicentennial firestorm has engendered, perhaps unwittingly and certainly indirectly.

One common theme is a perceived analytic shift from a monolithic French Revolution understood in terms of its world- and modernity-making historical impacts to a revolution in the lower case (or even revolutions in the plural) that participates in many multifaceted processes of change over the course of the decades around 1800. Instead of the singular events and legacies of 1789 and 1794 as the old literature had it, the new French revolution or revolutions that this issue outlines are more likely to be found outside any single date or world-making *journée*. They are likewise to be found outside singular structural imperatives of any kind and instead in dynamic historical processes located in multiple sites simultaneously and within multiple registers of historical action—textual, material, physiological, imaginative—all at once. The historiography of this new revolution or revolutions is also marked by an emphasis on eclecticism, pluralism, and scholarly pragmatism and by a guiding desire to escape from the blocks and binaries of the old debates. While complicated in its results, a new set of global attitudes and perspectives has also come to define this new revolutionary scholarship. This change manifests itself in everything from the reconfiguration of the Revolution into an event that can no longer be contained within the Hexagon and must be understood in terms of its Atlantic and global dimensions, to the new global networks of scholarly practice that are producing both a new kind of cosmopolitan scholar and scholarly literature and its ironic twin, a new postnational form of national and linguistic parochialism. Old scholarly categories (law, economy, political and social institutions) are being rejuvenated in this new space, while new categories (race, gender, the complexities of the self) are creating original innovations. The overall result has been the creation of a newly dynamic scholarly field, one that can be sampled, in abridged form, through the forum and articles of this issue.

Also common among our commentators was a recognition of the way in which the new digital technologies of the past quarter century have shaped the research and writing practices that constitute the field of French revolutionary studies. From the new global scholarly communication that e-mail and the Internet have made possible to the new accessibility of sources that the digitization of texts and archives

has provided, digital technology has been instrumental in making the new revolutionary historiography that this special issue encapsulates. It seemed appropriate, therefore, to use this issue as a vehicle for building new synergies between the Society for French Historical Studies' traditional "pulp-and-ink" journal and the digital infrastructure that has accrued around it in the same period. Founded originally in 1991 by Raymond Jonas as the e-mail discussion group FranceHS, and then reconfigured under its current name in 1995 during a period of affiliation with the H-Net listserv network, H-France has quickly made itself into a powerful digital partner in the field-defining discussions that this society and its journal have been facilitating for more than half a century. This relationship was further formalized in 2001 when a continuing agreement between H-France and the Society for French Historical Studies established the digital journal *H-France Review* as the official book review arm of the society. With this issue we hope to encourage a further collaboration between these different discussion spaces by inviting readers to participate online in further elaborations of the themes and debates of this issue. At the beginning of November, H-France will publish three essays offering reflection on the commentators' essays. We further invite you to direct your own responses toward H-France and to use that space in a newly explicit way as a vehicle for expanding the discussions that we have attempted to trigger in hard copy here. Are you intrigued by the tripartite (Colin) "Jones Conundrum" that revises the fifty-year-old (David) "Pinkney Thesis"? Or are you interested in discussing the provocative idea of a new radical centrist "blue" Jacobin consensus at the heart of French revolutionary studies, as Carla Hesse suggests? Or perhaps you are inspired by the authors of our articles to raise issues that deserve further consideration in light of the reflections offered by the participants in our forum or the H-France commentaries? We invite you to direct such impulses toward H-France. In this way, we hope, the traditional printed reactions on the twenty-first-century trends in French Revolution scholarship found here may encourage a further expansion of the twenty-first-century digital scholarship that is also transforming research and writing in this field.