

Polgehroneon

Interpreting the French Revolution

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For most of the last two centuries, historical interpretations of the French Revolution have focused on its place in a grand narrative of modernity. For the most 'counter-revolutionary' writers, the Revolution showed why modernity was to be resisted – destroying traditional institutions and disrupting all that was valuable in an older moral order. For those who we can broadly call 'liberals', the opposite was true. For them, revolutionary upheaval had been an essential component of progress towards a just and open society, in which the talents of the rising middle classes could be fairly rewarded, and where the rights of individual citizens could be guaranteed, and acted upon. For many liberals, the French Revolution's evocation of national identity as an active force in history, displacing dynastic loyalties and raising up 'the people' to new dignity, was also a core contribution to historical progress.

From the mid-nineteenth century an increasingly well-developed Marxist historical analysis also addressed the Revolution's meaning. Borrowing its notions of class-based historical progress from early liberal views of middle-class revolutionary triumph, this tradition placed increasing emphasis on the role of the common people, but also on the economic and political self-interest of all social classes in originating the breakdown of the 1780s. At its peak in the mid-twentieth century, this Marxist tradition produced works of unparalleled archival rigour and breadth of sympathy.¹

The dominance of assumptions about historical progress in 'modernity' was such that, as late as the 1970s, even quite penetrating critiques of the empirical basis of the Marxist viewpoint did not succeed in displacing it. Studies of actual patterns of property-ownership or political opinions, which invalidated assumptions of a 'pre-capitalist' nobility and a 'proto-capitalist' bourgeoisie, nevertheless left the general view that the French Revolution was a step on an inevitable path largely untouched.²

What this effective liberal-Marxist consensus left to one side, however, was the question of how to discuss the dimension of these events which was violently disruptive, and in 1793-94 represented the conscious unleashing of deadly Terror on essentially helpless populations. For most of the twentieth century, the belief in progressive modernity had made these questions seem tasteless, but as both the bicentenary of 1789 and the collapse of Soviet socialism loomed, such issues were again thrust to the forefront of debate.

By 1989, the work of François Furet, that combined a rejection of Marxist theories with a denial of the material basis of revolutionary politics, was en route to dominance. In the Anglophone world, it was aided at the popular level by Simon Schama, who delivered a searing polemic against revolutionary violence and the alleged popular delusions that nurtured it. At the academic level a range of conferences and publications were coordinated by Furet and Keith Michael Baker, whose own brand of analysis also placed heavy emphasis on the bad political choices made by revolutionaries from the very outset of 1789. The result was a picture of the French Revolution dominated by a dysfunctional 'political culture', in which rhetorical abstractions replaced calculation of interests, and devotion to the purity of the revolutionary process disastrously displaced practical attention to its ends. In the context of bicentenary celebrations, the French Revolution was reimagined as something which had offered great hope for the future, but which became at best a massive aberration, if not simply a theatre of horror.³

These views, although scorned by Marxists as essentially 'counter-revolutionary', successfully disrupted the liberal view of the Revolution's basic connection with progress. Intriguingly, however, this has subsequently opened the path for a much wider-ranging examination of revolutionary events themselves.

Timothy Tackett was one of the first to do this, using the correspondence and memoirs of the novice politicians in the 1789 National Assembly to show how unformed their convictions were at the start of the revolutionary process. Tackett demonstrated how significant the actual conflicts with royal and aristocratic forces were in helping these men 'become revolutionary'. More recently, Barry Shapiro has gone further, arguing that the events of that summer were literally traumatic for the Assembly, leaving its members psychologically unable to contemplate the kind of compromise with royal authority that might have ended the Revolution quickly.⁴

Studies of the aristocratic side itself have on the other hand suggested strongly that there was no viable route to compromise that could have brought the monarch 'on board' while also saving 1789's key gains of rights and citizenship. New sources indicate that Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and their key advisers were quite unwilling to admit the loss of what revolutionaries thought they had already surrendered.⁵

Further new studies have also illustrated the complexity of the ideas that revolutionaries carried with them, both explicitly and implicitly, from the Old Regime into the New. They combined, for example, a conviction of the need for a wide culture of elective office with stringent restrictions on actually seeking office, seeing declared candidacy as a form of moral corruption. Revolutionaries believed fervently in a free press, but often used it to expand and deepen a pre-existent 'culture of calumny' that took an almost self-destructive delight in publicly defaming political opponents.⁶

Much attention has been given to rediscovering the Revolution as an escalation, rather than an inevitable decline. Thus Peter McPhee's biography of Robespierre portrays a man of humanitarian sensibility driven by the interplay of inflexible ideals and seemingly ubiquitous enemies into endorsing massacres and purges. Jean-Clément Martin

discusses the violence unleashed by revolutionary events as something emergent from cycles of confrontation that cannot be reduced to either ideology or circumstance, but came from a potent and evolving blend of contexts.⁷

Until 1989, it seemed overwhelmingly important to see the French Revolution as part of a pattern of modernity that led to both capitalism and communism, and as part of an argument about which of those paths was better. The loss of that frame of reference has made some anxious about what the Revolution should be 'for'. However, recent scholarship suggests that a more deeply historical appreciation of events in their own context, distinct from that created by a century of ideological strife, offers ample food for thought about perennial questions of structure and change, conflict and peace, freedom and justice.⁸

Designing enquiries to make pupils think about interpretations of the French Revolution

The past changes as the present changes – the 'Industrial Revolution' acquires new meanings when we can map its impact on polar ice-caps. Task pupils to explore the shifting meanings of the French Revolution by looking closely at the way that the events of the Revolution are represented in books written at different times – textbooks from different dates, at *Key Stage 3 (11-14 years old)*, and academic history books – such as Soboul and Schama – at *AS and A2 (16-19 years old)*. Explore the content of the books: is the 'story' about the same things in all cases? For example, how many words or pages are devoted to, first, the storming of the

Bastille, and, second, the September Massacres? How many women are there and what classes are they from? Does the story have the same shape in all cases: where, for example, does it end? What significance do books attribute to the Revolution – in prefaces, in conclusions or on book jackets, for example? Explore patterns that emerge: what changes between earlier and later accounts? Finally, encourage pupils to speculate: why might the 'story' of the revolution change over time?

The Editors

Further reading

At www.frenchhistorysociety.ac.uk/french_revolution.htm there is a free revision-essay and series of audio podcasts, prepared by David Andress with the sixth-form of St Catherine's School, Guildford.

David Andress, *The Terror; civil war in the French Revolution*, London: Little, Brown, 2004.

David Andress, *1789; the threshold of the modern age*, London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

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Ronald Schechter, ed., *The French Revolution: The Essential Readings*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

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- George Rudé's *The Crowd in the French Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959, is the canonical detailed study in English. Albert Soboul, *The French Revolution, 1787-1799: from the storming of the Bastille to Napoleon* (trans. Alan I. Forrest and Colin Jones), London, 1989 (first English publication 1974) is the definitive Marxist survey.
- See William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Simon Schama, *Citizens: a chronicle of the French Revolution*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989; François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (trans. E. Forster), Editions de la Maison de Science de l'Homme and Cambridge University Press, 1981. See also the four volumes of *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, culminating with Keith Michael Baker (ed.), vol. 4, *The Terror*, Bingley: Emerald, 1994.
- Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: the deputies of the French National Assembly and the emergence of a revolutionary culture (1789-90)*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996; Barry M. Shapiro, *Traumatic Politics: the deputies and the king in the early French Revolution*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009.
- Munro Price, *The Fall of the French Monarchy: Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette and the Baron de Breteuil*, London: Pan Macmillan, 2002.
- Malcolm Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution: an apprenticeship in democracy 1789-1799*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996; Charles Walton, *Policing public opinion in the French Revolution: the culture of calumny and the problem of free speech*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Peter McPhee, *Robespierre: a revolutionary life*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012; Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et révolution: essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national*, Paris: Seuil, 2006.
- See the series of online essays collected as Volume 1, Issue 1 of the 'H-France Salon', www.h-france.net/Salon/h-francesalon.html.

This edition's Polychronicon was compiled by David Andress, Professor of Modern History at the University of Portsmouth.

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