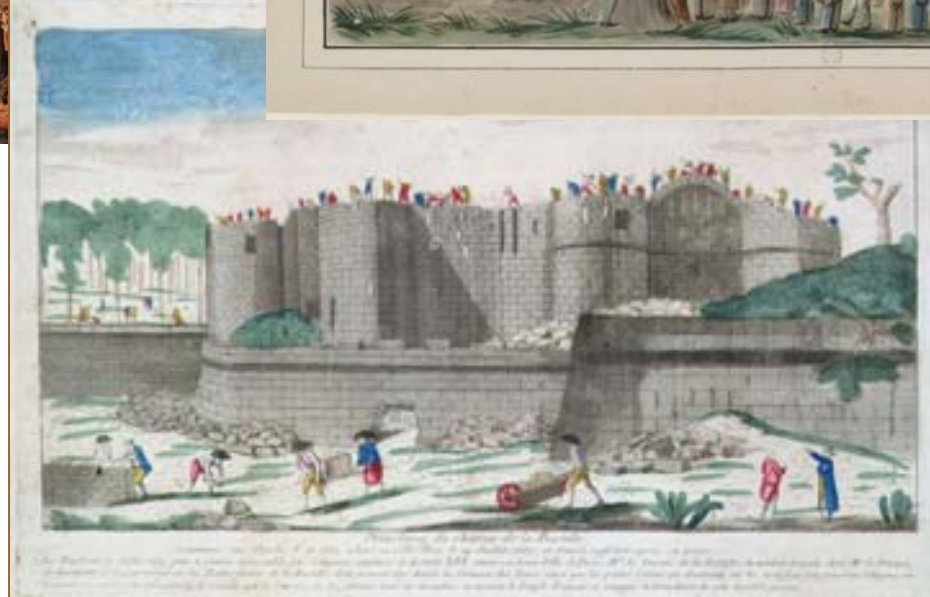


History B 356

French Revolution and Napoleon



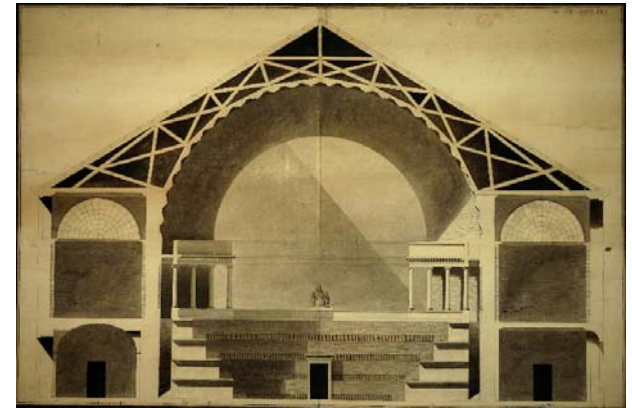
Bibliothèque Nationale de France, quai Tolbiac, Paris (Dominique Perrault, 1988-1998)



Previous lecture: From the worst of times to the best of times, through human action



Bibliothèque Nationale, rue Richelieu, Paris
(Henri Labrouste, 1862-1868)



Etienne-Louis Boullée,
Plan for the Royal Library, 1785



BNF, Quai Tolbiac (Paris)

Introduction to today's lecture: History is not the same as "the past"

Introduction: What is “historiography”?

Historiography of the French Revolution

Reactionary

Romantic

Marxist

Jacobino-Marxist

“cultural” or Revisionist

Where does that leave us?



What is historiography?

autograph	<i>autos</i> —self; <i>graphein</i> —to write or scratch
photograph	<i>photo</i> —light; <i>graphein</i> —to write or scratch
telegraph	<i>tele</i> —far, at a distance; <i>graphein</i> —to write or scratch
pornography	<i>porne</i> —prostitute (originally “bought” or “purchased”)

historiography *history* from the Latin *historia* (narrative, account, chronicle)
from the Greek *historia* (learning or knowing by inquiry) from
the Greek *historein* (to inquire); *graphy*—writing

“Historiography” refers to studying *how* history has been written.

We shall show that which it is incumbent upon all nations and their rulers to be acquainted: we shall demonstrate that even the most horrid deeds perpetrated during the French Revolution were foreseen and resolved upon, planned and premeditated...

Many years before the French Revolution, men who called themselves Philosophers conspired against the God of the Gospel, against Christianity... The grand object of this conspiracy was to overturn every altar where Christ is adored... This school soon combined with a conspiracy against kings ... [and joined that ancient sect known as the Freemasons] who only initiate the chosen of the elect into the secret of their unrelenting hatred for Christ and kings.

abbé Barruel, *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism* (1797).

Thanks to our sullen resistance to innovation, thanks to the cold sluggishness of our national character, we [the English] still bear the stamp of our forefathers. ... We have not been drawn and trussed, in order that we may be filled, like stuffed birds in a museum, with chaff and rags and paltry blurred shreds of paper about the rights of man. We have real hearts of flesh and blood beating in our bosoms. We fear God; we look up with awe to kings, with affection to parliaments, with duty to magistrates...Why? Because when such ideas are brought before our minds, it is natural to be so affected.

Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).



Our fathers, we must repeat, did all that it was necessary to do... They found despotism in heaven and on earth, and they instituted law. It was necessary, above all things, to vindicate the rights of man, which had been so cruelly outraged, and to re-establish this undeniable truth: "Man has rights, he is something; he cannot be disowned or annulled, even in the name of God; he is a responsible creature, but responsible for his own actions alone, for whatever good or evil he himself commits."

Thus did the false liability for the actions of others disappear ... The unjust transmission of good, perpetuated by the rights of the nobility; the unjust transmission of evil, by original sin, or by the civil brand of being descended from sinners, are effaced by the Revolution.

Jules Michelet
History of the French Revolution, 1847



The similarity of the last Romanov couple to the French royal pair of the epoch of the Great Revolution is very obvious. . . . Although separated from each other by 125 years, the tsar and the king were at certain moments like two actors playing the same rôle.

Certain elements of similarity of course are accidental, and have the interest only of historical anecdotes. Infinitely more important are those traits of character which have been grafted, or more directly imposed on a person by the mighty force of conditions, and which throw a sharp light on the interrelation of personality and the objective factors in history....

“He did not know how to wish: that was his chief trait of character,” says a French historian of Louis. Those words might have been written of Nicholas. . . . But what really could be “wished” by the last representatives of a hopelessly lost historic cause? . . .

Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (1929).

The ultimate cause of the French Revolution of 1789 goes deep into the history of France and of the western world. At the end of the eighteenth century, the social structure of France was aristocratic, having originated at a time when land was almost the only form of wealth and when the possessors of land were the masters of those who needed it. ... Meanwhile, the growth of commerce and industry had created, step by step, a new form of wealth, mobile or commercial wealth, and a new class, called in France the bourgeoisie... In the eighteenth century, the aristocracy and the clergy preserved the highest rank in the legal structure of the country but, in reality, economic power and personal talent had passed largely to the bourgeoisie. Such a discrepancy never lasts forever. The Revolution of 1789 restored the harmony between fact and law. This transformation spread in the nineteenth century throughout the west and then to the whole globe, and in this sense the ideas of 1789 toured the world.

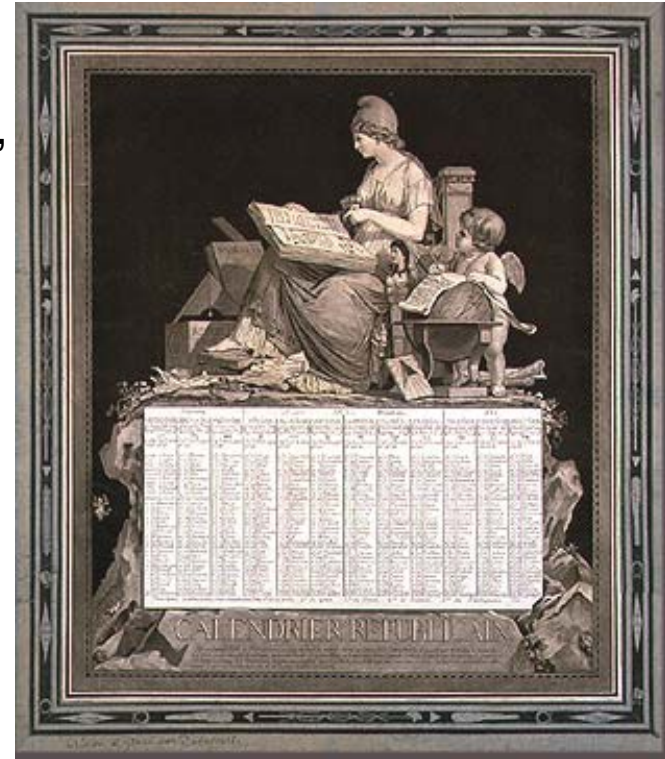
Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution* (1939).



The Revolution has renewed the souls of Frenchmen; it educates them each day in republican virtues. Time opens a new book in history; and in its new march, as majestic and simple as equality, it must write with a new and vigorous instrument the history of regenerated France.

Such is the spirit of the National Convention's decree of 22 September 1792, which orders that, beginning with that day, all public acts be dated as from the first year of the Republic.“

Charles-Gilbert Romme,
"Report on the Republican Era" (20 September 1793)



- | | |
|----------------|---------------|
| 1. Vendémiaire | 7. Germinal |
| 2. Brumaire | 8. Floréal |
| 3. Frimaire | 9. Prairial |
| 4. Nivôse | 10. Messidor |
| 5. Pluviôse | 11. Thermidor |
| 6. Ventôse | 12. Fructidor |

How did the revolutionaries understand their own role in History?

No nation had ever before embarked on so resolute an attempt as that of the French in 1789 to break with the past... to create an unbridgeable gulf between all they had hitherto been and all they now aspired to be. With this in mind they took a host of precautions so as to make sure of importing nothing from the past into the new regime... they spared no pains in their efforts to obliterate their former selves.

I have always felt that they were far less successful in this curious attempt than is generally supposed ... I am convinced that though they had no inkling of this, they took over from the old regime not only most of its customs, conventions, and modes of thought, but even those very ideas which prompted our revolutionaries to destroy it.

Alexis de Tocqueville

The Old Regime and the French Revolution

1856

Questions that emerge from our reading of the secondary sources :

Was the French Revolution intentional?

Did anyone expect it to happen?

Was anyone in control?

Were there central idea(l)s that united people (Liberty, Justice, Equality) or did these divide people as much as they unified?

What do idea(l)s look like in practice?

To what degree did social position shape individuals' role in and/or reaction to the Revolution?

How did this period change people's perception of social categories?

How much did the Revolution change? What did it leave intact?

What changed in reaction to the Revolution, even if it wasn't the sort of change that revolutionaries wanted or intended?

Image Credits

1. Photo of BNF (RL Spang)
2. Béricourt, "Fountain of Regeneration," 1793 (gallica.bnf.fr); others <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/>
3. Photo of BN (wikimedia); Boullée drawing (gallica.bnf.fr); BNF (Spang)
4. Photo of books (RL Spang)
6. "The Flag Bearer at a Civic Festival", engraving by Copia, chez Desmarest, 1795 (gallica.bnf.fr)
10. "France, represented as a globe, supported by the people, with the assistance of the nobility and the clergy", print, 1789 (gallica.bnf.fr)