
H-France Review Vol. 14 (January 2014), No. 2

Peter McPhee, ed., *A Companion to the French Revolution*. Oxford and Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. xxiv + 544 pp. Notes, bibliographies, and index. \$199.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4443-3564-4.

Review by Lloyd Kramer, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

The French Revolution of 1789 remains the most debated and controversial issue in all of French history, an event that never goes away and never receives a complete explanation. The Revolution continues to fascinate historical-minded people because it leads us into all the complexities of human motivations, historical causality, hierarchical social systems, economic transitions, collective violence, utopian political aspirations, enduring religious beliefs, physical survival, and emotionally-charged personal relationships. Peter McPhee's new edited volume introduces readers to these multiple layers of revolutionary history through twenty-nine well-informed, provocative essays that were written specifically for this book.

The essays range widely across the whole revolutionary era, offering excellent surveys of recent research and suggesting how contemporary historians are redefining the Revolution's historical significance. The book is long and too expensive for students to buy, but it includes the insightful perspectives of specialists currently working in Europe, North America, and Australia and also shows how evolving historical contexts influence every generation that seeks to explain the meaning of revolutionary events.

Contemporary historians, like their predecessors, are approaching the Revolution with questions that reflect changing political and cultural interests. Among the many subjects in this *Companion to the French Revolution*, for example, there is particular interest in the unanticipated influences of historical contingency (rather than structural components of historical causality), the personal realities of daily social experiences (rather than the historical significance of abstract political ideas), and the far-flung connections of global history (rather than simply the consequences of famous events within France itself).

These themes reappear often in this *Companion*, but they are also linked to other recent work on environmental history, human emotions and psychological traumas, political expressions of religious beliefs, surveillance policies in modern "security states," transnational networks in the Atlantic slave trade, conceptions of universal human rights, cultural constructions of gender and family identities, brutal outbursts of political violence, and the ontological distortions that accompany the organizing categories of historical analysis (e.g., peasantry, nobles, Jacobins, counter-revolutionaries, émigrés, Catholics, and bourgeoisie). Most of the analytical categories that traditionally explained the meaning of the Revolution seem to have become more fluid, contingent, and overlapping.

The "linguistic turn" may have lost its cutting-edge influence in historical studies, but the late twentieth-century questioning of scholarly discourses and well-delineated social classes has settled into a kind of postmodern acceptance of indeterminacy and ambiguity. The older scientific search for definite causes, economic or cultural origins, and clear categorical dichotomies has given way to more modest arguments about convergences, crises, and the intricate intersections of different social groups. There

are few precise origins or outcomes, and there is no master narrative; but the new empirical research remains impressive, and the Revolution's international significance is still strongly affirmed.

The field of revolutionary studies is therefore in play again—as it has always been—but we can safely say that all previously ascendant analytical frameworks are deemed to be inadequate, in part because each interpretation expressed the distinctive preoccupations of past historical generations (as Pascal Dupuy notes in the *Companion's* helpful concluding survey of history and memory). It would nevertheless be wrong to say that all earlier Marxist, revisionist, political, social, and cultural interpretations of the Revolution are now dismissed as one-sided, ideological relics of past historical contexts. In fact, as the essays in this new volume repeatedly confirm, each previous phase of historical research still provides useful insights for current analysts of the Revolution, but the meaning of the Revolution continues to evolve, and *A Companion to the French Revolution* shows how new themes are developing.

The recent “global approach” to the French Revolution becomes apparent, for example, by comparing McPhee's new volume with the four-volume collection of essays that appeared during the Revolution's bicentennial commemorations: *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* (1987–1994). Those volumes, which were skillfully compiled by Keith Michael Baker, François Furet, Mona Ozouf, and Colin Lucas, consisted of 104 contributions from virtually all of that era's leading historians of the Revolution.[1] Yet this large collection of essays included no chapters on the slave trade or the sugar commerce in France's Atlantic port cities, the slave labor system in Saint-Domingue, the revolutionary uprising of enslaved workers that led to Haitian independence, the impact of the Revolution in North Africa or South Asia, or even the connections with eighteenth-century revolutionary changes in North America. Terms such as “slave trade” and “Saint-Domingue” do not appear anywhere in the indexes, and the abolition of slavery elicits only a single page reference in one of the four volumes.

Although R.R. Palmer's transnational analysis of the Atlantic Revolutions (1959, 1964) has been rightly criticized for barely mentioning slave systems, gender hierarchies, and the revolutionary conflicts in Saint-Domingue,[2] it is perhaps more striking that a four-volume collection on the French Revolution was published in the late 1980s without chapters on the Caribbean or Latin America or the world outside Europe. France stands in these well-researched volumes as a revolutionary island in which intense struggles raged over internal issues that seemingly had little connection with the wider world.

I do not refer to this hexagon-centered approach to the French Revolution in order to denigrate the bicentennial era's remarkable historical scholarship, but the omissions in that period's monumental work suggest how the study of the revolutionary era has changed over the last two decades. McPhee's new volume gives far more attention to the transnational and global aspects of the French Revolution, and there are numerous references to the role of the slave trade and international commerce in the French economy. This volume therefore shows the growing interest in a new global analysis of the French Revolution, which appears even more explicitly in another recent book edited by Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson: *The French Revolution in Global Perspective*.[3] The editors of these other new essays stress that “the causes, internal dynamics, and consequences of the French Revolution all grew out of France's increasing participation in processes of globalization” and that many “republican political innovations emerged from international processes.”[4]

The Desan-Hunt-Nelson volume is even more “global” than McPhee's *Companion*, but there are numerous overlapping themes and perspectives. Indeed, McPhee's volume is dedicated to Lynn Hunt, “whose innovative research and generous scholarship pervade this collection” (p. v); and Suzanne Desan, Miranda Spieler, and Ian Collier have contributed chapters to both books. Taken together, these two important collections convey the new historical preoccupations that have emerged in our own context of

globalization, post-colonialism, North African revolutions, and transnational struggles for human rights.

Despite the significance of the new transnational and global themes (to which I will return), it should be noted that McPhee's volume also discusses issues that have often appeared in traditional historical narratives. There is much discussion, for example, of the deep resentments about ubiquitous social and legal hierarchies that blocked ambitious persons in the Third Estate from advancement into the elite spheres of old regime society. If these resentments were not exactly the "cause" of the Revolution, they certainly fueled the widening crisis once the conflicts gathered force in 1789 (as Jean-Pierre Jessenne, Sarah Maza, Michael Fitzsimmons, Serge Aberdam, Anne Verjus, and Noelle Plack explain in their insightful discussions of both the hierarchies and resentments).

The new analysis of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy (1790) also suggests that historians have correctly viewed this major reform as a key reason for the permanent opposition to the Revolution. Although there are interesting new perspectives on the Church-State conflicts (especially in essays by Dale Van Kley, Edward J. Woell, and Peter M. Jones), this volume mostly reiterates that alienated Catholics sustained a counter-revolutionary resistance that pushed the Revolution toward more centralization of power and more violence. Similarly, the analysis of the weak leadership of Louis XVI—whose overthrow and execution are described by Barry M. Shapiro as the French people's "traumatic" rejection of a father figure—confirms older views of the monarch. The discussions of revolutionary violence likewise revisit familiar historical events, though the essays in this volume add new details and perspectives (the violence receives particular attention in well-argued chapters by Donald Sutherland, Jean-Clément Martin, David Andress, Laura Mason, Stephen Clay, and Howard G. Brown).

Blood flowed almost everywhere after 1789, creating anxieties that help to explain Bonaparte's eventual coup-d'état as well as the local memories of revolutionary conflicts. Napoleon thus emerges in the book's later chapters as both the beneficiary of the Revolution's new "security state" (an interesting theme in Brown's essay) and as the figure who ended the political revolution—another traditional view that is generally reaffirmed in recent work on the political and social transitions after Thermidor.

These familiar themes suggest how *A Companion to the French Revolution* engages the specific issues of traditional historical narratives, but the essays also address long-debated, broader questions about changes and continuities across the whole revolutionary era. Although the contributors disagree about how much France actually changed, they tend to stress profound transitions, even when they note long-term continuities. The peasantry secured the abolition of seigneurial rights and fees and gained 30 or 40 percent of the newly sold church and émigré lands (a theme in Plack's essay), but most peasants remained poor. Nobles paid more taxes after 1789, but they also held on to most of their property and still owned the best lands after the Revolution (a theme in McPhee's own essay). Women gained new rights to inherit family wealth and to divorce their husbands, but they were still excluded from public offices and the right to vote (as explained in perceptive essays by Anne Verjus and Suzanne Desan). The Gallican church lost its autonomy and political power (Van Kley's theme), but religious sentiments remained strong, and Catholicism became more vibrant than it had been before the Revolution (Woell's essay explains this evolution). The Atlantic cities such as Bordeaux and Nantes lost commerce and population, but other businesses continued their prerevolutionary expansion, aided by the removal of internal tolls and the new uniform systems of measurements (McPhee's analysis of economic transitions). The volume as a whole therefore describes all kinds of revolutionary changes, yet the traditional debates about what changed and what stayed the same are still generating new empirical studies and new historical arguments.

Along with the continuing development of older historiographical themes, however, the *Companion* examines other issues that are attracting new attention in our present political cultures. There is new environmental research on how the Revolution affected land usage and forests, for example, which seeks

to explain why there was a 25 percent decline in forested land across France between 1789 and 1820. The expanding peasant cultivation of former woodlands and pasturelands may have contributed to these changes and to soil erosion, but other social groups and economic demands also shaped the Revolution's ecological impact (another theme in Plack's interesting essay). In addition to the new environmental research, historians are redefining various revolutionary experiences as disorienting forms of trauma and post-traumatic stress, and they are exploring psychological and emotional factors that affected the individual decisions to support or oppose different public actions (notable themes in essays by Shapiro, Marissa Linton, and Peter Jones).

The changing definitions of human rights are also receiving careful new analysis, with particular reference to gender relations and slavery (the subjects of essays by Verjus, Spieler, and Frédéric Régent); and contemporary concerns about individual rights, government surveillance, and national security may also be influencing new work on political repression and internal police controls (as in the essays by Mason, Brown, and James Livesey). Each complex issue in our own political-cultural context seems to open parallel lines of research and analysis in historical studies of the French Revolution. This dialogic exchange between current concerns and revolutionary events could be analyzed with themes from every chapter in this volume, but the discussions of contingency, daily life, and global exchanges provide especially notable examples of the present/past dialogues in *A Companion to the French Revolution*.

Historians have long stressed that the French Revolution emerged from many contingent actions and improvised responses to immediate problems rather than from a pre-existing, Bolshevik-type party or ideology. Transformations in the economic system or influential Enlightenment ideologies or the centralization of government power or even a rise in bread prices could thus never really explain why the revolutionaries declared the Rights of Man and Citizen or overthrew the monarchy or launched wars or supported the Terror. But the current intellectual suspicion of general "causes" and "origins" seems to go beyond older accounts of improvised actions by emphasizing how every significant decision was a contingent choice that could have gone in different directions. The famous abolition of the seigneurial system (on the night of August 4, 1789) and the subsequent Declaration of Rights developed almost by chance, even though there were coherent, underlying political themes. As Michael Fitzsimmons notes in a summary that might also apply to almost every issue discussed in this book, "the formulation and achievement of the principles of 1789 were much more a product of chance and contingency than of fixed goals or intent, and [they] developed in stages" (p. 75).

This pattern of contingency reappeared constantly in what the authors describe as a "convergence" of events or a "crisis" of state failure (Peter Campbell) or a variety of "cultural practices" that were available for revolutionary mobilization (Sarah Maza). The references to contingency in fact create one of the main thematic connections between otherwise disparate chapters, and this theme conveys the open-endedness of history rather than any possible argument for historical determinism. Maza affirms this perspective, for example, when she suggests that "the expression 'cultural origins' ought probably to be jettisoned" because the concept of "'origin' implies a causal, diachronic approach to a historical question" (p. 55).

Revolutionary events thus developed from contingencies rather than from "origins" or "causes," as almost every author explains with different political, social or cultural examples. The new organization of French *départements* and the selection of administrative centers emerged somewhat haphazardly from local political rivalries and negotiations (a theme of Alan Forrest's excellent essay); the outbreak of war in 1792 reflected the contingent decisions and policies of both French revolutionaries and the Austrian emperor (Thomas Kaiser's well-informed argument about international relations); and the Terror developed in different cities and borderlands as contingent responses to specific counter-revolutionary threats (Martin and Andress describe these processes with numerous examples).

Individuals also made unexpected personal or political choices that became improvised reactions to local social and religious conflicts. (Linton and Jones persuasively explain the complexities of such choices). Nobody could anticipate their next move—the unsettling experience that was shared by radical Jacobins, village priests, hungry peasants, angry sans-culottes, and noble émigrés. The contingent responses to unstable conditions continued during the post-Thermidor reaction, throughout the years of the Directory, and after the Bonapartist coup in 1799 (themes in the essays of Mason, Livesey, Brown, and Clay), so that the history of the French Revolution might be best narrated as a story of the contingencies that shape and impede human decision-making.

The accounts of contingency also emphasize the fragmented, daily *experiences* of people who lived through the revolutionary upheavals. Relatively few persons ever attended sessions of the National Assembly or the Convention, but everyone saw the changes in street names and government buildings, the celebrations of revolutionary festivals, the transitions in property ownership, the arrivals or departures of local priests, and the new clothing, money, and public spaces (discussed by Forrest, Woell, Plack, and others). There were also frequent encounters with the violence that grew out of local grievances or desires for vengeance against well-known neighbors; and this violence created anxieties for almost everyone in France. (Sutherland, Address, Clay, and Brown give particular attention to such violence.)

The commander of the Bastille, to take only one famous example that Sutherland describes, was beaten to death after his surrender, and the enraged crowd immediately extended this brutality by parading his severed head around Paris on a pike (p. 237). There was similar “exceptional justice” during the September massacres (1792), the revolt in the Vendée (1793), and the White Terror (1795), when people were simply murdered in their homes or in the streets of their towns. Such violence, as Stephen Clay notes, developed from political conflicts that spilled over into “local rivalries between families, clans and factions” (p. 362).

But violence was by no means the only common experience of revolutionary life. The constant elections, the circulation of pamphlets and newspapers, and the daily meetings of political clubs (all clearly described in a concise summary by Isser Woloch) created a highly politicized social life and a more democratic culture than any French person had ever known. The daily lives of French families were also affected by new inheritance laws that required equal divisions of property among the children of deceased citizens and by the new divorce laws that led to the dissolution of thousands of marriages (Suzanne Desan’s insightful essay provides informative details). Far from the Parisian assemblies and the famous revolutionary *journées*, the Revolution unfolded in family decisions about money or migration, daily struggles to find food, constant choices about religious practices, and recurring cycles of violence between neighbors or hostile social groups. This historical emphasis on daily experiences and choices, like the emphasis on contingency, is not entirely new, of course, but it contributes many of the innovative insights in this volume.

The most innovative themes of this collection, however, focus on France’s connections to the world outside of Europe. This global perspective is now reshaping much of the research on the Revolution, including the numerous new studies of French interactions with slave societies in the Americas and the revolutionary upheavals in Saint-Domingue. The revolutionary debates about slavery and the colonies are examined in chapters about evolving forms of repression and evolving conflicts among French planters, abolitionists, and emancipated persons on Caribbean islands (key themes in the essays by Spieler and Régent). Indeed, the intense factionalism of the revolutionaries in France often deepened through their disagreements about how new French rights and laws should be extended to colonized or enslaved persons.

To be sure, the French revolutionaries, unlike the Americans, voted to abolish slavery in February 1794, but this was another contingent action that only came after the prolonged slave revolt in Saint-

Domingue and after the Jacobin commissioner on the island had unilaterally abolished slavery to recruit fighters for military campaigns against invading English forces and displaced French planters. The radicalism of the Revolution in both the colonies and France itself was thus driven forward by the actions of formerly enslaved Africans in the Caribbean (Régent's theme). The struggle continued after 1800 when Napoleon sent forces to Saint-Domingue and Guadeloupe to restore centralized French control, but the defeat of his army in Saint-Domingue had far-reaching consequences. Haiti became an independent nation in which slavery was permanently abolished, France sold the Louisiana territories to the United States (where slavery spread), and the British gained a long-term naval/military ascendancy in the Caribbean and South Atlantic.

Napoleon's failed military campaigns outside of Europe thus emerge as a significant theme in this volume. The French setbacks in Egypt and in Ottoman-controlled Acre (1799), as Ian Coller argues, led to the final crisis of the Directory, the resurgence of European opposition to the French Republic, and the Napoleonic coup at the end of the revolutionary decade. Similarly, Napoleon's defeats in Saint-Domingue and the wider Caribbean opened the way for British interventions in Portugal and Spain that contributed decisively to the final collapse of the Napoleonic Empire. The meaning of Napoleon's military career and failures therefore changes as the historical focus shifts from the Russian campaign of 1812 or the Waterloo campaign of 1815 to the defeats in North Africa, Syria, the Mediterranean, and Saint-Domingue. Such refocusing suggests how the new global history places the French Revolution in a context that extends far beyond Europe and North America.

Coller's essay, for example, discusses revolutionary events in the Mediterranean region and describes the spread of new political ideas in North Africa and the Ottoman Empire. Extending and revising Palmer's interpretations of the Atlantic Revolution, Coller describes Arabs who visited the National Assembly in Paris (1790), revolutionary festivals that took place in North African cities, and Jacobin clubs that were established in the Ottoman-controlled eastern Mediterranean. He also urges historians to think beyond Palmer's "Atlantic Revolution" because "More than half a century since the sun rose on the Atlantic thesis, the revolutionary Mediterranean has as yet received little more than a few rays...." (p. 421). The history of the revolutionary era can therefore expand into new places and issues if we "think [of] the Revolution as a global event, an event profoundly shaped by both local and global factors. Thinking the revolutionary Mediterranean does not mean stretching the Atlantic thesis outward," Coller explains. It means instead a fundamental "rethinking [of] the global logic within which we have formed our enquiry" (p. 421). [5]

A global approach to the French Revolution pushes the analysis beyond even the "Black Atlantic," Latin America, and North Africa. It leads to Asia and helps to explain the expansion of Britain's empire in India (a theme in Mike Rapport's wide-ranging essay on the Revolution's international influence) as well as the early emergence of anticolonial agitations that drew upon and changed French ideas. The Age of Revolutions, as Palmer noted in the 1960s, was by no means merely a French or European upheaval, but new histories of the era are showing how the revolutionary conflicts also affected societies far outside the North Atlantic world.

The emerging global analysis of the French Revolution's events and legacies expresses a new generation's search for historical meanings in the transitional decades of 1775-1815. McPhee's volume has no single theme or unifying vision, but its diversity suggests the continuing vitality of a field that is constantly fragmenting into new themes and perspectives. There is thus no current consensus on the Revolution's significance, except perhaps for the familiar claims that it marks a starting point for modern history and that its influence spread widely in other countries.

I have stressed that the *Companion's* detailed accounts of contingency, daily experiences, and global interactions all point toward new research agendas that may help both students and professional historians define new subjects for empirical research and new categorical frameworks for analyzing the

issues they examine. Skeptics will nevertheless rightly wonder how historians of the French Revolution can rigorously expand their research and analysis into ever widening conceptual and global spheres. We all face the inevitable limitations of linguistic knowledge, financial resources, and professional life cycles. Who can say how new research themes might actually lead to better historical insights or better synthetic overviews? We can be certain, however, that the themes in McPhee's volume will give way to other concerns and perspectives as the next generation draws on its own historical contexts to interpret the fascinating public and personal trajectories that the French Revolution could not complete or fully envision.

Historians will continue their dialogue with the French Revolution because it carries us deeply into political, social and cultural questions that we are still trying to understand and still fighting about today. Each book that contributes to this open-ended process of critical thinking and historical analysis—and McPhee's well-organized, thoughtful volume surely makes such a contribution—reaffirms the Revolution's powerful legacy and provokes us to rethink our own problems as we explore an inspiring, disappointing, and far-reaching upheaval that seems never to end.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Peter McPhee, "Introduction"

Peter Campbell, "Rethinking the Origins of the French Revolution"

Jean-Pierre Jessenne, "The Social and Economic Crisis in France at the End of the *Ancien Régime*"

Sarah Maza, "The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution"

Miranda Spieler, "France and the Atlantic World"

Michael P. Fitzsimmons, "The Principles of 1789"

Alan Forrest, "Reimagining Space and Power"

Barry M. Shapiro, "'The Case against the King,' 1789-93"

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Peter M. Jones, “Choosing Revolution and Counter-Revolution”

David Andress, “The Course of the Terror, 1793-94”

Laura Mason, “The Thermidorian Reaction”

James Livesey, “The Political Culture of the Directory”

Howard G. Brown, “The New Security State”

Stephen Clay, “The White Terror: Factions, Reactions, and the Politics of Vengeance”

Mike Rapport, “The International Repercussions of the French Revolution”

Frédéric Régent, “Slavery and the Colonies”

Ian Coller, “The Revolutionary Mediterranean”

Isser Wolloch, “A Revolution in Political Culture”

Peter McPhee, “The Economy, Society, and the Environment”

Suzanne Desan, “The French Revolution and the Family”

Pascal Dupuy, “The Revolution in History, Commemoration, and Memory”

NOTES

[1] The volumes in this collection had different editors, but all carried the same overall title, *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*. The specific volumes included Keith Michael Baker, ed., vol. 1, *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1987); Colin Lucas, ed., vol. 2, *The Political Culture of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1988); François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., vol. 3, *The Transformation of Political Culture 1789-1848* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989); Keith Michael Baker, ed., vol. 4, *The Terror* (Oxford: Elsevier Science Ltd, 1994).

[2] R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959, 1964).

[3] Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson, eds., *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[4] Desan, Hunt and Nelson, eds. *The French Revolution*, p. 4. Although the global analysis of the French Revolution’s causes and influences is gaining momentum, there were already some attempts to reconsider the Revolution in these broader terms at the time of various bicentennial conferences. See, for example, the essays in Joseph Klaitz and Michael H. Haltzel, eds., *The Global Ramifications of the French*

Revolution (New York and Cambridge: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Cambridge University Press, 1994)—a book that somewhat surprisingly is never mentioned in either McPhee’s volume or in *The French Revolution in Global Perspective*.

[5] Collier praises Palmer’s *Age of the Democratic Revolution* for “challenging the diffusionist model of the French Revolution” and emphasizing the “contemporaneous conditions that gave rise to revolutionary phenomena” in different societies, but he wants to move away from Palmer’s limited conception of “the World Revolution in the West” (pp. 422-423).

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ISSN 1553-9172