

Introduction: Revolutionary historiography, adrift or at large? The paradigmatic quest versus the exploration of experience

DAVID ANDRESS

The French Revolution was, undoubtedly, an experience. The mass of writings from the period make it clear to us that participants and spectators of revolutionary upheaval dwelt intensely in every passing moment of drama, quailing at its uncertainties, revelling in its possibilities and often hardening their own convictions and enmities at each new turn. A significant tendency of recent historiography has been to privilege this sense of such events as actor-centred, breaking with previous concerns to identify a larger structural or ideological paradigm within which to understand them.¹ But to turn our attention onto the actors of history, rather than the social or cultural structures they seem to inhabit, has proved to be a move that itself threatens to bring only new perplexity.² One of the goals of this collection is to reflect on whether such a feeling is justified, and to argue that the diverse methods and interests of the twenty-first-century historical profession can continue to explore the classic conflicts and evolutions of history, and to develop insights into the experiential worlds of their participants, without running onto the shoals of frequently-unspecified epistemological dangers.

A wide-ranging discussion amongst historians of the Revolution in 2009, conducted in print and online, highlighted the divergence of views on this subject.³ While all the contributions made clear a recognition of the kaleidoscopic diffusion of approaches since the 1989 Bicentenary,

1. Such work ranges from that of Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary; the deputies of the French National Assembly and the emergence of a revolutionary culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), with its focus on the shifting, at times almost day-to-day experience of a closely-defined critical group, to that of Suzanne Desan, who in both *Reclaiming the sacred: lay religion and popular politics in revolutionary France* (Ithaca, NY, 1990), and *The Family on trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley, CA, 2004), brought wide political processes into sharp relief by relating them to the multifarious life-experiences of their participants and antagonists.
2. For a thought-provoking extended reflection on how this field appeared around a decade ago, see Rebecca L. Spang, 'Paradigms and paranoia: how modern is the French Revolution?', *American historical review* 108 (2003), p.119-47.
3. The discussion encompassed essays by David Andress, Laurent Dubois, Carla Hesse, Lynn Hunt, Colin Jones, Jean-Clément Martin and Sophia Rosenfeld in *French historical studies* 32 (2009), and essays by David A. Bell, Peter R. Campbell and Rebecca Spang online as vol.1:1

not all were happy with this state of affairs.⁴ Carla Hesse slightly awkwardly attempted to prioritise certain kinds of political and socio-legal questions to delineate the historiography of a ‘neo-Jacobin generation’ of younger scholars, while David Bell reflected with some apparent concern on the overlaps and omissions of the print essays, ‘A la recherche d’un nouveau paradigme’.⁵ In her contribution to this debate, Lynn Hunt was boldest in declaring that ‘It is time for a new paradigm’, and that ‘a reconceptualization of individual experience based on perspectives derived from recent research in neuroscience’ provides a way forward.⁶ Hunt’s claim can be taken as an example of the problems that any ‘paradigm-quest’ can have in the current dispensation.⁷

One of the grave difficulties of Hunt’s claim is that, being an historian, her attention to neuroscience moves rather slower than the science itself. Referring to the work of Antonio Damasio, and particularly his 1999 work, *The Feeling of what happens*, Hunt points to the evidence for significant unconscious factors in the construction of what we call ‘consciousness’, and the admixture of ‘emotions and feelings’, ‘empathetic identification’ and a ‘hardwiring’ of interpersonal understanding that goes beyond the mechanisms of language (and thus beyond the arguments of poststructuralism) to demonstrate that ‘social interaction is an evolutionary trait rooted in the individual body’.⁸ However, in the last decade research on conscious and unconscious decision-making has sprawled across neuroscience and its many related fields. One widely-noted publication in 2008 has even raised the question of whether consciousness can be said to be present in even the smallest acts of supposed ‘free will’, or is effectively a spectator to internal brain processes that have already happened by the time a ‘conscious’ decision is

of *H-France salon* (<http://www.h-france.net/Salon/h-francesalon.html>). Texts will be cited individually when mentioned below.

4. Of all the pieces, that by Peter R. Campbell, ‘Redefining the French Revolution: new directions, 1989-2009’, *H-France salon* 1:1 (2009) (<http://www.h-france.net/Salon/Salon1Campbell2.pdf>), is the longest, and the most in-depth consideration of this variety.
5. Carla Hesse, ‘The new Jacobins’, *French historical studies* 32 (2009), p.663-70 (667); David A. Bell, ‘A la recherche d’un nouveau paradigme?’, *H-France salon* 1:1 (2009) (<http://www.h-france.net/Salon/Salon1Bell1.pdf>).
6. Lynn Hunt, ‘The experience of Revolution’, *French historical studies* 32 (2009), p.671-78 (672).
7. Rebecca Spang, ‘Self, field, myth: what we will have been’ (<http://www.h-france.net/Salon/Salon1Spang3.pdf>), is a notably sharp dissection of possibilities beyond what she sees as Hunt’s rather mechanistic approach: see pp. 29-30.
8. Hunt, ‘The experience of Revolution’, p. 673. Damasio had previously published *Descartes’ error: emotion, reason, and the human brain* (New York, 1994). His scientific output has continued, and continues to complicate the picture of mind/brain/body relations: see for example Antonio Damasio, ‘Feelings of emotion and the self’, *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1001 (2003), p.253-61.

made.⁹ Attempting to influence the unconscious mind of consumers and citizens has been *en vogue* for several years now, with the influential publication of *Nudge* turning such ideas into a positive manifesto for government action.¹⁰ Meanwhile, debate continues in the digital realm about how far such ideas about unconscious bias need to be woven into the structure of experimentation itself, and how efforts to advance science overlap and interact with those to manipulate choices for gain.¹¹

Using such difficult and rapidly-evolving scientific debates as the basis for a considered historical evaluation must thus be highly problematic, threatening as they do to strip away any identifiable connection between the empathetic and socially-grounded personality that Hunt wishes to evoke, and the process whereby an individual arrives at decisions, or indeed records those decisions and related reflections for posterity. Perhaps even more confusingly, Hunt's summary above, which reflects in its discussion of 'hardwiring' the discovery in the 1990s of mirror neurons (itself a topic now subject to significant revision),¹² also reads remarkably like a summary of the views of eighteenth-century thinkers such as Smith, Hume and Rousseau in their discussions of moral sentiments, the complex relationship between reason and the passions, and the role of natural *pitié* in establishing basic social empathy.¹³ Even without the benefit of MRI scanners, eighteenth-century people were able to debate perception and reality, and come to conclusions about their selfhood and identity that recent historiography has recovered

9. The study is summarised here: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/04/080414145705.htm> (accessed 8 October 2012), and has led to a lively debate between brain-scientists and philosophers who dispute the concept of 'free will' at work, summarised here: <http://www.nature.com/news/2011/110831/full/477023a.html> (accessed 8 October 2012).
10. Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: improving decisions about health, wealth, and happiness* (New Haven, CT, 2008); in the UK, this has been taken up by, for example, Peter John *et al.*, *Nudge, nudge, think, think: using experiments to change civic behaviour* (London, 2011).
11. One brief discussion, published as this piece was being written, is Tom Ewing, 'Let's take a long hard look at ourselves' (<http://www.research-live.com/features/lets-take-a-long-hard-look-at-ourselves/4006901.article>), accessed 8 October 2012.
12. See Ilan Dinstein *et al.*, 'A mirror up to Nature', *Current biology* 18:1, 2008, p.R13-R18, accessed at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2517574/?tool=pmcentrez> on 8 October 2012; a sharp critique of mirror-neuron research and its relation to conceptions of emotion can be found in Ruth Leys, "'Both of us disgusted in my insula': mirror neuron theory and emotional empathy", *nonsite.org* 5, accessed at <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0960982207022014> on 8 October 2012.
13. See Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Discourse on the origins of inequality*, online at http://www.constitution.org/fjr/lineq_03.htm; David Hume's *Treatise of human nature*, online at <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hume/david/h92t/>, and Adam Smith's *Theory of moral sentiments*, online at <http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smMS1.html> (all accessed 8 October 2012).

from beneath layers of nineteenth-century scientism and prejudice.¹⁴ How far the working assumptions of modern medical science can actually tell us things about historical actors that they did not understand themselves – as opposed to merely giving us food for unresolvable speculations – is very far from clear.¹⁵

In truth, then, ‘experience’ is a very difficult category to use confidently and definitively, and Lynn Hunt’s own swerve in a few pages from neuroscience, around bodies and emotions, to end up at the power of ‘visual representation’ and ‘ways of seeing’ itself indicates the susceptibility of the term to multiple interpretations and implications.¹⁶ Yet it is precisely because ‘experience’ is so capacious and potentially slippery that it should be engaged with particularly carefully by those interested in the full historical humanity of the French Revolution’s (or any event’s) actors. We can admit, as we surely should, that our capacity to know such actors’ minds is limited and sketchy, but unless we are to go the whole neurological hog and deny our own consciousness, we ought to work with the assumption that such people were capable of experiencing, reflecting, choosing, achieving insights and making errors, just as we are. They were not, as we are not, calculating machines, and they certainly were embedded in a web of structuring assumptions as thick and pervasive as our own.¹⁷

How we mediate experience recorded in fragmentary and assumption-laden evidence into present-day conclusions will always be a delicate question, and one not necessarily helped by the alarming academic

14. For an account of the psychological underpinnings of this period, see John C. O’Neal, *The Authority of experience; sensationist theory in the French Enlightenment* (University Park, PA, 1996). Anne C. Vila, *Enlightenment and pathology; sensibility in the literature and medicine of eighteenth-century France* (Baltimore, MD, 1998) and Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility; the sentimental empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, IL, 2002) explore the particular overlaps of medicine and other scientific explorations with social experience. On the concurrent and subsequent impacts of the revolutionary era on sense of ‘selfhood’, see Jan Goldstein, *The Post-revolutionary self; politics and psyche in France, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2005). A wider-ranging study is Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the self; thought and experience in western Europe since the seventeenth century* (Cambridge, 2005). On Seigel, see ‘Forum: the idea of the self’, *Modern intellectual history* 3 (2006), p.299-344, including contributions by Aaron Garrett, Peter E. Gordon, Judith Surkis, Anthony J. La Vopa and Seigel himself. Another overview is Gregory S. Brown, ‘Review article: am “I” a ‘post-revolutionary self? Historiography of the self in the age of Enlightenment and Revolution’, *History and theory* 47 (2008), p.229-48.
15. See Barry M. Shapiro, *Traumatic politics: the Deputies and the King in the early French Revolution* (University Park, PA, 2009), and the discussion below in Ronen Steinberg’s chapter, p.177-99.
16. Hunt, ‘The experience of Revolution’, p.678.
17. Experience is of course never an unmediated category, as Joan W. Scott so ably noted of the work of E. P. Thompson: ‘The evidence of “experience”’, *Critical inquiry* 17 (1991), p.773-97 (esp. 784-86).

facility for turning an insight into a system, a label into a method. In a recent review article, Peter Denney discusses the complex history of histories of the senses – another critical dimension of individual experience. Noting that one key problem for such studies is to distinguish evidence for actual experience from the strong tendency to abstract prescription and normative assertion, he also observes how easy it has been for historians to be seduced into schemata, and to echo past judgments about necessary and appropriate hierarchies of sensory awareness and response. Much of this has been, implicitly or explicitly, as a consequence of seeking to define a periodisation of the rising ‘modernity’ of social experience. As recent work has demonstrated that such assertions – notably of the ‘post-Enlightenment’ dominance of the visual – can be disproved with evidence spanning centuries, it has nonetheless also left even more open than before the question of how to interpret an ever-growing range of accounts of experiential sensory stimulus.¹⁸

Daniel Wickberg’s 2007 suggestion that we needed a ‘history of sensibilities’ to adequately capture experience for analysis is a further illustration of these difficulties.¹⁹ He boldly asserts that his preferred term of analysis is ‘different from – and in some fundamental ways, superior to – competing and overlapping terms such as “ideology”, “worldview”, “habitus”, “structure of feeling”, “episteme”, “mentalité”, or “paradigm”’. It is ‘not as complex as “culture”’, but shares much of that term’s ‘variability of meaning and its history’. It is ‘a broader concept that integrates ideas, emotions, beliefs, values, and perceptions’.²⁰ It is, one might begin to suspect, everything and nothing. As Wickberg’s own examples show, as in a notable debate about eighteenth-century slavery and the ‘humanitarian sensibility’, such a word is able to be used to mean different things for different authors, none of whom successfully address the utility of the term as more than a description that could as well be called a worldview or a structure of feeling. Wickberg’s own conclusion ironically casts aside his chosen term to appeal for histories that acknowledge and explore ‘patterns of perception, feeling, thinking, and believing as fundamental to what makes one culture different from another’.²¹

If here the claimed move from insight to method seems in the end essentially hollow, another key example that draws on ‘sensibility’ takes something that in its time was expansive and multi-layered and reduces it

18. Peter Denney, ‘Looking back, groping forward: rethinking sensory history’, *Rethinking history* 15 (2011), p.601-16.

19. Daniel Wickberg, ‘What is the history of sensibilities? On cultural histories, old and new’, *American historical review* 112 (2007), p.661-84.

20. Wickberg, ‘What is the history of sensibilities?’, p.664, 670.

21. Wickberg, ‘What is the history of sensibilities?’, p.679-81, 684.

to a flattened plane of dry description.²² William Reddy set out to create a 'framework for the history of emotions', drawing on a wide background of ethnographic anthropology and other reflections in social science.²³ He addressed this towards a key moment in emotional history, when *sensibilité* was seen to animate a post-Enlightenment generation in France, and arguably provided one of the central experiential motors of the French Revolution.²⁴ Yet what emerges from this study is a theory of what Reddy dubs 'emotives' – that is, not feelings as felt emotions, but rather as linguistic self-descriptions. What Reddy offers is not a history of revolutionary sensibility as it might have been experienced – however difficult that might have been to address – but instead the dubious notion that emotions only become valid objects of analysis when we can catch people saying that they have them. And furthermore, it is at that point – when we can categorise them as part of an external cultural process of attributing meaning to such expression – that this attribution effectively blurs the sense that emotions might actually be bodily experiences. While it can be freely acknowledged that this is one way around the problem of knowing people's internal states, it does raise two major issues. Firstly, it is incompatible with historical scenarios – or sensibilities – in which emotional self-description was discouraged or downplayed; and secondly, for anyone who has ever experienced stomach-churning fear, blind panic, burning rage or bubbling joy, it cannot hope to capture what we know to be the reality of human emotion beyond mere outward-facing descriptive language.²⁵

Reddy's example echoes the problems of an earlier body of work, the 'emotionology' project pioneered by Peter and Carol Stearns. Although citing a definition of 'emotion' itself that ran a considerable gamut, from the actions of 'neural and/or hormonal systems, which gives rise to feelings (affective experiences as of pleasure or displeasure)' to 'general cognitive processes toward appraising the experience', and to 'physiological adjustments to the conditions that aroused response, and often to

22. This piece, while dealing in passing with the burgeoning interdisciplinary study of 'sensibility' as a conscious historical referent, does not dwell on this. For one recent attempt to bring the concept into focus in relation to the politics of the French Revolution, see David Andress, 'Living the Revolutionary melodrama: Robespierre's sensibility and the construction of political commitment in the French Revolution', *Representations* 114 (2011), p.103-28.

23. William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of feeling: a framework for the history of emotions* (Cambridge, 2001).

24. See for example David J. Denby, *Sentimental narrative and the social order in France, 1760-1820* (Cambridge, 1994); and the much earlier Pierre Trahard, *La Sensibilité révolutionnaire (1789-1794)* (Paris, 1936).

25. Barbara H. Rosenwein, 'Worrying about emotions in history', *American historical review* 107 (2002), p.821-45 (839), situates this work in the context of Reddy's wider corpus, and offers a penetrating critique of its assumptions.

expressive and adaptive behavior', the Stearns's definition of 'emotionology' was much more restricted. For them it was a strictly external structure, 'the attitudes or standards that a society, or a definable group within a society, maintains toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression; ways that institutions reflect and encourage these attitudes in human conduct'.²⁶ Emotionology thus can and should only study what societies collectively do with the idea of emotions, not how individuals actually experience them.²⁷

Both emotives and emotionology reflect a wider problem in the human sciences: the quest to be rigorous in accepting the limits of available evidence leads to a focus on what the evidence is in itself, rather than what it might stand for. Thus here descriptions and prescriptions about emotional states become the measure of what is sayable, and the 'scientific' rigour of the process requires that the endpoint be an evaluation of what has been said, not what it might have meant to the people involved. While for many, this might be the only appropriate response, it has not passed without challenge. In a powerful book, filled with the emotional expressions of the author's personal experiences and political convictions, the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo has argued against the stilted, flattening tendencies of attempting to do 'objective' social science.²⁸ Rejecting particularly the ethnographer's classic depiction of profound emotional and individual experiences (such as rituals of grief and mourning) only as manifestations of a fixed 'culture', rather than culturally-mediated realities for the participants, he demands that the 'objects of analysis' of such studies be given their due as also 'analysing subjects', able themselves to 'critically interrogate' the social scientists who come amongst them.²⁹

One of the challenges of history is of course that our objects of study are no longer in a position actively to talk back. Thus, if we are to take up an ethical challenge of the kind that Rosaldo poses, we have an even more complex task to ensure that we use the past to pierce the armour of

26. Peter N. Stearns and Carol Z. Stearns, 'Emotionology: clarifying the history of emotions and emotional standards', *American historical review* 90 (1985), p.813-36 (813), both definitions appear as epigraphs to the first page.

27. For a wide-ranging, thorough, but still essentially theoretical survey of historical/anthropological approaches to work with emotions, that posits a revised Bourdieuan framework for seeing them as an embodied practice, see Monique Scheer, 'Are emotions a kind of practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuan approach to understanding emotion', *History and theory* 51 (2012), p.193-220.

28. This work was produced in the aftermath of the tragic accidental death of Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, wife of Renato, and herself a pioneering anthropologist of emotion, as demonstrated in this (posthumous) publication: Michelle Z. Rosaldo, 'Toward an anthropology of self and feeling', in *Culture theory: essays on mind, self, and emotion*, ed. R. A. Shweder and R. A. LeVine (Cambridge, 1984), p.137-57.

29. Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and truth; the remaking of social analysis* (London, 1993), p. 21.

assumption around the present, and not simply as raw material for the development of yet more conceptual or methodological specialisations.³⁰ Many such constructions imply, or explicitly state, that a great breakthrough in understanding not just one period or situation, but all, can be achieved. In the turbulent marketplace of ideas, it is of course understandable that such claims should be made, but the plain fact is that the more such claims are made, the less likely it is that, amidst a continued effervescence of new research, any one new approach could be genuinely generally transformative.

As Sophia Rosenfeld has pithily reminded us, there is no point in historians seeking ‘the recovery of some kind of pure, unmediated experiential realm, in good part because such a realm did not and cannot exist’.³¹ Rosenfeld also points out, in an elegantly concise survey, how many authors have very recently attempted to use a particular emotional lodestone – very often fear, sometimes anger – to account for major episodes of the French Revolution, and risked thus shoehorning human complexity into schemata whose relative simplicity ‘give legitimate cause for anxiety’. One of the developments that Rosenfeld identifies positively in this context is that of generic experimentation, such as Antoine de Baecque’s engagement with the filmic avant-garde’s ‘montage and close-up, rather than seamless narrative’, or Sophie Wahnich’s ‘metaphorical opera’ in which she seeks to ‘give voice to the people’ in the run-up to the fall of the French monarchy.³²

Yet we do not need to focus only on the new to find daring and individual attempts to recover the experience of the revolutionary past. Richard Cobb spent a decades-long career invested in the turbulence that the Revolution inflicted on France, and whether portraying the blustering home-front warriors of the *armées révolutionnaires*, tracking the miserable existence of ‘terrorists’ hounded by post-Thermidorian authority, or depicting the lives and deaths of those who only tried to survive such terrible times, always produced work that was vivid, thought-provoking and humane.³³ Norman Hampson produced in 1974 *The*

30. See David Andress, ‘Beyond irony and relativism: what is postmodern history for?’, *Rethinking history* 1 (1997), p.311-26; and ‘Truth, ethics and imagination; thoughts on the purpose of history’, in *History and heritage: consuming the past in contemporary culture*, ed. J. Arnold, K. Davies and S. Ditchfield (Shaftesbury, 1998), p.237-48.

31. Sophia Rosenfeld, ‘Thinking about feeling, 1789-1799’, *French historical studies* 32 (2009), p.697-706 (704).

32. Rosenfeld, ‘Thinking about feeling’, p.703, 706. Anxiety itself has, unsurprisingly, provoked anxiety about its use as an all-encompassing explanation: see Alan Hunt, ‘Anxiety and social explanation; some anxieties about anxiety’, *Journal of social history* 32 (1999), p.509-28.

33. Richard Cobb, *Les Armées révolutionnaires: instrument de la Terreur dans les départements avril 1793-floréal an II*, 2 vols (Paris, 1961); *The Police and the people: French popular protest, 1789-1820*

Life and opinions of Maximilien Robespierre, one of the most generically experimental books to have been written on this period in the name of history, and an earnest attempt to get beneath the skin of a man whose experience of the last years of his life was both enigmatic and outstandingly individual. In later works Hampson did not renounce the quest to understand the Revolution's actors as people, producing as well as his biographies of Danton and Saint-Just a study of the National Assembly of 1789-1791 that still stands up to be read alongside Tackett's. While commenting modestly in its introduction that it offered only 'the confused spectacle of a crowd of intelligent but bewildered men bumping into each other in a fog', Hampson also stated resolutely that his approach 'has at least the merit of respecting their individuality and not reducing them to performers in someone else's puppet theatre'.³⁴ The quest to understand revolutionary experience without resorting to restrictive models or demanding new paradigms has thus its own long heritage, one marked by a notable lack of anxiety about the implications of neuroscience or the disciplinary consequences of diversity.

Yet it is also worthy of note that scholars more inclined to theorise have also offered suggestions for general modes of interpretation that focus on the active individual. Michel de Certeau for example notably addressed his model of social interaction towards the 'tactics' used by people to navigate the social world around them, re-appropriating the more structure-oriented reflections of Foucault and Bourdieu to do so.³⁵ More recently, the sociology of Bruno Latour has offered a model that disassembles the idea of 'society' to reassemble it around the actual social interactions of individuals, presumed to be operating with their own (fluid, contingent) internal models of reality, and to make 'the social' out of their choices, assumptions and self-representations.³⁶

In this complex context, where scholars of many stripes can draw radically different conclusions about what might constitute a 'paradigm' for future research, the approach taken by authors in this collection does not hinge on any one specific sense of 'experience'. Rather, it expresses a commitment to highlighting some of the varied ways in which the issue of experiencing dramatic and turbulent change in history can be explored. We move away from the urge to pin an external label on

(Oxford, 1970); *Reactions to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1972); *Death in Paris: the records of the Basse-Geôle de la Seine, October 1795-September 1801* (Oxford, 1978).

34. William Doyle, 'The life and opinions of Norman Hampson', in *Enlightenment and Revolution: essays in honour of Norman Hampson*, ed. M. Crook, A. Forrest and W. Doyle (London, 2004), p.1-18 (14-15). See this text *passim* for a concise survey of Hampson's work.

35. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of everyday life* (Berkeley, CA, 1984).

36. Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the social: an introduction to actor-network-theory* (Oxford, 2005). I am indebted to Charles Walton for this suggestion.

how people behaved, preferring to explore the possibility that they and we may only ever have differing understandings of their circumstances, and that prioritising our classificatory urges over their reflections and representations would be an ethical error. While we do not claim to have recaptured the anarchic genius of a Cobb, or to embody the radical rethinking of social analysis suggested by Latour, we do offer up the fruits of empirical study, and its necessary component of imaginative reflection, on a period that combined electrifying hopes and desperate tragedy. Revolutions in the world today continue to produce such wrenching juxtapositions, and if the French Revolution can no longer offer a simple structural paradigm to account for such upheavals, perhaps it may continue to serve as a source of reflection on the very great difficulty of avoiding their worse consequences.

In the first part of the volume, contributors explore some of the resources, from broad general cultural trends to individual and very personal trajectories, that can focus our attention to the developing nature of a revolutionary experience into and through the 1790s. Simon Burrows delves into a question that has been a historiographical hotbed of interpretations as he explores what real evidence we have to connect famous – and famously pornographic – ‘forbidden bestsellers’ and other ‘philosophical books’ to the origins of the Revolution. Drawing on the latest digital humanities methods to extract meaning from a vast database of book sales, Burrows offers striking evidence that the link between an ‘underground’ press, French official censorship, and the collapse of monarchical authority may be far more complex than we had previously thought.

Taking a sharp turn from the private consumption of salacious literature to quite different matters of public trust and civic culture, Charles Walton explores the evidence for a culture of patriotic giving emergent from the financial crisis of 1789, and extending far into the revolutionary decade. Revealing a complex calculus of altruistic redistributive impulse, alarm at continued looming state insolvency, and growing moral pressure to demonstrate patriotic commitment, this study exposes how far revolutionaries thought they could solve their problems by essentially voluntary, individual action, and what such ‘voluntarism’ might actually have meant in an atmosphere of abiding fear.

The contributions of Peter McPhee and Mette Harder draw us towards the centre of political life. McPhee’s considers Robespierre, so frequently discussed as if a mere bundle either of unflinching principles or depraved inclinations, and attempts to restore a sense of him as an individual who actively experienced the years of revolutionary upheaval and changed his opinions as a result. How far Robespierre’s willingness

to accept the need for violent efforts at revolutionary defence shaded into a commitment to coercive uniformity any more aggressive than that of his Thermidorian nemeses is a question certain to remain under vigorous debate. One of those who took action at the fateful moment of Robespierre's fall was Jean-Lambert Tallien, whose perhaps protean, perhaps merely slippery political development is charted by Harder's contribution. Between Robespierre and Tallien we see the two poles of revolutionary political activism, endlessly debated as to which can be seen as 'better' – to cling to principle more dearly than to life itself, or to adapt to the tides of affairs in the name of one's own survival, but also the survival of one's capacity to contribute. Examination of Tallien's life and writings provokes the question of whether such a man has in fact left us enough evidence to believe anything he said, though as Harder points out, there were compromises he refused to make, and suggestions that some principles underlay at least some of his activities.

The final essay in the first part broadens our gaze from notable individuals to one of the most notably collective experiences of the era – service in the dramatically expanded armies of revolutionary France. A new generation of military histories has already exposed a great deal about the extraordinary mix of idealism, resignation, patriotism and sometimes overt political bloodlust that propelled these forces forwards. In this piece Ian Germani explores the fate of those who did not obey, and who fell prey to a rapidly changing apparatus of military justice. Despite a lively and ongoing political debate about the democratic values that ought to be present in a republican military, both practical and ideological circumstances conspired to encourage a firm rhetorical commitment to unflinching exemplary capital justice. Yet Germani's dissection of actual judicial practice, in which personal appeals and mitigating circumstances sat alongside sometimes draconian rigour, illustrates once again that the experiential dimension of military life frequently overrode any regularities that we might try to account for with a neat typology.

Having followed several strands of analysis into and through the period of the Terror, we turn in the second part of the volume to a more multi-levelled examination of the years 1793-1794. In the first of these pieces, Alex Fairfax-Cholmeley takes us to the very heart of the Terror, the experience of victimhood through denunciation, incarceration and the threat of fatal trial. Picking up and refreshing some neglected strands of earlier historiography, Fairfax-Cholmeley's work strikingly demonstrates the multidimensional qualities of such travails, and most notably illustrates the vivid and sometimes inventive strategies with which such 'victims' fought back. The extent to which individuals and their supporting associates and family members were able and

willing to go into public print to defend their lives and reputations is truly remarkable. While on the one hand it exposes the shambolically pre-modern dimensions of the Terror's carceral regime, it also demonstrates that many detainees felt confident in playing the denunciatory game for their own benefit. Such evidence certainly attests to the significant agency granted to such individuals, but it also gives us pause to reflect on the extent to which their experience had led them to internalise the very habits of self-serving accusation that seem likely, in others' hands, to have placed them in peril.

We may speculate about the role of a longer-term 'culture of calumny' in prompting such behaviour, and longer-term cultural re-appropriations of revolutionary initiative also feature significantly in Jonathan Smyth's dissection of the national response to the *Fête de l'Être suprême* of June 1794. Widely assumed by historians to have been an event characterised by sterile compulsion, it is instead revealed as an intensely participatory experience, not least because it was taken to be, and claimed as, a return to religion after the horrors of dechristianisation. Coupled with a further widespread reported sentiment that the celebrations marked the expected end of 'terror', such beliefs make enthusiastic popular participation legible in new ways to historians. While revelatory of some attitudes that would not have best pleased the ideologues of Jacobinism, Smyth's research also indicates the apparently widely-felt sentiments of national unity that underlay the celebrations, suggesting that the positive appeal of the republic's message also had a significant hold.

What 'terror' actually meant to the men and women of the 1790s is the subject of the next piece, which shines a light on some of the very general questions with which we began. Ronen Steinberg asks whether we can credit modern psychotherapeutic definitions of trauma with any explanatory power in an age which understood the human mind, and its relationship to the body, in very different ways. As well as exploring how 'terror' as a concept fitted the pattern of what politicians wished to achieve against the nation's enemies, he also examines what contemporary medical and psychological opinion wrote on its effects. Here, the modern sense of the traumatising impact of peril clashes particularly starkly with a vitalist belief in the galvanising efficacy of strong emotional stimuli. While those who were already over-burdened with sensibility might be driven to mania, such an injection of dread and tension might be curative for those who seemed to suffer from a lack of this vital quality. From the writings of the period itself, there is no definitive answer to the question of what made up the experience of the Terror, but as the multiple efforts to respond to the issue demonstrate, the trauma of Revolution undoubtedly exposed the question of general

social functioning – of the nature of ‘society’ itself – in a way which anchors these events firmly at the origins of the experience of modernity.

From the very generally reflective to the very particular, we turn with Marisa Linton’s contribution to the effort to decode the individuals at the pinnacle of the experience of the Terror. Focusing on the threat of personal extinction through assassination, she explores the extent to which evidence exists permitting us to approach the emotional states and responses of men such as Robespierre, Saint-Just, Couthon and Collot d’Herbois in an atmosphere of continual peril. Musing on the possibility of assassination, sometimes receiving letters threatening or warning of it, and responding with the cultivation of an ethos of sacrificial preparedness (instead of adopting a more monarchical strategy of bodyguards and seclusion), the revolution’s leaders experienced the concept of personal security and danger in a way thoroughly alien to modern sensibilities. Yet it was also thoroughly explicable in terms of their own understanding of the sensibility of virtue, and was also an experience which did much to cement that understanding, and perhaps to propel Robespierre and others forward to meet their fate, rather than seeking to mitigate it.

In the third and final part of the book, we turn outwards once more from such intimate psychologies, exploring the diverse ways in which revolution was experienced beyond the boundaries of France and the French. Brecht Deseure highlights the remarkable efforts of French administrators in Antwerp to draw on the city’s historical traditions of liberty to assimilate it to the revolutionary experience. Contrary to prevailing historiographical understandings that see abstraction, ahistoricity and cleavage as keys to the revolutionary regenerative project, Deseure’s work shows that the French (eventually, after bitter experience) adapted their thinking to the realities of Belgian understandings of historical ‘liberty’. Such was their concern to successfully navigate the challenge of integrating the newly-reopened port to the Republic that the authorities eagerly co-opted a very particularist vision of historical civic freedoms, seeking to create a cultural model for local regeneration highly dependent on acceptance by those whose experience of revolutionary events was very different from the assumed French norm.

The contribution of Ffion Jones takes us even further from the Francophone orbit, to the collision of English and Welsh cultures in an atmosphere of growing intolerance fostered by fear of the French example. Shining a light on an emergent field of historiography, Jones demonstrates the power of the culture of the ballad in Welsh-speaking communities, and its use as a vehicle for political and religious commentary perhaps as significant as newspapers and pamphlets elsewhere

in this period. Dealing with the divisive aftermath of the French landing in Pembrokeshire in 1797, such commentary highlights the terroristic approach of Anglophone authorities to hunting down alleged collaborators and the extent to which such accusations were coloured by sectarian religious discrimination. Through ballads and other forms of public comment, we see the sometimes strident, sometimes anguished responses of a divided society in which the echoes of the French experience were decisively shaping understandings of politics.

Of those responsible for giving the French Revolution a place in the fearful hearts of law-abiding English folk, perhaps none are as significant as Thomas Paine. In his account of this truly international figure, Ward Regan reminds us of the innovative character of Paine's writings, in both their style and their substance, and reflects on the wealth of experiences their author had undergone, notably in France itself from 1792. The question of how far a man of such decided and original views was shaped by events, even in the latter stages of his career, is an intriguing one.

As this volume was going to press, the *American historical review* published a series of essays in a 'Forum' on the contentious aftermath of the 'linguistic turn' in historiography. One of the pieces, by Gary Wilder, makes explicit reference to the 2009 discussion on the French Revolution explored above. Here, this debate is situated as one more lamentable example of a malaise that Wilder detects across the historical discipline: the 'untimely return' of 'descriptive realism and archival objectivism', a 'professional backlash against the theoretical challenges' of social science, and particularly, as Wilder later makes clear, Marxism. In this context, Lynn Hunt is singled out as 'presenting liberal common-sense [...] as self-evident truth' and seeking to 're-establish history as a study of biological selves possessing an empathic human nature and to re-establish immediate individual experience as the subject of history'.³⁷ That this is a Bad Thing is taken for granted, though, evidently, for different reasons to those noted above.

Hunt is far from alone in being bashed however as, in an impressively densely-referenced piece, Wilder takes to task almost every aspect of recent historiographical practice that does not conform to his desired archetype of rigour, and closes with an explicitly-phrased demand: 'Rather than celebrate methodological consensus, we need to seek an analytic synthesis that relates the epistemological challenge of the linguistic turn to the social structural concerns of the Marxian tradition.' The purpose of this, in his closing words, is that 'we' can then 'craft

37. Gary Wilder, 'From optic to topic: the foreclosure effect of historiographic turns', *American historical review* 117 (2012), p.723-45 (723, 734).

histories of the present for the future that is already at hand as well as the one that we might want to create'.³⁸

Very tellingly, at no point does Wilder attempt to make an argument as to why 'we' should do this his way, when clearly so very many of 'us' are choosing not to, except to predicate the need for such research on the material conditions of twenty-first-century globalising society. Ironically, of course, very many historians are working in the fields, and with the methodologies, Wilder approves of – but for his purposes they must be presented as an embattled minority, so that five pages before (and in contradiction to) his stern closing words, he can also be found claiming 'The point is neither to exhort historians to be theorists or Marxists nor to suggest that there is no value in descriptive, narrative, or national history, but rather to challenge the common assumption that historians operating in different registers are not doing proper history'.³⁹

In the end, for all his very overt exhortation towards a critical history, Wilder, like many of the other paradigm-mongering authors above, is notably uncritical of his own assumptions, which are offered up as little more than a certain kind of radical academic common sense masquerading as self-evident truth. The ways in which this piece vacillates around the absence at its heart – the obvious point that choices of subject-matter and approach are and always will be political – remind us that Marxism itself is merely one variety of modernist metanarrative that has claimed to remove the need for pluralism by embodying scientific truth. One could doubtless have a long debate about which position is more naive – that a plurality of approaches amongst historians represents a healthy liberal culture, or that assertions of the pressing need for a Marxist academic revival will have any measurable effect.⁴⁰

Doubtless, too, the notable focus of this present volume on certain groups of European men and their experiences would not fit with the kind of history many other historians would like to see written. Except that, in a pluralist academic culture, there is no reason why it should not. There is an infinite variety of historical gardens, and in the absence of overt ideological coercion (which despite the fears of some has yet to come to pass in Anglophone academia), we should not be afraid or ashamed of the choices we make in each cultivating our own.

38. Wilder, 'From optic to topic', p.745.

39. Wilder, 'From optic to topic', p.740-41. To showcase the practical lack of 'embattlement', one of the other pieces in the forum, Durba Ghosh, 'Another set of imperial turns?', *American historical review* 117 (2012), p.772-93, is a wry, astute and penetrating survey of the notable health of the global field of 'new imperial' and postcolonial studies of the British Empire.

40. At the time of writing there is a real, urgent need to struggle for the autonomy and future viability of academic study, across the Anglophone world, but such struggle is an object in the contemporary public sphere, not a matter (in this author's view) for attempts at prescription within academic disciplines.

