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Conceptualizing the French Revolution: Problems and Methods

Ronald Schechter

William & Mary, rbsche@wm.edu

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The French Revolution



The French Revolution

The Essential Readings

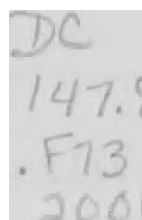
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Editor's Introduction

Conceptualizing the French Revolution: Problems and Methods

The Shadow of Furet

In France, for roughly half a century, Marxist historians enjoyed a virtual monopoly over the academic historiography of the French Revolution. Beginning in 1928 the Sorbonne's prestigious chair in the History of the French Revolution was reserved for historians with a demonstrable commitment to socialism. The combination of a rigid hierarchy in French academia and a leftist orientation among French intellectuals more generally – particularly during the quarter century after World War II, when the fabled anti-fascist record of communism provided it with moral authority – made it nearly impossible to challenge the reigning orthodoxy. It was only with the decline of communist hegemony in intellectual circles after 1968, and from a rival institution, the Sixth Section of the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (later renamed the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*), that a “revisionist” assault on the prevailing orthodoxy could successfully be launched, opening the way to a rich and diverse historiography of the Revolution.

The first in the Sorbonne's academic dynasty was Albert Mathiez (1874–1932), a disciple of the martyred socialist leader Jean Jaurès (1859–1914) and early supporter of the Bolshevik Revolution, whose roots he traced to the French Revolution. Succeeding Mathiez was Georges Lefebvre (1874–1959), who continued the tradition of Marxist scholarship and spread the word to the Anglo-American world with popular and widely-read English translations of his principal works.¹

Finally, Lefebvre's successor, Albert Soboul (1914–82), presided over the dissolution of the Marxist empire in the 1970s when his compatriot François Furet (1927–97) launched the first in a series of challenges to the Sorbonne's supremacy. Although Mathiez, Lefebvre and Soboul were not of one mind on all aspects of the Revolution, they shared Karl Marx's conviction that this world-historical event had occurred because an increasingly wealthy and self-confident class of capitalists known as the bourgeoisie, frustrated with a monarchy that had privileged a landed or "feudal" aristocracy, overthrew it in favor of a "liberal" political and legal order supportive of their own economic interests.

Long before members of the French academic community challenged this interpretation, historians in the United States and the United Kingdom began offering alternative explanations. Indeed, as early as 1929 the Harvard Professor Crane Brinton (1898–1968) argued, on the basis of tax records recording the relative wealth of members of the revolutionary Jacobin clubs, that they "contain[ed] rich and poor, laborer and intellectual, speculator and *rentier*." He concluded that these revolutionaries were "economically so disparate that no simple economic interest [could] hold them together," and suggested rather that "a philosophy, an ideal, a faith, a loyalty," had brought them together.² In 1964 Alfred Cobban, a British historian of France, claimed that the bourgeoisie, understood in the Marxist sense of a class of capitalists, played a relatively small role in the Revolution.³ The following year an American, Elisabeth Eisenstein, argued that "'France's bourgeoisie' did *not* initiate the protest movement of 1788 and did *not* play a prominent role in the events and reforms of 1789."⁴ In 1967 her compatriot George V. Taylor stated that it was "impossible to equate the identifiable leadership of the upper Third Estate – the 'revolutionary bourgeoisie' – with a social class that played a common role in the relations of production, or, more precisely, owned the instruments of production in an emergent capitalist economy."⁵

These Anglo-American objections made little impact in France, and even in the United States the notion that the Revolution stemmed from

2 Crane Brinton, "The Membership of the Jacobin Clubs," *American Historical Review* 34 (July 1929): 751.

3 Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).

4 Elisabeth L. Eisenstein, "Who Intervened in 1788? A Commentary on *The Coming of the French Revolution*," *American Historical Review* 71 (October 1965):

a rising bourgeoisie was a commonplace of many textbooks.⁶ Historians around the world paid attention, however, when a former member of the French Communist Party attacked his erstwhile comrades. In 1971, in a widely-read historical journal, François Furet wrote an article denouncing what he called the “revolutionary catechism” by which Marxist historians explained the Revolution.⁷ In 1978 he expanded his analysis into a book, *Penser la Révolution française*, which offered a radically new interpretation of the Revolution’s origins and character.⁸ In that book, a selection of which comprises the first excerpt in this volume, Furet argued that the Revolution was not the result of a triumphant bourgeois class and that its various events and phases could not be explained in terms of class struggle.

Yet Furet did not merely dispute the prevalent orthodoxy. He supplied a sophisticated theory of the Revolution’s origins and character. Drawing on the analysis of the nineteenth-century historian and political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–59), he claimed that the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV and his successors had paradoxically contributed to the development of a democratic or egalitarian ideology among the French.⁹ By depriving the old corporate structures of society of their power, according to this theory, the crown induced its subjects to grant moral authority to “men of letters,” who necessarily lacked political experience and instead propagated abstract ideas about equality and the sovereignty of the people. Borrowing from historian Augustin Cochin (1876–1916), Furet completed his analysis of the Revolution’s origins by describing the “channels” or mechanisms by which the new revolutionary ideology came to permeate French society. It was through the “cafés, salons, Masonic lodges and the so-called *sociétés de pensée*, or ‘philosophical societies,’” Furet argued, that the democratic ideology was disseminated.¹⁰ Yet because the state never recognized these “centres of democratic sociability” as legitimate forums

6 R. R. Palmer, whose translation of Lefebvre’s *Quatre-vingt-neuf* was a staple of many history courses, summarized the causes of the French Revolution in his own popular textbook: “The Revolution was the collision of two moving objects, a rising aristocracy and a rising bourgeoisie.” *A History of the Modern World* (New York: Knopf, 1950), 344.

7 François Furet, “Le Catéchisme révolutionnaire,” *Annales E.S.C.* 26 (March–April 1971): 255–89.

8 François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978). The English version is *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge and Paris: Cambridge University Press and Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1978).

9 Cf. Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart

through which grievances might be aired, the new, unofficial institutions of an oppressed society acquired a peculiar conception of power. Unlike the English, who supposedly learned through their representative institutions how to negotiate disagreements with the state, the French evidently developed an image of power as absolute, undivided (and indivisible), and of politics as a mortal struggle in which no compromise was possible. When the Revolution broke out, according to Furet, no individuals or groups could admit to holding power, which had been sullied by the reputation it had acquired under absolutism. Only "the people" could rightly exercise power, and politics consequently became a matter of persuasively expressing or interpreting the people's will. The Revolution, according to Furet, therefore "ushered in a world where mental representations of power governed all actions, and where a network of signs completely dominated political life." Finally, because of the absolute conception of power inherited from the Old Regime, all political actors were doomed to view their opponents as wicked conspirators who must be crushed. The result of this "logical evolution," Furet argued, was the Reign of Terror.

It would be difficult to exaggerate the impact of Furet's analysis on the historiography of the French Revolution over the past three decades. Not only did Furet break the monopoly of the orthodox interpretation in France. To a great degree he set the agenda for new and innovative scholarship on the Revolution. Historians committed to some form of class analysis were forced to rethink their assumptions about precisely what the bourgeoisie was and in just what ways the Revolution represented its ascendancy. Historians not holding such a commitment explored aspects of the Revolution's origins and course to which Furet had pointed but that he had not exhaustively analyzed, and addressed questions that he had raised or implied without explicitly or conclusively answering them.

The subsequent historiography has frequently been understood in terms of authors' approval or disapproval of the Revolution and their place on the right, left or middle of the political spectrum. For example, Jack Censer has examined Furet's "negative evaluation of the revolution," determined that Keith Michael Baker and Lynn Hunt (both included in this volume) along with other historians were "critical of the revolution," and wondered how to explain this "common pessimism about the revolution." He believes that "political bias, an expression of the political conservatism of the 1980s," is "too crude an explanation." He nevertheless has recourse to a political explanation, arguing that in

defending a revolution long on equality and short on liberty.”¹¹ Alternatively, Gary Kates has divided recent historians of the French Revolution into Marxists on the left, “Neo-Conservatives” on the right, and “Neo-Liberals” in the center. Moreover, he sees these labels as corresponding to historians’ relative sympathy or hostility to the Revolution in its various phases: with Marxists endorsing the entire Revolution, including the Reign of Terror; Neo-Liberals supporting the early, less violent stages of the Revolution, and Neo-Conservatives (including Furet) deploring it altogether.¹² More cautiously, Gwynne Lewis has written, “Some would argue that to identify . . . ‘revisionist’ historians with liberalism or liberal/conservatism would be going too far. I would, however, be prepared to take a few strides in that direction.”¹³

Yet the terms of left and right, liberal and conservative are often so relative and ambiguous that they risk obscuring more than they explain about the historiography of the Revolution. Adding the prefix “neo” does little to clarify matters, as does placing a slash between the terms; and relating these apparent political positions to positive or negative assessments of the Revolution only adds to the confusion. In particular, the notion that the Revolution was “long on equality and short on liberty,” which Censer seems to accept and attributes to historians on “the left,” is precisely the view of Tocqueville, whose views on democracy were very different from those held by people on “the left” today. More seriously still, the traditional political spectrum is ill-suited to describe much of the feminist scholarship whose impact on the historiography of the Revolution has been decisive.

Specifically, Joan Scott, whose work on the Revolution is excerpted in this volume (chapter 7), argues that the terms by which the Revolution defined citizenship effectively and inevitably excluded women from the national sovereignty that was otherwise loudly proclaimed to be universal. The concept of citizenship was *gendered*,¹⁴ and its gender was masculine. Scott suggests that feminists, beginning with Olympe de Gouges during the Revolution, have been handicapped by a political language that necessarily defined liberation in terms of the rights of “man”.

11 Jack R. Censer, “Commencing the Third Century of Debate,” *American Historical Review* 94 (December 1989): 1318, 1323, 1324.

12 Gary Kates, ed., *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 1–20.

13 Gwynne Lewis, *The French Revolution: Rethinking the Debate* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), unpaginated preface.

14 For an explanation of how the concept of “gender” can be used by historians

Thus she is, on feminist grounds, critical of the Revolution from its very inception, and critical as well of its legacy in political philosophy.¹⁵ Where does this situate her on the familiar left to right political spectrum? Like Furet, she has engaged in a thorough critique of revolutionary ideology. Yet to call her a conservative (or Neo-Conservative) would be absurd. To designate her a liberal would be equally wrong. After all, she concludes, "[T]he recurrence since the Revolution of feminist critiques reminds us not only that the democratic promise of liberal (and socialist and republican) political theory is as yet unfulfilled, but also that it may be impossible of fulfilment in the terms in which it has so far been conceived." Indeed, it is precisely Scott's feminist critique of the gendered terms of the political spectrum that makes the latter inadequate to account for that critique's political meaning.

Kates acknowledges that feminists as well as the "Neo-Conservatives" have criticized the Revolution, yet his attempt to resolve this apparent paradox is highly questionable. He writes, "[I]t is one of the great ironies of historical scholarship that . . . left-wing feminist scholarship has so far been more fruitfully deployed by Neo-Conservative Revisionist scholars than by anyone else."¹⁶ How the "left-wing" character of feminist historiography fits into the definition of political positions according to sympathy or criticism of the Revolution is not explained, and Scott's suggestion that feminism does not have a place on the gendered political spectrum makes this term even less plausible.¹⁷ Moreover, the emphasis on the apparent success of "Neo-Conservative Revisionist scholars" in "deploying" feminism obscures the more obvious success that feminist scholars have had in "deploying" their own claims.¹⁸ As evidence for this apparent appropriation of "left-wing" feminism by the right, Kates refers to Simon Schama's *Citizens*, a narrative history that synthesized and popularized numerous scholarly critiques of the Re-

15 Scott has expanded her analysis in *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996).

16 Kates, *French Revolution*, 15.

17 To be precise, Kates's example of feminist historiography is not Joan Scott but Joan Landes. Yet Landes similarly engages in a thoroughgoing critique of revolutionary ideology on the basis of its masculinist discourse. Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

18 Feminist historiography of the French Revolution has grown dramatically in little over a decade. In addition to the work of Scott and Landes, see esp. Dorinda Outram, *The Body and the French Revolution: Sex, Class and Political Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Olwen H. Hufton, *Women and the Limits of*

volution, feminist and otherwise. Here Kates selectively applies his schema that equates critique of the revolutionaries with conservatism by comparing Schama to Margaret Thatcher. Not only does this implicitly place feminists such as Scott in the same category as Thatcher, an absurdity that Kates does not contemplate but to which his logic inevitably leads. It mutilates Schama's politics as expressed in *Citizens*. Indeed, in one of his own rare allusions to contemporary politics, Schama criticizes the *laissez-faire* economic policy of Louis XVI's minister Turgot as comparable to that of Thatcher's ally in capitalism, Ronald Reagan.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Kates is compelled to dismiss Schama's feminist critique of revolutionary political culture as disingenuous, a mere "appropriation of feminist history for Neo-Conservative purposes," rather than entertaining the more plausible claim that Schama actually believes the feminist views he puts forth.²⁰ When assumptions about the sincerity of historians are necessary to make one's preferred explanatory categories operate consistently, then it is time to think about just how explanatory those categories are.

To be sure, as Gwynne Lewis rightly observes, it would be naïve "to pretend that history can be written in an ideological vacuum."²¹ Whatever the historians' intentions, their work will often be interpreted in light of contemporary politics. This is all the more true when the subject in question is as politically charged as revolution. Yet to see the recent historiography of the Revolution solely in terms of a political contest is to deprive it of much of its conceptual depth and scholarly relevance. Of course, the old debate continues over the bourgeois origins of the Revolution. Colin Jones, in his "Great Chain of Buying: Medical Advertisement, the Bourgeois Public Sphere, and the Origins of the French Revolution" (chapter 5), detects a vibrant and increasingly radical bourgeoisie in the readers of the late eighteenth-century provincial press. Sarah Maza, in her "Luxury, Morality, and Social Change: Why There Was No Middle-Class Consciousness in Pre-Revolutionary France" (chapter 6), argues that the French of the eighteenth century (unlike their British counterparts) did not think of their society as being led by a middle class in the modern sense (as defined in terms of wealth) and that it is anachronistic to attribute a causal role to a "bourgeoisie" that contemporaries would not have recognized. Yet these pieces are more interesting for their methodological implications than for their affinity

19 Schama writes of Turgot's policies, "All this was, of course, the direct ancestor of supply-side public finance, and had just about as much chance of success as its version two hundred years later in a different but similarly fiscally overstretched

or antipathy to Marxism, to say nothing of their approval or disapproval of the Revolution. Thus Jones's analysis is interesting largely because it ingeniously combines elements of economic history with the history of communication and "postmodern" understandings of political language. Maza's analysis is interesting primarily because it makes innovative use of contemporary literature and drama to decode prevalent beliefs regarding luxury, morality and the nature of society in pre-revolutionary France.

The excerpts gathered in this volume are therefore not organized according to their authors' political inclinations or feelings about the Revolution. Nor are they categorized, strictly speaking, according to their presumed sub-fields, i.e. intellectual, social, cultural, gender, religious history, since the most creative historians have been remarkably eclectic in combining the methods of the various sub-disciplines. I have tried to place some readings close together on the basis of the shared problems they address. Thus chapters 2, 3 and 4 all problematize the role of ideas in the origins of the French Revolution. Chapters 5 and 6, as mentioned above, ask whether the concept of class, in particular the middle class, can be useful in understanding pre-revolutionary France. Chapters 7 and 8 share a common concern with gender and bodies in revolutionary political culture, and chapters 9 and 10 treat the relationship between religion and the Revolution. Yet my placement of the various readings is not meant to be absolute or exclusive. Chapter 9 is as relevant to the issues raised in chapters 2, 3 and 4 as it is to religious history. Chapters 5 and 6 have important gender aspects that make them worth reading together with chapters 7 and 8. And chapter 8 is as much a reflection on the history of religion as are chapters 9 and 10. I have tried to elaborate on some of these and other connections in the explanatory headnotes to each chapter, but encourage readers to make their own connections, and to look for affinities and tensions between the various excerpts.

What all of the readings from chapter 2 through 10 have in common, at any rate, is that they implicitly or explicitly address questions that Furet raised in his iconoclastic *Penser la Révolution française*. Once Furet is seen as having done more than a demolition job on Marxist orthodoxy, the full relevance of his work for the subsequent historiography of the Revolution can be appreciated. This is not to say that Furet was the sole influence on historians of the Revolution, many of whom would likely have asked similar questions and treated similar problems for other reasons. But the concepts and methods through which Furet

accordingly, can be best understood not merely as the expression of political positions, but as attempts to address many of those same concepts and methods.

Intellectual History, Discourse and the “Linguistic Turn”

Not the least important of Furet's concepts was that of conceptualization itself. Furet argued that most previous historians, whatever their political sympathies, had insufficiently conceptualized the Revolution that they purportedly sought to understand. What this meant in practice was that they identified with one side or another in the revolutionary struggle and simply narrated its principal events from the perspective of their favorite characters. They did not distance themselves from the events they recounted and therefore fell victim to the illusions from which the historical actors themselves had suffered. The foremost of these illusions, according to Furet, was that of a radical break with the past. The revolutionaries themselves had proclaimed such a break, which their enemies deplored but did not question. Furet enjoined historians to be skeptical of contemporary perceptions and, while he recognized one true break – the rise of mass politics – in the historical fabric characterizing the Revolution, he emphasized the continuities in democratic thinking and conceptions of power that in his view spanned the Old Regime and the revolutionary period.

By underscoring these continuities, Furet highlighted the problem of the Revolution's origins. The question of origins is not an intellectual or scholarly problem if the event in question is seen as a mythical beginning, which is precisely how the revolutionaries understood their moment in history. (Theologians do not inquire into the origins of creation. They simply accept it as a given.) Yet questioning the extent of such a break from the past entails looking for connections between the more and less remote past, conditions that made possible the historical phenomenon one seeks to explain. To be fair to Furet's rivals, they conceptualized the Revolution's origins and did not deny its roots in the previous period, despite his insistence that their explanations involved nothing but the rote repetition of the “catechism” formula: the rise of the bourgeoisie. By presenting the question of origins as explicitly as he did, however, Furet stimulated discussion of this extremely difficult problem. The fact that so many of the excerpts in this volume address the question of the Revolution's origins is merely a reflection of the historiographical tendency of the past quarter century. Keith Michael

only, historians to ask where the Revolution came from. And if the problem of origins is not new, one of Furet's most important accomplishments was to define, to a great extent, the terms of the investigation.

In particular, Furet emphasized the importance of *ideas* for an understanding of the Revolution. Even the most cursory examination of his writings reveals the prominence of ideas for his historical analysis. The excerpt in this volume begins with a critique of "the *idea* of revolution as experienced and perceived by its actors" (my emphasis). Elsewhere Furet wrote of "political ideas," the "idea of equality," the "idea of plot," and the "idea that power is the people." Variations on the theme of ideas are the repeated reference to "notions," "concepts," "principles," "values," and "ideology." Moreover, Furet highlighted the importance of "men of letters" for the creation and propagation of ideas, and attributed particular importance to Rousseau. He called the Revolution "this strange offspring of '*philosophie*,'" ²² suggesting that the Enlightenment thinkers or *philosophes* had engendered it.

But what was the precise relationship between ideas and the events known as the French Revolution? It is this question that Keith Michael Baker addresses in his essay, "On the Problem of the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution" (chapter 2). The results of his inquiry are relevant not only to the historiography of the Revolution, but also to an understanding of that branch of the historical discipline known alternately as intellectual history or the history of ideas. For Baker the relationship between ideas and events is not as straightforward as often suggested. Baker criticizes historians for treating ideas as though they were objects capable of influencing action, as though, for example, "the Enlightenment" or its constituent "doctrines" could be shown to have caused the events later grouped under the heading of the French Revolution. He argues: that the perceived influence of ideas on events is an illusion of hindsight; that the "ideas" themselves are in fact collections of statements that can be (and have been) used in a variety of ways; and that the proper object of intellectual history is therefore the ways in which people have used particular kinds of statements to make particular claims. These ways, or instruments, of making claims Baker calls *discourses*.

What is a discourse? This word appears not only throughout Baker's work but in so much of the recent scholarship on the French Revolution that an understanding of its meaning is crucial. The term was popularized by French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–84). ²³ For

Foucault a discourse was a special kind of language that governed power relations in any given society. Its power consisted in its ability to define key words such as "normal" and "abnormal," "natural" and "unnatural," "rational" and "irrational," "healthy" and "sick." By conferring positive attributes to some people and activities and negative traits to others, discourses assured the power and legitimacy of certain groups and the exclusion or oppression of others.

For Baker it was the interaction between competing discourses that defined the political culture out of which the Revolution emerged. In particular, Baker argues that in the second half of the eighteenth century three discourses vied for dominance. One discourse praised *justice*, ostensibly the activity of the law courts known as the *parlements*, and was therefore popular among many of the magistrates who wished to limit the power of the monarchy. A second discourse valorized *will*, reputedly the principal feature of the sovereign "people" or "nation," and defined the thinking of more radical politicians who argued for popular sovereignty (as opposed merely to limited monarchy). The third discourse lauded *reason* and legitimized the power of "enlightened" bureaucrats who wished to reform the country from above without interference from below. Ultimately, according to Baker, the discourse of the will defeated the other two and therefore opened the way for the radicalism of the Revolution.

Joan Scott's article, "French Feminists and the Rights of 'Man': Olympe de Gouges's Declarations" (chapter 7), similarly relies upon discourse analysis. According to Scott, revolutionary discourse defined citizenship in universal terms. It suggested that all individuals, as a sole consequence of being human beings, were endowed with the right to share in the creation of the laws to which they would be subject. The revolutionary principle of equality precluded the special treatment or disproportionate empowerment of any particular individual or group. At the same time, Scott observes, revolutionary discourse contradicted itself by defining this ostensibly "universal" being, the citizen, in terms that only applied to certain kinds of people: i.e. white men. Not only did the deputies in the various revolutionary assemblies refuse to recognize the political rights of women, and only "emancipate" enslaved blacks after the successful slave uprising in Saint-Domingue. The very terms in which revolutionaries understood the qualities of citizens were thought to apply exclusively to white men, not to women or blacks. In her analysis of the contrasting revolutionary representations of men and women, Scott observes that citizens were seen as active, free, rational and concerned with the public good, attributes typically associated with men.

concerns. Scott shows that in this linguistic or discursive climate, all attempts to argue for women's rights were doomed. The attempts of Olympe de Gouges are a case in point. When this revolutionary feminist challenged the exclusion of women from the rights of "man," she argued on the basis of features that women alone possessed or were thought to possess: parental and familial love, courage during childbirth, and superior physical beauty. These assumptions about the special or particular character of women undermined the attempt to take part in "universal" citizenship and gave de Gouges's writings the appearance of a lobbying effort on behalf of special interests. Yet they underscore, in Scott's view, the inescapable strength of the discourse that guaranteed the dominance of men over women. Even today, Scott argues, "liberal" as well as republican and socialist political ideas defined in gendered terms threaten to make feminist critiques ineffective, and true equality may only be achieved once the old discourses are discarded.

On the surface there would appear to be little in common between Scott and Furet. Furet had little if anything to say about the exclusion of women from political life. His was an exclusively male story. Yet like Scott he was interested in exposing the internal contradictions in revolutionary ideology. More specifically, he shared Scott's sense that the universalistic language of the revolutionaries masked the fact that only a fraction of the population held power at any given time. Apart from the specifics of their arguments, Scott and Furet share the method of discourse analysis. And they are not alone in this respect. Other historians included in this volume have similarly emphasized the importance of discourse for an understanding of the Revolution. Sarah Maza (chapter 6) argues that the absence of a discourse valorizing the middle classes and the presence of one that defined society in terms of a moral community or family explains why the economic middle of French society did not acquire the authority in politics that its English counterpart enjoyed. Dale Van Kley (chapter 9), though he does not use the term "discourse," shows how conservative champions of absolutism and ecclesiastical authority shared with liberal advocates of secular, representative government the same legitimizing vocabulary that historians have since identified with "the Enlightenment." Even Colin Jones, an erstwhile opponent of discourse analysis, has made use of this method in his "Great Chain of Buying" article (chapter 5), as will be shown below.

Although historians have had many reasons for their methodologi-

tional intellectual history, but also because he used the term himself. He complained, for example, that “the historians of the French Revolution have taken the revolutionary *discourse* at face value because they themselves have remained locked into that *discourse*.” Elsewhere he argued that the Revolution “replaced the conflict of interests for power with a competition of *discourses* for the appropriation of legitimacy” (my emphasis). Although he never referred explicitly to Foucault and may well have developed his ideas on political language independently of him,²⁴ Furet shared Foucault’s insight into the relationship between language and power. He saw that, at least under certain circumstances, power was not simply a matter of making and executing laws, but of defining terms. Unlike Baker, who has generalized the claim that “political authority is . . . essentially a matter of linguistic authority,”²⁵ and others who have implicitly accepted this maxim, Furet limited his linguistic analysis to the revolutionary period and suggested that under “normal” circumstances language has less influence in determining power relations. Nevertheless, his observations about the role of language in conferring power during the French Revolution gave special significance to the work of historians who would apply Foucault’s theories to their analyses of the Revolution.

The emphasis on language, which Furet and other historians have used to revitalize both the historiography of the French Revolution and the sub-field of intellectual history more generally, is typically called “the linguistic turn.” It has been criticized not only for its tendency toward difficult jargon – itself ironically providing evidence of the claim that discourses serve to empower certain groups and exclude others – but for its apparent lack of concern for action in history. When reading Furet’s observation that the Revolution “ushered in a world where mental representations of power governed all actions, and where a network of signs completely dominated political life,” one is tempted to ask impatiently, What about the storming of the Bastille? What about the insurrections, coups d’état and political executions? What about the war with France’s neighbors and the civil war within its borders? Was the Revolution nothing but a linguistic event? Keith Baker defines the term revolution as “a transformation of the discursive practice of the community, a moment in which social relations are reconstituted and the discourse defining the political relations between individuals and groups is radically recast.” But not everyone will be satisfied with such

24 For a more complete analysis of Furet’s relationship to Foucault and other theorists of language and power see Lynn Hunt’s review essay on *Penser la Révolution*

a definition. David Bell objects that Baker “comes perilously close to suggesting that the French Revolution had its origins in a kind of rhetorical exercise, in which the rumbling sea of discursivity cast forth a new set of meanings that, through their own perverse logic, unconnected to France’s social and economic turmoil, then unleashed political chaos, civil war, the Terror, and ultimately a European conflagration with a death toll surpassed only by the holocausts of the two World Wars.”²⁶ The same criticism might also be applied to the other historians who focus on ideas and language at the expense of other aspects of human experience.

The Continuing Relevance of Social Analysis

Has the historiography of the French Revolution become too focused on ideas and language and too inattentive to other forms of activity? Readers will have to answer this question for themselves. Yet it is important to emphasize that Furet’s analysis focused on many aspects of human experience, not only language, and that these concerns have also played an important role in the work of other historians of the Revolution. In many ways, Furet was a traditional social historian. That is to say, he relied on the methods of sociology when undertaking historical analysis. He is normally not categorized as a social historian and is typically seen as an intellectual or political historian. Part of the reason for this confusion comes from Furet’s own writing. After all, Furet praised Tocqueville for attempting a “history in the inverse mode of a sociological interpretation.” Yet what he meant by “sociological interpretation” was a particularly narrow kind of social analysis that explained all ideology in terms of class interest. Otherwise, the basic categories of the social sciences were vital to his analysis. The most basic of these categories was “society” itself.

Daniel Gordon has argued against speaking of “society,” “the social,” and “sociability” before asking what these terms meant to the women and men of the eighteenth century who first employed them.²⁷ Maza similarly opposes the tendency of historians “to take [the] ‘social’ for granted” and prefers to ask how the people she studies imagined the human groupings in which they found themselves. Yet Furet, for better or worse, had no such qualms about speaking of society. Using categories invented by the German philosopher Hegel in the aftermath of

26. David A. Bell, “Is the Revolution a Text?” *Partisan Review* 59 (Spring 1992):

the French Revolution (and in part in order to explain it), he distinguished between “the state” and “civil society.” He saw these categories as real things and analyzed their relationship to each other before, during, and after the Revolution. He made his debt to social science even more explicit when he wrote that Tocqueville’s explanation of the role of intellectuals in the radicalization of the French “is not sufficient to account for *the sociological conditions* that shaped . . . what was to become the revolutionary consciousness” (my emphasis). Indeed, his recourse to Cochin resulted from his conviction that Tocqueville was insufficiently attuned to sociological structures. Cochin did not merely study what “men of letters” wrote and thought. He asked where and how they and their readers met. In this respect he was a social historian and Furet, by adopting his findings, was a social historian as well.

Other historians, despite their affinity for the “linguistic turn,” have managed to combine this methodological tendency with a commitment to social analysis. They are interested in what people did as well as what they said (or wrote). Indeed, for Baker, the distinction between doing and saying is specious. His thinking is informed by the “Cambridge school” of linguistics, which asserts that language not only describes; it *acts* as well.²⁸ (For example, when the police officer says, “You are under arrest,” this is not merely a description. It is also an act.) Moreover, Baker observes that actions without words, such as that of the rioter who picks up a stone, nonetheless have an “intellective” element to them. They *mean* something, just as words mean something, and those meanings are determined by the social context.

Roger Chartier (chapter 3) is even more indebted to the categories of social science, for if Baker considers his intellectual history a form of social history, Chartier calls for an “enlargement of perspective” that includes the analysis of other practices. It is not sufficient, he maintains, to study ideas or ideologies and instead he calls for “an approach in terms of cultural sociology.” Like Furet, he insists on the importance of the forms of “intellectual sociability” out of which the ideas of the Enlightenment emerged. This involves examining what Cochin (and Furet) believed crucial to the formation of revolutionary ideas: the philosophical societies, Masonic lodges, literary clubs and other “associations of the eighteenth century.” Chartier expands the field of investigation still further by adapting insights from the German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas. According to Habermas, the eighteenth century saw the rise of a “political public sphere,” a metaphorical space between the state and “civil society” in which private individuals came together to

discuss matters of public importance and, eventually, to criticize the policies of the state and promote revolutionary ideology.²⁹ Its institutions included salons, cafés, academies, and journals and it depended upon the circulation of printed material. Chartier does not believe that the forms of intellectual sociability or the institutions of the public sphere themselves necessarily produced democratic or radical ideas. He emphasizes the “discordances” between the “discourses that in representing the social world proposed its reorganization” and the “practices” such as the exclusion of the uneducated from the “public sphere,” which “created new differentiations and new divisions.” Indeed he argues that these discordances produced the cultural climate that made the Revolution possible. Yet he regards the public sphere as a real object of investigation, even if his interpretation of its role in the origins of the Revolution is not identical with that of Habermas. Thus an understanding of discourses is necessary, but not sufficient, for Chartier, who like Furet is both an intellectual and a social historian.

Robert Darnton (chapter 4) similarly attempts to combine intellectual and social history by placing the history of political ideas in the context of specific social practices. In particular, he is interested in the history of communication, a sub-field of historical scholarship that Habermas has done much to promote. The history of communication involves the study of how ideas were circulated and has included important studies of such topics as the book trade and the publication of newspapers and periodicals.³⁰ Darnton himself has written extensively on the history of

29 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

30 The history of communication, and of book publishing and the press in particular, has attracted enormous interest in the past few decades. Among the most important of these works for the history of the French Enlightenment and Revolution are: Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775–1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); *The Forbidden Best-sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: Norton, 1995); Jack R. Censer and Jeremy D. Popkin, eds., *Press and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Popkin, *Revolutionary News: The Press in France, 1789–1799* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990); Censer, *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994); Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Carla Hesse, *Publishing and Cultural Politics in Revolutionary Paris, 1789–1810* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991). On the role of the salons in the communication of Enlightenment ideas

book publishing and has more recently begun examining the character of “the news” in eighteenth-century France. In the selection excerpted for this volume, he addresses the question of “the influence of forbidden books” on the Revolution.

Previous historians, most notably Daniel Mornet, have attempted to determine the extent to which books influenced the opinions of eighteenth-century readers. For Mornet the result of Enlightenment literature was a product that he vaguely called “intelligence,” and this quality he saw as one of the principal causes of the Revolution.³¹ Baker has criticized Mornet for the lack of clarity in his concept of “intelligence” and for drawing a false dichotomy between “intellectual causes” (deriving from books) and “political causes” (deriving from “situations or events”). Chartier has criticized him on similar grounds, adding that “the diffusion of ideas” is not “a simple imposition.” In other words, he argues, eighteenth-century readers did not simply absorb ideas from the books they read in an uncritical or unquestioning manner, but rather interpreted and thus transformed the content of what they read in light of their own beliefs and experiences.

Darnton's analysis of the impact of books departs from Mornet's in three ways. First, whereas Mornet was primarily interested in the influence of the High Enlightenment, i.e. books written by *philosophes*, Darnton takes as his subject matter the anonymous libels, often pornographic in nature, which attacked the royal family, the French court and the clergy. Second, like Chartier, Darnton rejects the notion that readers simply accept what they read, that their minds are like “soft wax,” and emphasizes the need to understand *how* readers appropriate and transform the messages conveyed by authors. Third, he places his study of books in the context of other media, noting that ideas spread via “gossip, songs, letters, prints, posters, books, pamphlets, manuscript gazettes, and newspapers of sorts – foreign periodicals and the official, heavily censored French press.” In studying larger networks of communication, he argues, one sees the prominence and persistence of certain ideas, which have a longer life and greater impact than if they had been conveyed from books alone. For Darnton the most important of these ideas is that of a monarchy having degenerated into despotism. He does not argue that this idea “caused” the Revolution, but that its acceptance by a large number of French subjects made them more sympathetic to an anti-monarchical position when the revolutionary situation came about.

Colin Jones also combines the methods of intellectual and social history. Like Furet, Chartier and Darnton, he is interested in ideas as well as practices, language as well as institutions, discourse as well as the interests of classes and professional groups. Indeed, it is a sign of the strength of the “linguistic turn” that Jones, who in 1991 lamented that for Baker and likeminded historians “discourse reigns supreme and social factors bulk exceeding small,”³² by 1996 was employing discourse analysis himself. In his “Great Chain of Buying” (chapter 5), Jones argues that the bourgeoisie used a medical discourse, employing terms such as “constitution,” “regime,” and “circulation” to expose the reputed deficiencies in the French state and thereby to legitimize their attempts at political reform. His analysis, however, is not limited to language. Like Furet, Chartier and Darnton, Jones is interested in the sociological conditions that made specific discourses possible. As with Chartier and Darnton, he approaches his topic from the perspective of a historian of communication; his particular topic here involves the history of the provincial press. Like other historians with similar interests, he invokes Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, yet he follows the Marxist social philosopher more scrupulously by insisting on the *bourgeois* character of the public sphere and, like Habermas, connecting it “to the growth of capitalist relations of production.” Paradoxically, then, Jones has used the very methods that Furet advocated in his critique of Marxist interpretations to rehabilitate their claim that a rising bourgeoisie led to the Revolution. Like Furet, and Cochin before him, Jones examines the “sociological conditions” of revolutionary consciousness, yet these conditions turn out to be determined by economic factors. Still, if Jones is more of a Marxist than others who have shown an interest in the social structures behind the production of ideas, he is no more of a “social” historian than many of his non-Marxist, linguistically-inclined colleagues.

Religion and Revolution

If Furet informed discussions of the relationship between ideas, social configurations and history, it is perhaps not surprising that he displayed an interest in the role of religion in the French Revolution. After all, as the sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) observed, religion is inseparable from the workings of any society and indeed functions as a

means of holding societies together.³³ Furet saw political convictions in particular as greatly resembling religious faith. He described his academic opponents in religious or clerical terms, referring to them as “true believers” in the “revolutionary catechism” or “Lenino-populist vulgate.” He called them “disciples” who denounced any differing interpretation of the Revolution as “heresy.”³⁴ This language had rhetorical value insofar as it ironically suggested that Furet’s adversaries were more like priests than the revolutionaries they claimed to be. Yet it was not merely a rhetorical flourish. The use of religious terminology was rooted in Furet’s conception of the religious character of revolutionary ideology more generally.

Like Tocqueville, who noticed that “though its objectives were political, the French Revolution followed the lines of a religious revolution,”³⁵ Furet compared the object of his investigation to “the religious wars of the sixteenth century.” He found that in both cases human action was heavily invested with moral meaning, but that in the French Revolution “man . . . knew that he was saved or condemned” depending upon the history that “he” was evidently in the process of making. Furet called this belief a “lay eschatology,” referring to the prophetic End of Days at which time, according to Christian theology, God will judge all human actions. Combined with the conviction that “the Revolution had no objective limits, only enemies,” this belief constituted “a credo whose acceptance or rejection separated the good from the wicked.” Furet’s analysis of revolutionary ideology in religious terms, like that of Tocqueville, is suggestive, yet neither the one nor the other explains where the fervor that supposedly characterized the revolutionaries came from. This failure in turn highlights the larger problem, which Furet raised and other historians have examined, of the relationship between the Revolution and its “origins.” In particular, how could a “religious revolution” have come out of a period known for its secular character? How could it have been the product of the famously irreligious Enlightenment or, in Furet’s own terms, the “offspring of *philosophie*”?

Dale Van Kley addresses this question in his “Church, State, and the Ideological Origins of the French Revolution: The Debate over the General Assembly of the Gallican Clergy in 1765” (chapter 9). In this article Van Kley argues that many of the political ideas that would characterize the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods developed in pre-revolutionary disputes between believing Catholics over the proper

33 For Durkheim’s theories on religion and society see his *Elementary Forms of the*

organization of the French church. Liberal ideas of representative government and radical notions of the sovereignty of the "nation," Van Kley maintains, were largely developed by "conciliarists" who preferred to see the church governed by lay councils and parish priests rather than bishops. Meanwhile, bishops jealous of their power within the church allied themselves with the crown, thus promoting the conservative ideology of "throne and altar." On the right as well as the left – and Van Kley suggests that these terms are not anachronistic when applied to the pre-revolutionary period – disputants made use of the language of the Enlightenment. By extension, Van Kley argues that the Enlightenment itself, which was more a "set of appeals" (to reason, nature, rights, happiness, etc.) than a coherent doctrine, was not inevitably anti-religious.

Like Tocqueville's and Furet's analysis of the Revolution's origins, Van Kley's interpretation of the religious roots of revolutionary and post-revolutionary political thought emphasizes continuities. Yet other historians interested in the Revolution's religious aspects have focused on the discontinuities or breaks that they have seen as distinguishing the Old Regime from the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods. In her landmark book *La Fête révolutionnaire*, Mona Ozouf explains the phenomenon of revolutionary festivals, which previous historians had dismissed as curiosities or exercises in partisan propaganda, as a manifestation of the collective human need for the sacred. The conclusion to the English translation of Ozouf's study, excerpted in this volume (chapter 10), summarizes the book's findings. Ozouf argues that the revolutionaries, after attacking traditional Catholic worship as "fanatical," "superstitious" and supportive of "tyranny," nevertheless understood the urgent need to substitute the old forms of religious life with new doctrines, symbols and, above all, rituals. Ozouf judges the revolutionary festivals as successful in providing the sense of the sacred that Catholicism had previously furnished. Here she appears indebted to Durkheim's insight, which Furet seems to have shared, that all societies, whether "modern" or "pre-modern," need rituals in which they recognize and sacralize themselves. Ozouf emphasizes a particular aspect of the sacred experience that the revolutionary festivals apparently manifested: namely the sense of inauguration or beginning anew. She finds in the symbolism, language, and rituals of the revolutionary festivals a conviction that humanity was transcending its unhappy past and embarking on an entirely new period in history. This new age, according to the revolutionary faith, would be characterized by the perfect integration of individuals with the social order and the achievement of the

past, Ozouf suggests that they were doing precisely what they said they were doing. By the time Napoleon took power in 1799, she argues, the “transfer of sacrality” was complete. The new “social and political values” that the Revolution had promoted, “[r]ights, liberty, and the fatherland,” were now widely treated as sacred. Thus the “Revolutionary festival” was “exactly what it wanted to be: the beginning of a new era.”

Like Ozouf, Lynn Hunt understands the Revolution as truly marking a break from the preceding period. She also shares Ozouf’s Durkheimian sense that the Revolution involved an attempt to sacralize new values. In her *Family Romance of the French Revolution* she describes the process by which revolutionaries broke with the traditional way of imagining the state, i.e. as a family with the king as father, queen as mother and subjects as children, and replaced this configuration with “one in which the parents were effaced and the children, especially the brothers, acted autonomously.”³⁶ In her chapter “The Band of Brothers” (chapter 8), she examines the attempts of revolutionaries to sacralize the fraternal community that they believed themselves to be instituting. Focusing on the period between the arrest of the king and queen and the end of the Reign of Terror, Hunt studies the revolutionaries much as an anthropologist might study the religious beliefs and practices of a particular group. In this guise she tests the claims of a prominent theorist of religion, René Girard. According to Girard, violence is endemic to all societies, yet those that channel it into a symbolic sacrificial object or scapegoat are able to achieve domestic peace.³⁷ Hunt observes that the revolutionaries were engaged in precisely such a scapegoat killing when they executed the king in January 1793, that contemporaries referred to the event as though it had sacred meaning, but that this act of violence did not function as Girard’s theory would suggest, as “[t]housands more victims of every social class, both men and women, proceeded to the guillotine after him.”

Psychology: “the historian’s unacknowledged principal aide”

Speculation on the religious needs of societies, the relationship between guilt, punishment and the sacred, borders inevitably on the field of psychology. Hunt makes her debt to psychoanalytical theory explicit. Indeed, the very title of her book alludes to Sigmund Freud’s concept of

36 Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University

the “family romance.” According to Freud, certain children (primarily boys) responded to anger at their parents by imagining that they were not, in fact, their true parents. Their real parents, according to the form the fantasy typically took, were of a higher social rank.³⁸ Hunt does not apply Freud’s theory literally to the case of the French Revolution. After all, the revolutionaries, having abolished inherited rank and proclaimed the principle of human equality, could not easily have imagined any family to which they belonged, literally or metaphorically, in terms of elevated rank. Yet Hunt notes that family metaphors were a primary way of imagining the French state and society, both before and during the Revolution. And if the king and queen had functioned as father and mother to their French “children,” then the replacement of this family arrangement with a “band of brothers” must have had psychological implications. In particular, Hunt suggests, the “parricides” felt guilty about the murder of their figurative parents. Here she draws on another work of Freud’s, *Totem and Taboo*, in which the founder of psychoanalysis speculated that law and society originated from the psychological consequences of an act of parricide.³⁹ Hunt’s subjects apparently betrayed their sense of guilt through their silence regarding the killing of their monarchs, or, alternatively, through their passionate demands for silence on the matter. Yet this urge to silence and forgetting competed with the need to commemorate and legitimize the founding of the new family: the “nation.” Silence and speaking, suppressing and remembering thus alternated in a neurotic cycle.

Ozouf’s investigation of the religious or sacred aspects of the revolutionary experience similarly crosses the border into the field of psychology. Ozouf also considers Freud in her analysis of the revolutionary festivals. She notes (in a section of her book not excerpted in this volume) that if Durkheim saw festivals as opportunities for any given society’s integration and redoubled commitment to its rules, Freud understood festivals as moments of transgression, points at which the normal rules governing social behavior were violated. On the basis of her examination of thousands of revolutionary festivals, Ozouf concludes that Durkheim was closer to the truth than Freud.⁴⁰ Despite her criticism of Freud, however, she does not reject the attempt to understand the psychology of the historical actors she has chosen to investigate. Indeed, she repeatedly describes the psychological condition of

38 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1959), vol. 9, 225, 41. Cf. Hunt, *Family Romance*, xiii.

people who lived at the time of the Revolution. She refers to the “visceral . . . fear” that prevented revolutionary officials from intervening in unauthorized nocturnal burials. She tries to “imagine the feelings of the civil servants” when they saw the persistence of Christmas pageants despite the attempt of revolutionaries to suppress them. She credits “the emotion aroused among the sans-culottes” for the ceremonial acclamation of Marat. Finally, she describes the “obsession with ceremonies” among the revolutionaries, their “obsessive . . . recourse to antiquity” and “frantic desire to purge.”

The combination of psychological and historical analysis is typically called “psychohistory.” After enjoying a brief vogue from the late 1950s into the 1970s, it has lost much of its prestige, though vociferous critics were present from the beginning. Today the very word “psychohistory” is practically a term of abuse among professional historians.⁴¹ This bias is particularly ironic when one considers that psychological conditions are among the most fundamental of historical data. How people in the past felt, what attracted them and what repelled them, what they feared and what hopes they maintained, are not only questions that stimulate the curiosity of so many historians. They are crucial in the formulation of historical explanations. In other words, psychological conditions *matter*. They are not the only things that matter. Nor are they easily discovered. Indeed, they are among the most elusive of historical facts. Yet they matter nonetheless. Moreover, historians often acknowledge the importance of understanding psychological conditions, even if they fail to make this explicit or to avail themselves of psychological theories. Peter Gay writes:

The professional historian has always been a psychologist – an amateur psychologist. Whether he knows it or not, he operates with a theory of human nature; he attributes motives, studies passions, analyzes irrationality, and constructs his work on the tacit conviction that human beings display certain stable and discernible traits, certain predictable, or at least discoverable, modes of coping with their experience . . . Among all his auxiliary sciences, psychology is the historian’s unacknowledged principal aide.⁴²

Any review of the historiography of the French Revolution would seem to support Gay’s contention. Indeed, Furet himself, who stimulated the

41 Perhaps the best-known denunciation of psychohistory is still David E. Stannard’s *Shrinking History: On Freud and the Failure of Psychohistory* (New York

discussion of so many matters relating to the French Revolution, also raised crucial psychological questions. In some places he seems to have disparaged psychological speculation. He criticized Michelet for having written "a history . . . made up of discoveries of the heart and marked by an intuitive grasp of men's souls and actors' motives." Yet he praised Tocqueville for having seen "the discrepancy . . . between the intentions of the actors and the historical rôle they played," thus implying that Tocqueville similarly understood their intentions. Furthermore, Furet repeatedly used psychological language in his analysis. He claimed that the monarchy's concessions in 1788 "opened up a vast field for the deployment of ideas and social passions." He stated that by the summer of 1789 "thought and speech were liberated, not only from censorship and the police – as, in fact, they had been for some years – but from the internal inhibition created when voluntary consent is given to age-old institutions." Curiously, he also claimed that "revolutionary society exorcised the curse that weighed upon it by reconsecrating [power] in a manner that was the very opposite of that of the Ancien Régime," thus suggesting that the psychological legacy of the Old Regime was not yet overcome and had to be "exorcised." Yet both statements reveal a common interest in the feelings and inhibitions of the revolutionaries. Furet described "the frenzied collective preoccupation with power that . . . shaped the political battles of the Revolution" and wrote that "the plot was the figment of a frenzied preoccupation with power." Elsewhere he depicted this "collectively shared image of power" as a "phantasm," and suggested a kind of collective paranoia when he wrote that "the Revolution invented formidable enemies for itself." Even when he was not using terms such as "frenzied," "figment," and "phantasm" to describe the revolutionaries, Furet implicitly analyzed their psychological state and moreover judged it to be abnormal. He faulted historians for presuming that the Revolution was the "normal" response to supposedly intolerable conditions. The implication is that revolutionary behavior was abnormal. Consequently, Furet underscores the question of precisely what sort of mental state characterized the revolutionaries.

It is not surprising, therefore, that other historians have raised psychological questions about the origins or character of the French Revolution. Roger Chartier stresses the importance of "automatic and obligatory loyalties" or, more exactly, the erosion of these loyalties, in the fall of the French monarchy. He also authorizes speculation on the "temperament" of the historical actors in question, contrasting, with the nineteenth-century historian Edgar Quinet (1803–75), "the inflex-

structure of personality" in order to learn what was distinctive about the "psychic economy" – a term he borrows from the German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990) – of the eighteenth-century French. Robert Darnton, although he disagrees with Chartier on when and how the French lost their affection for the king and queen, nevertheless presumes that by 1785 "[y]ears of slander had damaged something fundamental in the people's attachment to the monarchy." He attributes much of this disaffection to books, which "aroused emotions and stirred thoughts with a power we can barely imagine today," whereas for Chartier anti-monarchical literature only reflected a "previous . . . affective disinvestment."⁴³ Yet both historians seem to believe that the emotions of the eighteenth-century French are not only discernible, but crucial for understanding the origins of the French Revolution. Similarly, Jones reports on the mental condition of provincial editors of advertising supplements, calling them "happy . . . to a man" and noting that for them "the market held few terrors." Maza presents a very different picture of literate French people in the second half of the eighteenth century. She finds a "fear of 'luxury'," "panic over its effects," and "an acute sense of moral void and social dissolution" resulting from the burgeoning of the consumer market. Yet both historians are confident in their ability to detect such emotions as fear, dread, and happiness. Indeed, Maza goes so far as to generalize her claims about the psychological condition of the French, as she writes of "the devastating effects of the Seven Years' War on the national psyche." Combining the related phenomena of psychology and religion, moreover, she explains the late eighteenth-century enthusiasm for sentimental art forms and "social morality" as "an attempt to promote new forms of spiritual fulfillment in one's sense of connectedness to a community of fellow human beings."

If one expands the realm of the psychological from that of emotions to the workings of the mind more generally, to thinking as well as feeling, then the presence of psychology in the historiography of the French Revolution is more pervasive still. The prevalence of the word "consciousness" is merely one indication of this phenomenon. Furet referred repeatedly to the term, though without ever precisely defining it. Jones writes of "class consciousness" among members of the bourgeoisie. Maza highlights the question of "middle-class consciousness" in the very title of her article, and though she finds it to be non-existent, she discovers another kind of consciousness, which imagined society as a single family held together by altruistic feelings and behavior. Baker

focuses on “intellection,” Chartier writes of “systems of perception,” and Darnton attempts to reconstruct the “mental world” of eighteenth-century French readers, yet all of these terms are simply different ways of expressing a single goal: an understanding of how human minds made sense of or constructed reality. If one adds the unconscious to the elements of the mind one wishes to study, then the full range of mental activity, the full scope of psychological investigation, can be understood as falling under the purview of the historian. Yet even if one excludes this arena as inaccessible, the points of connection between history and psychology are quite numerous indeed.

Thus history cannot be separated from psychology, and historians will return to psychological questions whether they explicitly address psychological theories (as Hunt does) or engage in a lay analysis of cognitive processes, “mental representations,” anxieties, “frenzies” and “phantasms.” In this respect, what is striking about the historiography of the French Revolution, a subject in which emotions and ideas play as great a role as in any historical period, is not the prevalence of psychological theory, but its relative absence. Hopefully, future work on the Revolution will profit from the vast discipline of psychology. After all, if attempts to combine history with various other fields have invigorated historiography, why should the combination of history and psychology prove any less fruitful?

History among the Disciplines

But here I am begging the question of just how valuable such combinations have been. The key word in this discussion is *interdisciplinarity*, or the crossing of boundaries between academic disciplines. Should scholars strive for interdisciplinarity? Should they borrow concepts, models and methods from other fields, or ought they to remain within the boundaries assigned by the conventions of their own disciplines? This is a very large pair of questions, which has been repeatedly debated and will no doubt continue to attract attention in academic publications as well as departmental and faculty meetings at colleges and universities throughout the world. It cannot be treated exhaustively here, yet the readings collected in this volume afford an opportunity to examine the implications of interdisciplinarity for the historiography of the French Revolution in particular and the field of history more generally.

As these readings show, the historiography of the Revolution over the

anthropology, literary criticism, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, religion, art history, and the already highly interdisciplinary fields of gender studies and cultural studies. A common complaint about this sort of eclecticism is its perceived tendency to pollute historical writing with jargon. Yet the historian Peter Burke has pithily defined jargon as "little more than the other person's concepts."⁴⁴ Terms like "discourse," "public sphere," and "sacrality" might offend one's sensibilities when read or heard for the first time. This reaction, however, is more a result of unfamiliarity than anything inherent in the words themselves. Once understood, they can be rejected as lacking sufficient relevance or explanatory power, yet in some cases at least they will clarify more than they obscure. Advanced students and professional scholars often assume that they are finished learning "vocabulary" and therefore impatiently reject unfamiliar terms as useless, especially if these come from disciplines in which they have had little instruction. A commitment to learn "other people's concepts" and at least to consider their applicability to one's own subject matter is well worth the required time and effort.

Learning from other disciplines is all the more advisable insofar as the scope of history inevitably includes their subject matter. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "history" as "[t]hat branch of knowledge which deals with past events, as recorded in writings or otherwise ascertained; the formal record of the past, esp. of human affairs or actions." Of course, in practice historians necessarily reduce this unimaginably vast purview by specializing according to period, place, and a comparatively manageable set of themes. But what are these themes? It would be impossible to write an exhaustive list, but some of the most obvious candidates are: the pursuit of power, wealth and status; the production and consumption of objects and use of technologies; the organization of communities; the perception and treatment of insiders and outsiders; attempts at creating and communicating meaning through symbols and rituals; mental divisions between good and evil, sacred and profane; feelings of attraction and aversion, impulses toward creation and destruction, peace and war; and the complicated relationship between human beings and the natural world. In short, history concerns itself, at least potentially, with nothing less than the totality of the human condition. It is therefore the natural partner of other disciplines that take as their subject any aspect of that condition.

This defense of interdisciplinarity is not new. It echoes the call for "total history," articulated in 1966 by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie but

implicitly advocated as early as the 1920s by his predecessors in the so-called *Annales* school, who combined such diverse interests as geography, demography, meteorology, sociology, psychology, and anthropology.⁴⁵ One finds sympathy for interdisciplinarity earlier still in the “New History” of James Harvey Robinson, an American historian of the French Revolution who in 1912 declared that since “History includes every trace and vestige of everything that man has done or thought since he first appeared on the earth,” it would be necessary for historians to study, among other things, anthropology, sociology, “Prehistoric archaeology,” “Social and Animal psychology,” “the Comparative study of religions,” and “Political economy.”⁴⁶ This optimism about the ability of historians to synthesize the knowledge of so many fields might appear naïve, perhaps even arrogant. The project appears more defensible, however, if the knowledge of the human past as informed by the relevant disciplines is seen as a goal that can never truly be reached but toward which it is worth striving, an ideal standard against which scholarship can be measured.

In some respects, moreover, history can be understood as an inherently interdisciplinary subject, which in fact conformed to the principles of *Annales* and the New History long before they were articulated. One could argue that Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian and reputed “father of history,” was an anthropologist, a geographer, a political scientist and moral philosopher in addition to being a historian. Closer to the period with which we are concerned here, David Hume, who was at once a philosopher, psychologist, sociologist and historian, believed history capable of revealing “the constant and universal principles of human nature” and “the regular springs of human action and behaviour.”⁴⁷ His polymath contemporary, Voltaire, wrote histories that paid attention to laws and customs, religious beliefs, economic practices, scientific endeavors, as well as politics, diplomacy and war. Both Hume and Voltaire exemplified the Enlightenment belief, best expressed in the project of the *Encyclopédie*, in the underlying unity of disparate branches of knowledge. The nineteenth-century historians of the French Revolu-

45 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The Peasants of Languedoc*, trans. John Day (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974). On the “*Annales* school” see Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929–89* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990).

46 James Harvey Robinson, *The New History: Essays Illustrating the Modern Historical Outlook* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), cited in Burke, *French Historical Revolution*, 9. On Robinson’s continuing relevance for an understanding of the French Revolution see Lynn Hunt, “Forgetting and Remembering: The French Revolution

tion inherited the conviction that history must inform and be informed by other branches of knowledge. Tocqueville, for example, was not simply interested in recounting the history of the Old Regime and seeking the origins of the French Revolution. He wished to know when and why revolutions occur, under what conditions status matters more than wealth or power, how religious inclinations affect political ideas and actions, how and when the organization of a polity influences the beliefs of its members, and under what conditions democracy is possible. He therefore shared the concerns of the political scientist and sociologist with those of the historian. Similarly, Karl Marx maintained theories of human nature, psychological notions of consciousness and alienation, economic theories of value and a dialectical model of history (inherited from Hegel) in which primitive forms of social and economic organization would collapse under the weight of their contradictions and give way to higher stages of historical development. Insofar as his disciples, including the Marxist historians of the French Revolution, have shared his assumptions, they too have crossed disciplinary boundaries.

Thus the interdisciplinarity of the work collected here is not in and of itself new. What is new is the precise combinations between history and the other branches of knowledge. The decline – relative though not definitive – of Marxist assumptions has opened up the historiography of the French Revolution to possible combinations unthinkable during the heyday of the old orthodoxy. The study of political ideas, once widely viewed as mere “ideology” masking more fundamental class interests, has flourished in the new historiography. Language and symbols are no longer seen merely as tools of class domination, but as defining features of social identity as well as political contestation. The relative status of women and men, once overshadowed by the presumably more fundamental relationship between those who owned the means of production and those who did not, can now be viewed as integral to an understanding of the character and legacy of the Revolution. The study of religion, once dismissed as the “opium of the masses,” can take its rightful place in the endeavor to explain how the Revolution came about and why it took the form it took.

As these readings show, history can benefit greatly from the freedom and willingness to explore other fields. Yet it does not merely take. It offers something in return. It provides a temporal aspect, an account of human experience at a time that no longer exists. Only the collection and interpretation of the traces of the past, whether in documents or

action and behavior," as Hume would contend, or irregular springs, or different mechanisms altogether, are hypotheses that only the study of history can test. And if one determines that people have changed in some fundamental way from the past to the present, this does not tell us whether that difference was continuous. There is no better way to examine such questions of continuity and change than to study a revolution, which by definition is a break but which, upon closer investigation, might yield surprising continuities, perhaps even toward our own day.