

“The future is certain, it is only the past that is unpredictable.”¹ This Soviet joke continues to resurface for both its humor and its truth, and nowhere does it resonate more than in Early Modern European history. While one might expect the history of Early Modern Europe to be established, it is still an area of lively debate. Indeed, continued research and revisioning of past events ensures us fresh, new perspectives even while staying immersed in what lies behind us.

The purpose of this field statement is to address the current, dynamic state of Early Modern European history, with an emphasis on early modern France. This statement will address both pedagogical narratives and interpretative changes in three subject areas – French absolutism, the Enlightenment in France, and the French Revolution.

The subject of French absolutism has undergone fairly substantial revision in the last twenty to twenty-five years. The current trend is to understand domestic absolutism as a pattern of negotiations between the French monarch and his nobles that underscores its absolute but also limited nature. The one area where a more traditional interpretation continues to dominate is foreign policy. In particular, Louis XIV virtually commanded the European scene during the second half of the seventeenth century, and the French military experienced evolutionary change in its organizational structure.

The subject of the Enlightenment in France has also changed dramatically in the last few decades. Older narratives of the field focused exclusively on the texts of Montesquieu, Rousseau, and other high Enlightenment writers. Yet some scholars have

¹ Soviet joke, quoted in Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), vi.

begun to question the exclusivity of these writings, suggesting that other texts – such as the pornographic literature of the low Enlightenment or the emerging French press – are more accurate reflections of eighteenth-century French society. Still other scholars believe that the Enlightenment is best understood by abandoning the texts altogether, going instead to the cultural and social practices and venues of eighteenth-century Frenchmen and women.

A discussion of the French Enlightenment invariably leads into a questioning of what link, if any, existed between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Of course, scholars continue to argue extensively over the Revolution's origins. However, two other areas of intense research and lively debate include the subjects of the Revolution's radical phase – whether it was caused by ideas or circumstances – and the Revolution's impact on women – whether it opened or closed doors for them. The debate in the area of gender also bleeds into the subject of methodology, as scholars pit archival research against examining the images, iconography, and rituals of the Revolution. While such a divergence of methods is not unique to French Revolutionary gender studies, examining it in such a context provides the opportunity to see the myriad ways historians are reinterpreting these subjects of Early Modern European history.

French Absolutism

Teaching absolutism in seventeenth-century France has certainly taken on new meaning in the last twenty years. It is, in short, a topic that has undergone fairly substantial change. Indeed, by interrogating the very nature of absolutism itself, scholars have so completely recast the subject that they stand in danger of revising themselves out

of a field. The present challenge, then, is to reframe the notion of what absolutism was – what it meant in seventeenth-century France – both for monarch, and French subjects up and down the social spectrum. To fully understand the dilemma of present-day scholars of absolutism, it is first necessary to map the interpretive changes that have occurred over the last few decades.

The “traditional” interpretation of French absolutism involved a fairly monolithic version of seventeenth-century life. Louis XIV, through a strong personal rule based upon divine right; few, yet loyal, ministers; a strong court system; and a return to religious uniformity, ushered in a new age for the French monarchy of national glory and centralized government. The age of absolutism represented progress from France’s feudal past. This was a celebratory history – centered on Louis XIV, Versailles, and those of significance at court there – that reinforced the very legacy Louis worked so hard to create. Largely absent from the traditional monologue was anyone outside of Versailles, either noble or peasant. These groups were cast as receivers of the benefits that absolutism brought to France, certainly not participants in its construction or its daily workings.²

In the mid-1960s, Pierre Goubert, representing the *Annales* School of historians, introduced the notion of the *longue duree* of history, as well as the twenty million or so Frenchmen who had heretofore been ignored from accounts of absolutist France. Goubert’s account did not treat the twenty million Frenchmen as individuals, but at least he tried to picture what was happening to them in the aggregate. *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen* still read mostly like a biography of Louis XIV. The essential

² For classic examples of the traditional interpretation of French absolutism, see David Ogg, *Louis XIV* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) and C. V. Wedgwood, *Richelieu and the French Monarchy* (London: The English Universities Press Ltd, 1949).

difference between the *Annalistes* and traditional accounts was that the *longue duree*, rather than Louis himself, became the driving force behind history. As Goubert saw it, the “big” things, like economics, demographics, or weather, defined Louis’ mind set and actions and, hence, were the underpinnings of absolutism. Gone from the narrative were the essence of kingship, Louis’ charisma, and the importance of religious beliefs and attitudes. *Annales* historians downplayed, even discounted, the importance of Versailles and life at court. Finally, the twenty million Frenchmen living under Louis’ reign, also subject to the large forces of the *longue duree*, were wracked by cycles of famine, disease, and economic hardship. In short, while Goubert did not interrogate absolutism itself, his notion regarding the forces that created it, and its effects on the populace, produced a far different narrative than that of traditionalist scholars.³

The present state of the field has involved a new generation of social and socio-economic historians questioning the very nature of absolutism itself. For example, David Parker traces the drive to absolutism in Louis XIV’s grandfather, Henry IV, and father, Louis XIII. First and foremost, the French monarchy possessed a dualistic nature – absolute, but also limited by notions of divine and natural justice. Second, French absolutism was no dramatic break with the past, Parker posits, no new form of government based upon an altered vision of society or kingship. It was, rather, a measure to restore order and royal authority to a society deep in the throes of change. Absolutism represented continuity, not progress, and was an attempt to deal with the social and political tensions embedded in a feudal society.⁴

³ Pierre Goubert, *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen*, trans. Anne Carter (New York: Vintage Books, 1970).

⁴ David Parker, *The Making of French Absolutism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 1, 90, and 148.

William Beik and James Collins support Parker's assertion that absolutism represented a reinforcement of feudalism, not a blueprint for change. There are subtle differences in their narratives, however. Beik, in his social history of Languedoc, invests a good deal of importance in the personal charisma of Louis XIV to garner the support of the nobility in order to make absolutism successful. In other words, "absolutism" was Louis' ability to make his programs, his reign, attractive to regional and local elite. Far from absolute, seventeenth-century monarchy in France was a series of negotiations between the king and the nobility. Although the balance of power was in the king's favor, his rule was far from limitless.⁵ Collins's fiscal history also explores the limits of the French monarchy. Again, absolutism was a series of negotiations – this time monetary – between king and local nobility on how much their region would pay. However, limits on monarchical power did not end with these negotiations. Other sources – from the social tensions between royal officers and local nobility; to the peasants who had no say in how much tax they were assessed but a considerable amount in how much they paid; to the collection process itself – also served to check the king's absolutist reign.⁶

Focusing exclusively on the domestic side of absolutism, however, offers an incomplete, even skewed, assessment of the subject. John Lynn's in-depth examination of the seventeenth-century French army argues that, at least in terms of military innovations and European entanglements, Louis XIV gave real substance to the concept of absolutism. The French army became the largest institution created by the seventeenth-century French monarchy. Some 420,000 men strong by the beginning of the eighteenth-

⁵ William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 31, 335.

⁶ James B. Collins, *Fiscal Limits of Absolutism: Direct Taxation in Early Seventeenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 66, 164, 200.

century and six times larger than a century earlier, this powerhouse not only set the European agenda for the age but also shaped France's governmental needs. Conceptually and institutionally, the seventeenth-century French army underwent a decided military evolution, transitioning in organization from an aggregate contract to a state-commissioned army. Whereas those scholars concerned with Louis' domestic agenda see absolutism as built upon a feudal past, the army of the *grand siècle* was a product of its age, helping to shape that age as well. The French army, Lynn argues, "drove and exemplified the increased power of the monarchy," establishing the reality of seventeenth-century French absolutism. In short, while Louis XIV may not have exercised absolute control over everything in his domain, he did transform those institutions with which he was most concerned as an early modern monarch – control over his government, foreign policy, and his army.⁷

Before returning to the essential question – what to teach regarding absolutism – let me suggest that, at least for those scholars interested in the domestic agenda of French absolutist kings, it is important for them to re-imagine this subject unless they want to revision themselves out of a field. If scholars are suggesting that social negotiations make absolutism something of a non-entity, what more is left to be done? In short, if absolutism wasn't absolute, where do historians of the field go from there? By recognizing, I would argue, that absolutism was a force in history, but also by recognizing that its nature was different than either traditionalist or *Annales* historians have posited. In short, social negotiations were at the heart of the practical solution to

⁷ John A. Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle: The French Army, 1610-1715* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), ix, 30-31, 599.

working out the limited character of the monarchy, the reality of which seventeenth-century observers clearly understood.

There is, then, I would posit, an essence to absolutism that acknowledges social interchange as its key underpinning. The French monarchs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were characterized by their absolute, but also limited, nature. The king's status as a demigod, or at least semi god, and the notion of rule by divine right under girded the sense of absolute rule.

Yet, there were limits also, and these came from several sources. First, religion granted the king absolute rule by divine right; however, it also served to limit his power by imaging him as the good "father-king" who acknowledged and worked to accomplish the needs of his people. Indeed, this dual character of the monarchy was ably expressed and defended from the religious quarter by contemporary Bishop Jacques-Benigne Boussuet in *Politics Drawn from the Very Words of Holy Scripture*.⁸ Second, the remnants of feudalism and the notion of feudal rights provided another check on royal power. Landed nobles had, over time, acquired not only vast wealth and influence, but those with important connections also received fiscal advantages from the state, as well as governorships that enabled them to wield considerable power in their own right. Combined with their influence at court, these nobles could prove to be, at times, a marked restraint on absolute monarchical power. Third, the very business of running the state – primarily in terms of taxation and judicial functions -- produced a vast layer of robe nobles who acquired their nobility through purchase. While not as powerful as the landed nobility, their sheer number and local interests still made them a force to be handled,

⁸ William Beik, *Louis XIV and Absolutism: A Brief Study with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 168-70.

rather than ruled in absolute terms. Finally, even peasants could come together to wield some power. The peasant uprisings of 1675 reveal that economic hardship and even the crown's own fiscal policy led common people to push back the boundaries of absolutism.⁹

The above suggests that social negotiations lay at the heart of absolutist France. Yet while various social groups could exercise some power to limit that of the king's, most of these groups found it in their interest to support the monarch as absolute; indeed, they would be hard pressed to imagine an alternative. Moreover, while there were limits on the absolute power of the monarch, the balance of power definitely lay with the king for several reasons. First, if nobles could not imagine an alternative to monarchy, neither could other groups within the social hierarchy. Second, the French monarchy was sanctioned by the Catholic Church, indeed, divinely sanctioned by God. Third, one of the real, perhaps innovative, concepts of seventeenth-century absolutism was the creation of royal commissioners who served the king directly. *Intendants* carried out the king's wishes in the provinces, while royal councilors and ministers served the king at court. These robe nobles had a vested interest in seeing that the apparatus of the absolutist government remain strong.¹⁰ Finally, the military was completely responsive to the king, which indeed gave him an upper hand in his negotiations with even the most powerful landed nobles. Moreover, the military played another invaluable role in consolidating monarchical power. The French monarchs' involvement in foreign wars satisfied not only their need and desire for greatness, but also channeled the various noble factions' own

⁹ Ibid., 6-9.

¹⁰ Ibid., 9.

aspirations into working *for* the king rather than against him.¹¹ In sum, while the term “absolutism” would have been foreign to seventeenth-century Frenchmen and women, they did understand and discuss the “absolute power” of the king, all the while recognizing that in practice, there were many real limits to that power.

Before proceeding to the subject of the Enlightenment, this early modern European world that stood on the brink of substantial transition had already undergone change. What, in short, were some of the forces other than absolutist monarchy that were shaping and reshaping life for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Frenchmen and women?

First and foremost, western Europeans emerged from the sixteenth century with a drastically altered religious landscape. The Protestant Reformation did much more than introduce religious plurality into a heretofore religiously uniform world. Traditional, pre-Reformation Christianity was a religion built largely on community. Confession, penance, and communion were as much social as religious acts, designed to satisfy sin and reintegrate the sinner back into communal life.¹² The introduction of reformed religion tore at the heart of the community. Indeed, scholars are now re-inserting religion back into France’s sixteenth-century civil wars, interpreting them largely as a clash of two religious cultures. Wishing to delineate the line between sacred and profane in different ways, Catholics and Protestants alike understood each other as a rent into the unity of the body social.¹³

¹¹ Parker, *Making of French Absolutism*, 60.

¹² John Bossy, *Christianity in the West, 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 46-49.

¹³ Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion, 1562-1629* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-3. Barbara Diefendorf is another scholar whose recent work on the St. Bartholomew’s massacres in Paris

Just as the Protestant Reformation had implications for the body social, the Catholic Reformation likewise changed the western European religious landscape. Both Protestant and Catholic reformers shared similar goals – to transform religion from a collective, communal experience to an individual relationship with God, and to bring about God’s kingdom on earth, through the use of social discipline, if necessary. Reformers used catechisms to teach specific beliefs flowing from different reform movements, but also more uniformly to instill Christian discipline. In short, while proceeding from different theological standpoints, Protestant and Catholic reformers arrived at the same place. The exclusion of the social act from church sacraments transformed Christianity from a communal religion to one in which the individual sinner stood in need of reconciliation before a sovereign God.¹⁴

Second, these religious changes had implications in other areas of early modern European life. As Christianity moved from a communal to an individual religion, some early notion of “private” space began to take shape. Indeed, the delineation between private and public that westerners know today would have been completely foreign to a community such as the one that welcomed Arnaud du Tihl as Martin Guerre in the sixteenth-century French countryside.¹⁵ Moreover, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Western Europe became a dual culture in ways other than religiously, as a new print culture was slowly emerging and interacting with the older, oral culture. Finally, elite Europeans also began to distinguish themselves from some of the popular rituals and

has re-emphasized their religious aspect. Using the metaphor of the body social, body politic, and body of Christ, and drawing on the work of Natalie Davis into the ritualistic aspects of popular violence, Diefendorf reinterprets the Parisian outbreaks of violence during the sixteenth century as neither random nor spontaneous, but as attempts to purge the body social. See Barbara B. Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross: Catholics and Huguenots in Sixteenth-Century Paris* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 34, 48, 103.

¹⁴ Bossy, *Christianity in the West*, 97; 115-16; 126-27.

¹⁵ Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

culture of the day, such that at least some distinctions came to exist between elite and popular cultures. This change can be witnessed in reformers' efforts to root out popular religious rituals and superstitions, but also in learned and elite attempts during the sixteenth century to collect and publish popular wisdom.¹⁶ All of these forces – religious changes, privatization, print, and the separation of elite and popular culture – served to interact with each other, as well as with the traditional culture already in place. The notion that absolutism was a political response to a dynamic society certainly has resonance. Yet while sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Western Europe was a society already in a state of transition, it stood on the brink of even more change.

The Enlightenment in France

Entering a discussion of the French Enlightenment is tricky business these days. Whereas a generation ago professors surveying early modern Europe might begin and end with the high Enlightenment texts, today such a choice is not so clear. Consider the other avenues available. One could descend with Robert Darnton to the underground network of Enlightenment writers frustrated by their inability to break into the salons, or travel with him to just outside the French borders to examine the “forbidden” pornographic texts that were French bestsellers. Or, we could abandon the texts but stay with print by studying the French periodical press with Jack Censer or the *mémoires judiciaires* of sensational eighteenth-century trials with Sarah Maza. Or perhaps a better route would be to join scholars such as Thomas Munck, Roger Chartier, and Dena Goodman who leave the texts behind altogether and focus instead on what they see as the

¹⁶ Robin Briggs, *Witches and Neighbors: The Social and Cultural Context of European Witchcraft* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 101-03; Natalie Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 229.

essential social and cultural changes of the eighteenth century. The choices, in short, become overwhelming. How do we, as twenty-first-century Americans, come to understand not only what the Enlightenment was, but what it meant to the eighteenth-century French?

In teaching the Enlightenment, I submit that the standard, high Enlightenment texts are still the best place to *start*. In essence, if we want to get a sense of the strains of thought that pervaded the eighteenth century – ideas such as the watchmaker character of God, the misconceived notions of institutional religion, the importance of humanness, and the equality of man – then going to those who were writing about such concepts makes sense. How better to get an eighteenth-century critique of convent life than to read Denis Diderot’s *The Nun*; or to understand contemporary fascination and comparisons with other cultures than by being exposed to Montesquieu’s *The Persian Letters*; or to understand the emergence of a political discourse outside the realm of absolutism than by grasping the essence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*?¹⁷

The high Enlightenment texts, however, can only be a beginning. There are questions that require us to move beyond these familiar products of Enlightenment to other forms of print, as well as to the social venues and cultural practices of the day. How far did Enlightenment ideas proliferate into a French society that was still largely illiterate? What other forms of print were popular and influential, and do they support the same critique of the French monarchy as the high writings? What cultural changes occurred during the “Age of Enlightenment” that helped move French society from absolutism to revolution? What role, if any, did women play in the Enlightenment, and,

¹⁷ Denis Diderot, *The Nun*, trans. Leonard Tancock (London: Penguin Books, 1972); Montesquieu, *The Persian Letters*, trans. George R. Healy (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1964); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1968).

more generally, did Enlightenment ideas carry implications for eighteenth-century constructions of gender? The following “tour” of some of the latest and most influential scholarship on the subject seeks to provide a teaching narrative that deals with these questions. In doing so, we will weave in and out of the world of print to illustrate its emerging influence within French society and its confluence with the existing oral culture.

To assess the impact of Enlightenment ideas upon eighteenth-century French society, we turn to the work of scholars interested in contemporary social and cultural questions and venues. Thomas Munck describes the eighteenth century as a general time of “enlightening,” a time when there was a growth in the willingness and desire to question and discuss previously taboo, perhaps even unconsidered, topics. Munck abandons the texts altogether in his research, and, yet, they are never far out of sight. He is interested in the places – mostly the coffeehouses – where the literate interacted with the illiterate. These are the places where the ideas that come from the texts were being discussed. While Munck can offer no real empirical evidence because he is not interested in the texts themselves, he posits that a rather large cross-section of society talked about the ideas due to the burgeoning print culture’s frequent interaction with the older, oral culture.¹⁸

Moreover, other texts were being discussed in the salons and coffeehouses as well. Thanks to the work of scholars like Robert Darnton and Jack Censer, we are now familiar with popular forms of eighteenth-century print beyond the high Enlightenment writings. An underground network of “pornographic” texts and low Enlightenment

¹⁸ Thomas Munck, *The Enlightenment: A Comparative Social History, 1721-1794* (London: Arnold Publishers, 2000). For an interesting look at the intersection of print and oral culture, see especially chapters 2 and 3.

writers emerged for a French populace that supported such a forbidden market. And the French press experienced expansive growth and “ebb and flow” changes during the latter half of the eighteenth century, becoming a springboard of discourse for an expanding reading public.¹⁹

This world of print did more than spread Enlightenment ideas, however, as cultural historian Roger Chartier argues. Print also transformed the French by granting them the faculty of reason and the power to judge. In short, print created a reading public out of which emerged more modern notions of public opinion. Indeed, Sarah Maza’s work with sensational French trials of the late eighteenth century illustrates how an expanding, though as yet, pre-political, public voraciously bought and read the blatantly dramatic narratives written by the young barristers that argued the cases. Over the course of two decades, however, the tone of these narratives changed – from heavily melodramatic literary works to political treatises. The transition in this genre reflects a change in the French public as well – by the late 1780s, this public had come into its own as a discerning, active force in pre-Revolutionary political culture.²⁰

Remaining with print alone, however, would cause us to miss other important cultural changes taking place during the eighteenth century – what Chartier terms “dechristianization,” or “secularization.” Post-Reformation Catholicism imposed a certain “religious stability” upon the people through regular attendance at mass and scrupulous performance of Easter duties. Dechristianization entailed, not a loss of respect for these, but the emergence of changing attitudes toward death and birth control, a

¹⁹ Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982); Jack R. Censer, *The French Press in the Age of Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1994).

²⁰ Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 37-44; Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Célèbres of Prerevolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 66-67, 309-11, 314-16.

decline in religious vocations, and a decline in religious texts in favor of scientific and political tracts. Couple this with a loss of faith in the absoluteness of the institution of the church and a declining influence of the parish in the lives of common people, and we begin to witness the long-term transformation from religion to politics as the organizing principle of French society.²¹ The real beauty of Chartier's cultural history is that it so thoroughly explores the impact that the texts themselves were having on French society.

Indeed, it is important not to stray too far from the high Enlightenment texts. For if one is to assess the misogynist underpinnings of the French Revolution, these writings would be one place to start. Indeed, Lieselotte Steinbrügge posits that Enlightenment writings are *the* place to discover the emergence of sexism. The strain of thought that classified women as closer to nature, more emotional, and more adept at private morality yet less capable of rational thought, was an outgrowth of mainstream Enlightenment texts. The discourse grew out of certain anthropological, medical, and moral/philosophical strains, however, not as a masculine effort to subjugate women.²² Unfortunately, Steinbrügge narrative fails to account for what eighteenth-century Frenchwomen made of these ideas. Despite the strains of sexism that emerged, eighteenth-century Frenchwomen responded enthusiastically to Rousseau's writings, for

²¹ Chartier, *Cultural Origins*, 93-105.

²² Lieselotte Steinbrügge, *The Moral Sex: Woman's Nature in the French Enlightenment*, trans. Pamela E. Selwyn (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4-7. One drawback to Steinbrügge's important study is her selectivity of the texts. While one would expect her to focus on those writings that give support to her search for the origins of sexism, her bias leads her to ignore *philosophes* like Condorcet whose views differed so remarkably from the texts Steinbrügge explores. For a somewhat different argument on the emergence of male/femaleness during the Enlightenment, see Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990). The crucial difference between the two is that Laqueur argues that the gendering of sex is an outgrowth of the political discourse of the Enlightenment. In short, "all men are created equal," is predicated upon a profound *difference* between the two sexes.

example, and created an important role for themselves out of the discourses that made them the keepers of private morality.²³

Locating the source of sexism in Enlightenment texts, however, does nothing to uncover the role of women in the Enlightenment. To do this, historian Dena Goodman gravitates away from the texts and into the world of eighteenth-century salon culture. Once out from under the spell of Rousseauian rhetoric, she argues, one sees that the *salonnières* were central to the Republic of Letters, acting as governesses that ordered and tamed an otherwise male-dominated, militant society. The men, on one hand, consented to the governing influence of women, in recognition of the need for the taming influence of such governance. The women, on the other hand, were able to pursue their own educational aspirations in addition to establishing themselves into a central niche of the Republic. In short, a few women found a way to participate in the project of Enlightenment.²⁴

Another important aspect of Goodman's research is that she also examines the important role of the spread of print culture – its dual impact on the Old Regime and the Republic of Letters. Her work on the epistolary genre suggests the character and nature of the early growth of print. The letters of the Republic expanded rapidly as a written discourse. However, once the discourse left the ordered culture of the salon, governance broke down, as the new community of readers moved beyond the reach of the

²³ Robert Darnton, "Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity," in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985): 215-56.

²⁴ Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 76, 89, 99-101.

philosophes and *salonnières*. Print facilitated the spread of Enlightenment, but it came at a price.²⁵

Finally, remaining focused solely on cultural and social venues of the eighteenth century, the high Enlightenment texts themselves, or even the low-life or pornographic genres, would cause us to miss an important aspect of eighteenth-century French political life. For if we fail to consider another print medium that was coming into its own during the eighteenth century – the French press – we would miss the fifteen-year period just prior to the Revolution when the French press basically reinforced the status quo. While there was some oblique critique of the French monarchy, any direct negative commentary was nonexistent, argues Jack Censer.²⁶ In short, when we consider the periodical press, we emerge with a different sense of the late eighteenth-century French society than when we delve into most other forms of Enlightenment print.

This pedagogical narrative of the Enlightenment began with the high Enlightenment texts and then purposely wove in and out of the world of print to illustrate one of the most important facets of the eighteenth century – the growing influence of print, but also its intersection with the older, oral culture. This mixture of traditional and emerging cultures enabled the spread of textual ideas beyond the realm of the privileged literate. Moreover, this merging of cultures, I argue, keeps the high Enlightenment texts a viable starting point for students of the eighteenth century while also nudging us into other genres of print, as well as into the coffeehouses and salons themselves.

In sum, then, while the Enlightenment texts are an essential beginning to teaching the French Enlightenment, they can be only that – a beginning. For if we were to begin

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 137, 152-57.

²⁶ Censer, *French Press in the Age of Enlightenment*, 118.

and end with the ideas themselves, we would miss too much. French men and women read much more than the high Enlightenment writings – the burgeoning press, sensational trial briefs, and a whole range of pornographic books. Traditional and natural religion, but also politics, emerged as acceptable topics in more and more salon and café discussions. Gender differences became the basis for the birth of sexism, even while some women found ways to participate heavily in the project of enlightenment. And a reading, discerning public was slowly evolving into a political essence whose opinion would one day matter. Such was French society on the eve of revolution.

The French Revolution

When Roger Chartier posed the question “Do books make revolutions?” in his *Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*, he cleverly articulated a question that has plagued scholars for generations.²⁷ What was the link between the Enlightenment and the French Revolution? As a way of tying these two themes together, this question also serves as a springboard for a discussion on the debate surrounding the causes of the Revolution. Yet the underpinnings of the Revolution must only be a beginning to any present-day classroom narrative on the subject. French Revolution scholars have created such a vast historiography that it can be daunting to wield discussion of the topics. There are two areas outside of the origins discourse that provide provocative avenues for exploration, however. The debates concerning the radical phase of the Revolution as well as those surrounding the Revolution’s impact on women help students get beyond the Revolution’s beginnings and well into its longer term implications for French society. Moreover, not only do such topics provide an enhanced understanding of the Revolution;

²⁷ Chartier, *Cultural Origins*, 66.

they can also serve as an important introduction regarding the differences among historians on the subject of “doing” history.

Discussing the origins of the French Revolution is obviously a must when teaching Early Modern Europe. If not careful, however, the topic can virtually hijack the course of study to the detriment of what I consider even more valuable lines of inquiry. Therefore, my teaching narrative uses a macro-level approach to discussing the Revolution’s causes. This approach allows more time for examining the Revolution’s radical phase and its implication for women, topics that provide for the exploration of more diverse instructional issues and intersect more closely with our current political and social climate.

It has been close to twenty-five years since François Furet overturned the Marxist paradigm with his methodology of linguistic analysis and his interpretation based upon Rousseauian political ideas.²⁸ The Furetian interpretation does not dominate quite so thoroughly as the Marxist one did, and the result can be overwhelming.²⁹ Yet, the topic of Revolutionary causes can be simplified considerably by focusing on whether one supports a social interpretation, a political ideas, or Enlightenment, approach, or some combination of the two – influences from Marxist and Furetian paradigms.

²⁸ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981). For the classic text detailing the Marxist interpretation, see Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, bicentennial edition, trans. R. R. Palmer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

²⁹ Jack R. Censer, “Social Twists and Linguistic Turns: Revolutionary Historiography a Decade after the Bicentennial,” *French Historical Studies* 22 (Winter 1999), 166. Censer’s review essay provides a concise review of the twentieth-century paradigms in French Revolutionary historiography. He posits that while no new paradigm has overturned the Furetian one garnered from linguistic analysis of contemporary political language, Furet and his followers have not altogether shut down other interpretations in the same way that the Marxist discourse did during its reign. With gender studies, analysis of Revolutionary images, as well as some neo-Marxist traditions alive and well, diversity best describes the current trend in French Revolutionary scholarship. Two other valuable historiographical essays that cover the overturning of the Marxist paradigm, revisionism, and post-revisionism include William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 3d ed. (Oxford University Press, 1999), 5-41, and Gary Kates, ed., *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1-20.

My own preference is to begin with a social interpretation, and follow it up by positing that the essential political rent caused by eighteenth-century social cleavages was accelerated by certain Enlightenment rhetoric. To this end, Alexis de Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution* remains an excellent text for exploring the social structure of the Old Regime, both its rigidity and fluidity. He posits that there was much less distinction between "middle class" and nobility than we assume based upon their cleavage at the time of revolution. Moreover, the middle class had many gradations that we often fail to recognize. It was, in short, a complex social hierarchy full of tension. It was also filled with Frenchmen and women who had lost faith in the government's ability to respond to the fiscal problems of the state.³⁰ These social tensions did not exist in a vacuum, however. Historian William Doyle's monograph, *Origins of the French Revolution*, provides a good companion to de Tocqueville. Doyle maps out the social landscape, but he also explores how Enlightenment influences exacerbated existing tensions. Social and political concepts that would have been unimaginable to many Frenchmen a century earlier – ideas like the natural equality of man, opposition to despotism, and the need for a representative political body – began to resonate with an expanding, increasingly political, public.³¹

De Tocqueville's and Doyle's monographs complement each other well and are good texts for a largely social interpretation that refuses to stray too far from Enlightenment influences. Yet, there is an essential difference in their narratives as well. For de Tocqueville, the antiquated French social structure made the Revolution inevitable. Doyle, conversely, argues against the inevitability of revolution, positing

³⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York, Doubleday, 1955), 81, 94, 178.

³¹ Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, 126, 129-30.

instead that the French state became vulnerable because it tried to take on too much. Regardless of whether the French state was set on a course toward revolution or drove itself to it, however, the social cleavages present in eighteenth-century French society, pushed forward by Enlightenment thought and discourse, eventually brought the French monarchy to its knees.

Having reviewed the Revolution's origins, we can now turn to the radical phase of the Revolution, which, in my view, offers a more interesting line of discussion. How does one explain the fatal behavior of the Terror years that only twenty-four months earlier seemed unthinkable? In short, does the Revolution's radicalism come from Enlightenment ideas or from the circumstances that arose during the course of the Revolution?

François Furet, albeit some years ago now, articulated the argument that ideas drove the Revolution to its radical phase. There was, Furet asserts, a Rousseauian "juggernaut" that couldn't be stopped. That discourse was an integral part of the Revolution from its outset, and its notion of the general will made radicalism a logical outcome.³² Moreover, Keith Baker has more recently taken up the "ideas" mantle. Baker argues that there were present from the early days of the Revolution three competing discourses – will, justice and reason. In the end, the discourse of the will wins out, thereby resulting in the terror.³³

My own preference, however, is the circumstances argument. One of the best efforts from those scholars positing that the Terror was born out of revolutionary

³² François Furet, "The French Revolution Revisited," in *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies*, ed., Gary Kates (London: Routledge, 1998), 71-90.

³³ Keith Michael Baker, "The Idea of a Declaration of Rights," in *The French Revolution* ed., Kates , 102-03, 108, 134-35.

circumstances is put forth by R. R. Palmer in his classic, *Twelve Who Ruled*. Palmer does not deny that there were strains of Enlightenment ideas – most notably the general will – present from the early days of the Revolution. Where he differs is in what causes the institution of the Terror. With the disorganization of the government came the organization of radicalism. In short, circumstances produced the Terror, not ideas. War, disunity, disorganization of the state, and foreign threat – these circumstances made any dissent an enemy of the People.³⁴ Indeed, Palmer’s thesis does a brilliant job of marrying the importance of Enlightenment thought with the critical nature of the circumstances that drove the Revolution into its radical phase. For if Enlightenment ideas – most notably the notion that installed the People as sovereign – were present from the beginning of the Revolution, something else had to turn behavior that was unacceptable in 1791 into the order of the day by 1793.

With the primary question that haunts the radical phase explored, it is essential to pursue some other facets of this disturbing, yet fascinating, period. There are several I would highlight. First, Jack Censer would again have us remember the press. Through the radical Parisian press, we see French society being rocked by two opposing forces – the *peuple*, who favored the Revolution and in which resided all that was good; and the *aristocrats*, hostile to the Revolution and embodying all that was destructive of society. An excellent visual companion to exploring the range of opinions present during the Revolution’s early years can be found in the film *La Nuit de Varennes*. In addition to examining the lack of unity present in the Revolution during its beginning, the film also does a magnificent job of wedding the social with the political as seen in the characters

³⁴ R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 57.

thrust together on this journey.³⁵ Moreover, these two sources reinforce the aspect of disunity that helped push the Revolution toward its radical phase.

Second, we would do a disservice to anyone studying the French Revolution if we did not give them a sense of the revulsion present during the Reign of Terror. Daniel Arasse's account, *The Guillotine and the Terror*, as well as the film, *Danton*, are quite effective at depicting the fear and horror. Arasse also articulates the political significance and symbolism of the guillotine that is visually displayed in *Danton*. The political strength of the guillotine was that it was the ultimate manifestation of the omnipotence of the People – it subordinated the individual to the collective will of the People and purged the body politic.³⁶

Third, despite my preference for an argument positing that circumstances produced the Terror, I think it is important to stress the amount of Enlightenment thought that keeps surfacing in books on the subject – both in the primary and secondary literature. For example, even Palmer suggests that the Reign of Terror was not a reign of darkness but an attempt to force enlightenment on the French people. He later suggests that the Grand Terror was, in addition to a psychological fever, also a time of an “idealistic enlightenment” program. Art, education, military – all were directed to the diffusion of the Revolution, and it became, in short, a secular religion.³⁷ Enlightenment

³⁵ Jack R. Censer, *Prelude to Power: The Parisian Radical Press, 1789-1791* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 38-39; *La Nuit de Varennes*, videocassette, 126 min., Columbia Pictures/Gaumont Company, Paris, France, 1982.

³⁶ Daniel Arasse, *The Guillotine and the Terror*, translated by Christopher Miller (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 75, 85-86; *Danton*, videocassette, 136 min., Franco Polonaise-Gaumont-TF1 Films Production, n. p. 1982.

³⁷ Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 45, 320-23.

thought is also at the center of the radical press's ideology and behind the introduction of the guillotine as a more humane instrument of death.³⁸

Keeping a loose tie to the Enlightenment also provides a springboard for discussing the different courses of revolution in France and America despite their similar rhetoric of popular sovereignty. In France, the Rousseauian discourse that predominated required that the individual must subordinate himself or herself to the general will; absent his or her ability or willingness to do so, the state would do the job instead. The discourse that predominated in the American Revolution, conversely, emphasized the English heritage of individual liberty and the need to guard against encroachment on the rights of Englishmen from any quarter – king, aristocracy, or the People.³⁹ Individual liberty in the French context meant “freedom” discovered through the rule of the People versus the rule of a monarch, and the freedom to rule through the general will. This notion of individual liberty within the confines of the general will is well illustrated even early in the Revolution through Censer's chapter on the radical press's treatment of individuals and institutions, as he depicts how quickly heroes of the Revolution could become villains.⁴⁰

The Revolution's relationship with religion provides a fourth and final angle from which to examine its radical phase. Indeed, there is a decided contrast between the early revolutionaries' conflicting approach to traditional religion and the seemingly ordered secular religion that the Revolution became by the Terror years. David Bell explores how early revolutionaries borrowed from both Reformation and Counter Reformation

³⁸ On these subjects, see in particular Censer, *Prelude to Power*, 47; and Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, 1.

³⁹ An excellent and concise overview of the English-version of rights and individual liberty can be found in Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 1-48. For the development of popular sovereignty in the United States, see Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988).

⁴⁰ Censer, *Prelude to Power*, 101.

approaches to language in order to advance their agenda and encourage national unity. On the one hand, revolutionaries used local languages, similar to Counter Reformation priests, to “convert” locals to the Revolution and prevent counter-revolutionary forces from gaining ground. Supporters of the Revolution also borrowed from the tactics of Protestant Reformation ministers, on the other hand, in eventually promoting a national language. Designed to advance the cause of national unity, a national language was also seen as a way to break the influence of local parish priests.⁴¹ In short, the Revolution’s response to the issues involving religion is but another example of the chaos of the early revolutionary period, further advancing the notion that circumstances produced the terror. The Revolution’s secular “religion” seemed like just the organized substitute needed to stem the chaos and handle the hydra of religion. Yet the Committee of Public Safety’s difficult experience with dechristianization in the provinces reflects that this hydra may even have been beyond the capabilities of those running the radical phase of the Revolution.⁴²

The third and final topic to be included in a teaching narrative of the Revolution concerns the varied approaches that French Revolution scholars employ in studying gender. Largely, this subject entails assessing what the Revolution meant for women. In simple terms, we can divide the scholarship into the liberal scholars, who argue that women found a role for themselves through the notion of republican motherhood, and the radicals, who see the Revolution as a step backward for women. Yet by examining four

⁴¹ David A. Bell, “National Language and the Revolutionary Crucible,” in *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680-1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 191-96.

⁴² Palmer does a good job of looking at the range of views on the dechristianization program within the Committee of Public Safety itself, the Committee’s involvement with dechristianization in the provinces, as well as the secular religion that the Revolution eventually embodied. Through both Bell and Palmer, we see just how out of touch with the provincial population the radical revolutionaries were when it came to religion. See Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled*, esp. 142-43, 164-68, 215-17, and 320-23.

important books on the subject, we can delve into several interesting aspects of the topic – notions of gender and the Revolution, the range of thought that exists in recent scholarship, and ways in which historians choose to research and write about gender and the French Revolution.

For scholar Joan Landes, the French Revolution was all about gender. She argues that the bourgeois republic was constituted through a discourse on gender relations. Whereas Old Regime France was a society based upon “class,” or social hierarchy, gender was at the heart of the Revolutionary republic. Two resulting discourses – domesticity and socialist feminism – emerged from the fall of the absolutist public sphere and the silencing of the “public woman.” The outcome for women was their exclusion from a public that was now gendered male – a republic constructed not only without women but also against them. Indeed, even the defenders of “women’s rights” could not escape the discourse of domesticity, or republican motherhood, as they, too, sought to silence the public women of the Old Regime.⁴³

It is important to understand that Landes’s is a discursive history. She is interested in language and texts, and how the discourses coming out of the Revolution speak to relations of power. While she acknowledges that women were initially drawn into the center of revolutionary politics, hers is a study of how the Revolution rather quickly confined, limited, and marginalized women, bequeathing to modern politics a language of gender.

Historian Dominique Godineau seeks the opposite. Hers is a narrative of women at the center of Revolutionary politics writ large. Even her title is illustrative – *The*

⁴³ Joan B. Landes, *Women and Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 170-71; 175-87; 200.

Women of Paris and Their French Revolution. In certain respects, Godineau is “taking on” gender histories like Landes’s. Godineau contends that some scholars have overlooked the important role that women played during the Revolution in order to highlight its misogynistic tone. Women marched and rioted, they sat in the galleries of convention and club meetings, they “voted,” wrote, and formed a club of their own. These were the working-class women of Paris, and they were, in short, ardent revolutionaries. Their *mentalité* included hostility toward the merchant, a sense of popular sovereignty, and support for the Terror as a means of economic stability and rooting out political enemies.⁴⁴ Her intersection of the history of women and the history of the Revolution, despite the anachronism, seeks to get at the account of women’s encounter with citizenship. It was initially an explosive encounter, but in the end, it was anything but political, circumscribing women to the interior of the family.

Interesting how two books can end up in similar places and yet be so different. In part, the difference stems from their sources. Landes’s discursive account leads her to text and language, whereas Godineau immerses herself in the archives, looking for the action and agency of the women of Paris. There is also the difference of intent – one to capture the revolutionary activity of Parisian women, the other to uncover the language of gender.

Historian Lynn Hunt offers yet another gender history in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*. She suggests that most Frenchmen and women needed a frame of reference for thinking politically during the Revolution. The metaphor of the family provided that reference for many people, particularly in terms of how they collectively

⁴⁴ Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and Their French Revolution*, trans. Katherine Steip (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 224-30.

imagined power relations. In short, then, gender was at the heart of the Revolution because it was also at the heart of family politics. Most eighteenth-century French used the latter to think about the former. The various family romances that played out during the Revolution – the good father, the aggressive band of brothers, the disorderly women, the rehabilitated family, and the enterprising orphan – brought unity to an otherwise fragmented world.⁴⁵

Again, the end result of revolutionary politics is the same in Hunt's account as Landes's and Godineau's. Although the family romance of fraternity put patriarchy in the past tense politically, the domestic ideology of the Revolution, if not exactly patriarchy, served to exclude women from the political.⁴⁶ Hunt's emphasis on the family as a metaphor provides a more relational narrative of gender, not only between men and women, but also concerning issues of fatherhood, fraternity, and parent-child relations.

Women were a threat not only in terms of their gender, but also for the very reason that they could act, as Godineau so amply demonstrates. Hunt's chapter on the French obsession with Marie-Antoinette's body further illustrates the threat of women. For if public women were dangerous to the body politic, the queen was a public woman of the first order. Not only was she representative of a counterrevolutionary conspiracy, but she also used her sexual body to corrupt the body politic. Marie-Antoinette's execution, then, served to separate women from any political activity absent that of their domestic role of republican motherhood.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 196.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 201-03.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 94-98, 121.

Hunt's sources, particularly her work on revolutionary iconography, serve as an excellent lead-in to the fourth book in this gender quartet, Antoine de Baecque's *The Body Politic*. Just as Hunt contends that the metaphor of the family provided a frame of reference for the revolutionary French to think politically, so de Baecque argues that corporeal metaphors allowed French revolutionaries to represent themselves. First, royal impotence provided a means to transfer power from the body of the king to the great citizen-body. Second, revolutionary narrative and art reflected two primary metaphors – the “New Man,” signifying the regeneration of the Revolution; and the hydra of aristocratic plots, signifying the monstrosity of counterrevolution. Finally, the rituals of laughter (political carnival) and tears (republican martyrs) allowed the body to be presented in public display, to be rendered transparent in flesh and bone.⁴⁸

Understanding de Baecque's working assumptions regarding gender is important in terms of grappling with the range of thought on how best to get at the subject, as well as a way of tying these four gender histories together. First, he posits, in order to truly explore Revolutionary gender, it is best to look at the ways in which French revolutionaries chose to represent themselves. This speaks to the use of sources such as iconography, narrative, and ritual as opposed to archival research. In short, this means that Godineau's approach runs in the minority, at least when grouped with Landes, Hunt, and de Baecque. Yet, if one wants to examine how *active* women were during the Revolution, if at all, archival research is a more effective method. Second, according to de Baecque, to truly understand gender and the French Revolution, it is best to talk in terms of gender *relationships*, not only to each other, but to the body politic as a whole.

⁴⁸ Antoine de Baecque, *The Body Politic: Corporeal Metaphor in Revolutionary France, 1770-1800*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 73-74, 101, 146, 248, 277-303.

For example, de Baecque concludes the book by examining the archival seal that was chosen to represent the Revolution – the body of Lady Liberty. In doing so, he alludes to the position of the feminine in revolutionary politics. “Rather than the Herculean metaphor of the political system, the Revolution came to prefer the *easily controllable*, *reassuring* representation of a principle: the *gentle* figure of Liberty.”⁴⁹ [emphasis mine] How did such a figure acquire the attributes of easily controllable, reassuring, and gentle? At least in part it came through the silencing of the public woman, the passiveness of the “female citizen,” the valorization of republican motherhood, and the ridding of the body politic of the body of the queen.

In sum, a teaching narrative of the French Revolution can be so unwieldy as to be almost completely unmanageable unless one selects certain distinct lines of inquiry, such as the Revolution’s origins, its radical phase, and its intersection with gender. While causal explanations of the French Revolution currently abound, I prefer an argument that places social tensions at the center and Enlightenment rhetoric on the periphery. Indeed, such a thesis is a natural lead-in to explaining the radical phase of the Revolution as caused by circumstances rather than ideas. In both cases, the ideas under gird the primary problem – an archaic and bankrupt social structure for the Revolution itself, and disorganization, chaos, and enemies both foreign and domestic for its radical phase. The radical phase is more than just its origins, however, as its revulsion and fear, the radical press, its divergence from the American Revolution, and its relationship with religion all provide important avenues to explore. Finally, examining gender during the Revolutionary years can be as daunting as trying to establish an overall narrative or assess the Revolution’s origins. Whether we examine the subject through an archivist

⁴⁹ Ibid., 320.

historian's efforts to recapture actions of women revolutionaries, or through the work of scholars who prefer language, images, and Revolutionary representations, it is helpful to remember the one piece of narrative they all share. In the end, the French Revolution silenced the public woman, and, in doing so, circumscribed French women to the home.

As France entered the nineteenth century, notions of modernity began to overtake the older ways of the Early Modern European mind set. The changes described thus far were extensive and had been a long time in the making; yet, transition was still to come. Finding a place to "end the story" can be difficult at times. The experiences that lay ahead as France sat poised upon the brink of modernity – Napoleon, industrialization, and nationalism – are important codas to what had come before, and thus I find it appropriate to provide a closing bookend to the Early Modern European French state.

Whether Napoleon was the great consolidator of the Revolution or one of its grandest betrayers is the central question surrounding this complex figure. Regardless of the answer, the Napoleon years are generally considered the closing decades of the early modern European era. Napoleon ruled over a French state that was vastly different than the Old Regime. If Napoleon was heir to the Revolution, it was in the manner in which he built political and social institutions that reinforced the changed social structure ushered in by the Revolution. It was indeed a revolutionary social structure – one that emphasized meritocracy and equality of opportunity rather than venality of office – and it was shored up by the Napoleonic legacies of a new legal code and educational system.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Martyn Lyons, *Napoleon Bonaparte and the Legacy of the French Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 297-98. For more on Napoleon's civil contributions to France, see Geoffrey Ellis, *Napoleon* (London: Longman, 1997), 234.

The vast scholarship on European industrialization has, in recent years, turned away from older interpretations. Far from considering industrialization a completely positive, revolutionary force, historians are rethinking its revolutionary aspect as well as the paradigm of a British model of industrialization that crossed the Channel and marched across Europe.⁵¹ Moreover, many scholars are also questioning two other long-accepted aspects of the subject – that the Industrial Revolution ushered in the modern world and that it was a universally positive force.⁵² For example, scholars are positing less mechanization during the early stages of industrialization as well as much less evenness of industrial development.⁵³ Workers’ attitudes toward the work changes around them were often slow and uneven, and, as the industrializing process divorced work from the domestic sphere, the changes on women were dramatic.⁵⁴

When we think of recent scholarship on the subject of nationalism, thoughts generally turn to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. The definition of nation, he argues is that of an “imagined political community,” one that is both inherently “limited and sovereign.” Important as a consequence of the early modern European experience, the model for imagining such a force was born out of Enlightenment and revolution that destroyed the divine monarchical model. And although Anderson thinks of nationalism in terms of historic inevitability, the nation is conceived from the start in

⁵¹ Sidney Pollard, *Peaceful Conquest: The Industrialization of Europe, 1760-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 45.

⁵² Lenard R. Berlanstein, ed., *The Industrial Revolution and Work in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: Routledge, 1992), xiv.

⁵³ Raphael Samuel, “Mechanization and Hand Labour in Industrializing Britain,” in *Industrial Revolution and Work*, ed., Berlanstein, 28; Christopher H. Johnson, “Patterns of Proletarianization,” in *Industrial Revolution and Work*, ed., Berlanstein, 86; and William H. Sewell, Jr., “Uneven Development, The Autonomy of Politics and the Radicalization of Workers,” in *Industrial Revolution and Work*, ed., Berlanstein, 155.

⁵⁴ James S. Roberts, “Drink and Industrial Discipline in Nineteenth-Century Germany,” in *Industrial Revolution and Work*, ed., Berlanstein, 103; and Theresa McBride, “Women’s Work and Industrialization,” in *Industrial Revolution and Work*, ed., Berlanstein, 63.

terms of language rather than blood. Indeed, he posits that the decline of Latin allowed people to begin to think as a nation, and the convergence of capitalism and print technology allowed for the emergence of the modern state. While nationalism may have gone off track a little, Anderson is still respectful of it as a historical force. Eric Hobsbawm, conversely, is not so sure that nationalism is rooted or inherent in the human experience. He, too, argues that the organizing principle is language, but suggests that people are being *encouraged* to find unity around a national language.⁵⁵ Regardless of whether we consider nationalism historically inevitable or the work of nationalists, nineteenth-century Europeans would have had difficulty “imagining” the modern state without the transition that Europe experienced during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.

As we have seen, the changes wrought during the French Revolution did not end there, yet the transition that had occurred over the previous three centuries was vast indeed. The French state that entered the nineteenth century was a very different place from the absolutist state that was emerging from a changed religious landscape and a series of bloody religious wars during the sixteenth century.

While we might understand absolutist France differently from the way we once did, there is still enough of a phenomenon there to secure a future. Absolutism domestically meant both an absolute and limited monarch – absolute in the nature of his rule, yet limited both by religion and a nobility whose support and allegiance made

⁵⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (London: Verso, 1991), 6-7, 37-39, 60-63; E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 9, 51-54, 59-62.

absolutism “work.” In terms of his relationship with other European monarchs, however, Louis XIV dictated the European agenda for half of a century. At least when we speak of military power and foreign policy, absolutism in France retains its traditional rendering.

While French monarchs, ministers, and nobles were busy making French absolutism work, French *philosophes*, *salonnières*, and Grub Street hacks were busy spreading Enlightenment. Whether we choose to immerse ourselves in the texts – high or low – in other avenues of print, or in the social and cultural avenues where the written and spoken world bumped up against each other, the enlightening process was having an impact on seventeenth and eighteenth-century French society. Previously taboo subjects were being discussed in coffeehouses and salons, religion as the organizing principle of people’s lives was surrendering itself to a literary and eventually political public sphere, and the social structure of society was beginning to give way to new political notions surrounding the natural equality of man, if not woman.

In the course of this process, then, French absolutism was not to last. The social cleavages inherent in a still largely feudalistic social hierarchy, fueled by the enlightening process and ideas, brought the French monarchy to its knees, and eventually to its end. Unfortunately, the chaos that became the Revolution was answered with radicalism born out of the sense of a foreign and internal threat engendered by war, disunity, and the initial disorganization of the state’s response to it, and shored up conveniently by Enlightenment rhetoric present from the beginning of the Revolution. Finally, strains of Enlightenment thought regarding essential differences between men and women had a profound impact upon revolutionary women who, once active, found themselves given over to the task of raising new generations of young republicans within the confines of

the home. Indeed, these themes in Early Modern European history continue to provide us with an unfolding and unpredictable past.

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