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The Institut d'Histoire de la Révolution Française in World-Historical Perspective

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If it had occurred to the original French revolutionaries to create an Institute for the History of the French Revolution, it would probably have been housed in a grandiose structure, perhaps a pyramid or a sphere designed by Ledoux or Boullé. Instead, it took a hundred and fifty years before the Institut d'Histoire de la Révolution française (IHRF) was established, in 1937, in the cramped quarters on the third floor of the main building of the Sorbonne where it is still housed. Even though it is a bit of a shock to American visitors accustomed to the comfortable premises of research institutes in our own country, there is something symbolically appropriate about the modesty of the IHRF's environment. Dedicated to the study of the movement that founded modern French democracy, the IHRF exemplifies the spirit of austere republicanism, Third Republic style. It is a setting totally devoid of architectural bombast, in which devotion to scholarship takes precedence even over honoring the distinguished historians, starting with Georges Lefebvre, who have served as its directors: if my memory serves, there are no photographs of them on the walls.

The modesty of the IHRF's quarters belies its importance to scholarship. Remarkably enough, given the universally acknowledged significance of the French Revolution, the IHRF is the only research center in the world devoted exclusively to the study of that event. It is a rendez-vous point for historians from all over the world, the one place where they know they can encounter other specialists and learn about the many individual and collective projects under way in their field. Particularly under its two most recent directors, Jean-Clément Martin and Pierre Serna, the IHRF sponsored numerous colloquia to promote the exchange of ideas about the subject and the development of new perspectives. On the open shelves of its library, one can find the classic works of earlier generations of scholars and the latest publications. One can pull down the oversized volumes of the original edition of the *Moniteur universel* and spread them out, rather than having to fight with the librarians at the Bibliothèque Nationale for access to one volume at a time. The cafés in the Place de la Sorbonne across the street, even as they strive to go upscale, still provide an unparalleled environment for the back-and-forth of conversation that generates so many new insights.

The importance of the IHRF seems so obvious to those of us who work on the French Revolution that the news, at the beginning of the year, that it was to cease to exist as an autonomous entity came as a shock. Paris academic institutions are in the midst of all kinds of restructuring, and it is not easy, from this side of the Atlantic, to fully understand the stakes in them. It is appropriate, however, for those of us who have benefitted so much from the existence of the IHRF to express

our concern about its future. The idea that we and future historians would be left without this unique *lieu de mémoire et de rencontre* is a painful one. Even in this new era, in which the scholarly exchange takes the form of blog posts and tweets between researchers who may never meet in person, the human encounters that take place in an institution like the IHRF and the sense of participating in the long tradition of research that it embodies are irreplaceable.

If memory serves, I first visited the IHRF in the fall of 1974. The terms of the fellowship I had received from the Social Science Research Council required me to seek the support of an appropriate scholarly center in France. I will admit that I had only a vague sense of the importance of the man who summoned me brusquely into his office, listened to my broken French for a few minutes, and told me that my intended dissertation on the counterrevolutionary press “n’a aucun intérêt pour moi.” My ignorance about French academia kept me from being unduly discouraged by Albert Soboul’s reception, and an encouraging meeting with one of Soboul’s contemporaries, Jacques Godechot, gave me hope.

Over the years, as I kept returning to Paris and became a part of the international community of scholars of the French Revolution, the IHRF became a more important part of my life. Under Soboul’s successors (with one unfortunate exception in the 1990s), American and other foreign scholars were more welcome on the premises than they had been under his regime. In the Soboul era, the IHRF was identified with a particular interpretation of the Revolution; in recent times, it has become a forum where different visions of that event are freely debated. I long ago lost count of the many rendez-vous I have had there with members of the IHRF’s scholarly *équipe* and with other friends for whom it provides a convenient meeting place. There is something special about discussing the French Revolution in a location surrounded by monuments of the era. Within a five minutes’ walk of the IHRF, one finds the Panthéon, the plaque marking the location of the Cordeliers Club, the Odéon, and many other sites associated with the history the IHRF keeps alive. And I have often amused myself with the thought of how Albert Soboul would react if he knew that the inarticulate American student whose prospects he dismissed so offhandedly has been invited to speak several times—in French, yet!—at the IHRF.

There may be valid arguments for integrating the IHRF into a larger administrative structure, but one hopes that those entrusted with overseeing the institution will recognize that the French Revolution is not just an “ordinary” era in French history. Others may accuse me of special pleading for my own subject area, but it seems fair to say that the French Revolution really is the one moment when, as Hegel put it, the *Weltgeist* descended on France. A monumental event in world history, the French Revolution has given rise to a unique tradition of scholarship, and the continuation of that tradition requires a research center led by scholars who are intimately familiar with the subject and the sources for its study. Even in this era of globalization in the world and decentralization in France, it is unthinkable that such a center could be located anywhere but Paris.

Certainly the IHRF could benefit from ampler resources. There may be a nostalgic appeal to the cramped rooms it presently occupies, but they are really not adequate for the needs of modern scholarship. By American university standards, French academics’ offices are always surprisingly small and uncomfortable, but the IHRF’s provisions for its professors are particularly minimal, especially in view of the number of students they supervise. It is hard to appreciate the riches of the IHRF’s library while trying not to trip on the multiple extension cords connecting users’ laptops

and the Institut's own equipment to the wall outlets, and one can only admire the persistence of our French colleagues who manage to organize world-class scholarly encounters without a dedicated auditorium or a comfortable seminar room. The less said about the bathroom facilities in the building, the better. But it will not profit scholarship on the French Revolution if the IHRF is absorbed into a larger institution with better facilities at the price of losing its soul.

No matter how one judges the French Revolution, it is an integral part of France's heritage and an essential reference point in world history. As struggles over the meaning of the concepts of liberty, equality, and fraternity continue to occupy the headlines, in France and all across the globe, the need for serious historical scholarship on the subject remains as vital as ever. The humble appearance of the IHRF should not mislead us: it is a unique and irreplaceable resource for the study of this extraordinary event. Its future matters, not just to our French colleagues who are directly involved in the reorganization currently under way, but to all of us who struggle to understand the French Revolution and who want future generations of scholars to be able to continue our endeavors.

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