

Thinking about Feeling, 1789–1799

Sophia Rosenfeld

The French Revolution may have become a historical backwater since the bicentennial celebrations two decades ago but, away from the lime-light, its historiography has undergone significant change. Not least, human motivation—and particularly the role of emotions in shaping revolutionary actors' public actions—has turned into a major concern.

Agency (as opposed to causation) was not the central problem in the historiography of the French Revolution for most of the latter half of the twentieth century. Marxist responses to questions of drive were typically limited by the insistence on humans as exclusively rational actors, constantly doing and advocating what was in their own economic best interest. Even in the subtlest of Marxist scholarship the presumption remained that motivation depended much more on exogenous than on endogenous preferences; by and large, people were predestined to express their class position. That conclusion began to wane in the 1980s, as cultural and intellectual historians, most often writing in the shadow of François Furet when it came to the years 1789–99, offered the possibility of looking to the realm of representations and social practices to explain revolutionaries' public commitments. But here even more, agency was taken off the table as discourse—meaning political languages, symbols, ideologies, concepts, even attitudes toward discourse—was given the power to determine circumstances, opinions, and behavior. Either historical actors were turned into full-fledged political theorists, acting out the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or they appeared as mere pawns in a war of words.

That was then. Historians, freed from strict adherence to either of these powerful explanatory models but typically informed by both, have over the last fifteen years reopened considerably older questions about agency and self. The result has not been the construction of a new,

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unified “theory” of why it all happened. Still, the search for answers has led scholars on both sides of the Atlantic to turn their attention to human psychology and, more specifically, to the historically contingent, collective emotional responses that the actors and events of 1789–99 unleashed and that, in turn, produced collective social and political action.¹ How people in different moments and places felt—what scared them, what made them joyful or proud or disgusted or compassionate—has become fundamental to understanding what those same people decided and did.

In a 2003 review essay in the *American Historical Review* cleverly titled “Paradigms and Paranoia,” Rebecca L. Spang despaired that a new generation of historians was “lurching from rational choice . . . to irrational fears,” resorting in a pinch to knee-jerk psychological explanations—mass hysteria, desire, conspiracy thinking—to explain the revolutionary dynamic. From her vantage point, this trend represented a major failing of postbicentennial cultural history, and she laid the blame squarely at the door of Furet, whose “emphasis on a *collective* frenzy has spared students any further effort to derive distinct political attitudes from particular social situations.”² For the moment, though, I want to suggest the opposite: the psychological complexity of humans, whether alone or gathered in streets and assembly halls, has become the focus of some of the most innovative work in the field in recent years largely as a result of scholars moving beyond the Furetian approach.³ The best of this work just might lead scholarship on the French Revolution to reemerge from its backwater status.

The turn to questions of sensibility or feeling (or the *return*, since identified precedents range from Edmund Burke to Jules Michelet to Georges Lefebvre) began shortly after the bicentennial celebrations concluded. Timothy Tackett, in an explicitly postrevisionist book of 1996 titled *Becoming a Revolutionary*, initially defined the problem. His study revolved around a seemingly simple question: how and why did the deputies to the new National Assembly become “revolutionaries”

¹ A new wave of revolutionary biographies, primarily in French, takes up many of these issues at the level of the individual; see the brief bibliography in Jean-Clément Martin, ed., *La révolution à l'oeuvre. Perspectives actuelles dans l'histoire de la Révolution française* (Rennes, 2005), 371. The present essay focuses on recent scholarship that addresses collective emotional expression, communication, and motivation.

² Rebecca L. Spang, “Paradigms and Paranoia: How Modern Is the French Revolution?” *American Historical Review* 108 (2003): 128.

³ François Furet’s discussion of the revolutionary dynamic in *Interpreting the French Revolution* (1978), trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, 1981), is indeed marked by psychological language, including words like *frenzy*, that is used to indicate the abnormality of the collective *mentalité* of the revolutionary moment. But Furet explicitly discourages the writing of history in what he calls “the mode of personal identification . . . made up of discoveries of the heart and marked by an intuitive grasp of men’s souls and actors’ motives” (14).

in the course of the year that began in May 1789? Tackett pursued the matter in ways recognizable to practitioners both of Marxist and of revisionist approaches; in a prosopographical study, he explored his deputies' class backgrounds *and* their reading habits, values, and social practices going back to the Old Regime. But in Tackett's telling it was less what these men did or read before 1789 that determined their subsequent political choices than their psychological "experience" of that first revolutionary year. Group dynamics and antagonisms within the National Assembly, the confrontation with violence and upheaval in the streets, the sense of both frustration and exhilaration at the situations in which they found themselves, the whole amplified by crowd support, generated a thoroughly new mind-set. Indeed, Tackett proposed that the emergence of this distinctly "revolutionary psychology" within the ruling class should itself be seen as one of the key developments of 1789.⁴ This was not followed by any grand theory of how emotions should figure in historical explanation or even an attempt at historicizing what it meant to have feelings in the late eighteenth century. What Tackett accomplished in this tightly focused study was to send other historians back to the drawing board: to rethink the timing of the emergence of revolutionary culture, the nature and effects of revolutionary "lived experience," and, ultimately, the psychological forces at work in the revolutionary remaking of French politics.

In the later 1990s these questions were taken up directly (and independently of the work of Tackett in almost all cases) by innovative historians of varying political and methodological orientations. Considered as a whole, this work suggests that the experience of the French Revolution, from its great *journées* to its small incursions into daily existence, was transformative at a personal level. The social historian Peter McPhee's synthetic *Living the French Revolution, 1789–99* (2006) makes an extended case for the extraordinarily dislocating effects of the revolutionary process on conceptions of time, space, social relations, power, evidence, language, and even the self among France's rural residents. According to McPhee, the French peasantry responded with alternating bouts of anxiety and elation, which then generated, variously, strategies of resistance, acceptance, and negotiation across the countryside.⁵ But what two decades of scholarship in cultural and intellectual history have also made clear is that the self was already a work in transition, at least for the educated classes, in the final decades of the Old Regime.⁶

⁴ Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture, 1789–1790* (Princeton, NJ, 1996), 307.

⁵ Peter McPhee, *Living the French Revolution, 1789–99* (Basingstoke, 2006).

⁶ The critical work here is Jan Goldstein, *The Post-Revolutionary Self: Politics and Psyche in France, 1750–1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

Sincerity of emotion had become a mark of virtue and truth alike, and emotional communication had become as vital to constituting the public realm as the private, familial one.⁷ The (late) Age of Reason, it turns out, could just as well have been called the Age of Sentiment or the Age of Passion. The message here is that the emotional sensibility of the last years of the Enlightenment—just as much as rational political argumentation or material interests or even “lived experience”—should be understood to have shaped agency and reaction in the context of the French Revolution’s unanticipated twists and turns.⁸

Already in 1992, in a work still squarely in the revisionist mode, Lynn Hunt signaled a shift in focus as she directed readers to a consideration of revolutionary participants’ “political unconscious” in the realm of power dynamics.⁹ Borrowing from Sigmund Freud’s account of “the family romance,” as well as from recent feminist theory, Hunt sought in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* to highlight the sexual anxieties inherent in the working out of a postmonarchical, fraternal political order, tracing them back to a prerevolutionary crisis in paternal authority. Similarly, in two oddly companionate volumes—one on the revolutionaries’ emotional relation to corpses (*La gloire et l’effroi* [1997]) and the other on the role of laughter as reaction and tactic in eighteenth-century culture (*Les éclats du rire* [2000])—Antoine de Baecque made a case for understanding the French Revolution in terms of the psychological resources of participants both famous and obscure. De Baecque proposed that a study of the “morbid passions” produced by the dead body as a physical object, combined with a study of one specific bodily form of emotional expression, would bring to light a corporeal revolutionary imaginary and “politics of emotions” that had shaped agency just as much as either class position or the formal political vocabularies revolutionaries had at their disposal.¹⁰ But it is William M. Reddy’s “Sentimentalism and Its Erasure” (2000) and *The*

⁷ See in particular Anne Vincent-Buffault, *A History of Tears: Sensibility and Sentimentality in France* (1986), trans. Teresa Bridgeman (New York, 1991); Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley, CA, 1993); David Denby, *Sentimental Narrative and the Social Order in France, 1760–1820* (Cambridge, 1994); and Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago, 2002).

⁸ A similar claim has been made in recent years by scholars of the American Revolution; see, e.g., Julie Ellison, *Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (Chicago, 1999); Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008); and Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2008). The study of emotion in American history is, however, indebted in large part to a different theoretical trajectory: Carol Zisowitz Stearns’s and Peter N. Stearns’s “emotionology” as described in their article “Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards,” *American Historical Review* 90 (1985): 813–36.

⁹ Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley, CA, 1992), xiii.

¹⁰ Antoine de Baecque, *Les éclats du rire: La culture des rieurs au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 2000), 8. See also de Baecque, *La gloire et l’effroi: Sept morts sous la Terreur*, available in English as *Glory and Terror: Seven Deaths under the French Revolution*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York, 2001).

Navigation of Feeling (2001) that have done the most to advance the thesis that the history of the French Revolution cannot be understood without “an adequate theory of emotions.”¹¹ Certainly Reddy agreed that the Revolution’s destabilizing effects produced a sea change in French emotional life; the early-nineteenth-century part of his story makes that clear. But in his telling, the special emotional regime that was the late Old Regime, with its deep faith in natural sentiment and deep aversion to hypocrisy, was equally responsible for the initial “embrace of political action” and for the Manichaean political logic characteristic of Jacobinism.¹² Reddy’s larger lesson for historians is that the past actors whose motivations we are so eager to understand must themselves be seen as products of evolving emotional norms.

What, though, is really to be gained from all this attention to what made revolutionaries laugh, cry, lash out at others, or even contemplate themselves? The most common answer is that it brings us closer to understanding what Reddy calls the “escalating spiral of suspicion” that was the Terror—and, by extension, the endurance of violence, terror, and terrorism (whether state sanctioned or antistate) as political strategies today.¹³ The great Marxist chroniclers of the French Revolution, from Alphonse Aulard to Michel Vovelle, explained the official violence of Year II primarily as a rational response to desperate circumstances, a necessary if unpleasant means to solidify a new regime truly menaced on all sides. By contrast, the critical early revisionist historians, including Furet, Marcel Gauchet, Mona Ozouf, and Keith Baker, tended, following Alexis de Tocqueville, to treat the Terror as a preordained consequence of an absolutist ideology wedded to the newer idea of popular sovereignty; as a result of this amalgam, pluralism could not be imagined as anything other than political failure to be cured by means of the army and the guillotine. In neither of these approaches was fear—or, more properly, panic rooted in the particular psychology of this historical moment and encouraged by a combination of real circumstances and conscious manipulation—taken to be a legitimate explanation for choices made and deeds done in 1793–94. Nor was it something to be explored except as a minor by-product of material struggles or ideology. This is what has changed in the study of the French Revolution. Present-minded historians have returned with a vengeance to the study of the Terror. And even social and political historians have found that fear, as well as vengeance, explains a lot.

¹¹ William M. Reddy, “Sentimentalism and Its Erasure: The Role of Emotions in the Era of the French Revolution,” *Journal of Modern History* 72 (2000): 144. See also Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge, 2001).

¹² Reddy, “Sentimentalism and Its Erasure,” 139.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 143.

In a 2000 article on the gradual development of an elite obsession with plots, Tackett himself proposed that “the very term ‘Terror’ should be ascribed a more complex meaning than that usually given it by historians. It should signify not only the judicial apparatus assembled to intimidate and punish the perceived enemies of the revolution but also the near panic state of fear and suspicion experienced during the period by the revolutionaries themselves.”¹⁴ That same year Arno Mayer, in his massive comparative study *The Furies*, argued that historians needed to move away from ideological determinism and find “greater empathetic nearness” to the revolutionary moments they studied. For him, that meant continuing to explore not only the contingencies that produced rational justifications for violence in both the French and Russian cases but also the force of feelings such as panic and repressed vengeance that came to the surface in the absence of “rational criteria” for decision making.¹⁵ Soon other historians fixed on different collective emotions as explanatory mechanisms. Patrice Higonnet, in a 2006 article, argued once more for attention to the links between “the sensibility of the Revolutionary lives we study” and agency; Terror, in his account, was a response to the “trauma” of dehumanizing violence that followed an initial period of social euphoria and joy.¹⁶ A related argument can be found in Sophie Wahnich’s essayistic *La liberté et la mort* (2003), which opens with a chapter titled “Les émotions de la demande de terreur.” As she explains, “To approach the Terror by way of emotions makes it possible to distinguish between violence released by the circulation of discourse and that released by the rupture of conscious and unconscious sacred equilibriums.”¹⁷ The revolutionary process, according to Wahnich, was set in motion when popular *effroi* (dread, or a mixture of fear and horror) at the threat of counterrevolution evolved toward popular *colère* (anger) and a demand for vengeance, culminating in the violence of the September Massacres. Finally, the *Conventionnels* of Year II were forced to “give a legal form to these emotions” and to “invent symbolic forms and practices for containing the ardor”; that is, they had to produce the Terror so as to put the brakes on this “volcanic” emotional force.¹⁸

¹⁴ Timothy Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and the Origins of the Terror, 1789–1792,” *American Historical Review* 105 (2000): 713. See also Tackett, “Collective Panics,” *French History* 17 (2003): 149–58; as well as Peter R. Campbell, Thomas E. Kaiser, and Marisa Linton, eds., *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester, 2007).

¹⁵ Arno Mayer, *The Furies: Violence and Terror in the French and Russian Revolutions* (Princeton, NJ, 2000), xvi, 9.

¹⁶ Patrice Higonnet, “Terror, Trauma, and the ‘Young Marx’ Explanation of Jacobin Politics,” *Past and Present*, no. 191 (2006): 159, 154.

¹⁷ Sophie Wahnich, *La liberté et la mort: Essai sur la Terreur et le terrorisme* (Paris, 2003), 24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 36, 33.

But most of these historians also eagerly eschew old distinctions in which the passions always constitute the source of the French Revolution's dark side while reason is responsible for its positive achievements. All the historians under discussion here take pains to emphasize the interdependency of emotion, reason, and practical considerations in the realm of decision making. Moreover, almost all stress the close connection between glory and terror, to borrow from de Baecque, in the revolutionary moment; emotional responses to extraordinary circumstances, themselves shaped by the emotional discourses, practices, and ideals of the late Old Regime, turn out also to have been responsible for some of the Revolution's grandest successes. Hunt's *Inventing Human Rights* (2007), which might be said to constitute the latest stage in her ongoing exploration of the evolving psychology of the late eighteenth century, takes this tack.¹⁹ She proposes (in an argument hard to swallow in all its particulars) that certain sensual or embodied "experiences" of the late eighteenth century, including reading epistolary novels and viewing pictures in public exhibitions, gradually produced actual, physiological changes in French men's and women's brains that resulted in two collective psychological developments: an increase in the feeling of individual autonomy and an increase in empathy with unknown others. These sentiments, according to Hunt, then provided the psychological foundation and, indeed, motivation for the (partial) development of an ideology of human rights at the century's close. Sentimentalism here engenders, as in Jessica Riskin's work on science in the revolutionary era or even in David Bell's study of the foundations of the idea of national belonging, the creative reimagining of the relationship between the individual and the larger world.²⁰

Such arguments do give legitimate cause for anxiety (to employ a psychologized form of expression into which it is all too easy to slip when writing about these subjects). Explaining the Terror as the result of the experience and manipulation of a feeling of terror runs the risk of tautology. We need to be equally wary of banal, unsubstantiated assertions of mood of the sort that rightly worried Spang in the review article mentioned earlier and, at the other end of the spectrum, of the direct application of either turn-of-the-century psychoanalysis or contemporary neuropsychology to the analysis of historical phenomena. As many (but not all) of the studies under discussion make clear, it is meaningless to evoke emotional reactions and motivations

¹⁹ Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York, 2007).

²⁰ Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility*; David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, MA, 2001).

without a full sense of the varying structural factors that shape emotional life and that, in turn, are shaped by emotional responses in every historical moment: the realms of sensation, thought, aesthetics, economic exchange, family life, and, yes, political norms, among others. No amount of empathy on the part of the historian can ever lead to the recovery of some kind of pure, unmediated experiential realm, in good part because such a realm did not and cannot exist.²¹

Nevertheless, I see two distinct payoffs from this current attention to revolutionary psychology that should be considered positive developments in the field of French revolutionary studies in their own right. First, the turn to emotion has been part and parcel of bringing the counterrevolution back into the story—as a political movement born of anxiety, as the focus of the anxiety of others, and even as a “modern” intellectual current dedicated to understanding the nexus of violence and emotion. In contrast to most revisionist scholars, Tackett, Mayer, and Wahnich draw attention in their respective works on the sources of the Terror to the reality of political and religious opposition to the French Revolution, and they do so as a way to explain, at least in part, the psychology of fear that this knowledge set in motion in revolutionary circles. Darrin McMahon does them one better in a pathbreaking study called *Enemies of the Enlightenment* (2001). Not only was the revolutionary avant-garde far from delusional in insisting on the existence of myriad enemies at the gates, as Furet suggested. The Revolution’s proponents were also not alone in being afraid. An active coterie of anti-*philosophes* turned antirevolutionaries burned with “envy, anger, and incomprehension,” with “radical rage and vehemence,” even with “revulsion,” at the heroes of the Enlightenment from well before the Revolution’s start.²² When, after 1789, their old opponents, the friends of the *philosophes*, seemed suddenly to be in the driver seat, the defenders of the old order became equally fixated on the possibility that their worst nightmares were about to come true. McMahon explains the resulting dialectic: “Lending credence to the belief of revolutionary militants that hostile forces conspired against them, anti-*philosophes* in turn saw in the actions of the Revolution’s proponents confirmation of their own theories of conspiracy. The fears and suspicions of the one fed the fears and

²¹ For different perspectives on experience and emotion, see Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 773–97; Bernard Lepetit, *Les formes de l’expérience: Une autre histoire sociale* (Paris, 1995); Fred Weinstein, “Psychohistory and the Crisis of the Social Sciences,” *History and Theory* 34, no. 4 (1995): 299–319; and Barbara H. Rosenwein, “Worrying about Emotions in History,” *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 821–45.

²² Darrin McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York, 2001), 6, 8, 10. Other recent works include Owen Bradley, *A Modern Maistre: The Social and Political Thought of Joseph de Maistre* (Lincoln, NE, 1999); and the final chapter in Didier Masseau, *Les ennemis des Lumières: L’antiphilosophie au temps des Lumières* (Paris, 2000).

suspicious of the other, fueling a process of spiraling radicalization.”²³ Jean-Clément Martin, one of the most important voices today in the study of right-wing revolutionary violence, concurs: revolution and counterrevolution must be understood to “participate in the same cultural and political process.”²⁴ Moreover, insofar as thinkers on the right like Joseph de Maistre and Edmund Burke were, as Mayer notes, particularly attuned to the raw passions and instincts (as opposed to pure rationality) that drive human behavior, they have also been resuscitated in recent scholarship as the source of valuable critiques of modernity and its inherent violence.²⁵ Hunt exemplifies this move. After clarifying in *Family Romance* that she rejects Burke’s conservative verdict on the French Revolution as a whole, she asserts that “my analysis is much influenced by Burke’s fundamental insight into the interweaving of private sentiments and public politics” and gives him particular credit for proposing that political obedience required “more than rational calculation.”²⁶ McMahon, too, insists that we would do well to listen not as partisans but as students of modernity to his “religious Right” of old, which “raised concerns that continue to be our own, dramatizing from the start the cultural costs of disenchantment” and revealing the “dark underside of modern rationalism,” among other creeds.²⁷

Second, new attention to emotional or supposedly irrational motivations has once again made the French Revolution a site of opportunity for historians eager to experiment with novel modes of analysis and presentation. Partly this is a function of the fact that the triggers of emotion (often sights, sounds, or objects) and the expression of emotion (laughter, tears, a beating heart, a bad dream) typically defy words. Yet our primary access to these sentiments, as well as our means of conveying them to others, remain resolutely linguistic. Especially in the wake of historians’ recent fixation on discourse, nonverbal experience and judgment born of bodily sensation pose new problems of historical representation. So does the demise of easily adoptable explanatory frameworks, whether Marxist or revisionist, that were themselves narrative in form.

Historians have responded by innovating. In her *Family Romance*, for example, Hunt tried to historicize the unconscious by casting the whole in the form of a modern myth. De Baecque has repeatedly insisted that

²³ McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, 57.

²⁴ Jean-Clément Martin, *Contre-révolution, révolution et nation en France, 1789–1799* (Paris, 1998), 9. See also Martin, ed., *La Contre-révolution en Europe, XVIIIe–XIXe siècles: Réalités politiques et sociales, résonances culturelles et idéologiques* (Rennes, 2001).

²⁵ Mayer, *Furies*, 54.

²⁶ Hunt, *Family Romance*, 4.

²⁷ McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment*, 14.

his techniques for writing revolutionary history come from avant-garde film, where montage and the close-up, rather than seamless narrative, provide a path to a new kind of vision and thus knowledge of the object at hand.²⁸ And in her most recent book, a study of the sixteen months between the king's flight to Varennes and his execution, Wahnich turns her story into a metaphorical opera in which she "gives voice" to the people, or more abstractly, the popular will by treating it as a kind of omnipresent chorus.²⁹ The plot of Wahnich's *La longue patience du peuple* revolves almost entirely around the communication of sound: when an otherwise patient people repeatedly fails through petitions and other formal means to generate a response from the new ruling class, violence becomes the only means by which this people can make itself heard. But that sound is the sound of emotion. As Wahnich explains it, to give voice to the people means nothing less than to give expression to the shifting emotions—compassion, clemency, patience, pity, vengeance, pride, and defiance—that constitute the lens through which the historian's subjects make judgments and, ultimately, intervene in history.

Studies like de Baecque's *Des éclats du rire* and Wahnich's *La longue patience du peuple* will certainly not be to everyone's taste. These books are idiosyncratic enough, political differences aside, that it is hard to call them conventionally "influential" in the sense of likely to draw imitators. But if Tackett's 1996 book opened up the question of how to explain the revolutionary mind-set beyond the contours provided by Marxist or Tocquevillian models, Wahnich's 2008 book suggests that the search for solutions has been a spur to creativity. The French Revolution, in the words of Martin, can be understood as "one of the places of experimentation for human liberty."³⁰ The hope for future studies of the French Revolution is for that experimental quality to remain evident both in the stories we tell and in the way that we tell them.

²⁸ On this approach by de Baecque, who is also a film scholar, see also the introduction to his book *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770–1800*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA, 1997).

²⁹ Sophie Wahnich, *La longue patience du peuple, 1792: Naissance de la République* (Paris, 2008).

³⁰ Jean-Clément Martin, *Violence et révolution: Essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national* (Paris, 2006), 308.

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