

## Reflections on a Symposium, ‘Living the French Revolution’

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My first day in the Archives Nationales, in June 1974, was spent in the old reading room in the Hôtel de Soubise. In those pre-digital days, one had to arrive well before opening hours to be sure of a seat. Like legions of overseas researchers on their first day in those archives, I was apprehensive and intimidated by my ignorance of apparently arcane procedures. As we waited in the foyer, a kind older scholar (although I now know he was only 45 years old) noticed my worried solitude and started chatting about our shared interests, before he was joined by an animated graduate student. The older scholar was Charles Tilly; his student was John Merriman, like me then studying the provincial face of the Second Republic and who was soon invited to stay with us near Perpignan, where I was researching.<sup>1</sup>

I recount that small tale to express how fortunate we are to practice a profession that we love and which invites us to be part of an international college of scholars and friends. John became the first overseas historian friend I made, and presented the opening paper in the symposium in July 2019. He was followed by Rod Phillips, whom I met a few years later at the first George Rudé Seminar, in Melbourne in 1978. They and the other presenters, the session chairs, and two panels of former students were among the 150 people who enjoyed a wonderful two-day gathering. One session of that gathering was a superb public lecture to more than 400 people by Timothy Tackett, whom I first met at the fifth Rudé Seminar, in Wellington, New Zealand, in 1986.

The programme and its delivery were the initiative of a committee of former PhD students: Michael Adcock, Judy Anderson, Greg Burgess, Ian Coller, Helen Davies, and Julie Kalman. Their generosity and commitment made an exceptional few days possible. They were supported by a dedicated group of professional staff from the Public Programs and Events division of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Melbourne. The Faculty also funded a lively dinner for participants, and the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies provided a reception. Travel costs for most overseas visitors were subsidized by the Office of the Vice-Chancellor. This support from every level of the University was reflected in the eloquent opening of the symposium by noted Voltaire scholar and Dean of the Faculty, Russell Goulbourne.

John Merriman’s passionate opening paper confronted us with the meaning of ‘terror’, contrasting the ‘terror’ ascribed to anarchists in the ‘Belle Époque that wasn’t’ with the extent of state violence against its opponents. It reminded us of the malleability of terms such as ‘terror’, so often assumed to have been invented by Jacobins in 1793 when there are in fact many examples of earlier use of it as a label of opprobrium (and of praise), for example,

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<sup>1</sup> John had finished his PhD on the Limousin and was doing research for his important book *The Agony of the Republic: The Repression of the Left in Revolutionary France, 1848–1851*; I had just begun a PhD at the University of Melbourne, completed in 1977 and published long afterwards as *Les Semailles de la République dans les Pyrénées-Orientales, 1846–1852: classes sociales, culture et politique*.

during the seventeenth-century wars of religion.<sup>2</sup> John's central question – how might we explain why certain 'illegalist' anarchists resorted to extreme violence against people they did not know personally – was echoed by Kieko Matteson's intriguing investigation of a collective homicide committed against two forest guards in Franche-Comté in 1813. While sharing an apparent hatred of the state and its agents, in this case the perpetrators knew their victims well.

Kieko's paper was one of several devoted to a second theme of the symposium, that of the history of the environment. Two common myths about the French environment are that the Revolution was an unparalleled disaster for France's forests, and that environmentalism really only developed in the 1960s. The papers on the forest environment included Caroline Ford's survey of the origins and purposes of mass planting of pines in the *Landes* of Gascony in the nineteenth century and the consequent destruction of an ancient pastoral economy on the 'wastelands'; and Hamish Graham's study of forest crime and its policing in parts of the adjacent region before the Revolution, where ownership and contestation was varied. Rod Phillips introduced us to the politics of grape types and the origins of 'appellations', noting how before the nineteenth century vine-growing was haphazard in terms of *cepages* and planting. Even the regional hierarchies of wines were matters revolutionaries felt impelled to consider. All of these papers stressed how the history of attitudes to the environment reveals a keen and ancient awareness of environmental choices, and how those choices were often conflictual and political. Similarly, Allan Potofsky's paper on debates over obstacles to the 'hygiene' and embellishment of Paris in the eighteenth century provided the deep contextual background to article 17 of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen on the right to property and compensation for its alienation.

A third, implied theme of the symposium concerned cultural difference. How might we make sense of behaviours and attitudes which we find almost impossible to fully decipher? Sophie Matthiesson's example was the evident enthusiasm expressed by political prisoners for the Cult of the Supreme Being, essentially defined by Robespierre and celebrated on 8 June 1794. Was this simply the case of prisoners expecting that the idealism of the Cult signalled a possible end to their detention or, as she proposed, a sincere expression of enthusiasm? In turn, Ian Germani examined attitudes to death, especially the heroic deaths of soldiers and patriots at a time when death rates of soldiers paralleled those in World War I. The desired stoicism associated with courage seems at odds with other historians' ascription of extreme sentimentalism to French revolutionaries and suggests the deep influence of classical models of civic sacrifice and virtue.<sup>3</sup>

A sensitivity to cultural difference also informed Timothy Tackett's public lecture on the extraordinary correspondence of an 'ordinary' citizen, Adrien-Joseph Colson. Analysis of more than one thousand letters by him highlighted for Tim the swirling and contrasting emotions of elation and hope, anxiety and fear. His lecture also probed a fourth theme of the symposium, how the study of one person may illuminate the revolutionary period. This theme of making sense of major upheaval through analysis of individuals was continued by Marisa Linton in her wide-ranging paper on the nineteenth-century stereotyping of Robespierre and Saint-Just, generating myths that have proven remarkably durable and which she is questioning. In turn, Laura Mason examined how reactions to Gracchus Babeuf shaped how the 'end' of the Revolution was perceived. Her trenchant paper raised the question – particularly pertinent in the current international climate – of whether a more important question than why there was 'terror' in 1793–94 is to examine why the Revolution ended in authoritarian rule after 1799.

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<sup>2</sup> See Schechter, *A Genealogy of Terror in Eighteenth-Century France*; and an important article by Kelly, "Conceptual sources of the Terror".

<sup>3</sup> Notably Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: a Framework for the History of Emotions*.

The theme of making sense of upheaval through the trajectories of individual lives was taken up in an international context by Sanjay Subrahmanyam's fascinating study of an Irishman, Thomas Conway, who seemed to be everywhere: in the United States, France, India, South Africa, even southeast Asia. While Conway's activities were legion, Ian Coller used a single archival glimpse of Michel Fertali, 'subject of the Ottoman Porte', to pose broader questions about the responses of the Muslim world to upheaval in western Europe. The two papers highlighted the disruptions of established transnational networks, practices and communities at a time also of new possibilities and mobilities.

Sanjay and Ian's papers overlapped with a fifth theme of the symposium, one that constantly confronts historians, especially of revolutionary situations, that of 'choice' and 'circumstance'. Do we best understand the actions of individuals as simply the result of the 'force of circumstances' or of deliberate choice, and are they subject to an 'iron law of unintended consequences' which always thwarts intention? Charles Walton explored this methodological dilemma explicitly, while Vesna Drapac considered it through the choices confronting French people after 1940. In particular, she examined the depiction of Catholics in popular film and television series such as *Un village français*, noting how they have continued to rely on binary simplicities despite more nuanced portrayals of diverse levels of collaboration and resistance.

A sixth theme running through the symposium was that of memory and the Revolution's legacy. We were given two fine case studies of this, first through Donald Sutherland's careful analysis of voting patterns in the Mâconnais (Saône-et-Loire) after the Revolution of 1848. He explored the apparent overlap in voting for Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte on 10 December 1848 and for *démocrates-socialistes* on 13 May 1849. Analysis of these elections inevitably raises questions about the weight of memories of the Revolution and its ideological legacies. Very different was Greg Burgess' reflection on understandings (both positive and negative) of the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in debates about a new declaration of rights in the Constitution of the Fifth Republic and in the United Nations.

Finally, in a concluding round-table session expertly chaired by David Garrioch, a panel of participants (Ian Coller, Marisa Linton, Laura Mason, Sanjay Subrahmanyam) considered 'what the Revolution means today'. The panel returned to the themes of periodization: does a renewed understanding of the Revolution in a global context suggest that our optic needs to be 1760–1840 rather than 1789–1815?<sup>4</sup> And should 1815 rather than 1789 be prioritized as a turning point of global rather than French significance in modern history? Does the resurgence of authoritarian regimes and militarism in our own times suggest that there should be a renewed focus on the failure of liberal constitutionalism after 1795 to prevent the rise of Napoleon?<sup>5</sup>

From my own point of view, however, this should not deflect attention away from an understanding of the fundamental shift in France in 1789–99 from an ancient seigneurial and hierarchical social and political order to one based on new conceptions of power, individual rights and property. And, whatever the reverberations and contestations of the Revolution across Europe, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, contemporaries were in no doubt that this was the age of the *French* Revolution. While the Revolution should be understood within a global narrative of imperial crises of commerce and territory, in France these escalated into

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<sup>4</sup> Reflecting the title of Armitage and Subrahmanyam (eds), *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, 1760–1840*.

<sup>5</sup> This reflects the recent collection by Bell and Mintzker (eds), *Rethinking the Age of Revolutions: France and the Birth of the Modern World*.

an unprecedented political and social revolution for “internal” reasons, a revolution which further engendered new international conflicts.

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Why was the French Revolution inherently different from the American Revolution (according to Burke). American Rev: they just wanted to return to the liberty that they were entitled to under the constitution (inheritance of rights) French Rev: complete destruction of older traditions, attack on the feudal system. Events of the French Revolution that Burke finds particularly troubling. Killing of King Louis & Marie Antoinette (the aristocracy), confiscation of church property and redistributing it to new rich people at the time. 2 components of society. 1. motivation: society requires loyal In the Reflections, Burke argued that the French Revolution would end disastrously because its abstract foundations, purportedly rational, ignored the complexities of human nature and society. Further, he focused on the practicality of solutions instead of the metaphysics, writing "What is the use of discussing a man's abstract right to food or to medicine? The question is upon the method of procuring and administering them." As the French Revolution broke into factions, the Whig Party broke in two: the New Whig party and the Old Whig party. As founder of the Old Whigs, Burke always took the opportunity to engage in debate with the New Whigs about French Jacobinism. In the French people in his Reflections on the Revolution in France, and, though Paine admired Burke's stand in favour of the American Revolution, he rushed into print with his celebrated answer, Rights of Man (March 13, 1791). The book immediately created a sensation. At least eight editions were published in 1791. philosophic ramifications. In political philosophy: Burke. In his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790) and An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs (1791), he discerned in the doctrine of sovereignty of the people, in whose name the revolutionaries were destroying the In this political text, Burke offers a passionate criticism of the French Revolution, based on a few key concepts. The first is a conservative belief that change must occur gradually over a long period of time, if it is to be successful. For this reason, he disagrees with the French Revolution, which is based on the idea of quick and immediate change. He believes that this kind of change can only result in chaos, disagreement and violence. He argues that society is "organic" and exists like a living organism that grows and changes over time. Another concept Burke refers to is the idea that experience is essential in governance. He is critical of a government founded upon theory, arguing that the leaders of the French Revolution have no practical experience in running a country. Reflections on the Revolutions in France earns itself a lasting place as one of the most influential arguments for conservatism in political philosophy. The letter overall questions many popular theories of the Enlightenment, a period that flourished during much of the eighteenth century and was spearheaded by writers like Jean Jacques Rousseau, who spoke out against establishments like the monarchy and church, accusing them of corruption and oppression. Burke believes the entire foundation of the French Revolution is faulty because it is built on the ideal of individualism. Burke states it is the radical scholar, the writer, and the lawyer leading the Assembly in Paris "not the experienced politician or cleric, who work for the good of the people.