

H-France Salon

Vol. 8 (2016), Issue 12, #3

My encounters with the Institut Historique de la Révolution Française:
From the Bicentenaire to the 21st Century

Jennifer Ngaire Heuer
University of Massachusetts Amherst

I first encountered the Institut d'Histoire de la Révolution Française (IHRF) in 1989-90 as an American college student studying abroad in Paris. I had an experience that may be unique and tends to intrigue scholars of the French Revolution—while admittedly leaving non-specialists baffled as to its import. At the University of Chicago, I had taken several classes with François Furet. That fall, I gleefully waltzed past the tourists barred from entering the Sorbonne, found my way through its hallowed, if also rather dingy, halls, and followed a year-long series of lectures by Michel Vovelle, then director of the IHRF. It was an intellectually dizzying experience—two very different approaches to interpreting not only the specific events of the 1780s and 1790s but also to doing history itself.

This sense of intellectual disorientation was intensified by both the uproar over the bicentennial of the French Revolution (which I only partly understood at the time) and also by contemporary events in Eastern Europe. I learned many things that year, among them:

- 1) Never predict what will happen with a revolution. You will be wrong. Wait until it has happened and then explain it.
- 2) If you are studying the French Revolution in particular, the *Archives Parlementaires* are indispensable. It was only later that I realized just how important the IHRF had been (and has continued to be) in its production.
- 3) As an American historian of France, trained by scholars at both the EHESS and the IHRF, it was wisest not to take sides in certain intellectual and personal disputes.

I returned to the United States expecting to “escape” the French Revolution and work on other topics, only to find myself slowly sucked back in, with copies of the *Archives Parlementaires* borrowed from Chicago’s Regenstein Library stacked in my dorm room as I tackled a senior thesis. Even then I didn’t realize what the long-term reverberations of some of my experiences would be. While I was in Paris, the University of Chicago hired one-on-one tutors to help befuddled American college students negotiate unfamiliar systems and stumble through awkward attempts at mastering a new language; I was inordinately fortunate to have been assigned to work with Dominique Godineau (herself a product of the IHRF). Some of my interest in gender and

revolution undoubtedly dates from that experience. She also made me draw up a chronology of the Revolution (which I did on a twenty-pound “portable” computer I had dragged to France with me, without an accompanying printer). It has survived through a very long series of hardware and software changes, has been modified by numerous additions and emendations, and still remains relevant; I consulted it repeatedly when I was teaching on the Revolution this past spring.

So in a very real sense, the IHRF helped launch my career as a historian of the French Revolution—even if very few at the Institut were aware of their influence at the time.

Over the years, I have remained grateful for many aspects of the IHRF, especially its resources as a library. I have found the Baudouin Collection of Decrees and Laws particularly useful recently. Digitization has changed how I interact with some of those resources. Other sites, from Gallica to the “advanced search” option of Google Books (despite the Google team’s disregard for pertinent bibliographic information) to the French Revolution Digital Archives hosted by Stanford, have also transformed research on the Revolution. Indeed, such resources have just allowed me to track down a key text for an article, rather than waiting in impatient limbo until I could next plan a research trip to Paris. Yet there is still an enormous amount to be said for a library specifically devoted to the French Revolution. This is true both as a virtual space, digitally bringing together sources from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with very recent publications, and as a physical space, one of fortuitous discovery (while digitization has its wonders, sometimes the best discoveries still come from actually holding a paper object—or prowling around looking at *usuels* when momentarily stuck about what to do next...) and fortuitous connection.

I am most grateful to the IHRF for catalyzing and promoting those connections—for introducing me to interesting people and scholarship (both by happenstance and more self-consciously cultivated *rencontres*) and helping to sustain on-going exchanges. Associated talks, seminars, workshops, and colloquium have often been incredibly thought-provoking—touching on, to name only a handful of topics, social and economic change; colonialism, slavery, and law; popular culture and theater; violence, war, and diplomacy; and citizenship, gender, and sexuality. This is testimony to the extraordinary reach of the French Revolution itself. (It is, incidentally, often quite fun introducing American students, accustomed to the more limited nature of the American Revolution—though there is also more to that story than they usually realize—to the extent and degree of change the French Revolution entailed, if also to the costs of that change.) It is also testimony to the creativity and intellectual engagement of scholars in the field. Even when I have been unable to attend events in person, perusing the Institute’s programs through its website has given me a sense of the state of the field, led me to discover emerging scholars (especially French and Europeans who do not necessarily frequent North American conferences), and kept me updated on others’ work.

I am especially appreciative of its two most recent directors, Jean-Clément Martin, who invited me to speak on my own research, and Pierre Serna, with whom I have had several productive exchanges. I have also had particularly stimulating exchanges with specific individuals who have been associated with the Institut in some way, including (and this is far from a comprehensive list), Anne Simonin, Guillaume Mazeau, Virginie Martin, Bettina Frederking, and Clyde Plumazille.

As I write, I am still unsure of how the IHRF is fitting into the changing nature of the University of Paris; the complexity of the situation (and perhaps my original lessons in keeping some distance from French internal politics) have left me uncertain about what its eventual form and legacy may be. I am worried about the losses that will accompany its dissolution or transformation. But I remain hopeful that it—and the people associated with it—will continue to play a vital role in promoting the study of a fascinating and crucial historical period.

Jennifer Ngaire Heuer
University of Massachusetts Amherst
heuer@history.umass.edu

H-France Salon
Vol. 8 (2016), Issue 12, #3
ISBN 2150-4873
Copyright © 2016 by H-France