For all their professional attention to the past, historians are a remarkably forgetful lot when it comes to the efforts of their predecessors. In the hundred or so years that have passed since the initial professionalization of the discipline of history, the span of historiography considered relevant in any given field has steadily contracted as the sheer amount of writing about the past has increased. This process of foreshortening is most apparent in those fields with a dense historiographical tradition, such as the French Revolution. Students of the revolution may have heard of Michelet, for example, but few read him; and, other than Tocqueville, few read any of the other nineteenth or even early twentieth-century historians of the event.

The reasons for this neglect are obvious yet, nonetheless, paradoxical. We act like scientists, who fully expect their work to be superseded, and sooner rather than later, even though we are not sure that history is a science. To do something innovative in the scientific scheme of things is to do something different from, yet building on, the work of one’s predecessors, usually defined as one’s immediate predecessors. Thus the study of historians who published their findings in the preceding years or decades is essential, if one is not up-to-date, making a new move is by definition impossible. At the beginning of their careers, in particular, historians are very much like scientists in their worry about competitors. What dissertation student does not lie awake at night worrying about some unknown and as yet unidentified scholar working away on the same archives, however narrowly defined? I know that I did: I imagined my potential competitor going to the local archives in Troyes or Reims on the days I went to the library in Paris or eagerly writing away in some French, American, British, or other university while I was still anxiously trying to figure out which archives to consult. However outlandish such fears may seem in retrospect—and there are enough true stories to make them seem anything but—they tell us something about the way we construct our very presentist discipline in practice.

The imagined relevance of the historiography of any field now precipitously declines after twenty or thirty years, reaching near zero after forty or fifty years at the latest. Who among us can claim to have read the bulk of historical writing in our fields before the 1940s? This systematic forgetfulness characterizes everyone in the profession except those, of course, who professionally study the writing of history; for them, however, history writing in the past provides knowledge of the
times in which the writing occurred, not of the period studied by the historian under examination. Thus Michelet is interesting to Hayden White as a nineteenth-century historian but not as a source for analyzing the French Revolution.\(^1\)

If systematic forgetfulness is a hallmark of historical study, then why turn back a century or so to contemplate the way historians conceived of their subjects then? When I embarked on the reading for this essay, I knew next to nothing about my late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American predecessors in the study of the French Revolution. Like most students of French history, I had dutifully learned the "classical" historiography of the event, that is, the canonical progression of French historians from Mignet, Thiers, and Guizot in the early nineteenth century to Aulard, Mathiez, and Lefebvre at the end of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth century. (One knew who they were even if one did not read them in detail.) James Harvey Robinson, Henry Morse Stephens, and others even less well known hardly figured on my list. But it is to them that I turned, for they published articles on the French Revolution in the fledgling *American Historical Review*.

This could have seemed like a dreary exercise in parental reverence, but it turned out not to be. Indeed, the more I read, the more I began to feel an almost uncomfortable identification with these particular founding fathers, whose personal experiences no doubt had very little in common with my own. In some ways, I ended up feeling more at home with the aims, aspirations, and judgments expressed by James Harvey Robinson, particularly, than with the assumptions that seem to guide the research of many of my contemporaries in the study of the French Revolution. I say this at the beginning of this essay in order to underline the fact that the reading I offer here is a very personal one that makes no claims to comprehensiveness or even-handed impartiality (though those were among the goals espoused by Robinson and the others).

The French Revolution looms large in the *American Historical Review* at its beginnings because Americans considered the French Revolution especially significant to their own history.\(^2\) The French was the other great revolution of the late eighteenth century, one followed closely, even obsessively, by the early leaders of the United States, just as France had been the other colonial power with an important stake in North America. It hardly seems accidental, then, that the French Revolution attracted the attention of some of the greatest historians practicing the craft in the United States at the time of the founding of the profession's flagship review. James Harvey Robinson and Henry Morse Stephens, in particular, played leading roles in the American historical profession in the 1890s and early 1900s. Stephens sat on the first editorial board of the *American Historical Review*, served as president of the American Historical Association in 1915, and authored an influential general history of the French Revolution.\(^3\)

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2. I am grateful to Joyce Appleby for drawing this tendency to my attention.

Robinson authored or co-authored a number of widely used textbooks in European history; aggressively promoted "the new history," a broad, socially relevant, interdisciplinary notion of historical study; and became president of the American Historical Association in 1929. Stephens and Robinson both participated in drawing up national history standards, Stephens on the Committee of Seven named by the American Historical Association in 1896 "to consider the subject of history in the secondary schools and to draw up a scheme of college entrance requirements in history," and Robinson on the subsequent Committee of Five appointed in 1907 to review and revise the earlier standards.

Their articles and those of their colleagues exude optimism about the new possibilities opening to historians and confidence about the kind of work that could be undertaken in the near future. These attitudes reflected the shared conviction that historians were marching forward on related fronts: the publication of new documents and new historical journals made historical study accessible to a much wider circle of scholars; the professionalization of study encouraged historians to believe that they could achieve some measure of accuracy in determining the provenance, contexts, and meaning of their documents; and the incipient internationalization of scholarship around the Euro-American positivist agenda of patiently building new knowledge fostered the sense that better syntheses would soon be forthcoming. As Robinson observed, both friends and foes of the French Revolution agreed that "the basis of historical research must be constantly broadened by the publication of documentary matter of all kinds," and these publications made possible a "detailed examination of the manners, customs, conditions, and property-holding not only of the Revolution but of the Ancien Régime." Such examination would in turn facilitate a more thoroughly "pragmatic history of the Revolution," one that measured its actual accomplishments and thus more precisely determined its fundamental place in French and Western European history.

Monographic work in the pages of the new journal strongly emphasized the contributions that could be made by new documents and careful comparisons between them. Stephens used the occasion of a long review of four memoirs of the French Revolution published in 1894 and 1895 to comment on the recent "bewildering wealth of documents" published with the financial assistance of the French government, projects that first began in the 1820s and 1830s but took off with local and national funding around the time of the Centennial in 1889. He made much of the documentary history of the memoirs, showing in detail how their uses could be compromised by relatives who insisted on rewriting infelicitous

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6 James Harvey Robinson, "Recent Tendencies in the Study of the French Revolution," *AHR*, 11 (1906): 529-47, quotes pp. 532, 547. This is unquestionably the most useful, because the most synthetic, of the articles published in these early years about the French Revolution, and it repays reading even today.
passages.\textsuperscript{7} Fred Morrow Fling (apparently, three names were a must at the time) reviewed the dispute among French scholars over the authorship of the *Journal d'Adrien Duquesnoy* and used his own reading of the manuscript in the National Library in Paris to patiently weed through the claims and counterclaims of his French counterparts.\textsuperscript{8} Clyde Augustus Duniway undertook a careful study of correspondence in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to demonstrate that the French monarchy preferred to see the United States continue in a weakened state under the Articles of Confederation.\textsuperscript{9} Duniway's article shows that American historians still gravitated to the history of eighteenth-century Franco-American relations even in the early twentieth century. Judgments about the value of newly published documents and the sifting of contradictory claims depended on firsthand research in manuscript sources available only in France; thus professionalization necessarily included at least some direct access to foreign sources.

In all of these articles, the excitement of fresh discoveries confirmed the belief that persistent misunderstandings could now be cleared up and disputes fairly adjudicated. Most remarkably given our current graphomania is the shortness of some of these pieces. C. H. Lincoln, for example, offered a major revisionist reading of the *cahiers* of 1789 in four pages. He advanced an argument very similar to those made today: "that the terrible character of the French Revolution was not caused by the gradual accumulation of burdens upon the shoulders of the peasants, causing the gradual growth of a spirit of hostility between the several orders." He emphasized instead the practical failures of "well-meaning delegates" and the consequent wastage of the forces of moderation.\textsuperscript{10}

Many of the themes of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century articles might now be characterized as "traditional," in particular an emphasis on the personal lives and political machinations of leading statesmen such as Mirabeau and Napoleon, the only two figures of the French Revolution to merit more than one article in the first few volumes of the new journal. Sidney B. Fay reviewed the evidence about Napoleon's decision to execute the duc d'Enghien and argued that it constituted one of his greatest political mistakes. William M. Sloane wrote about Napoleon's plans to establish a far-flung colonial empire stretching from the Far East to North and South America. Victor Coffin (a rare exception to the three-name rule) offered a study of Napoleon's administrative aims, depicting him as a "champion of legality." But even supposedly traditional topics could point in new directions. While Fred Morrow Fling stuck closely to an account of how Mirabeau's father repeatedly imprisoned him by means of *lettres de cachet*, R. M. Johnston explored the connections made by Mirabeau with Freemasons, illuminati, and German publishers while serving in Berlin from 1785 to 1787 as a secret agent of the very French government that had imprisoned him a few years earlier.

\textsuperscript{7} I am grateful to Denise Davidson for some preliminary research that proved very helpful to me in writing this article. H. Morse Stephens, "Recent Memoirs of the French Directory," *AHR*, 3 (1896): 473–89.

\textsuperscript{8} Fred Morrow Fling, "The Authorship of the *Journal d'Adrien Duquesnoy*," *AHR*, 8 (1902): 70–77.


The demimonde of hack writers, publicists, and underground publishers and their links with Masons, mesmerists, and spiritualists had already attracted attention.\textsuperscript{11}

A certain nationalist sentiment figured in some of these articles. In his consideration of French policy toward the Mississippi Valley during the administrations of Washington and Adams, for example, Frederick Jackson Turner made quite clear his interest in detailing the potential obstacles posed to American unification; he argued that French policy might have checked or even prevented "the destiny of the United States as arbiter of North America and the protector of an American system for the New World."\textsuperscript{12} Attitudes toward France and its revolution thus could include suspicion about its past imperial aims as well as a general distrust of revolutionary enthusiasm. Henry E. Bourne railed against French revolutionary impracticality, claiming that "government was something like a novel and dangerous toy, and these children in politics jostled one another in their eagerness to try their hand at it." But in his article on Parisian municipal politics in 1789, Bourne also concluded that the methods of mobilizing the local districts to counter higher authorities had been first devised by the bourgeois of 1789, not the Jacobins of 1792-1793.\textsuperscript{13}

The concept of a bourgeois revolution did not excite much controversy. Victor Coffin referred matter-of-factly to Napoleon belonging "in spirit emphatically to the bourgeois revolution," identifying fully with the revolutionary dissolution of the regime of privilege, favoring neither the sans-culottes nor the aristocracy in his policies.\textsuperscript{14} In his overview of recent work, however, Robinson did not use the phrase, even when praising Jean Jaurès for directing and himself writing part of the "best general history of the period . . . perhaps the best that has ever been written," the \textit{Histoire socialiste}.\textsuperscript{15} Jaurès' volumes are now regarded as among the canonical works in Marxist historiography, a historiography defined in large measure by the thesis that the French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution.

In general, ideological positions seem quite muted in the turn-of-the-century articles, especially given the fervor of historiographical debates in Third Republic France at the same time. Robinson bemoaned the "partizan enthusiasm" evident in French studies of their own revolution and even criticized the Paris municipal government that had subsidized many publications of important revolutionary documents; it had undertaken its valuable work in an "absurdly apologetic" spirit about the aims of the revolution. Yet he explained the attitude of the "exalted Republicans" as an understandable reaction to those who "have dared to look back with regret, even with yearning" upon an Old Regime polity based on privilege, despotism, divine right, and personal favoritism. Robinson himself favored a pro-republican point of view, yet this did not stop him from criticizing


\textsuperscript{14} Coffin, "Preliminary Study," 765.

\textsuperscript{15} Robinson, "Recent Tendencies," 543.
his French counterpart Alphonse Aulard and followers for thinking that they could "treat the history of the Revolution in the same spirit in which they might deal with that of Greece or Rome." The French had a long way to go, Robinson insisted, before they could achieve that "disengaged spirit." By implication, the American historians of France seemed closer to achieving the goal of objectivity.16

Although Robinson and his American colleagues labored to establish themselves as impartial observers of internal French disputes, they did hold strong views about the importance and meaning of the French Revolution. According to Robinson, "The Revolution will some day be recognized as fundamentally the most decisive and general readjustment to meet new and altered conditions of which we have any record." (He made this proclamation before the world wars or any of the other fateful events of the twentieth century.) The French Revolution was a "rebirth," a "reformation, social, political, and economic." Determination of its meaning required not only the complete digestion of all the information made available in new documentary publications but also the overcoming of the nefarious influence of "four fallacies": that the revolution only began in May 1789 and not at least three years earlier with the first efforts at reform; that it culminated in the Reign of Terror; that it was confined mainly to the city of Paris; and, finally, that its history could be written from personal memoirs, "that older form of historical fiction," rather than the newly published government documents, committee reports, letters, and diaries.17

James Harvey Robinson's four fallacies provide a good point from which to begin comparing turn-of-the-century views of the French Revolution with those of today. In what follows, I do not pretend to offer a comprehensive historiographical overview, certainly not one like the compactly panoramic review offered by Robinson in 1906. The literature is now too enormous, and much of it was reviewed in essays written on the occasion of the Bicentennial, including those that appeared in this journal.18 Instead, I want to raise the broadest comparisons between then and now, using Robinson's historiographical essay as my point of departure.

On three of Robinson's propositions, agreement is quite general. Historical research on the origins of the French Revolution has generally shifted ever further back into the eighteenth century, Paris has ceased to be the unique center of interest, and personal memoirs composed long after the events definitely take a back seat to government documents and other contemporary forms of documentation. Although many today might contest Robinson's confident assertion that "a scientific and adequate picture" of the Old Regime would reveal the full extent of its "ancient and chaotic conditions," almost everyone concurs that an accurate picture of revolutionary France depends on an in-depth understanding of the

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17 Robinson, "Recent Tendencies," 546–47.
country's previous political, economic, social, and cultural situation. Yet as research on the Old Regime has developed, the Old Regime has come to be seen as a distinct, separate entity. Research on eighteenth-century France now probably outweighs work on the revolutionary era, but it no longer fits so comfortably under the rubric of the origins of the revolution. In a sense, then, the Old Regime—a term invented by the revolutionaries to mark their break with it—has ceased being the "old" or former regime (ancien régime has both connotations); it has been restored as a regime in its own right.

Indeed, restoration is an appropriate term since this research often paints a much rosier picture of the Old Regime than Robinson's. The depictions of a few historians, notably Simon Schama's, recall those "hopelessly reactionary" efforts that Robinson decried as "rebuilding the ancient edifice with idyllic grace and peopling it with a happy and virtuous throng who had lived together in blessed concord until they suffered themselves to be alienated from God and their king by the satanic obsession of the Revolution." If most current work does not usually go quite this far, it is nonetheless true that much has been written recently to argue for the relatively benign nature of Old Regime institutions and practices, particularly in comparison to the repressive policies of the Terror. The monarchy is credited with allowing civil society to flourish in the form of salons, local academies, and even masonic lodges; it stopped short of killing its opposition among the magistrates, the philosophes, or clandestine publishers. By contrast, it is argued, the revolution showed no mercy for its dissidents. In other words, the revolution seems not only much less inevitable than it did to Robinson but, to some, also much less necessary or desirable.

A reevaluation of the significance of the Terror follows from this reassessment of the Old Regime, but that is hardly its primary source: the Russian Revolution, fascism, Nazism, Stalinism, and the Cold War made the Terror an almost inescapable focus of controversy. Robinson seemed heartened that "the Reign of Terror no longer claims the attention of many investigators," and he praised the work of Stephens for "reducing to its proper proportions the disimprisoned anarchy, which indeed seems almost trivial when compared with the magnificent turmoil in Russia at the present moment [1906]." In the 1970s, François Furet, then a repentant former communist, brought the Terror back into the center of analysis of the revolution, arguing that French Republicans, socialists, and communists had each in their own way downplayed its significance in order to achieve their political purposes. The French Republican contemporaries of Robinson separated 1793 from 1789, maintaining that 1793 was a temporary aberration, an unexpected by-product of the war effort. In the twentieth century, socialists and communists considered the Terror more central, though equally

19 Robinson, "Recent Tendencies," 541.
20 Margaret Jacob drew this distinction to my attention, for as a specialist in the history of the revolution I still tend to view most research on the eighteenth century through the lens of the question of the origins of the revolution.
23 Robinson, "Recent Tendencies," 546, 538.
explicable in terms of circumstances; it could be explained by the combination of war and the need to repress the social enemies of the revolution, especially the aristocracy. Furet contested any explanation that rested solely on circumstances; he insisted that the causes of the Terror had to be primarily ideological and cultural, since the Terror reached its height only after the French began to win the war. His influential analysis reshaped writing on both the Old Regime and the revolution, encouraging some historians to see 1789 as the decisive break between an ineffectual, politically anodyne but self-contradictory Old Regime and an inherently totalitarian revolution that inaugurated a completely new political culture based on deeply problematic democratic principles. 24 Keith Baker recently argued, for example, that the Terror grew directly out of the ambiguities present in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen passed in August 1789; in this view, even the declaration of individual rights contributed to an irresistible totalitarian dynamic. 25

Furet explicitly linked the French Revolution to totalitarianism; for him, the revolution was the origin of the gulag. 26 This has become a pervasive view, and the association now extends beyond the Bolshevik revolution to a connection with fascism as well. Patrice Higonnet compared the French revolutionaries' treatment of nobles to the scapegoating of Jews under Hitler. 27 In the name of feminist analysis, Dorinda Outram argued for even more sinister ties between the French Revolution and totalitarianism. In her view, the French revolutionaries' exclusion of women from the public sphere entailed a new politics of the body, in which men controlled and personified political ideals while reducing women to "feelers and doers, who cannot gain public weight and dignity." The revolutionary idealization of male stoicism, she insisted, actively encouraged government through terror and "thus opened the way for the emergence of modern totalitarian states." "The whole tendency of [the French Revolution's] political culture," she maintained, "was to collude with state terror." 28

Robinson wrote his words on the Terror before witnessing any of the fateful events of the twentieth century, and he died in 1936 before the concept of totalitarianism came into scholarly usage. 29 Although he might well have revised his estimation of the importance of the Terror if he had lived longer, he had his own reasons for downplaying its significance: he thought that the French

26 "Today the Gulag is leading to a rethinking of the Terror precisely because the two undertakings are seen as identical." Furet, Interpreting the French Revolution, 12.
29 Most of Robinson's work on the French Revolution appeared in the 1890s and first decade of the 1900s according to the bibliography in Hendricks, James Harvey Robinson, 114–20.
Forgetting and Remembering

Revolution made an essential contribution to the establishment of democracy and that the Terror was a temporary, unfortunate deviation from that long-term development. His "new history" explicitly favored "deeper special issues" and "fundamental and permanent results" over what he termed "the picturesque, the gruesome, the anecdotal" and "superficial" political agitation. 30 We might not consider the Terror an example of "superficial" political agitation, but need we then jump to the opposite extreme and recast it as the teleological embodiment of all the revolution's meaning?

Throughout his career, Robinson sought to make history more democratic in access and method. In The New History, he passionately argued for the alliance of history with anthropology, economics, psychology, and sociology in the hope that this coalition would draw attention to "the importance of the seemingly homely, common, and inconspicuous things," the knowledge of which would "promote the general welfare." 31 He believed that a more social-scientifically informed analysis would stress the structural trends and changes that most shaped ordinary lives. As he insisted, "Our democracy, with all its hopes and aspirations, is based on an appreciation of common men; our science, with all its achievements and prospects, is based on the appreciation of common things." 32

In his essay "The Principles of 1789," Robinson brought this broader agenda to bear on the French Revolution:

So few writers have as yet set before themselves quite clearly the problem of discovering and explaining the really great and permanent results of the Revolution, that the public may be forgiven for scarcely suspecting that there have been such results... Underlying the dramatic episodes of the Revolution, and obscured by them, is a story of fundamental social and political reform which not only serves to explain the history of France during the nineteenth century, but casts much light as well upon the progress of liberal institutions in Europe at large.

After reviewing the "marked tendency upon the part of English and German historians to condemn the Declaration of the Rights of Man as an instance of Gallic lightheartedness," he went on to argue that the aims of the National Assembly in composing the declaration became "perfectly intelligible" in the light of Old Regime social and political conditions, as well as that the democratic principles of 1789 "represent the most commonplace assumptions of European governments to-day." 33

As is by now evident, I find much to admire in Robinson's turn-of-the-century view. Although the events of the twentieth century do force us to reevaluate the significance of the French Revolution and do suggest that the revolution displayed proto-totalitarian tendencies that make it impossible for us to simply dismiss the Terror, as Robinson seemed to do, recent work has all too often insisted on a lock-step progression within the French Revolution from the principles of 1789 to

30 Robinson, "Recent Tendencies," 538.
31 Robinson, New History, 149.
33 James Harvey Robinson, "The Principles of 1789," in The New History, 203, 204, 229, 232–33. This essay combines the original AHR article, "Recent Tendencies," with some of his other work on the French Revolution.
the Terror and, more generally, within modern history from the French Revolution to both fascism and communism. That work also tends to consider the Terror, fascism, and communism as at once overwhelmingly important and inherently the same, effacing the differences between them and overlooking the other histories that might be told, for example, of the development of democratic institutions. Five years of significant events and trends separated the end of the Terror and the rise of Napoleon, and these also contributed to the apprenticeship in democratic practices and representative institutions that is, arguably, the most important outcome of the French Revolution, especially given France's subsequent history. We might not wish to cast the alternatives, as Robinson did, as a simple choice between a history structured by social-scientific inquiry and one more sensitive to political and ideological elements. (By insisting on the significance of ideology and political culture, Furet seems to set out the same choices from the opposite perspective.) We might hope to combine these different perspectives. But we are still very much caught up in the debate about the linkage between 1789 and 1793, between democracy and totalitarianism.\textsuperscript{34}

Despite the revived interest in the question of the Terror, little recent work has been devoted to any in-depth reconsideration of those elements most central to it: the legal apparatus, the evolution of attitudes toward political dissent, and the impact of the executions and factional infighting on the development of local institutions and practices. Did the regular legal system cease to function when special tribunals and commissions went into operation? Did crime, divorce, and property disputes disappear? Or were fundamental institutional and legal innovations continuing apace, as Robinson maintained? Furet's important reconsideration of the Terror took place on an almost entirely abstract level, focusing on its historiographical and theoretical significance, and his followers have concentrated most of their energies either on the Old Regime or on 1789 as the crucial year rather than on the years of the Terror. More thorough analysis of the place of the Terror will depend at least in part on new research.\textsuperscript{35}

When Robinson insisted that the spotlight must shift from Paris outward to the provinces, he did not appear to have in mind those other provinces, the French colonies. Turn-of-the-century historians, whether in the United States or France, demonstrated little interest in the colonial side of the revolution. Stephens proved something of an exception, for his two-volume history of the French Revolution devoted several pages in each volume to events in the colonies. He maintained that the history of the revolution in the colonies "deserves somewhat careful attention."\textsuperscript{36} Perhaps Stephens showed more interest in the colonies because he began his career lecturing on Indian history at Cambridge University, yet his use

\textsuperscript{34} Isser Woloch offers many fresh perspectives on these problems and reinserts the Terror into a long-term perspective in his remarkably wide-ranging study, \textit{The New Regime: Transformations of the French Civic Order, 1789–1820s} (New York, 1994).

\textsuperscript{35} When referring to the followers of Furet, I am thinking in particular of Keith Baker and his students. In \textit{The New Regime}, Woloch says more about the legal profession than about the operation of the courts. New work on the legal system of the revolutionary decade is now being undertaken by Suzanne Desan and Carla Hesse among others.

of the qualifier "somewhat" demonstrates just how little most scholars usually did attend to the colonies.

Colonial commerce and slave revolts, especially in Saint Domingue (Haiti), have attracted the attention of a hardy band of twentieth-century specialists, but their work has remained regrettably marginal to general considerations of the French Revolution. Given the importance of that commerce, the impact of the successful slave revolt in Saint Domingue, and the French abolition of slavery in 1794, this oversight can only be surprising. One in eight French people lived off colonial trade, and the single colony of Saint Domingue had 500,000 slaves in 1789 whereas all the United States had 700,000.37 The black slave revolt in Saint Domingue that began in 1791 and ended with Haitian independence in 1804 has been recently described as "one of the great revolutions of the modern world," yet this Caribbean revolution remains historiographically marginal despite the efforts of pioneers such as C. L. R. James in the 1930s.38 Simon Schama, for example, gives one sentence to the black uprisings in *Citizens* (only to explain the cause of metropolitan riots over sugar), and Furet mentions the subject not at all.39

This neglect reflects the remarkable power of the historiographical status quo in shaping views of the past, for there is no more telling ground for a consideration of the impact of revolutionary ideas or practices than the Caribbean colonies. In October 1789, for instance, Governor Peynier reported to the central government that the black slaves of Saint Domingue viewed the new revolutionary cockade made up of red, white, and blue ribbons as a signal of the manumission of the whites. People report to us and even write to us from the various opposing sides in the colony that the blacks all share an idea that struck them spontaneously: that the white slaves killed their masters and now free they govern themselves and regain possession of the land. It would be dangerous to even seek to destroy these false rumors by explaining the truth, and we make every effort to maintain silence without an appearance of mystery.40

The slavery of despotism may have been metaphorical in metropolitan France, but in the colonies it had a very concrete meaning. The conflicts between the rich white planters, the poor whites, the free blacks and mulattos, the thousands of recently imported slaves, the Old Regime administration, and the new revolutionary officials reveal revolutionary dynamics even more complex than those in metropolitan France, and analysis of them can shed new light on the oldest problems, from the meaning of liberty to the operation of the Terror. Very recently, interest in the colonial French Revolution finally seems to be on the increase, as younger (and even some older) historians become more interested


39 Schama, *Citizens*, 602. I truly mean these only as examples, for, like most others, I have never mentioned the colonies in my work. Elizabeth Colwill helped orient me in this field; she is working to reincorporate the revolution in Saint Domingue into studies of metropolitan France.

not only in the Caribbean side of the revolution but also in the links between the colonies and the metropole.\textsuperscript{41} The increase in interest no doubt reflects the growing concern with world history, colonialism and decolonization, and international economic, political, and cultural interactions more generally.

\textbf{If historians were revising} Robinson's list of fallacies today, they would no doubt add a fifth: that the history of the French Revolution concerned only men. With its emphasis on the material world and everyday life, Robinson's "new history" seemed to promise an opening to women's history. He insisted that his "history for the common man" could speak to both boys and girls, and his definition of the materials for this history was capacious:

The tragic reflections of Eli's daughter-in-law, when she learned of the discomfiture of her people at Ebenezer, are history; so are the provisions of Magna Charta, the origin of the doctrine of transubstantiation, the fall of Santiago, the difference between a black friar and a white friar, and the certified circulation of the New York World upon February 1 of the current year.\textsuperscript{42}

Yet women hardly figure in Robinson's writings on the French Revolution. In contrast, women's participation and gender relations now weigh heavily in the scales of contemporary interest, especially in Anglo-American scholarship about the revolution.

Work on women and gender relations, which extends back into the Enlightenment as well, has tended to reinforce the current negative evaluation of the French Revolution. Whether linked to the origins of totalitarianism or not, the revolution has been cast as bad for women. The current picture looks something like this: under the Old Regime, women, at least elite women, exercised influence in various ways, whether as hostesses in the salons of the Enlightenment or behind the scenes at the court. Revolutionaries attacked their power as part and parcel of monarchical, aristocratic society and introduced a new, middle-class, gendered notion of public and private spheres that more effectively excluded women from any meaningful participation in public life. Even those historians, such as Olwen Hufton, who downplay the significance of women's political clubs nonetheless portray women as inherently opposed to much of the revolution. In Hufton's view, "the most constructive force one can determine at work in society" was the attempt of women to reestablish religious worship in opposition to the revolutionary government.\textsuperscript{43} Others have denounced the middle-class republic as inherently sexist: for Joan Landes, "the exclusion of women from the bourgeois public was not incidental but central to its incarnation"; it was "essentially, not

\textsuperscript{41} Robert Forster has done much in this country to encourage interest in the colonies, both under the Old Regime and during the revolution. See, for example, "The French Revolution, People of Color, and Slavery," in Joseph Klaas and Michael H. Haltzel, eds., The Global Ramifications of the French Revolution (New York, 1994), 89–104. See also Anne Péron-Dumon, Étre patriote sous les tropiques: La Guadeloupe, la colonisation et la Révolution (1789–1794) (Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe, 1985).

\textsuperscript{42} Robinson, New History, 1.

\textsuperscript{43} Olwen H. Hufton, Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution (Toronto, 1992), 130. A more complex view of women's political activism can be found in Suzanne Desan, Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990).
just contingently, masculinist.” In her examination of “the ‘world historical defeat’ of women,” Madelyn Gutwirth echoes the same themes: “all our claims to universal democracy have long rested on an evasion of the realities of gender interests.” To explain the actions of the revolutionaries toward women, she argues that “the French Revolution itself arrived in the midst of a longer and broader struggle to resist women’s advancement in society and to restore an unquestioned male supremacy.”

I cannot offer here a full-scale reevaluation of this literature any more than I can provide a reconceptualization of the Terror or of the colonial revolution; moreover, my own work is much implicated in the general view that I have sketched. Most troublesome in this ever-growing body of publications is the now almost axiomatic condemnation of the French Revolution. Historians of gender relations denounce the French Revolution as bad for women because it attacked aristocratic forms of female power; because the revolutionaries banned women’s clubs; because the revolutionary government turned hostile to Catholicism and, in some cases, to religion more generally; because the revolutionaries expressed misogynist convictions; and because the universalism of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen seemed to mask an assumed male possessor of those rights. Since women did not gain full enjoyment of the rights promised by liberty, equality, and fraternity, these values can have no meaning for them, or so the argument seems to run.

Feminist analysis of the French Revolution’s bad attitude toward women tends to focus on the male reaction to and against women’s activism, whether religious or political; it takes women’s activism as a given and fails to recognize that while the misogynist reaction of the revolutionaries is hardly new—the likes of it can be found in virtually every political upheaval in history and indeed in almost all known history—the women’s organized activism surely is. During the revolution, organized secular women’s groups made precise claims for female political participation, and various men and women published explicit demands for equal property, divorce, familial, and political rights for women. These actions distinguished the French Revolution from all previous such upheavals, including the American Revolution of the 1770s and 1780s and the Dutch Revolution of 1787. What was new was not the predictable governmental reaction and repression but rather the surprisingly open political space created by the radicalization of the revolution from 1789 until 1793. What was new was the self-conscious organization by women to demand their political rights.

47 The clearest exception to this trend is Dominique Godinée, Citoyennes triomphantes: Les femmes du peuple à Paris pendant la Révolution française (Aix-en-Provence, 1988).
In short, the issues raised by the history of women and gender relations need to be reframed. Rather than just asking why the revolutionaries suppressed women’s clubs and opposed female activism and full citizenship for women, we should also ask what enabled women to organize in the first place, especially given the long history of widely shared attitudes about their proper place in society. Key to this mobilization of new interests was the articulation of a concept of universal rights, which in the French case, and apparently only in the French case, led ineluctably to a reconsideration of everyone’s rights, including those of women as well as Protestants, Jews, free blacks, slaves, actors, executioners, and even children. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in August 1789 put rights on the agenda, and they have stayed there in one form or another ever since. To dismiss this as the origins of totalitarianism or a con job to deprive women of their rights is to willfully overlook a bigger and ultimately more important story, that of the challenge posed to the old order by new conceptions of individual rights.

Just as Robinson tied his view of the French Revolution to the social-scientific agenda of the “new history,” so, too, much new work has been associated with “the linguistic turn” and “the new cultural history,” with their emphases on the language and rituals of political culture and/or body politics. Furet’s analysis of the “semitic circuit” that supposedly governed revolutionary politics inaugurated this trend among historians of the French Revolution, but it has become much more general since the 1970s, including now much of the work on gender relations.

Many things differentiate “the new cultural history” from Robinson’s “new history,” but perhaps the most salient of them has been the downplaying of social factors in new forms of cultural and linguistic analysis. Despite Furet’s own long apprenticeship in social history, his reconceptualization of the French Revolution emphasized its ideological and political cultural workings. His attack on the social reductionism of the Marxist “catechism” of the French Revolution—an assault already launched in the 1950s and 1960s by English and American historians—only gained added force with the collapse of communist regimes predicated on Marxist ideology. As a consequence, class analysis of the revolution has been largely discredited. This may be another area in which a return to Robinson’s perspectives might prove illuminating. Although Robinson did not employ a language of class analysis, his “new history” insistently drew attention to the role of social context and especially to long-term social trends. As the deriding of social analysis has become itself an orthodoxy, it is probably now time for the pendulum to begin swinging in the other direction. Colin Jones argues that it is time to “revivify” the bourgeois revolution by looking in new ways at the groups that made up the middle classes.

Of course, it remains significant that everyone on this list except women and children eventually won full political and civil rights, at least under law; the rights of free blacks and slaves remained a subject of contention and were revoked under Napoleon.

Robinson linked his advocacy of the "new history" to the progress of democracy, a reform agenda in U.S. politics, and a personal commitment to adult education and the popularization of scientific and historical knowledge. The political aims of those espousing new methods in the last twenty years are harder to discern, in part because they are more disparate. The anti-totalitarian school, taking inspiration from Furet, aims to show the dangers of revolution as a mode of action, and in the process it also underlines the paradoxes and contradictions of democracy as a form of government. Feminists point to the frauds perpetrated in the name of universalism, including the broken promises implied in the notion of democratic government. Less clear, at least to me, is what these critics would have favored instead: gradual change like that endorsed by Edmund Burke; a more moderate revolution like the American one, which included neither a Terror nor any public discussion of the political status of women and maintained both slavery and property distinctions for political rights (Furet seems to lean in this direction); or a continuation of the Old Regime because it moderated its censorship with considerable latitude for intellectuals and its misogyny with considerable maneuvering room for well-born women? What are the present-day political consequences that follow from the anti-totalitarian and feminist positions? They both have been so heavily invested in criticism of revolution, democracy, and, in the feminist case, liberalism, that an answer proves difficult to determine. Although I have advocated and practiced the approaches of "the new cultural history" and consider my own position both anti-totalitarian and feminist, I find myself much more comfortable with Robinson's views and goals than with the implied political positions of those I have labeled rather summarily the anti-totalitarians and the feminists.\textsuperscript{51}

It is possible to fault our turn-of-the-century predecessors on some counts, but they can also serve to remind us of what we have lost along the way of professionalization and sophistication of method. Returning now to their three main articles of faith, which revolved around the organized publication of documents, the possibilities of new levels of accuracy, and the prospects for better syntheses, we get a sense of just how things have changed for historians in the last hundred years. Publication of documents about the French Revolution has continued since the Centennial in 1889, getting another boost at the time of the Bicentennial in 1989. However, as the volume of publication of documents, and of books and articles about them, has increased exponentially, less and less professional time has been devoted to questions of accuracy, in part because historians now build on a more solid documentary base established over the decades, but also in part because historians no longer believe that accuracy in

\textsuperscript{51} Lynn Hunt, ed., \textit{The New Cultural History} (Berkeley, Calif., 1989), Some of the issues about the present-day purposes of historical knowledge have been developed in Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, \textit{Telling the Truth about History} (New York, 1994).
documentation will lead ineluctably to agreement about interpretations. The research seminar now tends to emphasize differences in interpretation rather than techniques for sorting out claims. The explosion in publication has also pushed the prospect of better syntheses even further away. Some find this deeply disturbing, while for others it is simply the new condition of knowledge in the information age.52

Perhaps the greatest single difference between our colleagues who studied the French Revolution at the turn of the century and those of today is the intervening shrinkage of fields of interest. Sometimes alone and sometimes with one or two collaborators, Robinson wrote college and secondary-level textbooks on all of European history, or as one title had it “from the origins of civilization to the present time.” He published document collections or source books on Petrarch, the pre-Reformation, the early Reformation in Germany, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic period, Metternich and the Restoration, and a French political protest of 1775, as well as more general collections on European history. In addition to collections of articles on method and teaching, he published professional articles on Roman history, church history, and Luther, as well as the French Revolution. He did not produce many monographic studies like those that form the core of professional historical knowledge today, but his influence as a teacher extended far beyond his own classrooms into high schools, colleges, and adult education centers all over the nation.

Although present-day scholars can publish in the same wide variety of genres that Robinson and his colleagues did, they have tended to narrow the fields of their own research. One is not just a specialist on the French Revolution now but rather a specialist on the economic, political, or cultural history of that period. The number of publications is rising so quickly that it is virtually impossible to keep up in both one’s fields of teaching and one’s fields of research. Syntheses seem not only more difficult than ever but even intellectually suspect because they must necessarily lack a solid foundation in firsthand research. The same might be said of textbooks, of course, for they depend on syntheses of the available syntheses. Speaking as someone who has recently suffered through the process of writing a textbook in European history, I believe that the activity of trying to make sense of broad swatches of history has been devalued: such activity does not usually count for tenure, promotion, or merit increases; in a sense, it does not count as one’s “work.” Robinson’s conviction that historians must try to educate the broader public in new ways of viewing history has been at least to some extent lost, and the result, it might be said, is a debate over national standards which reveals that the public has little idea of what historians do or why they do it. Perhaps the debate will help rekindle some sense of missed opportunities and a turn toward the synthetic.

If historical knowledge is cumulative, as I believe it is, and if the purpose of historical knowledge is to promote greater understanding of how things came to be as they are, then the undeniable increase in knowledge should enable historians to write better syntheses as well as more telling analytical studies—better

and more telling for the greater public as well as for fellow professionals. The reception of the work of Simon Schama and François Furet on the French Revolution shows that the public wants to know; if I do not agree with their interpretations, then it is up to me to write something more convincing yet still as accessible. I hope that more of us take on this challenge.

Historians now confront their tasks in an ever more internationalized profession. The fragmentation and parcelization of knowledge increases, but so, too, do the connections across national boundaries and between continents. Reading the articles from the turn of the century makes the difference palpable; traveling to a foreign library or archive in the 1890s was a major, time-consuming, expensive endeavor, limited to a select few and to a few occasions in a lifetime. Now, frequent international conferences on the French Revolution draw historians from almost everywhere in the world (except, usually, Africa). Although positivism supposedly no longer provides a commonly shared rationale for the study of history (in practice, it often still does), historians of many nations have nonetheless drawn closer together thanks to the combined consequences of communications technologies and the end of the Cold War. The effects of internationalization have not been equally distributed, however, and access to knowledge could well become one of the great definers of social status, both between and within nations. Access to knowledge was one of the great concerns of Robinson and his friends Charles Beard and John Dewey; the relation between knowledge and democracy remains as vital a concern today as it was for them and, indeed, as it was for the French revolutionaries in the first place. All the believers in the democratic revolution have seen the necessity for educational reform and for the dissemination of knowledge to the widest possible audience. These are convictions, like many of those which date to the democratic revolutions, that have lost none of their pertinence.