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The following essay is a response to a forum on “Twenty Years after the Bicentennial” appearing in *French Historical Studies* (volume 32, fall 2009)

A la recherche d’un nouveau paradigme ?

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Reading this forum was, in one sense, a wholly predictable pleasure. I have known and admired each of the authors for many years, and they have each produced characteristically thoughtful, lucid, and informative essays. Yet in another sense, the exercise was, it must be said, rather dispiriting. Twenty-four years ago, when I started graduate school, the French Revolution seemed among the most vibrant and important of historical subjects. Now, from these seven eminent colleagues, I see it described by such phrases as “historical backwater” (Sophia Rosenfeld) and “interpretive cul-de-sac” (Lynn Hunt). David Andress believes the field has “spent the last twenty years steadily getting over its own history,” which is scarcely more inspiring. Even the more optimistic Carla Hesse suggests a rebound from a near-death experience: “A phoenix has risen from the intellectual ashes.” Jean-Clément Martin, while likewise detecting a “renaissance” in progress (thereby implying a prior death or Dark Ages?), still admits: “Cette situation peut être considérée comme une régression ou une deliquescence.”

Footnotes sometimes speak as loudly as texts, and the footnotes to these essays tell a troubling story as well. Only one book published during the past twenty years is mentioned by more than three of the contributors: Martin’s *Violence et révolution*.¹ And while the contributors give it well-deserved praise, none of them credit it with establishing what Lynn Hunt calls a “new paradigm.” The historian who receives the most mentions in the forum is the same one who dominated debates about the French Revolution twenty years ago: François Furet. In short, it does not seem that any work published in the past twenty years has had an impact comparable to that of Furet’s 1978 *Penser la Révolution française*—or, for that matter, Lynn Hunt’s 1984 *Politics, Culture and Class*, or seminal articles published by Robert Darnton and Keith Michael Baker in the 1970s and 1980s.² So despite the phoenix-sightings (J.B. Shank uses the same metaphor as Hesse), it is hard to resist the impression that the field suffers from some significant fragmentation, exhaustion, and even confusion.

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¹ Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et révolution: Essai sur la naissance d’un mythe national* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

² François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978); Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Robert Darnton, “The High Enlightenment and Low-Life of Literature in Pre-Revolutionary France,” *Past and Present*, 51 (1971), pp. 81-115; Keith Michael Baker, “On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution,” in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan, ed., *Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 197-219. Baker’s enormously influential collection *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) appeared after the bicentennial, but mostly gathered together, in revised form, essays published earlier, including “On the Problem...”

The authors, even those who wax optimistic, largely agree on the reasons for this state of affairs. Most of them refer, in one way or another, to what Martin calls the “remise en cause des grands récits idéologiques” at the time of the bicentennial, caused by the simultaneous collapse of Marxist historical interpretations and Marxist political projects. Most of them also note the effect the “global turn” has had on the historical study of the Revolution. As Carla Hesse nicely puts it: “It is no longer possible to write a persuasive narrative of the French Revolution—as both Albert Soboul and Furet could do—without considering how the world beyond France shaped and inflected the internal, that is, the national dynamic.” Indeed, while Marxist histories of the Revolution at least implicitly inserted French events into a world-historical narrative, Furet’s is probably the most resolutely “internalist” major interpretation ever produced. But as Laurent Dubois admits at the end of his fine essay, the “global turn” has yet to provide the Revolution with a powerful explanatory framework. Finally, Lynn Hunt cogently observes that “the history of the French Revolution seems to be sharing in a general state of ‘paradigmlessness’ in the humanities.”

Of course, if the contributors to the forum have not sighted any new paradigms, they have identified several promising new research agendas. The global dimensions of the Revolution stand out most prominently here, and there is general agreement that some excellent historical writing has appeared on the subject, not least by Laurent Dubois.³ Research into gender and the Revolution of course goes back well before the bicentennial, but as several contributors note, it has particularly flourished since then (curiously, none of them mention Joan Scott’s *Only Paradoxes to Offer*).⁴ In addition, Carla Hesse calls attention to the Sorbonne-centered “neo-Jacobin” current of research, which explores the emergence of republican politics and republican institutions from a “radical centrist” perspective. And finally, there are the linked terrains of the emotions and “experience,” which Lynn Hunt, Sophia Rosenfeld, and, to a lesser extent, David Andress all invoke. I think the contributors could usefully have devoted more systematic discussion to the historiography of violence, to which Jean-Clément Martin and Howard Brown have both made major contributions in the last few years.⁵ But taken collectively, the contributions still provide an excellent survey of the current historiographical landscape.

I have to confess, however, that my own excitement at these new directions is tempered by dismay at how many areas of French Revolutionary history have clearly either fallen into neglect or failed to generate much excitement since the bicentennial. In this sense, the forum seems to me as significant for what the contributors *fail* to discuss, as for what they do.

To begin with the single most obvious omission, a serious interest in economics seems to have vanished from the field’s major currents of research almost entirely, except in the area of French Atlantic history, where Dubois points to some significant on-going activity. Colin Jones also notes the impact of some research in the area of consumerism, and several contributors refer to work that engages with the history of economic thought, notably by Michael Sonenscher.⁶ But in the forum, only Jones even bothers to lament the overall decline of economic history of the Revolution or to hope against hope for its own phoenix-like revival in the context of the current global economic crisis.

³ See particularly Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute, 2004).

⁴ Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁵ Martin, *Violence et Révolution*; Howard Brown, *Ending the French Revolution: Violence, Justice, and Repression from the Terror to Napoleon* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006).

⁶ Michael Sonenscher, *Before the Deluge: Public Debt, Inequality, and the Intellectual Origins of the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), and *Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). To be sure, significant work on the Revolution’s economic history has continued to appear, from such authors as Jeff Horn and Lisa DiCaprio, but economics remains outside the major debates on the Revolution.

The vast question of the Revolution's origins seems likewise to have virtually disappeared from sight with the collapse of the old "social interpretations." François Furet famously displaced the attention of historians from the Revolution's origins to its radicalization, but to judge from the forum, there has been no significant attempt to reverse the process. Laurent Dubois at least mentions the "merchants and professionals of the port towns," but only in a call for future research. Colin Jones, meanwhile, notes the importance that Jürgen Habermas's work has held over the past two decades, but he identifies this phenomenon as part of a general historiographical shift in focus away from the great revolutions and toward the Enlightenment. It is the Enlightenment, he observes, which is now most often seen as the birthplace of an ill-defined "modernity."⁷

To judge from the forum, there also appears to have been little major new work done since 1989 on the principal events and personalities of the Revolution. There is no mention here of any of the key Revolutionary *journalées*, and the names Robespierre, Danton and Mirabeau all fail to appear. While William Sewell's brilliant article on the fall of the Bastille as a "structural transformation" has had considerable influence in the profession as a whole, few French Revolutionary historians seem eager to follow in his footsteps.⁸ And while Timothy Tackett's name deservedly crops up several times in the forum, his book on the flight to Varennes does not.⁹ Colin Jones meanwhile notes that the obsession of earlier generations with Revolutionary political factions (as in the once-famous Sydenham-Patrick debate) has come to seem pointless and antiquarian to many.¹⁰ I might also mention that in the forum, the Cold War gets mentioned more often than the revolutionary wars, and the name "Vendée" appears not at all.

Finally, a quick reading of the forum could easily suggest that the realm of political and religious ideas has gotten very short shrift over the past twenty years. This, in fact, would be a misperception. The contributors tend to associate a close attention to ideas and "discourse" with a "post-linguistic turn" theoretical perspective that insists on the constitutive role of language in human affairs—a perspective they have come to find frustratingly limited. "As an object of experience and cognition," Lynn Hunt writes, "society was not just the product of an epistemological or even ontological discourse." Carla Hesse praises the "neo-Jacobin" historians for not just seeing the Revolution "as an episode in the conceptual history of an idea, or as an engine of republican ideas and symbols." Sophia Rosenfeld speaks, in a critical accent, of "historians' recent fixation on discourse." But in fact the contributors mention, and praise, many works that mostly deal with political ideas: by Baker, James Livesey, Andrew Jainchill, Marc Belissa, and several others.¹¹ Rosenfeld's own *A Revolution in Language* provides a superb example

⁷ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989). Rebecca L. Spang made a similar argument in her important review article "Paradigms and Paranoia: How Modern Is the French Revolution?," *American Historical Review* 108: 1 (2003): 119-147.

⁸ William Sewell, "Political Events as Structural Transformations: Inventing Revolution at the Bastille," *Theory and Society* 25: 6 (1996): 841-81.

⁹ Timothy Tackett, *When the King Took Flight* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Michael J. Sydenham, *The Girondins* (London: Athlone, 1961); Alison Patrick, "Political Divisions in the French National Convention," *Journal of Modern History* 41: 4 (1969): 421-74; Michael J. Sydenham, "The Montagnards and Their Opponents: Some Considerations on a Recent Reassessment of the Conflicts in the French National Convention, 1792-93," *Journal of Modern History* 43: 2 (1971): 287-293; Alison Patrick, "The Montagnards and Their Opponents: Some Comments," *Journal of Modern History* 43: 2 (1971): 294-297; Alison Patrick, *The Men of the First French Republic: Political Alignments in the National Convention of 1792* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972).

¹¹ Keith Michael Baker, "Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of Modern History* 73: 1 (2001): 32-53; James Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics After the Terror: The Republican*

of a book that takes ideas seriously even as it tries to move beyond some of the limitations of the “linguistic turn.”¹² Yet undeniably, the field of Revolutionary political thought has suffered since the bicentennial. One reason undoubtedly is that Furet, for all his success in building an ideological *machine de combat* in the 1980s, had relatively few students follow him into French Revolutionary studies (Keith Baker’s students, meanwhile, have tended to work more heavily on the Old Regime).¹³

These various absences will not matter very much, in the long run, if the new directions of research pointed to by the contributors end up generating powerful new statements about the French Revolution as a whole. But for the moment, I do not see much movement in this direction, and at least one contributor seems to treat the very idea of such statements with deep suspicion. “What passed for the history of the French Revolution, perhaps until 1989 itself, came close to being myth,” writes David Andress, who goes on to praise several recent works for resisting generalization in favor of exploring “kaleidoscopic” complexities and contradictions. Frankly, I find it hard to sympathize with this position. As two examples of historiographical “myths,” Andress cites Robert Darnton’s work on pre-Revolutionary “Grub Street” and the thesis, advanced by feminist historians in the 1980s, that the Revolution had an essentially exclusionary stance towards women. Does he really mean to conflate ambitious interpretation, based on verifiable evidence, with mythification? Of course subsequent scholars have challenged Darnton and the feminist historians, refuted them on some points, and challenged their broader arguments. But this is not “getting beyond myth.” It is the same thing Darnton and the feminist historians were doing in the first place, namely serious history-writing. Yes, overly argumentative, unsubstantiated history risks sliding into myth. But overly cautious, narrowly empirical history risks sliding into empty positivism.

When it comes to the potential for the new research agendas pointed to in the forum to generate far-reaching arguments about the Revolution as a whole, I am cautiously hopeful, but not yet convinced. As far as “global history” goes, the principal gains to date come from our new understanding of just how important events in the Caribbean actually were and just how much the former slave societies of Saint-Dominique, Guadeloupe, and Martinique participated in the history of a not-just-French Revolution. But while I agree instinctively with Carla Hesse that “the world beyond France shaped and inflected the [...] national dynamic,” I have not yet seen a powerful and convincing statement about exactly how and why this occurred. I hope that on-going research into the connections between the metropole and its colonies will provide one.¹⁴

In the area of gender, as several of the contributors note, the past twenty years have largely seen a move *away* from far-reaching arguments and from the earlier feminist narrative about the Revolution’s exclusion of women from rights and the public sphere. In its place have come interpretations that emphasize complexity, nuance, and paradox, both in the formal treatment women received from successive Revolutionary governments, and their successes and failures in defending their rights, interests, and aspirations on the ground.¹⁵ Whether this work will ultimately inform new paradigms about the Revolution as a whole remains to be seen.

Origins of French Liberalism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Marc Belissa, *Fraternité universelle et intérêt national (1713-1795): Les cosmopolitiques du droit des gens* (Paris: Kimé, 1998).

¹² Sophia Rosenfeld, *A Revolution in Language: The Problems of Signs in Late Eighteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); see review by David A. Bell, “Words and Tumbrels,” *The New Republic*, November 6, 2001.

¹³ Furet’s most important protégé, Pierre Rosanvallon, has concentrated more on the Revolution’s broad legacies to modern France. See David A. Bell, “Utopia and Calculation,” *The New Republic*, October 22, 2007.

¹⁴ Notably, forthcoming work by Jeremy Popkin.

¹⁵ Notably, in different ways, Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer*, and Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

Carla Hesse's "neo-Jacobin" historians and their *compagnons de route* have also shown something of an allergy towards grand narratives and polemics—not surprisingly, perhaps, given the polemical battering their mentors received from the Furet camp in the 1980s.¹⁶ As Hesse herself writes, "the new Jacobin history is politically ecumenical, attentive to multiple subject positions, and therefore decidedly written in the plural." And just as this school turns away from ideological conflicts in the present, so it also deemphasizes them in the past in favor of tracing republican institution-building and the emergence of Pierre Serna's "invisible yet omnipresent center." This is a refreshing tendency in many ways, but one that risks obscuring the legacy of violence and chaos that accompanied the Revolution's legacies of utopian hope and centrist republicanism. As Howard Brown has argued, one direct result of this violence and chaos was the emergence of a brutal "security state" during the Directory and the Consulate—a phenomenon that arguably overshadows the republican institution-building of the same period.¹⁷

One historian associated with the neo-Jacobin school who *has* offered a dramatic interpretation of Revolutionary events is Sophie Wahnich, in *La liberté ou la mort*.¹⁸ But as Sophia Rosenfeld notes, Wahnich does this by venturing onto the terrain of the emotions and making an argument—a rather far-fetched one, in the judgment of some reviewers—about popular "fear" and "rage," and the drastic measures taken by the Convention in order to contain them.¹⁹ Emotions and "experience" have generated considerable excitement recently as subjects of investigation because of the path they seem to offer beyond the limits of the linguistic turn. As Lynn Hunt concisely puts it: "The world is not just discursively constructed. It is also built through embodiment, gesture, facial expression, and feelings, that is, through nonlinguistic modes of communication that have their own logics." But as Hunt herself adds just a few sentences later, "It is not going to be easy to get away from the discursive focus." I agree, and perhaps with a greater note of pessimism. Even Hunt's suggestions for looking at visual communications, the experience of violence, and their possible relation to "hard-wiring" in the brain do not get us beyond the basic problem that we only know about the emotions of the past through texts that were shaped by their own multiple linguistic—or visual—contexts and conventions. Some works in this area—notably Antoine de Baecque's *Le corps de l'histoire* and Hunt's own *Inventing Human Rights*—have proven brilliantly stimulating and will certainly provide an important spur to research. But logics of nonlinguistic modes of communications remain, in my view, a problematic base on which to construct broad interpretations of the French Revolution as a whole.²⁰

But does the search for such interpretations need to take place solely on this tricky, constantly-shifting terrain? Has discourse analysis really led into a dead end? A book that has just appeared in the fall of 2009—too late for the contributors to take into account—suggests other possibilities. *The Terror of Natural Right* by the Stanford literary critic Dan Edelstein operates largely in the realm of discourse analysis and is deeply indebted to the work of scholars like Keith Baker and François Furet. Yet it also challenges some of their most important arguments, while offering a sweeping, original argument of its own about the genesis and course of the Terror.²¹ It forcefully confronts much of the work of the "neo-Jacobin" school as well, particularly the part of it that is concerned with issues of natural law. If nothing else, then, the book will certainly provide the occasion for some vigorous debates. It is too early to judge its long-term influence. But to me, at least, it suggests not only that the discourse-based "political culture" approach still has considerable life left in it, but that the French Revolution can still arouse the sort of passion and interest that first attracted me to the subject a quarter of a century ago.

¹⁶ As detailed in Steven L. Kaplan, *Adieu '89!* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

¹⁷ See Brown, *Ending the French Revolution*.

¹⁸ Sophie Wahnich, *La liberté ou la mort: Essai sur la Terreur et le terrorisme* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2003).

¹⁹ See, especially, the review by Charles Walton, *H-France Review*, vol. 4 (August, 2004), no. 77.

²⁰ Antoine de Baecque, *Le corps de l'histoire: Métaphores et politique, 1770-1800* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1993); Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

²¹ Dan Edelstein, *The Terror of Natural Right: Republicanism, the Cult of Nature, and the French Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

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