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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)

## Self, Field, Myth: What We Will Have Been

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“We define the myth as consisting of all its versions.”  
 Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth.”

In this year of anniversaries, historians are much in demand. They jet around the country to speak about democratic revolutions and to analyze popular movements that swept quickly across much of Europe. Major international conferences happen every few weeks; the volumes planned at them will enrich graduate students’ reading lists for years—if not decades—to follow.

It is with a tense little smile that the historian of France acknowledges this flurry of scholarly activity. For it is, of course, nearly all directed at the Eastern- and Central-European revolutions of 1989—events usually understood within a “global” framework.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, as historians of a single medium-sized country in Western Europe, it seems that we look back wistfully at a 1989 whose main claim to fame *might* have been the Bicentennial of the French Revolution. After all, wasn’t that what was expected in 1987–1988? Weren’t there conferences, review essays, and media spectacles galore? Wasn’t there, as we tell our undergraduates in survey course after survey course, a European “revolutionary tradition” that began in 1789 and somehow accounted for much that followed? And weren’t there, even

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An earlier version of this text was presented as part of “Repetition with Change: A Conference in Honor of the Legacy of Dominick LaCapra” (Cornell University, September 2009)—I thank my fellow participants for their comments. This essay has also benefited from conversations with Padraic Kenney, Ralph Kingston, Robert Priest, and Dror Wahrman.

<sup>1</sup> It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a complete list of these events, but notable conferences include: “Poland after Twenty Years of Freedom” (University of Warsaw, 22–23 May 2009); “The Roots of Global Civil Society: From the Rise of the Press to the Fall of the Wall” (Cambridge, UK, 2–3 Oct. 2009); “1989 in a Global Perspective” (Leipzig, 14–16 Oct. 2009); “Central Europe, 1989: Lessons and Legacies” (Lawrence, Kansas, 16–18 Oct. 2009); “Global 1989” (Princeton, 22–24 Oct. 2009); “November 9, 1989: The Fall of the Berlin Wall, Twenty Years After” (University of Cincinnati, 8–9 Nov. 2009).

when it was all over—and when Germans with pineapples and Chinese protesters confronting tanks had become familiar images worldwide—still those four big blue books published by Pergamon Press?<sup>2</sup>

Writing about 1789 in the year 2009 while simultaneously pondering 1989 is a complicated task. For some of us—such as J.B. Shank in his introduction—this exercise will prompt explicitly autobiographical musings. For others, the personal narrative may be less obvious, but it will nonetheless always be part of the story. It is, after all, only beginning graduate students who have the luxury of reflecting on “the state of the field” without themselves being implicated in it. We are the field. We do not create it *ex novo* in every generation, but, nonetheless, when we comment on “the field,” we comment on ourselves. If some share Lynn Hunt’s sense of occupying an “interpretive cul-de-sac,” it might be worth remembering that most dead-end streets are of human manufacture.<sup>3</sup>

To the uninitiated, this forum must show signs of the commemorative impulse run amok. Twenty years since two hundred years: how has this become an anniversary worth marking? Granted, in our digital age—that is, when we count by tens and multiples of tens because that is how many digits most of us have—centennials and bicentennials almost automatically take precedence over other sorts of anniversaries. Yet even without considering how having twelve fingers might alter our patters of memorialization (would duodecimality make this a busy conference year for historians of the American Civil War?),<sup>4</sup> we can still imagine how different the effects might have been if the authors of “89: Then and Now” had been asked to comment on “French Revolutions and Regime Changes: Fifty Years of the Fifth Republic.”<sup>5</sup> Such a rubric, I suspect, might have prompted Laurent Dubois to compare the loss of empire in the 1950s with that of the eighteenth-century; it might have enticed Colin Jones or David Andress to write on the status of the military in each of France’s republics. Indeed, if David A. Bell is correct when he calls the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars “the first total war,” perhaps historians of the French Revolution might just as meaningfully be reminded that it has been seventy years since 1939 (and ninety since 1919)?

My point in playing these number games is to demonstrate that framing devices matter. Examining the whole “twenty years since two hundred years” conceit is therefore as necessary as commenting on the individual responses it has provoked. What are the consequences—intentional and otherwise—of focusing our collective attention on ’89s? Chief among its effects, I think, is to re-animate old debates and reveal a repetition compulsion at the core of this historiographical venture.<sup>6</sup> As Carla Hesse, Lynn Hunt, Colin Jones, and Jean-Clément Martin all note, 1989 was the year both of the fall of European “Communism” and, it is usually said, of the final collapse of the “Marxist” interpretation of the French Revolution.<sup>7</sup> To structure a discussion of the French Revolution with reference to 1989 is, once again, to raise the question of Marx.

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<sup>2</sup> Keith M. Baker, ed., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, 4 vols. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987-1992).

<sup>3</sup> Hunt, p. 671.

<sup>4</sup> 2009 - (12 x 12) = 1865.

<sup>5</sup> David A. Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare as we Know It* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Freud’s fullest account of the psychic mechanisms at work in repetition can be found in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). See also, Dominick LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” *Critical Inquiry* 25:4 (summer 1999), pp. 696-727.

<sup>7</sup> Carla Hesse, “The New Jacobins,” *French Historical Studies* 32:4 (2009): 663; Lynn Hunt, “The Experience of Revolution,” *French Historical Studies* 32:4 (2009): 672; Colin Jones, “Twenty Years After,” *French Historical Studies* 32:4 (2009): 681; Jean-Clément Martin, “Réflexions sur les évolutions historiographiques depuis le bicentenaire de la Révolution française,” *French Historical Studies* 32:4 (2009): 689-690.

Elsewhere, I have suggested that the cultural history of the past fifteen years relies so heavily on theorists indebted to Marx (such as Benedict Anderson, Walter Benjamin, and Jürgen Habermas) that it strikes me as disingenuous to say that we are “post-Marxist.”<sup>8</sup> Yet it is precisely that claim that is revived here. By motivating this collection of short essays as they have, the editors and contributors of *French Historical Studies* once again inscribe the “there used to be Marxists, but then there was Cobban and Furet, and now we’re all revisionists” mantra at the center of revolutionary historiography. As slogans go, “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” it is not.

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In such a context—when the historians’ conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s loom nearly as large as the historical conflicts of the 1780s and 1790s—it is understandable (but nonetheless slightly fanciful) that one contributor to this autumn’s retrospective chose to devote his first paragraph to sparring at a “Marxist” windmill.<sup>9</sup> Mentioned only to be dismissed, Henry Heller’s *The Bourgeois Revolution in France* nonetheless serves a vital function in David Andress’s contribution.<sup>10</sup> Heller’s existence allows Andress to give his comments a sense of narrative drama and urgency. Two poles are once again established: “Marxists” on one side, “the rest” on the other. Andress mentions a strikingly wide range of authors and approaches in the remainder of his review: from the empirical political history of Munro Price to the category-challenging work of Antoine Lilti and the socio-cultural study of gender roles and law undertaken by Suzanne Desan. In another day and age, historians would have been unlikely to treat utterances such as “the very next day, la Marck did indeed arrive at Metz” and “divorce ... called into question older conceptions of the character of marriage” as belonging to the same conceptual domain, but gender history’s challenge to traditional political narrative does not disrupt Andress’s synthesis.<sup>11</sup> Instead, the cry can almost be heard: “All for one and one for all [except for Henry Heller]!”

Introducing an element of plot into a review essay is no easy task, it must be said. In his formulation of the “Jones Conundrum,” Colin Jones attempts to do so by proposing that French *histoire culturelle* and North American cultural history are fundamentally distinct, hardly as compatible as Andress and Carla Hesse suggest. I admit that I find myself tempted to agree with Jones, for it is almost comforting to think that in a world where maps provided by Michelin help *localiser* the nine *McDo*’s in Perpignan (and where multiple French cheeses are to be had in Bloomington, Indiana), national intellectual cultures nonetheless persist. Yet upon reading most of the other contributors to this forum, it is the thematic coherences and the shared methodologies that prove most striking. While some sort of transatlantic difference certainly exists, I think it operates less on the level of understanding than on that of execution. Sophia Rosenfeld’s well chosen adjectives for the work of Antoine De Baecque and Sophie Wahnich, for instance—“essayistic,” “experimental,” and “idiosyncratic”—suggest that it may be the

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<sup>8</sup> See my “Paradigms and Paranoia: How Modern is the French Revolution?” *American Historical Review* 108 (Feb. 2003), pp. 119-147, especially pp. 145-147. Let me be clear: I was not saying there and I am not saying now that I think we *ought* necessarily to be “post-Marxist.” I find reading Marx to be worthwhile for a host of reasons. I was and am saying that I find the insistence on “cultural history” as a story distinct from that associated with “Marx” to be self-congratulatory and misleading. I think that Ethan Kleinberg’s comments on the relation of “post linguistic turn” history to “deconstruction” sketch a related argument in a compelling fashion (though I do not completely agree with his reading of Carolyn Steedman). See Ethan Kleinberg, “Haunting History: Deconstruction and the Spirit of Revision,” *History and Theory* 46:4 (2007), pp. 113-143.

<sup>9</sup> David Andress, “The Shifting Landscape of Revolutionary Interpretations: A Death of the Past and a Rebirth of History,” *French Historical Studies* 32:4 (2009): 647.

<sup>10</sup> Andress has reviewed Heller’s work at length elsewhere; see *French History* 21:3 (2007), 361-362.

<sup>11</sup> The first quotation is from Munro Price, *The Road from Versailles: Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, and the Fall of the French Monarchy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), p. 120 and the second from Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 138.

institutions within which, and the markets for which, historians write that differentiate French and North American approaches most sharply.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, French historians share more with “French theorists” than Jones admits. Meanwhile, in North America, “French theory” is still named, but its real challenges rarely confronted. Alas, poor Foucault: normalized into the stuff of footnotes!

Like Andress, Jones relies on the Marxists-revisionists-post-revisionists developmental model to structure his introductory comments. He does so, however, to note the persistence of what he calls the “sophisticated nit-picking” characteristic of much revisionist scholarship. This was an intellectual strategy, I think he is saying, that combined with “the facts of history” (1989 and all that) to “reorder the historiographical landscape” and “downplay the significance of the French Revolution as a world-historical event.” In this new landscape, our *champs* proved difficult to cultivate. As Jones writes, ours has been “a broken field—... full of ancient vestiges and new beginnings, of sudden eclipses and false starts.” Bad enough that Marxists found themselves “rudderless,” the real horror is that the French Revolution, in Sophia Rosenfeld’s words, became “a backwater.”<sup>13</sup>

Absent an intellectual and political tradition in which “revolution” is a goal, revolution most vitally concerns those who oppose it—hence the proliferation of books such as Reynald Secher’s *Le Génocide franco-français: La Vendée vengé* (1986), Florin Aftalion’s *L’Economie de la révolution française* (1987), and Renaud Escandé’s edited volume, *Le Livre noir de la révolution française* (2006).<sup>14</sup> Much more so than elsewhere, historians working in France have therefore had to contend with the emergence of an explicitly anti-revolutionary historiography (distinct from the histories of counter-revolutionary movements that Rosenfeld describes). How is the historian of revolutionary France to proceed in the face of this vitriolic backlash?

Carla Hesse tries to salvage republicanism from the discredited debris of Revolution by focusing attention on the “new Jacobins” (by which, I believe, she means *both* the historians she commends and the French republicans of the Directory). In work guided by these “less polemically inclined”<sup>15</sup> doctoral supervisors, she suggests, the Revolution has been subjected to “dereification” and resituated within long-term historical developments.<sup>16</sup> Institutions loom larger than ideologies; “technical” studies of legal practice take priority over the rhetoric of *Conventionnels*.

Hesse’s identification of “new Jacobins” resembles an earlier generation’s rediscovery of the Girondins, thus putting her in an enviable position: she herself may be “the new Lamartine.” Like Lamartine, she supports studying history in order to create a “useable past;” like Lamartine, she traces a history of revolutionary law and violence that inevitably takes us beyond European France to the colonies in the Caribbean.<sup>17</sup> Like Lamartine in his capacity as Minister of Foreign Relations in 1848, Hesse maintains

<sup>12</sup> Sophia Rosenfeld, “Thinking about Feeling,” *French Historical Studies* 32:4 (2009): 702, 706.

<sup>13</sup> Jones, pp. 680-681; Rosenfeld, p. 697.

<sup>14</sup> For useful reviews of the last, see: <http://ihrf.univ-paris1.fr/spip.php?article207> For a different perspective, see <http://33.royaliste.com.over-blog.com/article-16611800.html>

<sup>15</sup> “Less polemically inclined” Jacobins may strike some as an oxymoron, but a substantial body of literature suggests that they did in fact exist in considerable numbers. See Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Hesse, p. 663, 665.

<sup>17</sup> “...et que le sang répandu à flots n’y crie pas seulement terreur et pitié, mais leçon et exemple aux hommes,” Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire des girondins* (1847; Paris: Hachette, 1902), vol. 1, p.4. On Saint Domingue, see volume one, book 10, sections 7-11. For an incisive recent discussion of law and the colonies, see Miranda Spieler, “The Legal Structure of Colonial Rule during the French Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 3<sup>rd</sup> series 66:2 (April 2009), 365-408.

that a republican revival will not bring the return of ideologically-driven Europe-wide war. There is, she asserts, “a ‘third way’ forward.”<sup>18</sup>

Unlike Lamartine, whose *Histoire des girondins* is the unfolding of two dramatic years, Hesse insists on “deeper and longer trajectories” stretching from the Wars of Religion to the post-1945 era.<sup>19</sup> Once again, a “new revolutionary landscape” emerges, one in which the years 1789-1799 may be part of a major waterway but they are not themselves distinctive features or the site of particular topographical relief.<sup>20</sup> Hesse’s many historiographical “signposts” may help us navigate the Gironde, but hers is a landscape with nary a Mountain in sight.<sup>21</sup>

It remains for Lynn Hunt to strike the only overtly revolutionary note in this forum. With characteristic clarity and forcefulness, Hunt calls for “a new paradigm, not only for understanding the French Revolution but also for humanistic studies more generally.”<sup>22</sup> Since 1981, when her review of François Furet’s *Penser la révolution française* helped to put “political culture” on historians’ conceptual agendas, Hunt has played a central role in defining paradigms and directing research strategies.<sup>23</sup> In this short essay, she encourages “a reconceptualization of individual experience based on perspectives derived from recent research in neuroscience” and a new focus on “nonlinguistic modes of communication” such as visual culture.<sup>24</sup> Though they may appear unrelated, both are animated by Hunt’s urging that we “get beyond,” “replace,” and “get away from” discursive analyses and linguistic metaphors.<sup>25</sup>

If Hunt’s enthusiasm for developments in other fields sometimes sounds a slightly naïve note—readers of Bruno Latour or W.J.T. Mitchell may be surprised by her celebration of science’s “discoveries” and

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<sup>18</sup> Hesse, p. 664.

<sup>19</sup> Hesse, p. 665.

<sup>20</sup> Hesse, p. 669.

<sup>21</sup> Hesse, notes 6, 9, 15.

<sup>22</sup> Hunt, “The Experience of Revolution,” p. 671.

<sup>23</sup> Her review of Furet can be found in *History and Theory* 20:3 (1981), 313-323. Among her key contributions, Hunt’s *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) is a classic as well as being the first work in the “Studies on the History of Society and Culture” series which Hunt co-edited for decades. See too, Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) and Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). The lead author on a major textbook, *The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Bedford St. Martins, 2009), Hunt has made major contributions to how history is taught all across the United States. Mention should also be made of her comments on the historical profession as a whole, written while President of the American Historical Association (*Perspectives*, 2002). See especially, “Has Professionalization Gone Too Far?” (February 2002), on-line at <http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/Issues/2002/0202/0202pre1.cfm>.

<sup>24</sup> Hunt, p. 672, 674. These are both interests she has explored elsewhere, including in her *Inventing Human Rights* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007) and in a conference she co-organized with Vanessa Schwartz, “Capturing the Moment: Visual Evidence and Eyewitnessing” (Univ. of California at Los Angeles and Univ. of Southern California, 1-2 May 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Hunt, pp. 673, 674. This sort of language is central to the “return to disciplinarity” as dissected by Joan Scott. Scott writes, “The call for certainty and stability, long muttered, is now very confident and loud. Among historians, it takes the form of a renewed emphasis on empiricism and quantitative analysis, the rehabilitation of the autonomous willing subject as the agent of history, the essentializing of political categories of identity by the evidence of ‘experience,’ the turn to evolutionary psychology for explanations of human behavior, and the trivialization and denunciation of the ‘linguistic turn’...” See her “Against Eclecticism,” *differences* 16:3 (2005), quotation from pp. 121-122.

art history's "uncovering"—it is nonetheless commendable in its willingness to extend the definition of interdisciplinarity.<sup>26</sup> While I definitely share Sophia Rosenfeld's hesitations in the face of what we might call Hunt's recent "physiological turn," I do also find it liberating to compile bibliographies that range beyond the Library of Congress's DC and PQ shelf marks.<sup>27</sup> Done with suitable rigor, it seems to me that this sort of extended inter- or multi-disciplinarity might be just the antidote that is needed to C.P. Snow's "two cultures" or Latour's "modern constitution."<sup>28</sup> Yet this resolution will not amount to much if humanists persistently yield to the temptations of "science envy," however it may reveal itself.<sup>29</sup>

In Hunt's case, her fascination with cognitive science and behavioral neurology comes at the cost of abandoning many of her earlier and most significant insights. Her wishing to "get away from" language and textuality is especially difficult to fathom for it relies upon a dichotomy—that between the "discursive" and the "real"—that she has elsewhere critiqued very capably. (Most notably in "The Rhetoric of Revolution," chapter one of her *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution*.) Scholars, of course, change their minds, but Hunt's "The Experience of Revolution" does not read as an exercise in auto-critique. Rather, her opening comparison between rethinking concepts and emptying e-mail "trash" suggests that her advocacy of new directions is almost an operational imperative produced within the technology of academic research itself. We have been Marxists, she says. Then we were neo-Tocquevilleans. Now we have to be something else. Otherwise, as she wrote several years ago, "The rat-a-tat-tat of scholarly and political crossfire threatens to obliterate the real accomplishments."<sup>30</sup>

Hunt's "The Experience of Revolution" chiefly names past histories in order to break from them. In this, it is like many other historiographical commentaries on French Revolution scholarship. The impulse at work here is a properly revolutionary one, not unlike the one that animated the naming of an "ancien régime" in 1789-1790. Historical trends—"vulgar materialism," "the new social history," "the linguistic turn," etc. etc.—are identified in order to be rejected. Along with reference to its richness and the value of its insights for other subfields, this cataloguing of past errors has become such a standard feature of Revolutionary historiography that we rarely remark upon it. Yet it is a repetition mechanism, like the marking of "twenty years since two hundred years," that has consequences well worth pondering.

Neither dialectical nor dialogical, the usual "there used to be Marxists, but then there was Alfred Cobban and François Furet, and now we're all post-revisionists" story is, instead, a fairly blunt-edged

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<sup>26</sup> Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (1979; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) and Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). In writing about the "construction" of facts, Latour is most definitely *not* saying that discourse exists whereas material "reality" does not; see also Bruno Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30: 2 (2004), pp. 225-248. This is not the place for a comprehensive bibliography of relevant work in art history and visual culture studies; two key works are W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, eds., *Visual Culture: The Reader* (London: Sage, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Hunt's argument in *Inventing Human Rights* is, Rosenfeld writes, "difficult to swallow in all its particulars," p. 703.

<sup>28</sup> C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959); Bruno Latour, *We have Never been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (1991; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>29</sup> A recent article on Weimar Germany asks similar questions about how to use quantification without succumbing to positivist temptations. See Adam Tooze, "Trouble with Numbers: Statistics, Politics, and History in the Construction of Weimar's Trade Balance," *American Historical Review* 113:3 (June 2008), pp. 678-700.

<sup>30</sup> Lynn Hunt, "The World we have Gained: the Future of the French Revolution," *American Historical Review* 108:1 (2003), pp. 1-19.

bit of Whiggish narrative. The metaphor is linear and the logic, reminiscent of modernization theory. “Turns” and “signposts” offer guidance for proceeding along a single path. Arguments and individuals difficult to narrate in this way—John Markoff’s 1996 *The Abolition of Feudalism* and the *oeuvre* of Richard Cobb are just two examples—largely disappear from the map. Yet because this tale is one of progress, the horrors of the past (be they imprisonment by *lettres de cachet* or under-theorized models of class formation) must be held constantly before our eyes. There can be no going back. There is no way out of the cul-de-sac but up!

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Reading some of the other pieces in this forum, one wonders if the particular re-visionings Hunt demands are not in fact well underway. For example, Sophia Rosenfeld’s “Thinking about Feeling” suggests that “lived experience” has been a central analytic category for over a decade already and for authors as different as Timothy Tackett and Sophie Wahnich. Yet Rosenfeld also insists—rightly, I think—that “No amount of empathy on the part of the historian can ever lead to the recovery of some pure, unmediated experiential realm, in good part because such a realm did not and cannot exist.”<sup>31</sup> Decades ago, we might remember, psycho-historians suggested—much as Hunt does—that selves are real, formed in a social context, and may change across time.<sup>32</sup> Yet the more subtle psycho-historians also realized that we never have direct access to the unconscious (any more than we do to experience). If dreams, in Freud’s memorable phrase, are “the royal road” to the unconscious, that is only because of the detour into language that they are forced to take when being remembered, recounted, and interpreted.

While Rosenfeld surveys a literature that meets Hunt’s call for “a reconceptualization of individual experience,” Laurent Dubois’s contribution suggests that Hunt’s anxiety to “replace the text or linguistic metaphor ... (if I knew with what, I would tell you)” may be misplaced. Dubois demonstrates that it is twenty-first-century historians who have learned “to see the world differently”—and they see a world where 1789 does not even figure on the map. (He certainly does not mention it in his essay, though 1793, 1794, 1801, 1802, and 1803 all appear.) His concluding comments, proposing that one treat Orléans (Loiret) as a site of Atlantic history, initially sound quite prosaic, like the words of a professor advising a student in search of a dissertation topic. Nonetheless I think they actually point to the same profound re-assessment targeted by his earlier questions, *viz.*: “Where is the Haitian Revolution?” and “What does it mean to call the French Revolution ‘French’?”

On my reading, Dubois’s “An Atlantic Revolution” suggests that national histories may increasingly be obsolete. If, in the words of Stuart Hall, “we re-read ‘colonization’ as part of an essentially transnational and transcultural ‘global’ process” then we must also produce a “decentred, diasporic, or ‘global’ rewriting of earlier, nation-centered” narratives.<sup>33</sup> In other words, if we take the message of Atlantic history seriously, then the “French” Revolution may cease to exist (and so, too, might the Haitian). Or, rather, while both would still be meaningful for intellectual and political historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—who could ask: “how did this Atlantic or global phenomenon come to be understood chiefly as an event in French history?”—the terms would have decreasing significance for scholars of the eighteenth century. As Jean-Clément Martin observes, something like this has already

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<sup>31</sup> Rosenfeld, p. 704.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past* (1985; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); another useful way of thinking about the relationship between history and psychoanalysis is offered by Michael Roth, *Psychoanalysis as History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987). For further bibliography, see the website for my “History and Psychoanalysis” graduate course, <http://www.indiana.edu/~histpsa/>

<sup>33</sup> Stuart Hall, “When was ‘the Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the Limit,” in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 242-260, quotation from p. 247.

happened in France with future secondary-school teachers studying “Révoltes et révolutions en Europe (Russie comprise) et aux Amériques de 1773 à 1802.”<sup>34</sup>

Such a development *could* produce profound historiographical effects, ones that might constitute the first real paradigm shift in decades, if not centuries. Please note: I am *not* here endorsing paradigm shifts for their own sake or even “calling” for one. Instead, I am saying that with the break up of empires (including the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union in 1989-1991), the conceptual “tectonic plates”—to keep with the geographical language so beloved by authors of review essays—may be moving in ways we cannot fully measure. National historiographies may not go completely extinct, but Europeanists who can enclose their fields within a single national context may become increasingly rare. It is a luxury afforded few of our Africanist colleagues, after all.

So too, perhaps, may some nineteenth-century modes of historical understanding—many of which were developed in tandem with nationalist mythologies—come under increasing pressure. Insofar as narratability and the rational use of evidence have long been the defining features of “History” as a modern academic discipline, I think we are unlikely to abandon them completely.<sup>35</sup> Yet the “science envy” manifest among a number of senior humanists might productively be understood as indicative of growing uneasiness with History’s forms of explanation and especially with its styles of exposition.<sup>36</sup> No longer believing in the nineteenth-century equation of archives with truth, it may be tempting to reject the first whilst clinging to the latter.

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It has been more than half a century since Alfred Cobban toyed with the idea of entitling his Inaugural Lecture, “Was there a French Revolution?” Worried that this might seem rude “to our French friends” and “awkward” for his incipient professorial career, Cobban instead posed an apparently more empirical question: “What was the French Revolution?”<sup>37</sup> Yet his answer, famously, was that it was a myth. That is, the Revolution was a story told about a series of events—it was not, it could not be, the events themselves. The events and actors themselves were both too bi-polar (they reached “the heights of heroism and...the depths of civil strife”) and too liminal (they existed “between the rational and the romantic...between the oecumenical ideal and the rise of nationalism”) ever to be fully grasped. “The real fallacy behind all the myths of the French Revolution,” Cobban concluded, was “the idea that there was *a* French Revolution, which you can be for or against.”<sup>38</sup>

One response to the categorization of the Revolution as a myth—evident in Carla Hesse’s piece and in the final sentence of Colin Jones’s, in particular—would be to say that myths are vitally important for community existence. Far from “over,” the French Revolution is very much on-going, and it is one tool

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<sup>34</sup> Martin, p. 691.

<sup>35</sup> On the difficulty of writing something that is recognizably “History” (as opposed to “about the past”) without those qualities, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?” *Representations* 37 (1992), pp. 1-26 and “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts,” *Post-Colonial Studies* 1:1 (1998), both also available in his *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>36</sup> Here, I echo Rosenfeld’s point about innovation with the forms of history, pp. 705-706. Daniel Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008) represents another case of “science envy” among North American historians of France.

<sup>37</sup> Alfred Cobban, “The Myth of the French Revolution,” in his *Aspects of the French Revolution* (London: Cape, 1968), 93.

<sup>38</sup> Cobban, 108.



we need for dreaming of a more equitable and just future. To say that something is a myth need not be to belittle it.<sup>39</sup>

Another response to Cobban would be to say that in questioning the mythology of the French Revolution, we have inadvertently produced another myth, that of the Revolution's historiography. Marx begat Marxism which begat Jacobino-Marxism which begat Georges Lefebvre, *etcetera, etcetera, etcetera*. The "rising bourgeoisie" may no longer exist, but we all learn about the rise and fall of "revisionism." In short, there is a strong temptation to write the historiography of the French Revolution as its history once was written: as a unidirectional tale of progress. (Or, conversely, as one of decline and the degeneration into populist/post-modernist chaos.) It is an understandable impulse, for these are chiefly the forms of history we know how to write.

With this recognition, we return to the "Jones Conundrum." For in the delineation of what counts as "history" and hence of how the history of history can be written, national intellectual cultures and institutions do play a significant role. Genre conventions within the North American academy weigh as heavily on dissertation supervisors and editorial boards as do disciplinary considerations. "Experimental" and "idiosyncratic" may pass muster at the CNRS, but they would sound warning bells within most tenure and promotion committees.<sup>40</sup>

As my opening epigraph reminds us, a myth consists of all its variations. Displaced from a history of progress to a historiography of "paradigms," the basic story remains the same. The myth of the French Revolution and the myth of French Revolutionary historiography cannot be disentangled. If we change how we think about the task of historiography—perhaps by reading and engaging with, rather than naming and rejecting, scholarship from earlier decades—we may find that history looks different, as well.

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<sup>39</sup> On the changing relation of myth and history, see my review of Patrice Higonnet, *Paris, Capital of the World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002 ) <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/City/reviews/spang.html>

<sup>40</sup> If they want to break with the confines of the academic monograph, senior historians working in North America most often aspire to write a trade book. I applaud the desire to reach a broader audience, but "the general reading public" (or, its editors) so far seems to share a highly conventional notion of historical writing.