

Introduction

Paul Friedland and Mary Louise Roberts

Much like the Revolution of 1789, the revolution that overturned French historiography in the 1980s and 1990s attracted a wide range of followers. While the “linguistic turn” did not spawn a historiographical Marat, calling for twenty thousand heads to fall, it did give rise to its own brand of theoretical *enragés* for whom cordiality toward those not sharing their views was not always a priority. As the fervor of revolution has gradually faded, something of a counterrevolution has taken place. While, again, there have been no victims’ balls or demands for vengeance against yesterday’s fanatics, we have consistently heard a call to go back to the ancien régime, often expressed in the euphemistic demand that we “return to the archives.”

For many of us in the field of French historical studies who devoured the theoretical texts produced on both sides of the Atlantic during the 1980s and 1990s, and who were profoundly marked by the insights contained in their pages, the last few years have been frustrating. Every revolution, even an intellectual one, has its radicals and its idiots, and while we may cringe at their excesses, we are equally discomfited by those who would, so to speak, throw the theoretical baby out with the bathwater. What, after all, would a “return to the archives,” bereft of theory, look like? Would we simply allow the documents to speak for themselves? Would we return to the days of crunching numbers, inventing categories and counting the number of people to whom they supposedly apply?

This special issue of *French Historical Studies* is intended to showcase scholarship that, in our view, points a way forward out of the historiographical morass in which we find ourselves. We have titled this issue

Paul Friedland is currently a fellow of the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University. His most recent book is *Seeing Justice Done: The Age of Spectacular Capital Punishment in France*. Mary Louise Roberts is professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. She has just completed a study of the American military in France during the Second World War, *Foreign Affairs: Sex, Power, and the G.I. in France, 1944–1946*.

The authors wish to thank Patricia M. E. Lorcin and J. B. Shank for the opportunity to edit this issue, as well as for their generosity and guidance in its preparation.

French Historical Studies, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Spring 2012) DOI 10.1215/00161071-1498454
Copyright 2012 by Society for French Historical Studies

“Theorized History” rather than “History and Theory” to emphasize our conviction that, as much as we may insist on the importance of theory to the study of history, in the last instance theory is an analytic tool rather than an end in itself. While all the authors in this issue are well acquainted with a range of theoretical approaches to the study of history, they have not allowed any particular set of assumptions and concerns to color their understanding of the past. In the first article, for example, Peter Sahlins shows how Louis XIV’s domestication of wild animals in the royal menagerie paralleled his project to tame the aristocracy, that is, to turn unpredictable beasts into stylized aesthetic objects. While Sahlins draws from Norbert Elias’s important writings on the civilizing process and court society, the story that he tells differs greatly from Elias’s own narratives. Here theoretical insights inform the story to be told, but the end is by no means preordained. Indeed, Sahlins’s conclusions, and his revelations about court society—both animal and human—are startlingly new and surprising.

A similar balance characterizes Dan Edelstein’s essay concerning the evolution of the concept of revolutionary authority. While Edelstein’s very focus on the truly *revolutionary* nature of the Revolution—how it represents a complete departure from everything that precedes it—and his focus on political rhetoric and authority might properly be described as Furetian, his conclusions differ markedly from Furet’s own. Unlike Furet, who saw the radical nature of the Revolution as somehow inherent in its premise, Edelstein sees the radicalization of the Revolution as the product of an evolution. Revolutionary authority did not spring fully formed into existence like Athena from Zeus’s head; it developed gradually over time. Whereas the Revolution’s legitimacy was, in the early years, predicated on the people’s sovereignty, Edelstein shows through his analysis of political rhetoric that from 1792 onward the Revolution became, however tautologically, the locus of its own power, a “self-reflexive authority” that, in the absence of constitutional constraints, evolved into a dangerous law unto itself.

While Edelstein draws on the work of many historians and theorists, his conclusions are not predetermined by any specific theoretical approach, and he is consistently wary of anything that smacks of unexamined preconceptions or easy answers. A similarly nuanced approach characterizes the way in which the historians in this issue deal with the historical evidence, evaluating surviving texts not as if they contain some hidden truth waiting to be revealed, but as the building blocks of an argument to be constructed. They historicize documents as thoroughly as possible by questioning the naturalized assumptions through which historical actors produce their point of view. Through careful analysis of archival, printed, and iconographic texts, the articles in this

issue aim to tell us not what “actually” happened but what the historical actors *thought* was happening. Rather than “recovering” truths that conform to their own preconceptions of the past, these historians uncover the preconceptions of the past themselves. The stories they tell concern our own historical becoming—the evolution of modern notions of authority, honor, identity, and civilization. Resisting the idea of the past as an objectively knowable thing that awaits historical discovery, the authors recognize just how much the past is incorporated in our present, as familiar and as strange, as knowable and as incomprehensible, as the world in which we live. They see history as a pursuit that may tell us less about who we were than about who we did not realize we are.

The analytic richness of the essays that follow results from a willingness to seek historical specificity and to reproduce (rather than diminish) complexity. In “The Face of Imposture in Postrevolutionary France,” for example, James H. Johnson probes the anxiety about identity at a time when the rigid social order of the *ancien régime* was being replaced by a new kind of malleable social status that had more to do with one’s reputation in the public eye than with bloodlines. Johnson resists the temptation to have his protagonists, both real and fictional, tell identical stories about imposture. Instead, he produces a complex view of a burgeoning meritocracy built on the ruins of the old order of estates. Moreover, rather than depending on reductive notions of causality, Johnson looks for causation in several different registers, emphasizing the “echoes and affinities” between phenomena as opposed to the logic of cause and effect. His approach is one of suggestion and implication rather than of argumentation.

In her examination of bankruptcy in the early nineteenth century, Erika Vause makes a similar commitment to reproducing the ambiguity and complexity of her sources. While she focuses on one well-known bankruptcy, that of Charles-Denis Demiannay’s bank in Rouen, she resists constructing a synthetic narrative of the bank’s demise, and instead focuses on various and conflicting accounts as told by contemporaries. For Vause, simple narratives of “what happened” are beside the point. The story lies in the structure of the narratives themselves—in particular, their grounding in economic and moral principles. This focus allows Vause to explore a crucial issue, “the vexed relationship between cultural values and economic motivation.”

Andrew Aisenberg also challenges us to rethink historical narratives in his analysis of the political and legal debates concerning the occupation of North Africa in the 1830s. Such debates, which took place in and out of the National Assembly during these years, reveal the initial inconceivability of a common legal framework for France

and North Africa. A simple narrative about the rise of colonialism is impossible, then, because the legal genesis of Algeria as a territorial possession was so complex and confused. Painstakingly deferring to the contradictions in his sources, and refusing a clear story of origins, Aisenberg uses ambiguity productively by exploring the effects of a slippery boundary between the “political” and the “social” in government discourse on the North African case. In facing the complex task of situating Algeria within a larger legal framework, the legislators put forth conflicting sets of social facts about the new territory. As in the Deminay bankruptcy narratives, these “facts” supported a wide diversity of social, economic, and scientific principles. Aisenberg’s aim is neither to parse the “true” from the “false” fact here, nor to understand such facts as reducible to specific political interests. Rather, he focuses on their genealogy and, perhaps most important, how they figured in (as well as shaped) the domestic “social question” dominating July Monarchy politics. Such an approach allows Aisenberg not only to tease out the links between colonial and metropolitan politics but also to show how the liberal creation of the colonized subject and that of the worker were imbricated in each other.

It is perhaps Elizabeth Everton’s article that most directly challenges the notion of truth as a coherent, unitary subject. Through an ingenious analysis of the caricatures of Caran d’Ache, Everton complicates the standard account of the Dreyfus Affair as a struggle between truth and military *raison d’état*. Both the Left and the Right, she argues, saw themselves on the side of truth, although they defined truth itself in different ways. While those on the left saw *vérité* as rational, abstract, and scientific, those on the right saw it as a function of the individual, grounded in personal integrity rather than abstract “fact.” By analyzing truth itself as a cultural artifact, Everton breaks new ground in our understanding of political cartoons. While in the past historians have reduced the meaning of such visual propaganda to the expression of political interest, Everton’s sensitive analysis suggests that we can learn a great deal from such sources about the cultural frameworks in which political debates operate. Like the other authors, Everton proves that these visual documents hold a deep treasure of historicity that we have all too often overlooked.

Questioning how such seemingly self-evident concepts as civilization, authority, identity, honor, and truth were historically constructed may, at times, seem as unpleasant as revealing the ingredients of sausages, exposing the unpalatable components of an otherwise tasty final product. But such discoveries make historical scholarship a more dynamic, creative process. In revealing how our own reality and preconceptions came into existence, history becomes relevant to the present.

While the following essays range widely, they share the conviction that the essence of the past is not to be found in the discovery of some document at the bottom of the archive box, but instead is to be ascertained through the careful juxtaposition of documents, revealing the different ways in which historical actors made sense of the same situation.

In closing, we would like to emphasize that this issue was intended not as a “defense” of theory, but rather as an illustration of how theory can enrich historical insight. Our approach is not meant to be didactic or dogmatic. Instead, our aim is to showcase the possibilities of a “theorized history” as it is very broadly defined. The articles presented here do not reject the call to return to the archives. Rather, they provide eloquent testimony to the fact that many of us never left.