

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

### **French Revolutionary Studies: Challenges and Potential Ways Forward**

Charles Walton  
University of Warwick

This paper aims to identify some challenges facing the field of French Revolutionary studies and proposes potential ways of moving forward. The most immediate challenge, I believe, involves making the Revolution relevant to debates about democracy. Throughout much of the twentieth century, interpretations of the Revolution were implicitly tied to competing conceptions of democracy, social and liberal. When François Furet famously stated that ‘the revolution is over’ in the 1970s, he meant that the Marxist philosophy of history had been debunked and that the ‘totalitarian’ nature of the French Revolutionary tradition had been exposed. (Furet, 1981 [orig. 1978]) Though controversial, his claims revitalized the field in the decade leading up to the Revolution’s bicentennial.

As the Marxist paradigm waned in the 1980s, so, too, did debates about the shape of democracy. Francis Fukuyama's thesis in *The End of History and the Last Man*, which described the triumph of liberalism over socialism, although criticised at the time, was nevertheless reflected in the kinds of topics French Revolutionary scholars chose to investigate. (Fukuyama, 1992) Emphasis shifted from class to the individual (its psyche and gender), human rights (though, revealingly, not social and economic rights), political representation (and the dangers of sovereignty), and market culture (a vehicle for public opinion and individual freedom).

Research on the French Revolution after 1989 was thus conducted in a climate in which there seemed to be a general consensus about what democracy should look like. Though not everyone fully embraced liberalism, no robust alternatives were in sight, at least not in Europe and North America. Given this context, it is not surprising that critiques of liberalism did not work their way into interpretations of the Revolution. In explaining why a largely liberal revolution went wrong, historians pointed to either illiberal factors (proto-socialist ideology, counter-revolution) or contingent ones (the king's flight, the war). The notion that liberal ideas and principles – civil and political, but also *economic* – may have contributed to the Revolution's tragic course was not entertained.

### **The politics of liberal political economy**

Although historians cannot make readers find relevance in the topics they study, they can seize opportunities to try to do so. The fissures appearing in western liberalism today strike me as offering such an opportunity. In light of the 2008 financial crisis (largely spawned by a liberal political economy that allowed financial markets to run amok) and increasing awareness of the corrupt, plutocratic influences in democratic polities (investment banks, energy companies, media magnates), conditions strike me as propitious for analysing how political and economic power related to each other in the French Revolution. How did contemporaries think these forms of power *should* relate to each other? That is, what was thought to constitute good governance or, alternatively, corruption? And how did those forms of power actually relate to each other in practice? That is, how was the

Old Regime's political sociology of interests transformed by the Revolution?

Such questions call for integrating the problem of *interests* into the analysis of Revolutionary politics. The importance of interests in the French Revolution was largely obscured in late twentieth-century historiography. Although historians have recently sought to recover the economic dimension of the period, they have tended to focus on political economy, that is, on *ideas* about interests rather than the politics of them or their political sociology. Texts have been privileged over the rough and tumble of the street, or of heated assemblies, clubs, guilds (before their abolition), sections, committees and tribunals. Perhaps we should expand our purview of political economy to consider the *politics* of political economy. Specifically, we might examine the friction between economic and political liberalizations during the Revolution. The two are usually seen as distinct processes. Indeed, historians tend to think about politics and the economy as separate spheres. But as Karl Polanyi suggested in *The Great Transformation*, this conceptual separation of society into political and economic spheres is itself a product of the eighteenth-century imagination. (Polanyi, 1944) It allowed for the emergence of the 'self-regulating market' idea, so cherished by political economists and many revolutionaries. The 'self-regulating market' was seductive as a principle for reforming society because it offered the promise of equity, material security and economic growth through the non-political (and hence, non-contentious) means of natural economic laws.

Despite common misreadings of his work, Polanyi never argued that the self-regulating market actually came into being in the eighteenth century. It was and has always been a myth, and a politically dangerous one: in seeking to unburden politics of its most vexing problems – interests, distributive justice, the social question – the self-regulating market principle exacerbates political tensions, leading to the adoption of drastic and often calamitous measures.

Although Polanyi had nothing to say about the French Revolution (he sought to explain the origins of fascism), his insights are helpful for interpreting its radicalization. In pursuing both economic and political liberalizations, early revolutionaries invited more individuals to the

political table but denied them the right to bring their material demands with them. The self-regulating market, liberal reformers insisted (in so many words), would satisfy needs and wants. To be sure, eighteenth-century economic liberals should not be confused with twentieth-century neo-liberals. As historians have shown, liberal political economists of the Enlightenment took sentiments, empathy and morality seriously, and many of them believed in social assistance and philanthropy. (Livesey, 2001; Rothschild, 2001; Shovlin, 2006) They were not the eighteenth-century equivalents of Milton Friedman. Moreover, historians have shown that the French economy had *dirigiste* tendencies both before and after the Revolution; it was never fully *laissez-faire*. (Horn, 2006; Minard, 1998; Potofsky, 2009) Polanyi would not have refuted these facts. Ultimately, his analysis points elsewhere, to the political implications of *attempts* to economically liberalize society. According to his theory of the ‘double-movement’, the more a regime tries to evacuate material demands from politics, the more likely those demands will return to politics with a vengeance. Society – and not just the lower orders – will respond to the economic volatility and social vulnerabilities that market freedom produces by pressuring the state to protect its interests (elites usually have an edge over others in obtaining that protection). The form that this return of material demands and interests to politics takes can vary according to conditions and available political and ideological currents – Polanyi posits no telos –, but if frustrations are running high, it is likely to be illiberal.

This insight opens up avenues of interpretation for the French Revolution. When early revolutionaries liberalized the grain trade, abolished the guilds and corporations, suppressed state regulatory institutions, curtailed the king’s budget (and, hence, his capacity to keep powerful courtiers and pensioners happy), forbade the formation of any association based on economic interests, closed the chambers of commerce and prohibited collective petitions, they *tried* to deprive interests of the institutional means of expression and negotiation. What were the results of this nearly total liberal economic revolution? Political frustration and radicalism, in both revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forms.

In his *La fin des corporations*, Steven Kaplan appears to be moving towards a Polanyian interpretation when he observes that, after the National Assembly abolished the guilds in 1791, the artisan world of Paris transferred its socio-economic concerns to the political section: '[t]o a certain extent the section functioned as a corporative institution by proxy'. (Kaplan, 2001, p. 615) His conclusion suggests that, by studying *the politics of political economy* (and not simply political economy or politics), we might appreciate how the famous Aristotelian question *who rules?*, a question at the centre of so many studies of sovereignty and representation, was inseparable from questions concerning interests and distributive justice: *Who gets what? Who owes what to whom?* Sovereignty and distributive justice were, in both theory and practice, intertwined problems. If redistribution is a form of power, that is, a means of maintaining allegiances – as Hobbes well noted, it 'procureth friends and servants' – it is worth investigating what happens when the sovereign eschews redistribution, as the National Assembly did when it economically liberalized society. (Hobbes, 1651, p. 41) Without redistribution, is a regime left with only ideology and coercion as binding forces? Also (and to persist with this premise), if redistribution is power, then can its abandonment by the top help explain why power shifted downward to the clubs, sections, and sans-culotte 'armies', that is, to sites where redistribution did occur, albeit spontaneously, frenetically and often coercively? If this hypothesis is correct, perhaps the Revolution's radical slide towards popular sovereignty can be attributed to changes in the theory and practice of redistribution.

In any case, factoring material interests back into French Revolutionary politics and examining the tension between political and economic liberalizations might open up new perspectives on both new and old topics, such as social and economic rights (largely ignored in histories of revolutionary rights), property (ecclesiastical, commercial, common and private), taxes (were they to be voluntary, as some thought; how were they to be collected and redistributed?), pensions and subsidies (who merited them and on what grounds?), charity (was it to be voluntary or managed by the state?), and subsistence (were food markets to be regulated or left to free-market forces?). Although many of these topics have been treated in the past, what is needed is a capacious interpretation that weaves them together into a larger story

about democracy and distributive justice. Such an approach should render the study of the Revolution useful for thinking about the difficulties involved in abrupt liberal transitions more generally, especially in instances when political and economic liberalizations accompany each other.

### **Epistemological imperialism and geo-temporal prejudices**

French Revolutionary studies face other challenges as well, notably, the perception that this field has an out-dated sense of its own importance and that it is still steeped in geographical and chronological biases, Euro-centrism (or Gallo-centrism) and exaggerated claims about holding the key to ‘modernity’. Pierre Serna has recently insisted that ‘an unspoken but both explicit and implicit historiographical prejudice about the superiority of the French Revolution must be consciously dismantled.’ (Serna, 2013) The statement expresses a post-modern sensibility, an embarrassment about the traditionally preeminent place of the French Revolution in narratives about modernity and Europe’s leading role in it. While prejudices should always be scrutinized, it seems to me that there is a risk of obscuring the French Revolution’s vast and important legacies. For better or for worse, these legacies *have* stretched across time and space, firing political imaginations the world over for more than two centuries, albeit with a great deal of cultural and contingent accommodation. The challenge, it seems to me, is to acknowledge and analyse the Revolution’s great geographical and chronological reach without lapsing into epistemological imperialism.

As the recent historiography on the French Revolution demonstrates, we are beginning to overcome geographical prejudices. Studies of France’s colonies, especially Saint-Domingue, are proliferating, as are ones that situate the Revolution in an Atlantic or global context. The recent volume *The French Revolution in Global Perspective*, edited by Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt and William Max Nelson, offers some of the most cutting edge work in this vein. (Desan, Hunt, Nelson, 2013) It is surprising, though, given the current interest in empire, that so few historians are examining the Revolution’s legacy in the First Empire. Historians of early nineteenth-century France tend to focus on Napoleon, domestic politics, or war. Yet, much of relevance might be learned by exploring how the Revolutionary legacy took

shape in the course of imperial expansion and forced regime changes. In any case, our field should welcome more studies like those of Jennifer Sessions, who has identified how the legacies of the First Empire figured in the conquest of Algeria, and Andrew Jainchill, who has examined the links between republicanism and empire in the minds of revolutionaries during the Directory. (Sessions, 2011; Jainchill, 2008)

If our geographical prejudices are beginning to break down (and there is more to do on that front), chronological ones persist. The French Revolution continues to be seen as the watershed moment of modernity. The belief, or perhaps assumption, that it ushered in the modern world is reflected in the structure of the European sections of many history departments, where 1789 marks the boundary between the early modern and modern periods. But the French Revolution is beginning to lose its privileged place in stories about modernity. In recent decades, modernity has come to be defined in many different ways and found in many different times and places – so much so that one wonders, as deep historians Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail do, whether the concept is still useful. (Shryock and Smail, 2013) Given this proliferation of ‘modernities’ and critiques of it, to insist today on the Revolution’s paradigmatic ‘modernity’ strikes me as ridiculous rearguard action. Modernity is (and I agree with Shryock and Smail on this point) epistemologically imperialist: it flattens out and subordinates everything that came before. It creates a temporal hierarchy that is implicitly bound up with identity: the modern (us) versus the pre-modern (them). The Revolution becomes the story of how we became ‘us’, unlike ‘them’.

In any case, I do not think we need the concept of modernity to make the case for the Revolution’s historical importance, which is empirically demonstrable. That post-modern sensibilities call for eschewing the French Revolution’s ‘superiority’ (as Serna puts it) is itself a sign of the event’s longstanding importance. Rather than be embarrassed about this fact, we should try to explain it. Why and how has this particular revolution captured political imaginations for so long, and not just in Europe? (Pol Pot and his fellow executioners read Rousseau and Robespierre!) Answering this question might involve collaborative studies on the French Revolution’s legacy from several

disciplines: history, philosophy, political theory, literature, art and film. Perhaps it is time to offer a collection of essays along the lines of Keith M. Baker's *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* of twenty years ago, but one that drops 'modernity' from the analysis, encompasses more than politics and reaches beyond the hexagon: *Global Legacies of the French Revolution?* (Baker, 1987-1994)

The current trend towards global history surely summons us to do more than study non-European/North American societies. It should, I believe, invite us to adopt more cosmopolitan analytical approaches – to make the familiar unfamiliar – even in European and North American history. Analytical categories drawn from cultural anthropology, such as debt, obligation and redistribution, may be helpful in this regard. Not only do these categories offer the opportunity to examine the relationship between interests and politics; they also help us analyse the Revolution in terms that render it comparable to other periods and societies, which we might too readily dismiss as 'pre-modern'. For example, in his recent book *Debt: The First Five Thousand Years*, anthropologist David Graeber points out that in ancient Sumer, princes would periodically reverse trends of indebtedness, expropriation and enslavement by annulling all debts in society. These acts were called 'declarations of freedom.' (Graeber, 2011) But if freedom has historically meant the release from debt (one finds this in the Bible as well), how then do we make sense of one of the first acts of the French Revolution, which shackled the new regime to the old one's debts? On June 17, 1789, just after a group of deputies to the meeting of the Estates General seized sovereignty and declared themselves to be the National Assembly, the nation's debts were put under the safeguard of this new body, which also promised to continue making interest payments (a kind of redistribution). In this comparative light, the French Revolution begins to look strange. An aspect of it that has been taken for granted (shouldn't states always pay their debts?) suddenly invites fresh analysis. To improvise on Rousseau's opening to the *The Social Contract*, one might conclude that the French Revolution was born in chains but everywhere touted freedom. The chains (of debt) may have been self-imposed, but they were the pre-condition of being born. Financiers expected rents (interest on the debt), and the National

Assembly staked its legitimacy on its ability to meet this redistributive demand.

In short, the global turn in history and postmodern sensibilities should not prompt us to make the French Revolution smaller than it really was. While rejecting epistemological imperialism – the French Revolution as the midwife of modernity – we should try to make historical sense of its global legacies while opening it up for comparison with other abrupt political transitions. Doing so can make it useful for thinking about recent times as well as the deep past.

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