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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)

Redefining the French Revolution. New directions, 1989–2009.

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It is an honor to be invited to contribute to the project for an on-line discussion of the recent historiography of the Revolution. The special issue of *French Historical Studies* on which this response is based is one of a series of publications in the last decade that have tried to take stock, prompted by the magic intervals of ten, fifteen, or twenty years since the bicentenary. This year in France *Le Monde* and *Le Monde diplomatique* had special features.¹ It is doubtful that the general public elsewhere has noticed, though—except maybe in some quarters to wonder whether there can be another revolution, in the current climate of crisis. In this response to the six essays and editorial introduction, I shall try to show how and why the bicentennial vision of the Revolution has foundered, to be replaced by complexity but not coherence. And yet, the present situation of revolutionary historiography is fascinating because we have a much more sophisticated understanding of the currents at work during the revolutionary decade than we did twenty years ago.

I

Before considering some specific issues in the light of the excellent contributions by our panel in *French Historical Studies*, let us first go back to our chosen starting point in 1989 and ask what did the bicentenary represent? It was undoubtedly a huge jamboree, but in terms of its historiographical achievement, what would be the appropriate description? Is it best characterized by the word “stocktaking,” or “renewal,” or “turning point,” “development” perhaps, or even “battle”? It was all of these at the same time.² The period 1987-90 was certainly marked by disputes. Against the classic interpretation of the Revolution based on the notion of class struggle, which few serious historians still believed in 1989, was deployed a media-oriented and colloquium-based triumphalism of the François Furet (1927-1997) camp, eager to impose a different and politically-driven view of the Revolution. The prominence of this vision (for it quickly became the main focus of debate) was greatly helped by

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¹ *Le Monde diplomatique*, 3 February 2009; *Le Monde*, 5 April 2009 (article de Sophie Wahnich); *Le Monde*, 10 May 2009 (article de Nicolas Weil). (see lemonde.fr-politique/revolution); *Le Monde de la Révolution française – Hors Série*, 12 volumes; reedition of 1989 – 18 June 2009; *Le Monde Hors Série – La Révolution en héritage 1789/2009* (2009).

² The bicentenary is best analyzed in Steven L. Kaplan *Farewell Revolution*, 2 vols. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), especially volume 2.

international circumstances: the collapse of the Soviet empire; the ending of Chinese isolation; the renewed philosophy of individualism; the end of recession and the advance of global capitalism. Thus the bicentenary witnessed the public consolidation of a politically motivated critique of the earlier socialist interpretation of the French Revolution.

Among professional historians rather than the general public, the bicentenary was certainly more important for the emergence of a new interpretation than it was for the attack on the old view. By the later 1970s, most politically disengaged historians already had come to accept that the weight of evidence produced in empirical studies did not support the classic view of a bourgeois-capitalist revolution. The real work of “revision” (read “demolition”) had already been carried out by Alfred Cobban, Robert Forster, George Taylor, and William Doyle in the 1960s and 1970s, drawing upon numerous empirical studies. François Furet’s *Penser la Révolution française* reprised his 1971 polemical *Annales E.S.C.* article that had largely employed the arguments of his forerunners; the other chapters in his book were more innovative. William Doyle’s *The Origins of the French Revolution* had drawn out the implications of the critique of the social interpretation to construct an essentially political narrative.³ This modified George Lefebvre’s classic text of 1939 at every step. By the time Lynn Hunt’s book on *Politics, Culture and Class* came out in 1984 and Cobban was finally made available in French, the revisionist battle had clearly been won, and the question of how to replace the old interpretation was clearly on the agenda.⁴ She was able to put forward a new and provocative “political culture” approach to the Revolution that, of all the works offering a new view, has perhaps best stood the test of time. One of the most interesting texts of the new cultural history, its importance is to have offered an interpretation of how a revolutionary political culture came into being and to offer an explanation for its coherence.

When the bicentenary came around, as far as the historiography was concerned, it was rather a case of entrenched positions confronting one another. Defenders of the classic interpretation, who were for the most part politically committed to the idea of the Revolution as a good thing, were upstaged and put on the defensive by modernizing socialists, liberals, and conservatives who doubted that Revolution was a legitimate or desirable form of progress, since it apparently led to violence. They were using the French Revolution to attack political systems, specifically Communist regimes, whose legitimacy was rooted in revolution rather than in liberal democracy. In France, the political stakes were high because if the Socialist Party was to attract enough votes to win power, it needed to emancipate itself from its militant revolutionary heritage. Furet’s 1978 book was designed to decouple the *deuxième gauche* from its revolutionary heritage, hence the declaration that “the Revolution is over.” At least as applied to modern western European societies, it probably was. The danger was that by killing it off in France it would be declared dead everywhere else. This is the curious case of a liberal critique opening the door to conservative interpretations. Those who stressed the undesirable levels of violence in the Revolution, and who argued that revolution and violence were inseparable, in effect espoused the Burkean position that slow measured change was preferable; such a view was suggested by the dates that Furet chose for his overview of the Revolution published in 1988: *The French Revolution, 1770-1880*—this was a good revolution that took a hundred years to achieve its goals, for the radicalism of 1789 apparently led to the state violence of 1793. The historiography of the Revolution has never been able to escape the controversies that accompanied its birth, and true to this adage the bicentenary was as much about politics as it was about the experience of the French Revolution of 1789-99. In a major concession to the Right, the Revolution was not to be “celebrated” but “commemorated.” The binary political division saw researchers labelled and put into historiographical and political boxes. Almost everyone seemed to play the game because it was also a time of opportunity for historians, now that they were in the limelight

³ For a cogent summary of the historiography, see Jack R. Censer “Commencing the Third Century of Debate,” *American Historical Review* 94 (1989): 1309-25.

⁴ Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

and apparently had a role to play in the worldwide reorientation of political systems towards liberal democracy.

But by looking at the Revolution through a political lens and sticking reductionist labels on scholars whose work was often far more subtle, by ignoring the empirical elements of research in favour of its overall arguments, the debates and labels of the bicentenary failed to do full justice to the work at the time. Although there were lots of dissenting mutterings, younger scholars had no voice, and it would have been a brave act to express an opinion without half a lifetime's research in one's suitcase. The Marxist Left was pushed into a position of defending the indefensible, for the post-1968 generation of historians on the Left had already moved a very long way from crude Marxism, into the history of ideologies, culture, and language—fields far too complex to sustain simplistic notions of class—and were busy revising their own vulgate.⁵ In his conclusion to an excellent overview of the present state of studies, Haim Burstin dates this from Soboul's colloquium in 1974.⁶ The revisionists of Furet's persuasion focused on the class-based interpretation of politics and substituted what now seems to have been an equally inflexible version of politics rooted in political philosophy, which suited a conservative vision of the Revolution.

Since 1989, the no-longer-Marxist Left, if a Left can be clearly defined now, has further taken on board notions of political culture and representation—just as have the new generations of historians of all political persuasions. Twenty years later the work published around the bicentenary has been integrated and added to from many different perspectives. The upshot has been to undermine Furet's exclusively political-philosophical interpretation with an effective, if not quite orchestrated, counter-attack. Whether we can yet talk of the “return of the social” in a new guise is difficult to say. It seems to me that in the field of French Revolution studies, the key issue comes down to how you define “politics.” George Taylor's oft-quoted polemical assertion that France witnessed “a political revolution with social consequences and not a social revolution with political consequences,” surely begs the question of what is the social and cultural content of politics.⁷ To see politics as an autonomous domain, or the product and expression of either “class war” or “competing discourses” is clearly to stress particular collective and apparently conditioning elements over the complexities of human behavior in society. It has long been clear from studies of the ancien régime state that politics as it took place at court or in the provinces was a complex socio-political business in which many different interests were in play.⁸ Politics can and should be defined in such a way that it includes social, cultural and economic interests. If the sphere of politics can be regarded as an arena in which complex individuals and groups struggle over all kinds of interests that they articulate in terms of the cultural rules of the game, through strategies and rhetoric, then the social and cultural elements of politics are indeed crucial. These elements may well be more important for most participants than the expression or pursuit of material interests or political philosophical goals.

⁵ Michel Vovelle himself is the best example of this trajectory. See the special issue of *French History* devoted to him: vol. 19:5 (2005).

⁶ Haim Burstin in his conclusions to Jean-Clément Martin, ed., *La Révolution à l'oeuvre. Perspectives actuelles dans l'histoire de la Révolution française* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005), pp. 333-42.

⁷ George V. Taylor, “Noncapitalist Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution,” *American Historical Review* 72 (1967), pp. 491–92.

⁸ This is part of the argument about ancien régime political culture of my *Power and Politics in Old Regime France* (London: Routledge, 1996). It need hardly be said that Tocqueville's version of the state hardly stands up to scrutiny in the light of all the new work on what I call “the baroque state” in order to avoid the historiographical baggage associated with “absolutism” and “centralization.” See James B. Collins, *The State in Early Modern France*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

The bicentenary also produced an immense flood of conferences and publications. Although there were numerous republications of both older studies and works of slight or recycled erudition, there were also dozens of colloquiums held and a significant volume of new research published—so much so that much of it that did not fit easily into the current polemics was almost overlooked. Sadly, many conferences were often held with participants being chosen from one side or the other, rather than both together. Then, suddenly, there was relative silence. Over the next decade other fields grabbed the limelight: global history; a broader cultural history, first developed for early modern France, but now widely adopted; gender studies. The shelf space devoted to books on the Revolution in the FNAC or Gibert Jeune shrank from half a wall to a couple of shelves.

For all that, the Revolution has survived as a topic, albeit with reduced numbers of researchers. It is still popular with the general public and students. And nothing was finally decided in 1989. Much excellent work saw the light of day, which by its diversity of content and approach left a legacy of complexity that the next two decades have been dealing with and adding to. Almost every year since 1989 has seen the appearance of at least one solid, remarkable, and influential study. The field is still at the cutting edge of historiography, and two decades of quiet reflection have had an enormously beneficial impact on our understanding of an event that was, let us affirm, of world historical importance.

II

On the assumption that readers will have previously read or are about to read the six contributions to the forum in *French Historical Studies*, I will develop my intentionally provocative response after simply drawing attention to the key ideas that they have collectively expressed. All the panelists see the period since the bicentenary as the end of a period of political strife over the Revolution. Twenty years on, they proclaim, we are in a new world of Revolutionary studies—and this is undoubtedly true. There is both excitement about this sea change and perhaps some regret or nostalgia for the lost limelight and the sense of importance the bicentenary offered historians. Today, who in politics even pretends to listen to academics over issues of world political importance? Yet internationally, the world of French Revolution studies has undoubtedly become broader and more inclusive. Geographically, as Dubois argues, it now has to include the French empire in the Caribbean, which had its specific experience of the Revolution, while the imperial economic dimension is not to be neglected. Sticking with the idea of an Atlantic Revolution, we could also add in the renewed interest in revisiting Palmer and Godechot in ways that stress patriotism rather than democracy and emphasize networks of influence and borrowings from abroad (England, America, the Netherlands, Geneva especially).⁹ Most of the essayists celebrate the fact that the historiography of the Revolution has also become broader in terms of the range of topics that are today perceived to be at the heart of the debate. The histories of gender, religion, violence, and emotion may once have seemed oblique approaches, but they now seem to offer insights that may become central because they cast the Revolution in a new light. Overall, there is general agreement that the Revolution has gained enormously in variety, in complexity, and that, as a consequence, we are in a period of renewal. Deeper and more reflective analysis is becoming possible because there is less focus on polemics between opposing views of the nature of the Revolution. A community of researchers has been developing with a smaller field benefiting from globalization

⁹ R.R. Palmer, *Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959-64) famously interprets the wave of revolutions as “democratic.” Palmer’s thesis was reconsidered in a symposium in *Contemporanea. Rivista di storia dell’88 e del ’900*, x, 1, 2007, pp. 125-55: ‘L’era delle rivoluzioni democratiche’; for the Atlantic perspective revisited, see Annie Jourdan’s latest contribution revealing more complicated relationships between the revolutions: *La Révolution batave entre la France et l’Amérique* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008), especially the early chapters; for international patriotism and a section on Palmer, see Dale Van Kley, “Religion and the Age of ‘Patriot’ Reform,” *Journal of Modern History* 80 (2008): 1-44.

through internet communications, *H-France* itself, the spread of English, and such international forums as the major annual international conferences. In France, there is a new professoriat who read English and for whom the distinctively French political stakes have indeed diminished. The new pressure in France to publish in international journals, which now parallels the need for foreign researchers to publish in French, is breaking down French isolationism. Historical approaches are now international, and the distinctive contribution of French scholars compared to foreign scholars is usually a superior documentary basis to their research.

The French Revolution has always been a site for researchers at the cutting edge of historical approaches, and both the subject matter and the methodologies of studies published in the last two decades reflect the fact that we are also in a new world of historical studies in general. The widening of the field has also resulted in fragmentation: the Revolution has become the site of many different narratives that neither begin nor finish with the revolutionary decade. Different timescales are employed according to the particular topic, and the revolutionary process is seen to have had diverse effects. But it is clear that even within these longer timescales, the Revolution had concentrated effects. It furthered, dislocated, or multiplied the impacts. Even so, the current interest in gender, republicanism, and modernity has the effect of downgrading the Revolution from its former status as the key foundational moment, as J.B. Shank and Colin Jones remark. There are obvious gains in that the Revolution has become a site of complex interactions. This opens the door to re-conceptualizing the Revolution itself, no longer as essentially a political and ideological struggle (however interpreted) but as a social and cultural process of extraordinary complexity. There is a potential loss in that these new grand narratives may convey a sense of inevitability to the unfolding stories, downplaying the way that, as these notions passed through the matrix of the Revolution, their outcomes were perhaps more contingent than the narrative would suggest. One such grand narrative is the rise of “republicanism,” whose long trajectory needs to be carefully evaluated if a sense of an inevitable path to 1792 is to be avoided. Such an argument would depend upon certain assumptions about republicanism’s degree of popularity during the ancien régime, and upon a certain reading of the constitutional developments of 1789–91. The pamphleteer Cerutti in October 1789 argued that the new constitution being written in 1789 was essentially republican because the Assembly had most of the power, and Furet made this into a plank of his analysis—but Timothy Tackett, in one of the key post-bicentennial studies, has challenged this by reconstituting the politics more closely through the study of the testimony of those involved, as has Michael Fitzsimmons.¹⁰ The history of the Revolution retains its capacity to confound grand narratives by its tales of the interaction between contingency and ideology.

The result of these investigations into longer-term movements has thus been to begin to redefine the Revolution (though of course no single view prevails)—but the redefinition is skewed towards the Terror and Jacobin Republic. For the most part our panelists ignore the period 1789–91 and direct attention towards the period from 1792 onwards, the First Republic. Many of those alive in 1789 seem to have regarded the outbreak of revolution as an opportunity to be seized. The rapid formation of a new revolutionary culture, first analyzed in terms of political culture by Lynn Hunt in 1984, created a huge range of possibilities for individuals and groups to advance their position, employing tactics and strategies that we are only now beginning to recover—for such issues have to be on the agenda for historians to address them. Many different interests were trying to make their voices heard to profit from new legislation and to acquire, defend, or consolidate power in towns and villages all over France. Merchants, landowners of all levels, women, peasants, masters, workers, actors, writers and artists,

¹⁰ Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789–1790)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); see Michael Fitzsimmons, *The Remaking of France: The National Assembly and the Constitution of 1791* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), and idem, *The Night the Old Regime Ended* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2003), all of which stress that the new system was workable.

soldiers, curés—all these and many others were involved in claims and struggles in a new context. Studies of individuals and groups have deepened our understanding of the political culture by revealing how it was employed and exploited for further interests. I would add that the way they redeployed their ancien régime rhetorical forms and skills, retaining the structures as it were but changing the content, is another aspect that is neglected but surely important. An *ancien régime* looking forward into the Revolution cannot fail to be struck not just by the emergence of a new and relatively coherent political culture, but also by the extent to which there were continuities that still need studying, even though many historians seem to have switched their attention to the Republic. As Harriet Applewhite has argued, “The political struggles of the first two and half years of the Revolution were not a radical departure, nor an unprecedented politicization of a formerly non-political world, but a continuation and deepening of political cleavages growing out of decades of royal reform attempts, the resurgence of privilege and prerogative, bishops against priests, the tax-privileged against the tax-burdened.”¹¹ Can the First Republic be understood without the longer *durée* as well?

III

Naturally, the increased focus on the later years has brought significant benefits. According to several of our panelists, a notably more complex vision of the Terror is emerging. The Terror still seems to be such a pre-occupation that it almost defines the Revolution, and I shall return to this below. Readers will recall that the issue of the Terror has always been a touchstone for interpretations of the Revolution. The bicentennial version of the conflict saw the proponents of the “circumstances” argument pitted against what I call the “neo-Hegelian” dialectical argument advanced by Furet. He argued that the inherent contradictions in the discourses and ideologies of 1789 created the matrix which encouraged, nay determined, the emergence of a republic characterized by violence. The Republican Terror in 1793 was inherent in the contradictions in 1789. Politically, the circumstances argument tends to defend the 1789 revolution by showing that it was blown off course; establishing a determinist link between 1789 and 1793 serves to undermine the very idea of a desirable revolution. Given the further contributions of his students, notably Patrice Guéniffey in a very solid book that is not without its critics, the debate has rumbled on.¹² In France the split between scholars was originally more one of Left versus Centre and Right, but in the Anglo-Saxon world, strangely enough, some of the leading advocates of the traditional anti-Furet argument were not on the left, but conservative, and their opposition was as much methodological as political.

However we interpret the Revolution, the Terror always has been and clearly still is deeply significant. It is something of a victory for the conservatives that in the last twenty years the debate has been redirected away from the Revolution’s association with liberty and equality and towards the assumption that 1793 was inherent in 1789. Revolution is equated with Terror and violence. In practice the 1989 revolutions provided a mixed answer to the problem of inherent violence, given the trajectory of some ex-Soviet states. The new history of violence, and in particular the highly discursive essay by Jean-Clément Martin (*Violence et Révolution*), reflects the concern of researchers to set the Terror in a longer perspective and one that does not assume the Terror all stemmed from the Centre.¹³ Research into the provincial violence does indeed point to the importance of local struggles that had a large degree of autonomy from any Parisian impetus and to a surprising continuity in the personnel involved from 1789

¹¹ Harriet B. Applewhite, *Political Alignment in the French National Assembly, 1789-1791* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), pp. 208-9.

¹² Patrice Guéniffey, *La politique de la Terreur: Essai sur la violence révolutionnaire, 1789-1794* (Paris: Fayard, 2000).

¹³ See Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et Révolution. Essai sur la naissance d’un mythe national* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), and the H-France forum on this book: <http://www.h-france.net/forum/h-franceforumvol2.html>. For the very long perspective, see Jean Nicolas, *La Rébellion française. Mouvements populaires et conscience sociale, 1661-1789* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

right through to 1799.¹⁴ Local studies of factions, clubs, and the administration (and sometimes they overlapped so much they were almost the same, divided into two groups who alternated) and studies of representatives on mission have set the role of the state in a different perspective.¹⁵ Even if there was a gradual slide toward the legal justification of exceptional measures,¹⁶ the issues of a weak central government at war and prone to conspiracy obsession (always present but greatly multiplied by the flight to Varennes and the arrival of deputies from different groups) and pressures from the sans-culottes, all combine to create a more compelling case that elements of contingency were more important in producing “the Terror” than an inevitability rooted in the working out of ideological contradictions since 1789. It is certainly possible to argue that there would have been a Terror without Rousseau, and of course his *Considerations on the Government of Poland* and the *Constitution of Corsica* are rather more cautious than *The Social Contract*, while the experience of America and the Netherlands also shows that the General Will could be applied without Terrorist consequences. For the Revolution, a powerful new counter argument is emerging that it was not all about state repression, that it stems from weakness, that it was not “Rousseau’s fault,” and that the Jacobins were not inherently terrorists but actually committed republicans, some of whom would go on to try to create functioning republican institutions during Thermidor and the Directory.¹⁷ The Terror reflected local struggles and relations with the representative on mission and was much more anarchic and local than treating it as a question of national political philosophy would imply.¹⁸ But the local work also shows new groups operating in often more violent ways than before the Revolution, within the new political culture created by the Revolution. This should lead to a complex compromise argument for “contingency within a new political culture.” When examined closely the Terror almost dissolves as a single entity produced by the will of politicians at the centre. With new insights about how the language of the Revolution was exploited,¹⁹ and how power worked in the provinces, we can understand that it was more a question of politicians in Paris riding the wave of the sans culottes pressure, in the context of weak governmental

¹⁴ Stephen Clay, ‘Vengeance, justice and the reactions in the Revolutionary Midi’, *French History* 23 (2009): 22-46, summarizes a lot of his work on the continuities of factional struggles and modes of violence across the Revolutionary decade and beyond, stressing the key issue of vengeance as a motor for many of these local conflicts; idem, “Les réactions du Midi: conflits, continuités et violences.” *AhRf*, 345: 3 (2006): 55–91.

¹⁵ Michel Biard, *Missionnaires de la République: les représentants du peuple en mission, 1793–1795*, CTHS histoire, 8. (Paris: CTHS, 2002).

¹⁶ See also Howard Brown, *Ending the Terror. Violence, Justice and Repression from the Terror to the Revolution* (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 2006; Anne Simonin, *Le déshonneur dans la République. Une histoire de l’indignité. 1791-1958* (Paris: Grasset, 2008); and D. M. G. Sutherland, *Murder in Aubagne. Lynching, Law, and Justice during the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ See especially J.-P. Gross, *Fair Shares For All* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Bernard Gainot, *1799, un nouveau jacobinisme? La démocratie représentative, une alternative à Brumaire* (Paris: CTHS, 2001).

¹⁸ Keith M. Baker, ed., *The French Revolution & the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 4, *The Terror* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1994); Michel Biard, ed., *Les politiques de la Terreur*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008); For historiographical approaches, see Antoine de Baecque, “Apprivoiser une histoire déchaînée. Dix ans de travaux historiques sur la Terreur (1992-2002),” *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 2002:4, 57e année, pp. 851-865; and both Hervé Leuwers, “Pratiques, réseaux et espaces de sociabilité au temps de la Révolution française” and Michel Biard “Paris-Provinces. Le fil conducteur des pouvoirs rouages et dysfonctionnements,” both in Martin, ed., *Révolution à l’oeuvre*, pp. 41-56 and 57-76. The classic study of a representative is Colin Lucas, *The Structure of the Terror: The Example of Javogues and the Loire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973; Paris, 1990).

¹⁹ For example, Morris Slavin *The Hébertistes to the Guillotine. Anatomy of a “Conspiracy” in Revolutionary France* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994) shows, as do many micro-political studies, the way language is used and exploited by politicians in the *mêlée*.

legitimacy and weak power in France, by using rhetoric to keep ahead and stay in power. The Terror was localized and of varying if often enormous and tragic impact. Nevertheless, the local research cannot answer the question of the Great Terror in June-July 1794: was it driven mainly by the need to curtail anarchy and re-establish central authority, however imperfectly, or was it ideologically driven by the desire to create a republic of virtuous citizens?² Perhaps this is *une question mal posée*, as the answer depends in part upon which groups had the power and influence to impose their local or national agenda in the second half of Year Two. Factions existed, and power was not centralized effectively in one committee. We are returned to the need for detailed “empirical” studies to answer questions posed by recent re-conceptualizations.

IV

There are two very significant omissions in the essays: any discussion of the origins of the Revolution and the extent to which revolutionary political culture reflected but transformed pre-existing attitudes and strategies. The period 1789-92 has benefited from some excellent work in the 1990s, but it still needs more work on the aims of the deputies and the way citizens seized the opportunities on offer through the new legislation.²⁰ The field of ‘the origins’ is an even bigger issue that should not be regarded as a sub-field. Once upon a time, the origins were thought to characterize the whole Revolution, whether as class struggle or as leading to the moment at which the ideas of the Enlightenment were to put into practice. Today, the classic interpretation has been undermined, there is ambivalence about the Enlightenment, and no new paradigm for explaining revolutionary change has emerged. As we have seen, the Terror now characterizes the Revolution, and the model of revolution itself is much less optimistic. Why the shift from the positive image of 1789 to the negative image of ‘93? Is it because historians accept Lynn Hunt’s argument that a new political culture, a mythic present, was created from 1789 to 1793, which makes the problem of origins almost irrelevant? Or have historians perhaps accepted the argument that there were two explanatory streams at work, one that explains the collapse of the ancien regime (not just the state but the whole socio-cultural regime)—but which would be largely irrelevant to an understanding of the revolution once it had started; and a second stream for the origins of the revolutionary culture that replaced the old regime—which essentially seems to mean focusing on the Enlightenment, ideology and consumerism as particularly relevant? While this may seem a helpful way to see things, it is of course in many ways a false dichotomy. The two streams are linked in interesting and sometimes unexplored ways. In particular the crisis of 1787-9 can be seen as a period that had a transformative effect upon the ever-wider groups that became involved.²¹ The exploration of precisely what changed, and what carried on in new guise, might provide a useful perspective on the Revolution as a process.²² It could be that the polyvalence of the Revolution, which fuelled conflict and prevented it ending, has something to do with the way it started.

²⁰ For example, two books that can be read partly as studies of the process of empowerment are Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990) and John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 1996).

²¹ The present writer has been working for many years toward a model that can re-integrate social and cultural elements into the definition of politics and draw together much of the excellent new work on the 1780s into a coherent interpretation of the relationship of state failure to the revolutionary process and the way this impacts upon the subsequent revolutionary dynamic. My interpretation puts particular stress on political management and the transformative effect of the long crisis from 1787 to 1789 upon attitudes, providing a moment of choice later than is often recognized, but which is to be explained by social and cultural attitudes and interests that were translated into the political sphere in terms of individual and collective strategies.

²² Like violence, conspiracy is present in the old regime, but develops new forms and becomes endemic during the revolution: see Timothy Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789–1792,” *American Historical Review* 105 (2000), pp.

The question of the origins raises some thorny questions: can historians legitimately address the question of causation, and has the Revolution become too fragmented an area for any attempt at generalization.²³ Should historians abandon such a positivist notion as origins, steeped as it is in assumptions about relevance and causality, in favor of the idea of a genealogy? This is an issue confronted by Roger Chartier in his 1990 book on *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, and he opted for a genealogy, on the grounds that the revolution has to be conceivable before it can be possible. One could turn the problem around and argue that notions of genealogy and political culture are poor at explaining why things happen and that the very grammar of writing history implies an acceptance of logically coherent links, a selective narrative, and thus... of origins.²⁴ An analysis does not have to be a positivist enterprise, for surely no serious modern historian would write a book on the origins of the Revolution or indeed of the Terror in anything more than the provisional sense of making as much sense as possible of a wide range of work that can perhaps be put together coherently enough to offer a new, but temporary, highly provisional, paradigm of how the French state and society got into revolution or Terror. This need not necessarily be an enterprise oriented towards narrative; it can and should be a flexible attempt to explore problems raised by new research, and perhaps more particularly, by recent methodologies. A new generation of historians has produced a lot of new work on the origins since 1989, and it is no doubt time to rethink its implications.²⁵ Everyone is agreed that a new paradigm for explaining revolution is needed, and it must certainly address the interpretational gap between the analysis of the political culture including the debates of the ancien régime, and the ways it breaks down which are more complex than merely a consequence of the shifting culture of intellectual debate. Much of the best new work is interdisciplinary and resists labeling.

To my mind, most labels ignore complexities, and have no place in the new historiography. Several of the essays under discussion employ labels in their historiographical discussions. Confusingly, each historian seems to use the terms in rather individualistic ways. Does a label with political overtones really help to understand the implications of a scholar's work, or does it buy into the very politics whose demise our authors celebrate? Take me for example: a revisionist, post revisionist, British empiricist, hyper-empiricist(!), *Annaliste*, socio-histoire-oriented, post-modern, Foucauldian admirer of Bourdieu's notion of strategy, involved in the cultural turn, working both on an ambiguous discourse and the perhaps hopelessly outdated notion of causation, origins (or is it genealogy?) in order to get at the role of ideology and the problem of how a revolution occurs in a certain political culture. How very true you will say, but is it helpful, and would any single label fit? "Down with all barriers and labels. To the

691–713; and Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser, & Marisa Linton, eds., *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007 & pbk edition March 2010).

²³ Lynn Hunt, "The Experience of Revolution," *French Historical Studies* 32 (2009): 672.

²⁴ For a critique see Ronald P. Formisano, "The Concept of Political Culture," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 31 (2001): 393-426.

²⁵ There has been a lot of new work on the origins. A few examples: Michael Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Marie-Laure Legay, *Les États provinciaux dans la construction de l'État moderne aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Geneva: Droz, 2001); David Bell, *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Régime France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs. The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Dale Van Kley, ed., *The French Idea of Freedom: The Old Regime and the Declaration of Rights of 1789* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); John Hardman, *French Politics, 1774–1789* (London: Longman, 1995); John Markoff and Gilbert Shapiro, *Revolutionary Demands: A Content Analysis of the "Cahiers de Doléances" of 1789* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Philippe Grateau, *Les Cahiers de Doléances. Une relecture culturelle* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2001). These represent important post-bicentennial work in just three areas of the origins. For more pointers to other areas, see, Peter R. Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution* (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

frontiers, astride the frontiers, with one foot on each side, that is where the historian has to work,” thus wrote Lucien Febvre reviewing Marc Bloch’s *The Historian’s Craft*.²⁶

V

Another way of responding to the penchant for labels—and, more seriously, of understanding the shift in historical approaches from discourse towards a new sense of the complexity of the individual—is to take a closer look at epistemology as it currently applies to the Revolution. It is interesting to note just how much the field of French Revolution studies remain at the forefront of developments in the discipline of Historical Studies. Taking inspiration from John R. Hall’s *Cultures of Inquiry* and Gérard Noiriel’s *Introduction à la socio-histoire*, we might consider the application of some of their insights.²⁷ Socio-historical inquiry can be seen as part of a discipline in movement, but it is a discipline that possesses traditions and conventions. These have been subjected to close scrutiny since the 1960s through the rise of post-modern theory, gender studies, anthropology and sociology. New analytical concepts have emerged and taken some fields by storm: thick description, political culture, discourse, strategy, for example, to the extent that the word ‘empiricism’ has in some quarters taken on a critical sense of a refusal to engage with these approaches. Of course, empiricism has to do a lot more than say “look what I found in the archives.” Noiriel’s point is to advocate a definition of socio-historical inquiry based upon a notion of *histoire-problématique*, history researched and written in terms of a delineated problem and debate, which seems not so far from our common heritage in the *Annales* School. Hall’s crucial point is that although we may stress among ourselves such methods as “empiricism,” “narrative,” and “discourse,” what we are actually doing is founding our inquiry on epistemological premises that range from the highly philosophical (which are therefore by definition not subject to detailed proof through a coherent narrative constructed through accumulated “empirical” work—Furet’s view might be a case in point) through various mixtures in between, including political culture and cultural history, to the other end of the spectrum where we can find an approach that eschews questions of grand theory in favor of going first to the evidence in order to see what turns up, and then making this into a narrative. Of course, this last position is, ironically, also based on an unspoken theory of reality that would seem to deny many of the difficulties of recovering it that have been pointed to by those who employ theories which show that meaning is elusive, constantly deferred or reconstructed, according to the differing perspectives of the initial author of the text or the reader. But even those who are most theoretically driven attempt to prove or illustrate their argument with reference to data that they analyze with a degree of empiricism or by an argument based upon verifiable evidence. For instance, a crucial point in Furet’s argument was that the electoral process ushered in a concept of Rousseauian equality, so it needed to be proved by looking at the evidence.²⁸

As historical knowledge is constantly evolving and accumulating, especially in a popular field like the French Revolution and its origins, much research serves to change the known facts in numerous subfields. This then provides a new base line of relevant information to which future work has to respond, whether it is mostly archival and narrative or based on published texts and theoretically informed. It is apparent that the field of the Revolution has become so prolific and complex, in multiple

²⁶ Peter Burke, ed., *A New Kind of History, from the writings of Lucien Febvre*, trans. K. Folcap. (London, 1973) p. 31.

²⁷ John R. Hall, *Cultures of Inquiry. From Epistemology to Discourse in Sociohistorical Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Gérard Noiriel, *Introduction à la Socio-histoire* (Paris: Découverte, 2006).

²⁸ François Furet “La Monarchie et le règlement électoral de 1789,” in Keith Michael Baker, ed, *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, vol. 1, *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1987), pp. 375-86. The initial meaning of the “key” declaration of 17 June has been re-examined “empirically” in a thought-provoking article by Robert H. Blackman: “What’s in a name? Possible names for a legislative body and the birth of national sovereignty during the French Revolution, 15-16 June 1789,” *French History* 21 (March 2007) 22-43.

languages, that no scholars can fully keep up (hence the utility of such sites and discussion forums as H-France). And few have time, in an age of performance indicators, to realign their own ongoing research according to different approaches that require a mastery of different and unfamiliar methodologies. The result is a kind of growing subdivision within the discipline; walls exist. Not therefore the kind of wall between academic disciplines that Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch set up the *Annales* to overcome, but walls composed of differentiation within the same field. In reality, most historians, often firmly entrenched in their own approach and in a circumscribed field, are far less flexible than the foregoing discussion of current revolutionary historiography might imply. Not many adopt wholly new methodologies, though those who do are to be admired, and it is more often the case that a new generation puts these epistemological changes into practice. Shifts in epistemology can be important, but a rather different and fruitful process has also driven forward our understanding and created a reshaped and new kind of history. This is the application of existing epistemological approaches to new ranges of sources. Every approach to the sources is based upon certain ideas of what can be done with them, and certain approaches privilege certain hermeneutic theories. Historians thus often choose or delimit their sources in line with the theories with which they first started. Others, often younger scholars, then come along and take the same basic approach but apply it to different sources, with results that sometimes create tensions in the big picture.²⁹ This is what has been happening in French Revolution studies.

We have already mentioned a second element that is not dealt with by Hall and Noiriel, but which is also an issue of key importance to current historiography. The issue of selfhood, or persona,—in brief, what a person is—is important because it lies at the centre of a wide range of historical interpretation. Answers have ranged from regarding the individual as capable of more or less autonomous action, to notions of motivations as defined by membership of social, political, or gender groups, to post-modern theories that we are all actors constructed from many discourses, but whose autonomy is reduced to the point of these “actors” being seen to mouth the discourses they embody. Positivist approaches to the individual have been undermined by the recognition that claims to historical truth are illusory, for even if we had the right answer, how would we know that it was so, given that we only have texts created by individuals themselves embodying discourses about “reality”?

Scholars of the Revolution are now working with a set of approaches to historical individuals that render them far more complex than ever before. This development seems to stem largely from dissatisfaction with the idea that we are prisoners of the discourses that construct us, and of which we are unconscious, which raises the question of agency, choice, or intentionality. Individuals and the wider culture can still be regarded as embodying numerous discourses, of power, rights, sexuality, gender, religion, or the body, for instance. And the new field of the history of emotions radically expands the range of components of the individual and society that can be studied and factored into fields as “relevant.” For example, emotion clearly has an important role in violence, politics, and religion. This being so, how far are we as individuals in control of what we do? There are all sorts of constraints operating upon individuals though cultural and linguistic codes, which, like discourses, have their own

²⁹ For three stimulating examples of the way a discourse can be studied, see Marisa Linton, *The Politics of Virtue in Enlightenment France*, (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), shows how a crucial discourse is redefined and appropriated; Jay M. Smith, *Nobility Reimagined. The Patriotic nation in Eighteenth-Century France*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005) focuses on the different modalities of noble discourse; Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution from Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), explores the way a religious debate operated as a dialectic, generating new ideas in different and evolving contexts. For other new approaches to “notions-concepts,” see Jacques Guilhaumou, “De l’histoire des concepts à l’histoire linguistique des usages conceptuels,” *Genèses*, 38 (2000): 105-118.

history and yet are subject to constant change. Most historians with any interest in cultural history would accept that discourse is now a notion of fundamental importance.

So how then can we return agency or intentionality to individuals, in order to arrive at a more convincing analysis of revolutionary politics, perhaps? Michel Foucault offered a new way of interpreting the role of the individual, in effect subordinating it to currents of thought or ways of seeing the world that far transcend the span of a single life. Although much work assumes that an “author” is in effect a bundle of such discourses, it does not in fact follow that the individuals were entirely unconscious of these formative languages. Without jettisoning the vital insight that created a whole new field of research and indeed made such concepts into topics for research, we do need to emancipate individuals from that idea, best expressed by Furet, that Robespierre was no more than the purest mouthpiece of revolutionary discourse. Once historians had to free people from the prisons of the *longue durée*, and now it is time to free them from the prisons of the *longue durée* of discourses by refining our approach to discourses to include new sources and new subjects as well as factoring in the very illuminating micro-historical reconstruction of the context from all angles.³⁰ Granted, not all discourses operate on a level that can be apprehended by individuals, such as those on the family, the body, sexuality, or civility.³¹ Certainly, much of what we take to be social and political reality is ordered or constructed by conventions that we barely perceive, as they form a part of our wider culture. In other words, as individuals we inhabit a *habitus*. It has rules of the game that can be explored through the notion of “culture” and for politics, “political culture” with its various techniques. This has been done for courtiers (first studied by Elias who developed the notion of *habitus*, famously redefined by Bourdieu in his work on power relations), and I sense that we are currently building up a useful new picture of the revolutionary *habitus* created in 1789. It remains true, I concede, that not all discourses are susceptible to being employed strategically by knowing authors.

On the other hand, there are many discourses of which individuals were fully aware, and consequently the actors can be seen to manipulate them with their own strategies. The discourse approach has broken down through a realization that the Foucauldian argument—that “authors” unknowingly embody the discourses—seems to make claims that fly in the face of the historical work that shows that some of these discourses, such as those of virtue, patrie, and classical republicanism, were being manipulated by writers, philosophers and politicians. This would be particularly true of political philosophical discourses. Of course, if the authors only spouted a single political line, this argument might come unstuck, but some studies of language and politics do show individuals appropriating elements of different discourses at different times in order to further their aims, in effect either employing a *bricolage* or simply switching between types of argument.³² This is hardly surprising given that this was an age of

³⁰ By “reconstructing the context” I do not mean just recovering the intellectual historical context of pamphlets and other texts, but factoring in the whole range of motivations and political environment that are usually ignored by those focusing purely upon the ideas and discourses in order to recover an intellectual aim or debate. It is methodologically limiting to select utterances that reveal a discourse or debate existing over time without showing exactly what its participants were ‘doing’ by participating.

³¹ Examples of recent studies of themes partly beyond individual consciousness might be Antoine de Baecque, *Le corps de l'histoire : métaphores et politique, 1770-1800* (Paris : Calmann-Lévy, 1999); Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Susan Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

³² The microhistorical reconstruction or exploration of the precise context in which utterances were made, rather than looking at similar utterances over a long period, is one way of discovering the strategies employed. The biographical approach also can be important here. For a fine example of how men changed and adapted, as well as the complexity of the individual, see Pierre Serna, *La République des Girouettes, 1789-1815 et au-delà. Une anomalie politique, la France de l'extrême centre* (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 2005); also Hervé Leuwers, *Un juriste en politique: Merlin de Douai*

rhetorical education, often provided by the Oratorians, and that many of the speakers were lawyers. As an illustration, the partly empirical work on Robespierre in political situations, with factions and friends, explores the way he used language to further his strategies and is the counter-point to political philosophical interpretations of him.³³ This kind of tactic can be followed in Steven Kaplan's work on the *sans culottes* and Hirsh's study of the masters, both of which provide evidence of the ideologies being exploited to further particular ends.³⁴ The upshot has been to reveal individuals operating both within a world partly constructed by discourses that are culturally constructed on a level deeper than individual consciousness (which means we must study evolving social practice to get at these), and appropriating and manipulating the revolutionary discourses, language, and laws to suit their own strategies (which should also return us to the social construction of these strategies though social practice).

In the last twenty years, the expansion of the range of sources consulted, combined with a deeply archival approach, as well as a willingness to take on the hermeneutic problem of agency, has underpinned great advances in our understanding of revolutionary culture and politics. One approach that is singled out and advocated by several of our authors (especially Lynn Hunt and Sophie Rosenberg) is the new history of "experience," "sentiment," "feeling," "emotion." The field has exciting potential, and many different perspectives will no doubt emerge, but the link between emotions and politics is surely a significant area. Work has focused more on tears and fears than, for example, on friendship, love, or anxiety. Much remains to be done and theatre and novels must be included.³⁵ But the benefits of addressing emotions are wider still. An important consequence of incorporating emotion into the analysis of motivation and response is that it helps us define "selfhood" or the persona more richly and deeply. Thus we can take a further step away from the de-personalizing language of "actors," "scripts," and "inherent contradictions," toward a more multi-faceted approach to the individual. This is an important development that further contributes to the refinement of the discourse-based approach with the diminished role attributed to intentionality. By accepting the complexity of individuals, by exploring their multiple allegiances and concerns, their fears as well as their ambitions, the historian transforms the former "actor" into at least a partial author of his or her own script, here adding in to the mix a crucial element of irrationality. The approach is still essentially discourse-oriented, for emotions do indeed form part of the repertoire of discourses, in that their expression has varied over time, but they are hard to recover historically.³⁶ Another candidate for subtle attention is the visual culture of the revolution, first integrated into the wider, textbook picture in Jack Censer and Lynn Hunt's *Liberty Equality, Fraternity* and meanwhile further developed by art historians, and most recently by Rolf Reichardt and Hubertus Kohle.³⁷ Can the two areas be linked? Along with lawyers, actors, musicians,

1754-1838) (Artois: Artois Presses Université, 1996). Authors, especially politicians, appropriated the discourses strategically, rather than simply being their vehicles.

³³ Annie Jourdan, "Les discours de Robespierre. La parole au pouvoir," in Annie Jourdan, ed., *Robespierre. Figure-Reputation* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 73-110.

³⁴ See Jean-Pierre Hirsch, *Les deux rêves du commerce, entreprise et institutions dans la région lilloise, 1780-1860* (Paris: EHESS, 1991) and Steven L. Kaplan, *La fin des corporations* (Paris: Fayard, 2001).

³⁵ See Philippe Bourdin & Gérard Loubinoux, eds., *Les arts de la scène et la Révolution française* (Clermont-Ferrand: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2004).

³⁶ An example might be that fear of hunger was translated into "taxations populaires." Similarly, the spectators' response to images and performances can be situated within traditions of the possible range of responses.

³⁷ Jack Censer and Lynn Hunt, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State University Press, 2001) is a pioneering attempt to integrate these sources and their discussion into the teaching of the Revolution. See especially the six essays on the theme of representations of the crowd in 1789 on the website that goes with the book: <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/imaging/essays.html>. Most recently, see Rolf Reichardt and Hubertus Kohle, *Visualizing the Revolution. Politics and Pictorial Arts in the Eighteenth-Century France* (London: Reaktion, 2008). See also Annie Jourdan, *Les monuments de la Révolution. Une*

and artists were three groups that found that they had a head start if they embraced revolutionary culture, perhaps because of its performative elements. Paul Friedland has suggested that a shared concept of representation is at work linking political and theatrical representation.³⁸ How does art and performance stir the emotions during the revolution, and how far does symbolism divide spectators and promote active responses?

A new approach of a different kind may be described by the term micro-history, which I take to mean something like “the technique of looking deeply at a particular problem from all possible angles with all possible sources.” A subject cannot be renewed just by changing perspectives, for these, to convince, have to be based on deep research, and the great advantage of micro-history is that it is necessarily archival. This kind of “empiricism” has its true home in France, where access to the sources is easy. One cannot help but be impressed by the depth of analysis in the best French works that are produced over a period much longer than the traditional three-year doctorate.³⁹

VI

The great loser in this new historiography has been the overall interpretation of François Furet. Quite how François Furet’s interpretation should be described is not at all clear from the essays. Is Furet to be regarded as a “revisionist” for attacking Marxism, or as a “post-revisionist” by virtue of his new interpretation, or “Tocquevillian” by virtue of his adoption of Tocqueville’s argument on the ancien régime origins of Jacobin centralization? His relationship to Tocqueville is I believe too selective for him to be called essentially Tocquevillian, and his overall argument certainly owed a lot to Edmund Burke and Jacob Talmon. To my mind he is best characterized by his intellectual history approach. His method might be described as “neo-Hegelian” because the motor of History is a dialectic of ideologies and discourses driven forward by their contradictions. However we characterize his analysis, he was a great historian of the Revolution whose contribution had the huge merit of generating research and animating a debate for about twenty years.⁴⁰ With Keith Michael Baker and Colin Lucas, with whom he produced the greatest monument to the bicentenary, the four volumes on political culture, he succeeded in setting the agenda—in

histoire de représentation 1770-1804 (Paris: Champion, 2007) and Natalie Scholz and Christine Schröer, *Représentation et pouvoir: La politique symbolique en France (1789-1830)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2007); for further references, see Philippe Bordes, “La recherche sur l’art de la Révolution française: le tournant du bicentenaire,” in Martin, ed., *Révolution à l’oeuvre*, pp. 257-68.

³⁸ Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

³⁹ The best starting points for recent research are Claude Mazauric, “Vrai ou faux tournant dans l’historiographie révolutionnaire?” *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, 310:1 (1997): pp. 555 - 565, (http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/ahrf_0003-4436_1997_num_310_1_2076); *La Recherche aujourd’hui, Numéro spécial: Bilan et perspectives de la Recherche, XVIIIe siècle*, 30 (1998); Martine Lapied and Christine Peyrard, eds., *La Révolution française au Carrefour des recherches* (Aix-en-Provence, Publications de l’Université de Provence, 2003); Martin, ed., *Révolution à l’oeuvre*.

⁴⁰ It is important when discussing only general interpretations not to underplay either the contribution to scholarship or the impulse given to research by these outstanding scholars. Their impact has in fact gone beyond direct influence, because, challenged and inspired by this work, it has been possible to apply a similar discourse-based approach to sources he has not himself used, either by applying Foucault’s notion of discourse to other streams of language, of a different kind, for example virtue, *patrie*, classical republicanism. Moreover, the same approach can be applied to entirely different sets of sources, such as pamphlets and newspapers that are much less highly philosophical, or even to speeches and to the documentation generated by everyday politics.

so far as anyone can set an agenda for individualist scholars.⁴¹ But in terms of its own methodology Furet's explanation now appears to be too selective because the discourses identified as key are not all of those that could have been chosen and because studies of the use of language show their "actors" to be much more in control of their own script.⁴²

François Furet's approach is a form of intellectual history that stresses the key role of political philosophical conceptions. Its particular focus and coherence turned out to be its major weakness. Several panelists—Hunt, Jones, Rosenfeld—express reservations about the explanatory potential of post-modern theories of discourse. The discourses of political philosophy are no longer perceived to drive revolutionary politics in the same exclusive way, although they certainly played an important role. There has been an almost complete abandoning of the idea that the motor of the revolution was its inherent ideological contradictions, in favor of a more traditional stress on the interplay between contingency and the new political culture. It is now incumbent upon historians of ideas to go beyond simply demonstrating that the (often rather abstruse) debates existed in order to show us how they affected politics in practice—otherwise their work will remain of limited relevance to historians of the Revolution. In short, the political-philosophical approach has been undermined over the last two decades by the breadth of approaches spurred on by the bicentenary and by a transformation in the very definition of History as a discipline. Several of our essayists appear to be every bit as skeptical of a totalizing explanatory notion of political discourse as they once were of class conflict.

VII

In the last twenty years we have come a long way from Furet's pronouncement that the Revolution is over, but none of the essay contains a ringing endorsement of the Revolution such as one might have expected in some quarters twenty or thirty years ago. David Andress is of the opinion that "In ceasing to be a political football in debates that seem ever more parochial in hindsight, the history of the French Revolution can become available for other, wider reflections on the modernity that, however vaguely we must characterize it, still seems to have been born in the years around 1789."⁴³ In point of fact, the politics were far from "parochial," and they were not simply French because a whole vision of revolution as a legitimate form of political change was at stake. It must be admitted, however, that in France the Revolution still exists as a political football—hence the stronger emphasis by many historians in France on micro-history and a strongly dispassionate approach that we find in Jean-Clément Martin's magisterial essay. That said, with the notable exceptions of the question of human rights and written constitutions,⁴⁴ the recent research seems no longer to be driven by positive assumptions about

⁴¹ Keith Michael Baker, Colin Lucas, and François Furet, *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Pergamon, 1987-1994). A second monument of scholarship is François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds, *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (London: Belknap Press, 1989).

⁴² There is a lack of work on the rhetorical education of the revolutionary generations and the way they applied their models learnt in school or at the bar before the Revolution to revolutionary discourse. In the present state of studies we can see that they are manipulating the discourses but cannot get beyond that to see exactly how. The classic study is Harold T. Parker, *A Study in the Development of the Revolutionary Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937), but he does not discuss rhetoric, only sources. A more recent French study on a similar theme is by Jacques Bouineau, *Les Toges du pouvoir ou la révolution de droit antique* (Toulouse: Association des publications de l'Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail et Editions Eché, 1986). On the context of the rhetoric and also strategies, a thought-provoking contributions is Peter France, 'Speakers and Audience: the First Days of the Convention', in John Renwick, ed., *Language and Rhetoric of the Revolution* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), pp. 50-68; on speech in the Revolution, see Patrick Brasart *Paroles de la Révolution: Les Assemblées parlementaires, 1789-1794* (Paris: Minerve, 1988). One sees from the physical context in the assemblies just how much of an advantage was rhetorical training and experience in public performance.

⁴³ David Andress, "The Shifting Landscape of Revolutionary Interpretations: A Death of the Past and a Rebirth of History?," *French Historical Studies* 32 (2009): 653.

⁴⁴ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

revolution and liberty (this has been a big victory, therefore, for conservative views), or even about maintaining and sustaining a positive view of the revolution even where it is justified.⁴⁵ Yet all the authors of our essays are in favor of just the kinds of complexity that undermine the oversimplified narratives used to discredit the Revolution. Has one legacy of the bicentenary been to make historians shy of expressing value judgments? Should the *métier d'historien* no longer include open political commitment? Of course the stakes are different for foreign scholars of the revolution as opposed to French, but I would argue that the Revolution should continue to be defended against misrepresentation because it should remain for future generations as a beacon of freedom to choose one's destiny. The battle to sustain this view is far from won, and it still requires answers to the big question of the origins and nature of revolutionary violence. But in 2009, to a generation raised or matured in the age of economic expansion and the consumer benefits of globalization, the Revolution still appears to be seen more as a warning beacon of the dangers of radical change. Its disorder seems to threaten the good life, and political change grows not from revolution but from economic liberalism, the operation of the market, does it not? So the hopeful political message of the Revolution has been somewhat lost in the last twenty years; it seems that we hardly need the Revolution because revolution as a form of political action is unnecessary and moreover doomed to end in totalitarian regimes that grow out of disorder. And yet, exactly at a time when the world is getting smaller and we are urged to include empire in our histories, surely this is rather Eurocentric? The French Revolution took place in a society that was in some ways more akin to regimes existing outside of America and Europe today than to modern Western states and societies. Should we not affirm the ideals of the revolution in face of oppression in the rest of the world? Globalization is a mixed blessing, often involving a sort of imperialism, and do not people everywhere need the idea that radical change is possible? An entirely positive image of the Revolution would smack of mythmaking, and the ancien régime was certainly not as bad as it was painted, but it is worth fighting at least historiographical battles to preserve the image of idealism and the virtues of very real changes in state and society that were far from entirely negative. The alternative is cynicism and depriving future generations of the very idea that revolutionary change is possible or desirable.

Whether historians are “for” or “against” the Revolution's longer-term achievements, whether or not they think the ends justified the means, the outbreak of Revolution is a socio-political phenomenon that still defies coherent explanation. If the Revolution was not in its origins an act of will but the product of societal tensions and mismanaged reforms, then our field of study may still be highly pertinent, given the crisis today. How revolutions occur is at least as important as how they go wrong, though none of our authors focuses on this issue. On February 1, 2009, *The Sunday Times* reported that President Sarkozy was warning his aides anxiously about the pre-revolutionary crisis. It is doubtful if they had an answer, even if they were up with the latest research. What we have gained in depth and complexity we seem to have lost in accessibility. The new research is hardly gripping for the wider public, and without the political vehemence and the sense that big political issues are at stake, how can we attract students and readers? Yet a wider public is still out there, in France, where there are so many books available, and where Max Gallo's narrative is a best seller, and also in the United Kingdom.⁴⁶ It is probably a publishing truism that on French history there are only about six publishable names, Joan of Arc, Cardinal Richelieu (perhaps), Louis XIV, Marie Antoinette, Louis XVI, Robespierre, and Napoleon, but the last four are associated with the Revolution. Popular biographies and histories regularly appear, a new set for each generation, telling a tale only marginally different from the older books, often worse than older studies, but selling well enough. There is still a large group of people who are fascinated with the good stories on the one hand and on the other the struggles to establish liberty and equality. In an

⁴⁵ David Andress does in his conclusion to *French Society In Revolution, 1789-1799* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1999) point out that the Revolution was a social and demographic turning point for the better. For a recent French perspective on problems of interpretation and legacy, see Michel Biard, ed., *Terminée la Révolution...*, (Actes du IVE colloque européen de Calais, 26-27 janvier 2001), *Bulletin des Amis du Vieux Calais*, 2002.

⁴⁶ Max Gallo, *La Révolution française*, 2 vols., (Paris: XO Editions, 2009).

age of international terrorism there is a fascination once again in the first Terror. A documentary entitled *Terror! Robespierre and the French Revolution* on BBC 2 was watched by 1.2 million for an uninterrupted 90 minutes on Saturday July 11, 2009, and it has become the topic of heated internet discussion. How are we as historians to engage with these potential audiences, for the fate of the subject depends upon our ability to do so? If Lynn Hunt is right, without a paradigm for the human sciences, in an age when complexity has made generalization impossible, and with no major political issue at stake, we are in trouble. In the last twenty years, work from many perspectives has enriched the Revolution, but fragmented it. Given the lack of an agreed definition, an *histoire totale* of the Revolution is no doubt impossible, but it is a mirage that should inspire brave new attempts to integrate as much of the new work as possible. Such studies serve a purpose because they reveal not just what we know, but what we need to find out because they make the gaps in our knowledge more evident, thus raising questions for further research. I cannot help wondering what such a study of the Revolution would look like today?⁴⁷

⁴⁷ For example, compare and contrast Jean-Clément Martin, *Contre-Révolution, Révolution et nation en France, 1789-1799* (Paris: Seuil, 1998) with Annie Jourdan, *La Révolution, Une exception française*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2004, 2nd, ed., 2006).