

H-France Salon

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### My IHRF

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It took me a long time, in my career as a historian of France, to come to a full appreciation of the Institut d'Histoire de la Révolution Française (IHRF). I began my serious study of the Revolution, in the 1980s, under the spell of François Furet, who was no friend of the place. From his works, and the atmosphere at his seminar at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, it was all too easy to get an impression of the IHRF as the redoubt of a petrified Jacobin tradition that did not need to be taken seriously. In preparing for my graduate general examinations I read the major works of Albert Soboul and Michel Vovelle and, to my surprise, found that they were anything but intellectually petrified and deserved to be taken very seriously indeed. But my Furetian friends encouraged me to distinguish between the scholars and the institution that they directed. And as an apprentice researcher I had few occasions to make use of the Institut's formidable scholarly resources, since my dissertation largely concerned the ancien regime.

So it was only later, as my career developed, that I really discovered the Institut's importance and value. My subsequent projects delved much more deeply into revolutionary history, and as I researched them I came to appreciate both the intellectual tools the Institut has done so much to help develop (especially the *Archives parlementaires*!) and the work of its affiliated scholars. They had a sheer mastery of the sources and previous scholarship that I envied, as well as an ability to produce thoughtful analyses at an impressive pace. I came to see that their deep immersion in their subject had not in fact led them into an unthinking celebration of it, as Furet had charged, and that there was more than a little to be said for their research methods, as opposed to his. I still appreciate Furet's work, but now recognize just how much his criticism of his opponents amounted to a caricature.

In 2004, Jean-Clément Martin invited me to present a paper to the conference called "La Révolution à l'oeuvre," beginning a more personal connection with the Institut that has lasted to this day. The paper I gave was controversial (on which more in a moment), but Martin graciously invited me back on several occasions, as has his successor, Pierre Serna. I have been fortunate to attend conferences, contribute to collective volumes, and also to invite some of the Institut's scholars to the United States.

Unlike some of my wiser American colleagues and friends in the field, I have not managed to steer clear of revolutionary controversies. I used the occasion of the 2004 conference to try out some ideas that would later go into my book *The First Total War*. My paper was something of a thought

experiment, but I didn't give much consideration, as I wrote it, to how French colleagues would likely react. When the time came to deliver it I was suffering from the worst jet lag I have ever experienced and had not slept in more than thirty hours. I finished reading the text, and in my delirium it seemed as if every hand in the room went up. Jean-Paul Bertaud, the dean of revolutionary military history, rose to give a long, sharp critique of the paper, and a couple of his students were considerably less kind. I answered as best I could and cannot remember whether I made any sense or not. I thought I had probably burned my bridges with the Institut before I had even built them.

But over the next few years, I found to my pleasure that this was not the case. Jean-Clément Martin was critical of the paper as well but published it in the conference's *Actes*. And then, a couple of years later, he invited me back to the Institut to give a longer, more fully thought-out paper on the project in his research seminar. We had a long, spirited discussion afterwards, which left me feeling that while my book was unlikely to receive many hosannas in the vicinity of Escalier C, at least it would be taken seriously there.

When the book itself appeared, this theory happily proved correct. By this time Pierre Serna had taken over from Martin and participated in a small roundtable on the book at the École Normale Supérieure. He started off his comment with the warning that he would be "résolument critique," and indeed he was. There was another lively discussion. Pierre then told me that he would be publishing his comment on the Institut's website, under a new rubric to be called, appropriately enough, "Controverses!" (exclamation point included). But he graciously invited me to contribute a response, which I did. It was an act of intellectual generosity entirely at odds with the caricatural view of the Institut with which I had grown up.

And then Pierre did something more generous still. He told me that while he still disagreed with the book, he wanted to make its arguments fully available to French readers. And so he recommended its publication, in translation, in the book series he was directing at Champ Vallon. To publish a book you disagree with, for the sake of the discussion it can promote, is the mark of a true intellectual, and I'll always be grateful to Pierre for doing this with *La première guerre totale*. Pierre, like Jean-Clément Martin before him, has also been exceptionally hospitable to my doctoral students, welcoming them to their seminars, introducing them to the Institut's formidable resources, and giving them an intellectual home in Paris (as well as, in Pierre's case, putting their French to the test by delivering papers at an impressively rapid speaking pace!)

Today, while François Furet's influence still persists strongly in the study of the French Revolution, there is not much of a school continuing and building on his work. The center of French Revolutionary studies in France, and therefore in the world, remains where it was before Furet burst on the scene: the IHRF and its scholars. And it remains an intellectually vibrant center, as testified to particularly by the way its scholars have, during the years since the bicentennial, reinvigorated the study of the period 1794-99 and the place of Revolutionary France in the wider world, particularly with relation to France's Caribbean colonies.

Like my colleagues in this *Salon*, I can only conclude by emphasizing the importance of the IHRF to historical scholarship in general. The institutional changes introduced last year sent anxious ripples through the community of Anglophone scholars of the Revolution, and we are especially

concerned about the future changes connected with the Université de Paris I's eventual move northwards. A research institute is not simply the sum of its parts. Those parts cannot be decoupled from each other and spread about through a larger institution without seriously deleterious effects. Today, the history of the French Revolution remains as important and instructive as ever. The study of this history requires a dedicated, well-funded research institute. It requires the IHRF.

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