**Fifty Years of Rewriting the French Revolution**

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John Dunne signposts main landmarks and current directions in the historiographical debate.

Each age, we are often told, rewrites the past in its own image. In the case of the French Revolution, this is an understatement. In the second half of this century the scholarship has seemed to be in a state of almost permanent revolution as historians have taken up one interpretative or methodological approach after another. Some of the story of this historiographical roller-coaster ride may be known to readers, thanks to William Doyle's best-selling text book Origins of the French Revolution, which begins with a long and detailed survey 'Writings on Revolutionary Origins since 1939'. Although still the most widely read account of the scholarship in the English language, it was written as long ago as 1979, and a vast amount of water has flowed under the bridge since then. My main concern in this essay is to draw attention to important developments which have occurred in the scholarship – on the Revolution as a whole, not just its origins as in Doyle's book – over the last twenty years. How ever, let me start by briefly revisiting the territory already mapped by Doyle.

**The ‘Marxist' paradigm**

Before the 1960s there had long existed a large measure of agreement within the academic community, not just in France but worldwide, about the causes, nature and meaning of the events of 1789 and the following decade. Ultimately these were to be understood in terms of the aspirations and grievances of an emerging class of wealthy town-dwellers, whose growing economic importance had not been reflected in their position within the social hierarchy or political system of the ancien regime. Belief in the Revolution's essentially 'bourgeois' character did not imply a denial of the role of other social groups in the unfolding of the Revolutionary drama. In his celebrated textbook The Coming of the French Revolution (Eng. translation, 1947; original French edition, 1939), Georges Lefebvre placed great stress on the aristocratic offensive which effectively launched the Revolution by forcing Louis XVI to call the Estates-General. At the same time the best research efforts of Lefebvre and fellow-Marxist historians were directed at uncovering the part played by others in the bourgeois revolution: the peasantry in Lefebvre's case, the ordinary people of Paris in Albert Soboul's The Sans-Culottes (originally 1958) and George Rude's The Crowd in the French Revolution (1959). If until the middle of 1793 popular activist groups exercised increasing influence over the course of the Revolution, they never actually held the reins of power, which after the nobility ceased to play a major role on the national stage were left firmly in the hands of middle class professionals.

Since it fell from favour, historians have wondered how this 'Marxist' paradigm enjoyed such wide acceptance for so long. Part of the attraction surely lay in its great clarity and coherence: the same theory claimed to explain simultaneously the Revolution's origins, internal dynamics and long-term consequences. Perhaps more importantly, though, it was less 'Marxist' in an exclusive sense than is often thought. On the one hand, some of the insights it took from Marxist theory – such as the notion of economic interest guiding political action – had become part of' the common intellectual property of the age. (Much the same happened with Freud's ideas.) On the other, much of the interpretation derived from earlier, non-Marxist historiographical traditions. Liberal and republican historians had always attributed the Revolution to the inequalities and inflexibilities of the ancien regime. Equally, insofar as it removed such obstacles to political and economic development – at whatever cost – they also viewed it as a 'progressive' event.

**The Cobban 'consensus'**

The first challenge to this long-established orthodoxy came in 1954 when the British historian Alfred Cobban delivered his inaugural professorial lecture on 'The Myth of the French Revolution'. However, it was only with the publication of his book The Social interpretation of the French Revolution ten years later that his 'Revisionist' case began to attract widespread attention and debate. Cobban had hone little or no archival research on eighteenth-century France; instead he used data gathered by Marxist historians to show that the findings of recent research could no longer be contained within their theoretical model. Feudalism as a system had withered away long before the Revolution abolished its last vestiges in the form of seigniorial rights. Far from advancing emergent capitalism, the Revolution was largely responsible for France's economic backwardness relative to Britain. Most crucially, where Marxists saw a self-conscious, capitalist bourgeois class, there was in fact only a loose collection of disparate social groupings. The one which provided the personnel of the Revolution consisted not of industrialists and businessmen but of officeholders and. lawyers. Nor did these revolutionaries act as unofficial spokesmen for the forces of capitalism: their principal commitment was to the new state machine and their own survival in office.

For all its brilliant incisiveness, Cobban's critique of the orthodoxy was rather abstract and above all negative: despite suggesting some interesting lines for future research, he had no coherent vision of the Revolution to offer. In the years after his death in 1968 a new generation of Revisionists, now from French as well as British and American universities, set out to remedy these deficiencies. Using evidence from their own 'purpose-built' research, they opened a major new offensive against the orthodoxy. Whereas Cobban had sought to show that the old picture of the bourgeoisie was an unacceptable caricature, a number of historians argued the same was true of the nobility. Chaussinand-Nogaret's The French nobility in the eighteenth century: from feudalism to enlightenment (198S; original1y 1976) made the case most forcefully: far from the parasitic obstructionist caste of Republican or Marxist writing, the nobility on the eve of the Revolution was a diverse and open group whose leading elements were actively promoting France's political and economic modernisation. Other historians pointed out that the Revolution v as not the catastrophe for the nobility that had been supposed, and that the wealthiest and doubtless most influential members of post-Revolutionary society came from noble backgrounds.

Having knocked down, from both sides, the bourgeoisie versus nobility class-conflict model, the way was open to a positive, Revisionist synthesis in which elements of both groups were seen to collaborate in pursuit of common goals and interests. The events culminating in 1789 were the work of a mixed, educated elite of property-owners – both noble and commoner – which shared a vision of limited or responsible monarchy and social reform. These notables soon lost control of events and their moderate liberal experiment gave way to Jacobin dictatorship. However, after the dust had settled, what emerged from the Revolution was something very much like the political and social order that the notables of 1789 had had in mind, Variants of this idea of a revolution of the 'notables' or 'enlightened elites' are to be found in publications by most of the leading specialists of the 1970s, including Colin Lucas and Francois Furet, and also in Doyle's Origins, where it is presented as an emerging 'new international consensus'.

Despite the acclaim with which it was first greeted, this interpretation never came to command the academic scene as the old 'Marxist' paradigm had done. This was not because of the strength of neo-Marxist or any other criticism – in the English-language historiography, certainly, it largely escaped rigorous scrutiny – but resulted from mass defections from within the Revisionist ranks. While Doyle stayed true to 'no-nonsense Revisionism', Lucas, Lynn Hunt and others joined Furet in search of the new.

**The New Revisionism**

In retrospect we can date the beginnings of the New Revisionism as early as 1978 with the publication of Furet's essay 'The Revolution is over' in his collection Interpreting the French Revolution (1981; originally 1978). The first, non-French work to follow Furet's lead, Lynn Hunt's Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution, did not appear until 1984, however. By the Revolution's bi-centenary in 1989 the intellectual ascendancy of the new approach was clear. The first of the big international gatherings of academic specialists marking the occasion met in Chicago in 1986. In the words of one commentator, 'the conference's very goal, reflected in the organisation of the sessions...was to serve as an empirical test of the pre-Revolutionary parts of Furet's thesis'. New Revisionist themes were also much in evidence at most of the bicentennial conferences held over the next three years. In France, for his frequent media appearances as well as his influence in academic circles, Furet was nicknamed 'King of the Revolution'.

Even more fundamentally than its forerunner, the New Revisionism is based on a rejection of Marxist historiography. Cobban had argued that the Marxist version of the social interpretation of the Revolution was incorrect but called for a fresh empirical, social history approach to the Revolution. New Revisionists as a whole neglect the social dimension, while before his death Furet declared a social interpretation of the Revolution a contradiction in terms. For such scholars the Revolution was above all about politics. Not only this: it was about a new kind of politics. This was what marked it off from all previous historical events, and was the (only) way in which it changed the world. If socially and economically the France of the 1780s was still recognisable in the France of the 1830s, 'in the realm of politics', to quote Lynn Hunt, 'almost everything changed. Thousands of men and even many women gained first-hand experience in the political arena: they talked, read and listened in new ways; they voted; they joined new organisations; and they marched for their political goals. Revolution became a tradition and republicanism an enduring option. Afterward, kings could not rule without assemblies, and noble domination of public affairs only provoked more revolution'.

**Political culture**

The New Revisionists' real originality lies, however, less in this seemingly obvious but important insight than in what aspects of politics they study and how. They are not so much interested in political policies, institutions or processes – the goings on in successive Revolutionary assemblies or the Jacobin Clubs, or how and why people voted in the never-ending series of national and local elections of deputies, judges, priests, National Guardsman and so on. Rather, as is all too evident from their book titles, their concern is with the new 'political culture' that 'made possible the emergence of distinctive policies and the appearance of new kinds of politicians, conflicts, and organisations', The rather elusive concept of political culture is usually defined as 'the set of discourses or symbolic practices' through which collective political activity is carried on. In their efforts to 'read' the various discourses (or 'languages') of the new politics and to uncover the meaning behind the symbolism of revolutionary imagery and rituals, they draw on the insights and methods of cultural anthropology and literary theory.

In her pioneering work, Festivals in the French Revolution (1988; originally 1976), the French historian, Mona Ozouf, traced the changing character of these celebrations. The largely spontaneous demonstrations of local solidarity with the Revolution – frequently through the planting of a tree of liberty – soon gave way to vast official ceremonies, such as the 'semi-militarized' festivals of Federation held throughout the country on the first anniversary of the storming of the Bastille, or the lavish Festival of the Supreme Being, in which scenery, costumes and choreography were by the famous artist David. (The over-inflated nature of the proceedings is said to have brought ridicule on its sponsor, Robespierre, and contributed to his fall. Peter Mandelson take note.) The staging of these events was part of an official 'cultural politics' designed simultaneously to forge national unity and to bestow legitimacy on the country's new rulers. Lynn Hunt's Politics, Culture and Class ranges more widely over similar ground. It studies the revolutionaries' invention of the rhetoric of revolution and the elaboration of new symbols and rituals to replace those of the dark days of 'tyranny' and 'superstition. Hunt shows how symbolic representation and, resistance could generate all too real conflict, and help shape the course of events. Reports of an army regiment 'maltreating' the tricolour cockade triggered off the march by women to Versailles in October 1789, which resulted in the king and the National Assembly being forced to move to Paris.

This new approach to the Revolution has been a major factor in the recent awakening of academic interest in the late ancien regime, as historians have sought, somewhat surprisingly, to trace the origins of the 'modern democratic' culture of the Revolution back to the 1750s and beyond. This search for origins has taken various directions. One charts the rise of public opinion in the course of the eighteenth century. In Mona Ozouf's words: 'There was no public opinion under Louis XIV, for the balance of the monarch outshone it. Similarly, when public opinion had become king, it left no place for royal authority' This phenomenon was not the result of socio-economic change – for example, the growth of a literate and semi-leisured middle class, itself the result of the expansions of trade, rather it was an artificial political creation, a by-product of the escalating conflict between the monarchy and the Parliament of Pans. Another involves more direct search for the intellectual origins of the Revolution in the Enlightenment. In this refashioned intellectual history the concern is not so much what the classic texts of the most famous philosophes actually meant, but how their ideas, principally Rousseau’s, were made available to and re-interpreted by the men of 1789. It is a measure of how far things have come since the days when ideology was dismissed as only a rarefied expression of bourgeois class interest that one historian has felt it worth returning to the old question ‘Do books make revolutions?’.

At first sight an object of study or a methodology, the new ‘political cultural’ approach is in fact much more than both of these. For Furet and Baker the approach contains a fully-fledged interpretation. Contrary to appearances, the so-called liberal or constitutional phase of the Revolution already had within it the seeds of the Terror. Jacobin dictatorship was not the product of the wartime emergency but was the working out of the totalitarian tendencies within Rousseauist ideology, already present in 1789. Rather as Burke had predicted back in 1791, it was always going to end in tears - specifically those of the victims of the guillotine and other forms of 'state terrorism' As Simon Schama put it in characteristically provocative fashion, 'The Terror was merely 1789 with a higher body count'. If the Terror was an integral rather than accidental phase of the Revolution (as Furet had once suggested in his early Revisionist phase), so too was Napoleon's Empire. Like Robespierre's Jacobins he justified his despotic rule through claiming to represent national sovereignty. His political regime did indeed inherit from both the revolution and the ancien regime, as has been generally accepted, but, contrary to what has been generally maintained, it did not synthesise fundamentally opposing traits from the two traditions. Rather, it accentuated the latent authoritarianism that was common to both.

**Gender History**

If the 'political cultural', approach and the new interpretation it contains have dominated the academic scene on both sides of the Atlantic for the most of the last two decades, they have not done so to the exclusion of all else. In the last decade or so there have been two other growth points in the scholarship. One is women's or gender history. Whether or not the growth of interest in gender can directly linked to the disenchantment class as a category of historical analysis, the development clearly has a solid material basis in the increasing number of women entering the historical profession. Though very much their own women, historians working in this field exhibit some affinities with the various schools of Revisionism. All their most recent writing shares with exemplars of the 'political cultural' approach an interest in language and symbolic representation, together with a fondness for the same academic jargon (or should it be discourse?). Both traits are evident in an article by Dena Goodman in which she categorises the salons of late ancien regime France as a 'female-controlled discursive space'. Also like the New Revisionism, much feminist writing has adopted a hostile stance on the Revolution. In this case, of course, it is linked to the Revolutionaries' failure to confer the same political rights on women as on men. Not only were women denied the vote in national elections (something that was not rectified until 1944), but in November 1793 the Convention banned public political activity of any sort by women and closed down the most active women's political club, the Society of Female Revolutionary Citizens. However, whether Joan Landes and others are right to present the Revolution as a backward step in women's history is another matter. According to Landes, the period witnessed the replacement of a relaxed, indulgent aristocratic 'patriarchy with a strict and all-encompassing bourgeois one, in which politics and the 'public sphere' became an exclusively male preserve, and home and the family became the woman's. However, this thesis has its feminist critics who are unhappy with its rose-coloured depiction of the ancien regime and suggest that the emphasis should be on the real, though limited and short-lived, opportunities for women's participation in the Revolutionary political process.

**High politics**

The other innovation in the recent scholarship has been the proliferation of studies which might be classified as 'old-style political history'. Like the historians of the political cultural approach, the authors of these studies are clearly believers in 'the primacy of politics', but the aspects of politics they choose to look at are very different. Indeed it could be said that they are interested in everything 'which the New Revisionists (and Marxist historians before them) leave out of the picture: particular institutions such as the Court, aspects of the formal political process, and, above all, the political lives of leading individuals or groups. In terms of pure numbers, work on the ancien regime wins hands down over the Revolution. On the former, among the major English-language works to appear in the last couple of years are: John Rogister, Louis XV and the Parlement of Paris, 1737-1755 (Cambridge 1995), Julian Swann, Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754-1774 (Cambridge 1995) and John Hardman, French Politics, 1774-1789 (London and New York 1995). Of comparable importance on the other side of the divide, only Malcolm Crook's study, Elections in the French Revolution (1996), and Timothy Tackett's work on the deputies of the National Assembly leap to mind. As human lives usually spanned the divide, several of the recent crop of biographies have a foot in both camps: outstanding among them is Hardman's Louis XVI (Yale 1993).

The critical approach to discourse in most of these works and the cautious return to the social in some are not the only signs that the New Revisionism has passed its zenith. Clearly there is to be no dominant paradigm in the field for some time to come. In the early 1970s one American commentator writing on the state of Revolutionary historiography suggested that the field, with no paradigm to define the research agenda, was entering a period of 'crisis' which would only be resolved when a new paradigm appeared. At the end of the same decade, another American, George Taylor, while rejoicing, as a leading Revisionist, that the Marxist approach was now 'interred in the graveyard of lost paradigms assassinated by critical research', noted a downside; with- out the defunct orthodoxy 'how can we explain the Revolution in fifty minutes in a survey course?' To which one might add, this is nothing to the problem faced by an A-level student with an exam answer on the revolution to write. Overall, though, surely the ongoing 'crisis' of the last thirty or forty years has been highly beneficial for the health of the subject as a whole. Remarkable advances have been made on a wide variety of fronts. And if the loss of certainties and the proliferation of alternative perspectives make it more difficult for lecturers and students to carry out some of their professional obligations, both can find consolation in the buzz of the seminar room.