

Ideology or *Mentalités*?: Religion, Revisionism and the French Revolution

by
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BY

Robert Gareth Penner

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University of
Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirement of the degree**

Of

Master of Arts

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Abstract

In the 1980's and 1990's Revisionist scholars repudiated the social interpretation of the French Revolution on the grounds that its origin and content were ideological rather than historical. The Revisionist argument relied on concepts borrowed from the French *Annales* school to establish a set of relations between history, religion and ideology in such a way as to provide for both an alternative to the social interpretation of the Revolution and a vigorous anti-Marxist polemic. At the heart of the Revisionist critique of Marxism was a definition of ideology as a pseudo-religion that imposed severe limitations on the study of religion and the Revolution.

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Table Of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Religion and the French Revolution.....	9
Mona Ozouf: Religion and Revolution.....	10
Timothy Tackett: Religion and Counter-revolution.....	17
Suzanne Desan: <i>Reclaiming the Sacred</i>	24
Dale Van Kley: Religious Origins of the French Revolution.....	30
Conclusion.....	35
Chapter Two: The Historiography of the French Revolution.....	40
George Rudé.....	45
Alfred Cobban.....	50
William Doyle.....	53
Conclusion.....	56
Chapter Three: High Revisionist Historiography.....	58
Gary Kates.....	59
Sara Maza.....	69
Suzanne Desan.....	72
Vivian Gruder.....	74
Conclusion.....	77
Chapter Four: Alternatives to High Revisionism.....	78
Claude Langlois.....	78
Michel Vovelle.....	82
Chapter Five: The <i>Annales</i> and Marxism.....	86
Peter Burke: Intellectual revolution.....	89
François Dosse: Interdisciplinary Warfare.....	92
Traian Stoianovich: A New Paradigm.....	94
The <i>Annales</i> and Marxism.....	97
Chapter Six: The <i>Annales</i> versus Marxism.....	103
Conclusion.....	116

Bibliography.....122

Introduction

In 1989 François Furet and his Revisionist colleagues declared the French Revolution finally over. Two hundred years after it began, the Revisionists argued that the French Revolution had never really been a revolution at all, at least not in the way it had previously been imagined. For the Revisionists the socioeconomic rupture described by both the revolutionaries themselves, and the Marxist historians who followed them, was a historiographic construction that hid the actual continuity of French social and economic history.¹ In place of the traditional or “orthodox” social interpretation of the Revolution the Revisionists constructed a history of the Revolution as a political and cultural phenomenon. The Revisionist alternative to the social interpretation contributed to an effervescence of political and cultural histories of the French Revolution — and a concurrent backlash against social and economic accounts of it.

The consequences of this Revisionist success for the study of religion and the Revolution were mixed. The Revisionists had argued that the “orthodox” interpretation reduced culture to an effect of more important social and economic structures, and religion to the role of an ideological mask for class interests. While the Revisionist alternative to that reductionism certainly held out the promise of reinvigorating investigations of religion in the Revolutionary period that promise was qualified by a very

¹ What constitutes Revisionism and what makes up a Revisionist are topics to be discussed both in this introduction and in later chapters. Historiographical accounts of the movement abound but are, for the most part, if not Revisionist proper at least Revisionist in tenor. Gary Kates’s introduction to *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and Controversies* (New York, 1998) is as good an example of these as any other. For a decidedly non-Revisionist account see Michel Vovelle’s article ‘Reflections on the Revisionist Interpretation of the French Revolution’, *French Historical Studies*, 16 (1990) pp 749-755.

particular definition of ideology.

For Furet, French political culture had become secularized as the nation state replaced God as the ultimate end of history. In his argument the grand narrative histories of the nation state stood as something of a developmental stage between the apocalyptic chronicles of the Middle Ages and the contemporary structural analysis he himself practiced. Marxist historiography, according to Furet, remained stuck at this developmental stage; no longer religious but not quite secular Marxism was an ideology; a pseudo-religion that constructed itself as both mythic and explanatory rather than one or the other.² At the heart of Furet's critique of Marxism was a teleological progression of historiographical worldviews that proceeded from the religious, to the pseudo-religious, to the properly secular; and this teleology had serious consequences for the academic study of religion.

The most obvious drawback of that progression was the reduction of not just ideology, but also of religion, to anachronistic phenomena any modern society. This is a problem not because it is a necessarily false view, but because it marginalizes those communities and individuals that use religious vocabulary to express their political, social and cultural interests. Furet's definition of ideology radically limits the scope of historical analysis by excluding such groups from participation in the history of their own

² Furet's use of religious metaphors and analogies to describe Marxist ideology and historiography occur as early as the seminal Revisionist article he co-wrote with Denis Richet 'Le Catéchisme révolutionnaire,' *Annales E.S.C.* 26 (1971):255-289. Revisionist literature since then has been rife with words such as "orthodoxy," "dogma" and "iconoclasm" but the Revisionist articulation of a historiographical debate in religious language goes beyond mere rhetorical flourish. Furet makes a formal theoretical connection between religion and leftist ideology with his conception of ideology as pseudo-religion in *The Passing of an Illusion: The Idea of Communism in the 20th Century* (Chicago, 1999)

time.

In the following thesis I will argue that when academic students of religion (henceforth: religionists) appropriated the High Revisionist rejection of Marxism, they also imported Furet's definition of ideology as pseudo-religion into their work. When High Revisionist historians who studied the relation of religion to revolutionary politics put a concept developed by Furet as part of a critique of Marxist ideology to work as a general analytic category, they produced histories in which their theoretical assumptions were at odds with their attempts to take the religious and ideological claims of their subjects seriously.

Historical studies of religion, and especially of its relation to revolution, would have been better served by a less teleological model of ideology than that of the Revisionists. The Revisionists themselves provided evidence that ideas — religious and otherwise — are always articulated with reference to a particular historical context. Ideologies are not disassociated with reality, but constructed within a web of perceived interests — be they psychological, economic, social or cultural. All ideologies — religious, revolutionary and even revisionist — are not simply socio-psychological structures that exist through time but provisional sets of arguments made by self-conscious actors to meet their immediate needs. Such arguments may persist over years, or even centuries, but that persistence is not an argument for anything other than their continued usefulness.

It is my aim to show how Revisionist conceptualizations of ideology and religion are inadequate as analytic categories in both the history and historiography of the French

Revolution. I will proceed in three stages:

1) I will begin by identifying what I perceive to be a general problem in High Revisionist studies of religion and the French Revolution. I will show how the claims of the historians that wrote those studies rest on a shared theory of religion and ideology that suits neither their ultimate goal of understanding religion as a historical phenomenon, nor their immediate goal of explaining the data their research has produced.

2) I will identify and outline the type of revisionism from which that theory of religion and ideology was appropriated. In that revisionism, which I call High Revisionism, historians attempted to situate themselves outside ideological debate over the meaning of the French Revolution by defining ideology as a pseudo-religious worldview. I would argue that this bid for ideological neutrality was unsuccessful, and that High Revisionism remains part of an historiographical debate that is always also an ideological debate. Nonetheless High Revisionist claims have on the whole been taken as given by North American historians of the Revolution. Furthermore the High Revisionist conflation of Marxist ideology with socioeconomic methodology has meant that analysis of religion and the French Revolution has been crippled not only by a problematic definition of ideology, but also by methodological narrow-mindedness as well.

3) Finally I will show how *Annales* historian François Furet used concepts such as the *longue durée* and *histoire des mentalités* to secularize traditional Conservative hostility toward the Revolution. Furet reconfigured the history of the Revolution in such a way that it was possible for a French historian to be morally opposed to it without, as a corollary, being a supporter of Church and Monarchy. While such a reconfiguration had

obvious attractions for conservative North American scholars it also had at least one unanticipated drawback. After Furet disentangled religion from Conservative historiography, he used it as a polemical device with which to critique Marxists historiography and politics. The consequence of that critique was that religion, like Marxism, was excluded from participation in modern political life on the basis of its anachronism.

Revisionism

Before I proceed with my thesis proper I will briefly outline the two historiographical schools that are the subjects of my analysis. The first is that of "Revisionism." Revisionism is always a revision of something, and in this case it is a revision of the social interpretation of the French Revolution.³ The Revisionists situated the social interpretation at the University of Paris and identified it with a group of Marxist scholars, in particular George Lefebvre and Albert Soboul. During the first half of the twentieth century these Marxist historians used new sociological and economic tools to gather and arrange data in support of the argument that the Revolution was essentially a class struggle. For the Marxists the Revolution was a political battle in which a capitalist or proto-capitalist bourgeois class overthrew the ruling feudal classes and seized power over the French state.

³ The literature on the Marxist "orthodoxy" is extensive and it is by no means only the Revisionists who identify the historians at the University of Paris as the most influential twentieth century historians of the Revolution. George Rudé, for one, places Lefebvre and Soboul at the epicentre of a major methodological shift in French Revolutionary Studies and as major forces in determining both the mode and content of scholarship for quite some time after that shift. See Rudé *Interpretations of the French Revolution* (London, 1972).

The first phase of Revisionism was comprised primarily of Anglo-American scholars — Alfred Cobban and George Taylor were perhaps the most prominent — who criticized the class analysis of the Revolution for imposing inappropriate theoretical (read Marxist) categories on their data.⁴ The historians of the social interpretation had imagined the Revolution as the political ascendancy of a capitalist bourgeoisie over a feudal aristocracy, but Taylor and Cobban showed how the formation of capitalist institutions and classes did not precede the Revolution but occurred after it. It followed therefore that social and economic changes were not the cause of the Revolution but its effect.

The second major phase of Revisionism included French scholars, notably Furet, and a considerable shift in polemical tack.⁵ The Revisionists no longer engaged their adversaries on shared methodological ground but shifted the debate from how best to interpret social and economic data to the claim that the Revolution could only be understood as political and cultural phenomenon. The Revisionists argued that the Revolution was the creation of a political culture that was autonomous from its socioeconomic context. One of the key characteristics of this new culture was that its

⁴ See George V. Taylor, 'Non-capitalistic Wealth and the Origins of the French Revolution', *American Historical Review*, 72 (1967) 469-96; Alfred Cobban *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1964).

⁵ Some key texts of the second wave of Revisionism are the article 'Le Catéchisme révolutionnaire,' by Furet and Richet; Furet and Mona Ozouf (eds.), *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1989); Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* Elbor Forster, trans. (Cambridge, 1981; French edn., 1978); Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1990).

members misinterpreted the Revolution as the political realization of a socioeconomic process, and it is this misinterpretation that is the foundation of subsequent social and economic accounts of the Revolution. By arguing that the revolutionary ideology of the Jacobins was analogous to that of twentieth century Marxism the Revisionists made the social interpretation a product of an anachronistic and false worldview that could be safely ignored as irrelevant.

The *Annales*

If there is proof of Furet's genius it may well be his use of a structural and anti-narrative approach like that of the *Annales* to shift the debate over the meaning of the Revolution from class explanation and towards a political history of elite decision makers. For Furet the great weakness of traditional conservative histories had been their reliance on royalist and religious ideologies, and he found in the *Annales* the conceptual foundation on which to construct a secular and democratic critique of the Revolution and its followers. *Annales* concepts such as the *longue durée* and the *histoire de mentalités* relied on a distinction between different orders of time and it is on that distinction that Furet's anti-Marxist project depends. By contrasting the slow rhythms of long term social and economic history with the quick pace of political history Furet made the Marxist attempt to embed self-conscious political action in a field of unconscious social and economic behaviour seem absurd. Furet defined the Revolution as a purely political event, an event disconnected from, and even running counter to, the deeper social and economic trends driving the history of Europe. The High Revisionists did not however, pursue the rigorous social and economic analyses favoured by the *Annales*. Rather, once

Furet had shifted the focus of debate away from class conflict, they produced a series of works that emphasized the importance of language, symbol and culture in the production of political discourse. And amongst these works were a handful written by historians concerned with religion. The best examples of which are works of Mona Ozouf, Dale Van Kley, Timothy Tackett and Suzanne Desan.⁶

⁶Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca: 1990); Mona Ozouf, *Festival and the French Revolution* (Cambridge:1988); Timothy Tackett, *Religion, Revolution, and Regional Culture in Eighteenth-century France and the Ecclesiastical Oath of 1791* (Princeton:1986); Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven:1996)

Chapter One: Religion and The French Revolution

In the following chapter I will be discussing four texts directly concerned with religion and the French Revolution. Mona Ozouf, Timothy Tackett, Suzanne Desan and Dale Van Kley, the authors of those works, did not belong to any formal historiographical school, but there are two important commonalities in their works that bear examination.⁷ The first is that all four historians positioned themselves historiographically in opposition to histories that reduce religion to social and economic factors, and identified their own approaches as political and cultural. The second commonality is that while all four were addressing different research questions, and working with different data, their conclusions were strikingly similar. They each argued that conflict in the French Revolution was primarily a conflict between two groups with different worldviews. One group, generally represented as the French people, had an inherited, religious worldview which persisted over time as a cultural structure. The other group, the revolutionaries, had an ideological worldview which was political in that it was concerned with the day-to-day application of power, modern in that it was a product of Enlightenment thought, but religious in its millennial ambitions and dogmatic tenor.

It is my argument that these two commonalities are evidence of an unacknowledged, but shared, theory of religion and ideology on which these four

⁷ Suzanne Desan, *Reclaiming the Sacred: Lay Religion and Popular Politics in Revolutionary France* (Ithaca: 1990); Mona Ozouf, "De-Christianization" and "Revolutionary Religion," *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*. Furet, François, and Ozouf, Mona, Eds. (Cambridge: 1990) pp.20-33 and pp. 560-577; Timothy Tackett "The West in France in 1789: The Religious Factor in the Origins of the Counterrevolution," *Journal of Modern History*, 54 (1982): pp 715-745; Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven:1996).

histories depend. I argue further that this theory is inadequate on two counts. It fails, at a strictly theoretical level, to explain the events of the Revolution in historical terms because it ultimately resorts to teleological explanations of behaviour. And it fails at a methodological level because it cannot accommodate the data Ozouf, Tackett, Desan and Van Kley have produced.

Mona Ozouf: Religion and Revolution

In 1990 François Furet co-edited *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* with his colleague Mona Ozouf. The *Dictionary* is a collection of short essays on a variety of subjects and is generally considered to be a key text in the Revisionist canon. Ozouf's contributions to that volume included two articles both directly concerned with religion and the French Revolution. Those two articles, "De-Christianization" and "Revolutionary Religion," are as close as one can come to finding an orthodox Revisionist position on the subject. Although they differ marginally from Furet's own brief allusions to the subject they are more extensive and to the point, so I shall use them as a touchstone for my discussions of Tackett, Van Kley and Desan.

The two articles addressed the problem of how revolutionary ideology was both anti-religious and religious at the same time. Ozouf correctly asserts that while some revolutionaries were certainly anti-Christian, and most at the very least wanted to overhaul the institution of the French church, but she mistakenly conflates Christianity with religion. That Robespierre hated Christianity does not mean he hated religion. Ozouf's formulation was based on a set of assumptions about the nature of religion and ideology that was common to all High Revisionist historiography. The High Revisionist

critique of the social interpretation turned on a construction of French history as a progression of cultural phases. In that construction Modernity, which is secular, emerged from medieval Christendom, which was religious. Modernity and Christianity were represented in this view as incompatible worldviews, and it is that presumed incompatibility of the religious and the modern outlooks on which Ozouf's problem, and her solution to that problem, were based. From her perspective the revolutionaries were cultural bastards, neither modern nor primitive, they were hybrids who on the one hand destroyed churches and on the other built temples.

The methods Ozouf used to argue this point were borrowed from the *Annales*. She used both the *longue durée* and *histoire des mentalités* to reconfigure the way historians approached the relation of religion to revolutionary politics. The fulcrum around which that reconfiguration turned is an opposition between a natural and slowly evolving religious sensibility and an artificial and dogmatic political ideology. Prior to the advent of Revisionism historians of all political stripes were in general agreement that there was a conscious effort on the part of the more radical revolutionaries to rid France of the Roman Catholic church. Ozouf argued that while this traditional picture may have been true it was a limited truth. The short and intense period of Revolutionary de-Christianization offered a distorted reflection of a much slower process of modernization that had spanned centuries. A fuller picture of de-Christianization could be seen by broadening the perspective from which one looked at the problem. According to Ozouf,

Antireligious sentiment was something that developed gradually over centuries, that was experienced rather than philosophized; it was spontaneous rather than coerced, arising out of the depths of society rather

than being imposed by the political authorities.⁸

In choosing to take such a long view Ozouf was not ignoring the wilful de-Christianization of the revolutionaries so much as suggesting that the brutal convulsions of the Revolution concealed as much as they revealed.

France prior to the Revolution has traditionally been portrayed as an overwhelmingly Roman Catholic country. Such a portrayal emphasized revolutionary rupture, and made secularization a violent and rapid occurrence that fit neatly into the ideological predispositions of both the clerical right and the radical left. By contrast, Ozouf drew on the research of *Annales* historians, like Pierre Chaunu and Michel Vovelle, to show how prior to the Revolution there were already substantial social, gender and regional differences in religious practice. Nor was religion simply a pillar of the *Ançien Regime*; the Jansenist controversy of the seventeenth century had hopelessly entangled the Church in politics, and fostered the national habit of protesting both papal despotism and royal authority. In addition to the dissent and fragmentation within the Church, popular culture in general had been growing steadily more and more secular over the centuries preceding the Revolution. Finally, Catholicism itself, as it was practiced in the late eighteenth century, was not an age old practice but a relatively recent phenomenon, a product of the post-Tridentine Church's attempt to reassert its dominion over Europe. So, Ozouf argued, the process of secularization was already well under way

⁸ Ozouf, p.20.

by the time the Revolution began.⁹

Which is not to say that Christianity, or Roman Catholicism to be more precise, was not an important part of it what it meant to be French. Without referring to either the tremendous wealth of the Church and clergy or to their political privileges, Ozouf briefly discussed their place in French life. The clergy were a society within a society — distinguished from the masses among whom they lived by their clothing, their code of conduct and their relatively enlightened attitude. For Ozouf the eighteenth century clergy existed in a delicate equilibrium with the rest of French culture. This equilibrium was disrupted when the revolutionaries tried to forcibly integrate the clergy into larger society by making them citizens. The paradoxical effect of this was that those clergy who refused to integrate became even more isolated from the rest of society than they had been prior to the Revolution.¹⁰ The relations of the Church and the Revolutionary state became increasingly polarized until they devolved into the de-Christianization campaigns and counter-revolution. But that intense ideological conflict occurred against a cultural backdrop of slow, steady secularization that both preceded and outlasted the Revolution itself.

The de-Christianization campaign may have profoundly effected French society

⁹ The choice of Chaunu and Vovelle as sources is an interesting one, particularly in the light of Ozouf's comments about the pre-Revisionist politicization of history. Chaunu was a rightwing Catholic whose vitriolic polemics make even Furet uncomfortable, and Vovelle was a Marxist, and Furet's chief antagonist. Another interesting element of her argument here is the way she subtly suggested that orthodox Catholicism, like dechristianization, was imposed on a culture rather than a product thereof. To link Marxist ideology and the institution of the Catholic Church is a common enough rhetorical device in Revisionist historiography but as we see here, and as we shall see with Van Kley, that link occasionally becomes an analytic as well as a polemic device.

¹⁰ Ozouf, p.25.

but ultimately for Ozouf the slow transformation of worldviews proceeded despite the political interference of either the right or the left.¹¹ The Revolutionaries destroyed a great deal of the outward traces of religion, and the institution of the Church was left in a shambles, but the religion itself, at least as Ozouf understands it, continued. The people began to hold services in their homes without priests and independently of the Church hierarchy. It was women who defended the old religion of the priests with boycotts and riots, and it was the resistance of these women to the Revolution that “gave a feminine visage to the French Catholic Church in the nineteenth century.”¹² A new mentality did emerge in France after the de-Christianization campaigns but the reformation of the Catholic church was hardly what the revolutionaries had in mind when they began their experiments. And while the Revolution may have sped up the process of reformation it had little else to do with it. This new religious attitude was inward and not outward, and it did not need the institution of the Church let alone the encouragement of the Revolution. It was private, and like the women who practiced it, politically marginalized. Religion, it appeared, could to some degree be influenced by socio-political events, but not deliberately controlled or manipulated for political purposes. For Ozouf the Revolution accidentally made visible a process of secularization that was key to modernization, a process that had been forced underground and retarded by the failure of the Reformation in France.

The slowly changing religion of the French people was very much different from

¹¹ Ozouf, p.29.

¹² Ozouf, p. 29.

the sorts of deliberate political machinations that are the subject of Ozouf's other entry on religion in the *Critical Dictionary*; her essay "Revolutionary Religion." When the Revolution finally relegated religion to private belief it established a workable relationship between the otherwise mutually exclusive principles of modern political behaviour and traditional religious worldview.¹³ Yet this privatization of religious belief only came about after a brief flirtation between the revolutionaries and a public religion. If one accepts that the Revolution was anti-Religious, as Ozouf does, how does one explain the existence of the Revolutionary cults, however brief that existence was, prior to this privatization of belief? Or as Ozouf puts it in another way "What kind of religious sentiment waxes and wanes over the course of a few months?"¹⁴ Her answer to that question was that what the revolutionaries created was a pseudo-religion; not religion but ideology.¹⁵ According to Ozouf,

If one believes that religion requires the designation of a different order of being, a different kind of place, an extraordinary state, then there was no revolutionary religion. The organizers of the revolutionary ceremonies, who sanctified biological and social bonds, were unable to imagine anything transcending man other than man himself. Their pathetic attempt to solemnize what Constant called the "private affections" through the publicity of ceremony is the best indication there is a weakening of the collective bond and an increasing retreat into privacy" "revolutionary religion" was the harbinger of a society without religious support.¹⁶

This analysis of Revolutionary religion provided a striking contrast with the Catholicism

¹³ Ozouf, p.560.

¹⁴ Ozouf, p.29.

¹⁵ Ozouf, p. 568.

¹⁶ Ozouf, p. 570.

that survived de-Christianization. The revolutionaries were doomed to failure when they tried to manufacture a religion because religion, in Ozouf's view, is more than the product of social, economic and psychological interests. Religion for her is "an order of being" that is beyond the ken or control of politics — it is transcendent. Ideology for Ozouf was quite literally a false religion, an empty mimicry of an "extraordinary state." It is no wonder that historians such as Desan, Tackett and Van Kley, historians with a sympathy for the religious, found such a representation of the Revolution an attractive one to duplicate in their own work. Ozouf was not merely dismissing the social interpretation of the Revolution in her revisionism, she was also attempting to move religion entirely beyond the scope of reductionist critique altogether.

What Desan, Tackett and Van Kley failed to account for in hitching their horses to the Revisionist bandwagon, however, was the theory of religion and ideology on which this brand of Revisionism was based. There is a teleology in Furet's anti-Marxist project that was not explicitly articulated in Ozouf's definitions, although it was hinted at, and that is that the sacred should not be reclaimed, that it should remain private, marginal and unspoken, because the time has long passed for the feminine and irrational fancies of Christianity to be seen or heard in the public market of modernity. Religion, when it strays out of the privileged place to which Ozouf has banished it, and into social or economic spheres of behaviour, becomes a dangerous political anachronism. It is here that the tension between the secular and political conservatism of Furet and the ambitions of scholars who hope to reclaim the sacred as a field of study makes its appearance. Furet's conservatism had been deliberately refashioned to exclude God from its moral

evaluation of the Revolution. For Furet, Marxist ideology is contemptible precisely because like religion it is irrational, dogmatic and antiquated.

Timothy Tackett: Religion and Counter-revolution

Timothy Tackett's article "The West in France in 1789: The Religious Factor in the Origins of the Counterrevolution," is the earliest of the four texts I analyze in this chapter.¹⁷ It predates both the *Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution* and the burst of High Revisionist historiographical production that occurred in late 1980s and early 1990s — although only by a few years. Tackett was nonetheless part of the more general Anglo-American revisionism at least, and as we shall see quite close to High Revisionism proper.

Tackett argued that the first debates over the origins of the counter-revolution were waged between a clerical right, which emphasized the faith and piety of the counter-revolutionaries, and an anticlerical left, which emphasized the cynical aristocratic leadership of the counter-revolutionaries and the misguided ideology of their followers. The range of accepted motives for the participants of counter-revolution were royalism, resistance to conscription, support of religion and the self-interest of charismatic leaders. In these early histories the socio-economic context of the counter-revolution was never seriously analyzed.

Tackett did not describe these early debates in detail himself, but pointed interested readers to a summary of the major traditional arguments in Charles Tilly's

¹⁷ Timothy Tackett "The West in France in 1789: The Religious Factor in the Origins of the Counterrevolution," *Journal of Modern History*, 54 (1982): 715-745

study *The Vendée*.¹⁸ Tilly's work, along with that of his contemporary Paul Bois, were examples for Tackett of the new type of history that used the methods of social science to avoid the political pitfalls of earlier, more overtly ideological histories.¹⁹ Tilly and Bois shifted the focus of research from difficult-to-resolve questions of motivation to the analysis of quantifiable social and economic conditions. They asked questions about the organization and composition of groups that supported the Revolution and the counter-revolution, about the relations between different segments of the population before and during the Revolution and about the connection between rapid political changes and slower social and economic changes. They concluded that it was the relative degree of economic integration between towns and rural areas, and the processes of modernization in general, that provided the key to understanding why counter-revolution occurred in some regions of France but not others.

Bois and Tilly failed, however, to account for a handful of areas in France which, while having similar social and economic conditions to the Vendée, did not produce counter-revolutionary uprisings. While Bois and Tilly, among others, provided insight into local conditions they failed to provide a broad regional perspective.²⁰ Why, Tackett wanted to know, was the West as a whole different from the rest of France? He suggested that a whole host of social, economic, demographic, cultural and political factors would have to be taken into account in answering such a question, but that he

¹⁸ Charles Tilly, *The Vendée*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), pp. 6-9.

¹⁹ The text Tackett referred to is Paul Bois, *Paysans de l'Ouest*, (Paris, 1971).

²⁰ See for instance Donald Sutherland, *The Chouans: the Social Origins of Popular Counter-revolution in Upper Brittany, 1770-1796* (Oxford 1982).

could offer a useful overview of one critical aspect of the problem; a regional analysis of church structures and religious culture.

For Tackett it was not that earlier historians entirely neglected religious issues in their studies, but that too often economic, rather than religious factors, were fundamental in distinguishing between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary areas. For instance, although Tilly stressed the power of the parish clergy in those areas most prone to counter-revolutionary activity, he attributed that power primarily to the clergy's position in that local society rather than the content and quality of local belief systems. The clergy were certainly the social elite of the village parish, and it was the church that provided symbolic cohesion in the scattered hamlet society of the region, but Tilly failed to offer an explanation as to *why* the clergy had more influential position in the Vendée than in other parts of France.

Tackett suggested the reason for Tilly's failure to offer such an explanation had to do with the tendency of social and economic historians to reduce religion to something it is not. Religion in their view was always a mask for the real agents of historical change — it was ideological in the vulgar Marxist sense. According to Bois for instance, the regional differences in religiosity which traditional arguments about counter-revolution relied on, and which Tackett wanted to reintroduce into the contemporary debate, did not exist prior to 1789. For Bois the ideological polarization between the Revolution and religion was not the cause of regional resistance to the Revolution but a product of it. Bois's challenge to prove the presence of a "Eucharistic frontier" prior to the Revolution was one that Tackett accepted. He proposed to answer the questions of Tilly and Bois by

analyzing what he considered to be religious, rather than political or economic or social aspects of life in the region. Tackett's argument rested on the assumption, however, that there was a religious sphere of behaviour and thought that was distinct from the economic and political spheres that earlier historians, such as Tilly and Sutherland, had analyzed. But since Tackett had no means of evaluating the relative intensity of religious belief in different regions, and categories such as "piety" were too ambiguous for him to work with, he was, despite his best intentions, forced to resort to social and economic proofs of religious belief.

In the first half of his study Tackett examined the ecclesiastical structures of the rural West by studying the distribution of Church wealth, the rural density of the clergy, and patterns of clerical recruitment. He argued that in the West the relative economic wealth of the parish clergy, their local visibility and their close connection with the family networks of the rural elite, gave the parish priest more prestige and power than anywhere else in France. The second half of his paper juxtaposed this distinctive rural culture with the transformation of religious attitudes among the urban elite in the same region. Using data on urban patterns of clergy recruitment, analysis of book ownership and *salon* membership, and, in particular, the content of the *cahiers de doléance*, Tackett argued that the urban elite in the West was at least as supportive, if not more so, of the Revolution as anywhere else in France. There was, according to Tackett, a profound cultural chasm between progressive town and reactive country that did not cause the counter-revolution but certainly exacerbated existing tension. The clash of the anti-clerical towns and the pro-clerical countryside was as much a clash of what Tackett called

“religious world views” as anything else. Tackett:

In the final analysis, there can be no denying the importance of economic relations, of patterns of land tenure, of the issue of military conscription as factors in the outbreak of the *Vendée* and *Chouannerie*. Yet it seems clear that the socioeconomic clashes between the town and country were paralleled by an independent cultural clash; and that the peculiar constellation of religious structures and attitudes rendered this clash as sharp and pronounced as in any other region of France. And we must seriously entertain the possibility that it was this very religious confrontation which served as a key catalyst in the relative cohesion and unity of so much of the rural west, galvanizing and energizing the diverse and sometimes contradictory patterns of social and economic conflict at the local level.²¹

That there were substantial cultural and ideological differences between the town and country was something that Tackett proved beyond a doubt, but the causal role of religiosity, as a “key catalyst” in local conflicts is another matter. The weakness of Tackett’s argument is that while he demonstrated that the ecclesiastical structures, distribution of Church wealth and the social position of rural clergy were different in counter-revolutionary areas than elsewhere in France, he could not provide proof of a more religious worldview in those areas. All Tackett could do was infer religious belief from the social and economic data he collected. Moreover, his data suggested that religious culture was *not* autonomous from other factors in the Vendée, but that the clergy and their local allies in the rural elite had particularly strong social, economic and political motivations for resisting the Revolution — motivations which had nothing to do with their imagined relationship to the transcendent. His evidence also suggested that the wealthy peasants and the rural clergy in the Vendée had shared social and economic

²¹ Tackett, p.745.

interests prior to the disintegration of the Church and the redistribution of its land and wealth among the pro-Revolutionary bourgeoisie. Tackett's claim that a religious worldview functioned differently from the ideological worldview of the Revolutionaries simply because its adherents claimed a special relationship with God was ultimately unconvincing. The argument that religious institutions had unique relations with other socio-economic structures in the Vendée, and that these relations caused unique tensions in that region, does not need an autonomous religious worldview to explain it — it simply needs a more sophisticated socio-economic and ideological analysis.

Tackett's pursuit of "the religious factor" can be explained to some degree by his distaste for reductionism and a desire to rehabilitate religion as a subject in its own right, but there is another factor to consider. Tackett's use of the *longue durée* and *histoire de mentalités* were typical of historiographical trends at the time. It was with the methods of the *Annales* school that Tilly, Bois, and other twentieth century historians of the Vendée, had reconstructed the counter-revolution as not simply a reaction to Revolutionary politics, but as the product of long term socio-economic changes that began before, and lasted substantially longer, than the Revolutionary period. Urban centers had been modernizing at the expense of rural communities for quite some time, and in the power vacuum created by the Revolution latent hostility became open conflict where relations between town and country were already the most tense. Tackett took that *longue durée* model as his starting point, and argued, in addition, that in areas where there was a particularly stark contrast between the ideology of the modernizing town and the *mentalité* of the traditional country, the violence and passion of the conflict were further

inflamed. Tackett shared with the *Annales* school the same set of binary oppositions that was the backbone of the Revisionist theory of religion; *mentalité* is set against ideology, tradition against modernity, the rural against the urban, and so on.

Tackett, like Ozouf, described earlier historiography as crippled by a highly politicized debate. And while contemporary debates were no longer polarized by political issues, but organized around sociological data, they had become unfortunately reductionist. Tackett, again like Ozouf, argued that political behaviour during the Revolution was motivated more by autonomous worldviews or mentalities than by individual perceptions of political, social or economic interests. Tackett's representation of the counter-revolution was that it was essentially a conflict between two mutually exclusive modes of thought. That conflict may have been articulated politically, and even Tackett conceded, socially and economically, but he insisted on reading it as ultimately a clash of cultural worldviews. Tackett, in an effort to avoid reducing religion to socio-economic factors, instead constructed religion as an autonomous system of beliefs that is disconnected from the world it is presumed to be observing. Like Ozouf, Tackett contrasted the religious *mentalité* of the French people with the ideology of the revolutionaries, and like Ozouf, Tackett assumed both to be ahistorical cultural structures. But that separation of revolutionary ideology and counter-revolutionary religion from their social and economic context is simply not supported by his data; the ideas Tackett's subjects had about the world, be they privileged rural clergy or godless bourgeois revolutionary, were quite clearly related to how they perceived their position in it.

Suzanne Desan: *Reclaiming the Sacred*

Suzanne Desan argued, in *Reclaiming the Sacred*, that prior to the twentieth century historians gave one of two main explanations for the resurgence of Catholicism in the years immediately following the Revolution.²² The radical left argued the resurgence was symptomatic of a political reaction and should be interpreted as counter-revolutionary ideology. The clerical right, on the other hand, argued the resurgence was an attempt to return to the religious practices of the *Ancien Régime* and that it could be explained without reference to local, regional or national politics but as an expression of religiosity. For Desan, as for Tackett and Ozouf, those earlier debates were driven by ideological differences more than by disagreements over evidence. Desan, again like Tackett and Ozouf, claimed that by the middle of the twentieth century new historical approaches and methods had disrupted that ideological stalemate. By the 1960s and the 1970s historians had begun to use quantitative methods to gauge religious practice. They re-examined the long-term effects of the Catholic Reformation on popular religious practices and the coincidental secularization of French culture. The rapid de-Christianization of the Revolution was placed in the context of a gradual decline in Christianity's fortunes that spanned the centuries of the *longue durée*. Like Ozouf and Tackett, Desan was interested in understanding how the drama of the Revolutionary period fit into the slower process of cultural modernization.

Desan's thesis was that the Revolution freed popular culture from clerical control and allowed for an upsurge in lay spirituality — and even in a revival of what she terms

²² Desan, p. 18.

older traditions, traditions that the Catholic church had been trying to suppress for centuries. Without knowing or understanding what they were doing, the revolutionaries destroyed the institutions that had been retarding the process of religious modernization in France, and provided the people of France with the conceptual vocabulary they needed to articulate their emerging worldview.

Reclaiming the Sacred is a study of the impact of the Revolution on lay practice and popular political activism in the department of Yonne. Yonne was typical of the French heartland in two key ways. The first was that during the *Ancien Régime* there was peasant resistance to attempts by the Catholic Church to reform a local religious culture that was deemed too superstitious. The second key for Desan was that the Yonne as a whole seemed to welcome the Revolution. In contrast to counter-revolutionary areas such as the Vendée, in the Yonne de-Christianization programs were fairly successful; the Revolutionary festivals were popular and there was widespread clerical abdication. After the fall of Robespierre, however, local attitudes towards the Revolution changed. Villagers demanded the right to public worship, they broke into churches to practice mass, they engaged in illegal processions, petitioned for religious liberty and even rationalized riots on religious grounds. For Desan this was evidence of a local religious worldview that was in conflict with the secular worldview of the Revolutionaries. The conflict of these two worldviews ultimately resulted in the syncretic fusion that produced a “modern” Catholicism.

The religious activists Desan was studying were not the same peasants and rural clergy that Tackett focused on, but people living in provincial towns and villages. The

Catholic groups in towns were better organized, better educated, and more highly politicized than their rural counterparts, and so that is where the resurgence took place — at least in the Yonne. Whatever the mode of the religious activism, and whatever the sort of person involved in it, at the root of it Desan argued, was a widespread desire to return to Catholic practice. She wrote that the lay people who broke into churches to conduct illegal masses and who brought buried statues out of hiding to sanctify and preside over their prayers, felt “a deep rooted attachment to the religion of their fathers.”²³ Desan argued lay Catholics challenged the Revolution using revolutionary language to express a “fervent desire” for the sacred.²⁴ The new political vocabulary provided the villagers with a language in which to articulate the religious worldview that the ideologies of neither the pre-Revolutionary Church nor the Revolution could contain, let alone control.²⁵ Catholic villagers took advantage of the revolutionary context to express a spirituality that had existed prior to not only the Revolution, but also prior to post-Tridentine Catholicism. Beyond the overtly political reaction of the villagers to Revolutionary authority, however, Desan provided no proof of such a deeply rooted Christianity.²⁶ Desan herself admitted that while they may have imagined that they were preserving age-old ways and beliefs, the lay Catholics were not simply defending traditional practices by traditional means. Their demands for the right to practice the religion they chose, not the one that was

²³ Desan, p. 121.

²⁴ Desan, p. 222.

²⁵ Desan, p. 121.

²⁶ Desan, p. 121.

imposed by Church or State resulted in something new.

The Catholicism that survived de-Christianization not only overcame vast material losses of property and personnel it also overcame “the far deeper challenge of the rival secular culture promoted by the Revolution.”²⁷ The attempts to replace Catholicism with a revolutionary culture had failed — and it is this failure that is key to understanding the relation of Desan’s text to the larger Revisionist framework. The Revolutionaries failed to articulate a relationship between politics and culture that was both consistent with the realities of modernity and was integrated with the religious *mentalité* of the French people. For Desan the modern Catholicism of the Yonne, by contrast, was the natural product of popular religion, of a culture that changed so slowly it seemed almost frozen — a culture that was above all not the deliberate creation of theologians or ideologues. Yet Desan’s evidence quite clearly suggested that the lay Catholics of the region willingly transformed their religious practices to deal with the volatile revolutionary context and to reflect their own shifting interests. Desan herself wrote that the Revolution created “a cauldron of political and cultural turmoil in which lay-led rituals became a field of cultural transformation.”²⁸ For a people deeply rooted in traditional worldview the people of the Yonne seem to have been particularly susceptible to changes in the wind.

The deep religion of the people, as it is constructed by Desan with elements of

²⁷ Desan, p. 218.

²⁸ Desan, p. 121

both the *longue durée* of the *Annales* and Furet's High Revisionism, is at odds with the dynamic political nature of lay Catholicism as she described it. Desan showed how such events such as riots contributed to the creation of new religious meaning as well as to the redistribution of power within the community, but she treated that redistribution of power as incidental to the real purpose of the Catholic resurgence.²⁹ She tried to turn Marx on his head, as Tackett tried to do and, as we shall see, Van Kley attempted to as well, but her own evidence worked against her argument. She claimed that the villagers were motivated by a religiosity that was autonomous from their political, social and economic interests. Her only evidence for that religiosity, however, was to be found in the villagers' conflict with political authorities. This suggests to me that the lay revival can be explained more convincingly with reference to what its participants perceived to be their political and social interests than it can with references to piety and the sacred. From the outset Desan's Revisionist notion of ideology as a false worldview prevented her from establishing the nature of, or even just describing, the relation between the villagers' claims about piety and religion, and the tangible social and political results of their activism that she acknowledged. Desan insisted instead that something ineffable and transcendent was behind the lay Catholics' behaviour, something that cannot be properly explained by sociology and economics but can be by the word "religion."

Desan, like Ozouf and Tackett, used *Annales* concepts such as the *longue durée* and *mentalités* to reconstruct a post-Revisionist history of the Revolution. In this new history the ideology of the revolutionaries was a worldview which conflicted with the

²⁹ Desan, p. 216.

religious worldview of the French people. Political events during the Revolution were understood by Desan and Tackett as expressions of a conflict between a representation of the world which is by definition false — the ideology of the revolutionaries — and the religious mentality that both preceded and outlasted the fevered energy of de-Christianization. The only evidence Desan provided for such differing worldviews is, however, as with Tackett, the existence of a social and political conflict that could be explained without reference to an imagined relationship to the transcendent. When Desan writes that “lay actions bore witness to a determined or heartfelt defense of their living religion” one can’t help but wonder whether a social or economic analysis, of the sort entirely absent from her book, or an analysis of gender relations, or almost anything else, might not provide a more convincing theory of motivation than the claims of piety made by the participants of overtly political conflicts. Rather than seeing the reaction to the imposition of Catholic and Revolutionary ideology in the Yonne as evidence of local resistance to outside interference, or even simply as part of a field of local politics, Desan posited the existence of a religious worldview that is somehow more authentic than a mere ideology. The teleology of Revisionism — in which a religious worldview precedes a modern worldview and in which ideology is a transitional moment in that process of secularization — underwrote Desan’s own attempt to reclaim the sacred for the historian while at same time protecting it from rigorous critique. Yet this teleology which is contradicted by Desan’s evidence that for a brief period at the very least, lay Catholicism in Yonne was ideological and religious and modern all at the same time.

Dale Van Kley: *Religious Origins of the French Revolution*

Dale Van Kley began *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution, 1560-1791* with the argument that Revisionism, by severing the causal chains that bound religion to class interests, had provided historians with the opportunity to analyze properly the relation of revolutionary ideology to religion and politics. Van Kley, like Ozouf, Tackett and Desan, suggested social and economic analysis had provided a necessary antidote to the political narratives of nineteenth century historiography, but that such modern methods have become overly reductionist.

The question Van Kley attempted to answer in his book was how could such an aggressively anti-Christian ideology as that of the revolutionaries emerged from such a universally Christian country as France? That question, as well as the answer that Van Kley provided, depended on the same underlying assumptions we have already been examining; most importantly, that ideas about the world are not the result of any single individual's interaction with it, but the product of an autonomous worldview or cultural matrix. If one does not assume ideas about the world are determined by monolithic cultures, as Van Kley did, but the product of a wide variety of influences, including but not limited to that of culture, the problem his question frames ceases to be a problem — or at least becomes a different sort of a problem.

Van Kley's answer to his own question, however, further emphasized the assumption that ideology is the product of a cultural history. He argued that the failure of the Reformation as a cultural phenomenon in France was the primary cause of de-Christianization. The claim that the Reformation failed in France is not one that should,

however, be taken for granted. There is a substantial body of literature that argues the Protestant community, while certainly a minority, was a disproportionately powerful and influential actor in Revolutionary France.³⁰ Nonetheless, the Reformation, which in Van Kley's argument was the midwife of Modernity, ultimately produced a culture, at least in England and the United States, in which the privatization of religious belief contributed to the separation of political, social and cultural spheres necessary to the practical functioning of a democracy. In Catholic France, however, the continuing role of religion in debates of public policy — in the arguments of both the left and the right — contributed to an atmosphere of increasing polarization and acrimony.

Van Kley analyzed that intensifying conflict by exploring how “the secularized legacies” of a seventeenth century religio-political conflict, between the state and the Jansenists reformers who contested absolutism, contributed to the formation of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary ideologies. He argued that during the second half of the seventeenth century the Jansenist movement united the biblical, doctrinal, and presbyterian ecclesiastical tendencies of the Protestant Reformation with some of the chief social constituencies of the Catholic League. This combination of Protestant tendency and Catholic constituency made Jansenism a politically subversive movement that, in Van Kley's words, “could not avoid flinging a religious gauntlet in the face of divine-right monarchy.”³¹ The Jansenist critique of the divine right monarchy was traced

³⁰ In English see Jean-Pierre Dormois, ““An Appeal Unto Heaven?”: Why Were Montebeliard Protestant so Supportive of the French Revolution?” *Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, 25 (1990): 141-155 and James N. Hood, “Patterns of Popular Protest in the French Revolution: The Conceptual Contribution of the Gard,” *Journal of Modern History*, 48 (1976): 259-293.

³¹ Van Kley, p.12.

by Van Kley through various transformations until the eighteenth century when it culminated in the Revolution. Van Kley argued that by that time the potentially moderating influence of Reformation ideas was no longer a factor in French politics, and the only sort of democracy that could emerge from French Catholic culture was a totalitarian democracy.

Van Kley's method for proving that argument was an interesting mix of an *Annales* theory of culture and a more traditional history of ideas. He consulted a comprehensive body of documents — including revolutionary periodicals, parliamentary archives, police and trial records, memoirs and journals — to show the genealogy of a set of concepts as they passed through generations of thinkers. He did not pay a great deal of attention to the social and cultural context which might have played a role in the formation, transformation and transmission of those ideas, but concentrated primarily on how different thinkers arranged and re-arranged them, and their trajectory over an extended period of time. In that sense he was conducting a very different sort of history than either Tackett or Desan, who for the most part confined their actual research, if not their introductory and concluding theorization, to quite specific times and places. Another difference is that Van Kley was working with what he considered to be the rational and transparent discourse of an elite, not the *mentalité* of the people. While he did not explain the actual mechanisms by which thought and society are linked, Van Kley implied that religious worldviews and lay beliefs should be the product of theological and philosophical thought rather than the other way around — an implication which is complicated, perhaps even compromised, by his ultimate claim that the political ideology

of the revolutionaries is the result of cultural degeneration.³² While Van Kley handled ideology and the distinction between ideology and religion more critically than Desan, Tackett or Ozouf, he ultimately, like them, failed to explain its terms convincingly:

However it be defined, ideology obviously differs from religion in its disinvestment in transcendence and conscious focus on sociopolitical order. Yet, as I hope to show in this book, ideologies have on the one hand drawn generously from religions both for their languages and general orientations. On the other hand, as in the case of early conservatism, they have sometimes made the role of religion in society their primary object of concern. This book is in part about that gradual, almost imperceptible, transition from religion to ideology without thereby meaning to imply that there is anything irreversible about his process, that ideology has ever replaced or can replace religion in the quest for ultimate meaning. Like religion, however, ideology is apt to construct social reality as well as to reflect it.³³

Van Kley did not pursue his meditation on ideology and religion for more than a sentence or two and in the end his version varied only slightly from the Revisionist conception of ideology as a mode of thought that marked the transition from Christendom to Modernity.

Van Kley claimed that the development of Revolutionary ideology in France was largely the result of the failure of Protestantism in that country. Following Edgar Quinet, a nineteenth century Conservative historian of the Revolution, Van Kley argued that,

Trying to reap the political harvest, as it were, of a philosophical century

³² I do not want to harp too much about the possible influence of Calvinism on Van Kley's historiography but he does contort the religion-ideology-historiography thesis of the High Revisionists in interesting ways. At the risk of flippancy, ideology for Van Kley is theology distorted by an overtly secular worldview. This is a quite different formulation than Furet's idea of ideology as historiography that has been distorted by a covertly religious worldview. The reasons for that difference likely have to do with the re-articulation of High Revisionist theories to meet Van Kley's immediate religious and political interests. The consequences of that difference for Van Kley is that rather than simply excluding religion from political society, religion can occupy a privileged place in society.

³³ Van Kley, p. 10.

without any prior religious preparation, the French Revolutionaries prematurely proclaimed the doctrine of “philosophical” toleration instead of first uprooting Catholicism root and branch as the sixteenth-century Reformation had. For it was only after having allowed Catholicism long enough to wean their populations from the habits of spiritual subservience that Protestant countries were later able to adopt a policy of confessional toleration, whereas France, having bypassed the Reformation, fruitlessly tried to institute political liberty without a prior revolution in religious consciousness.³⁴

Van Kley went on to say that with Catholicism in possession of the lay religious conscience it was only a matter of time until the Revolution failed. So long as the French people were “morally unprepared” for political liberty — that is, so long as they were not Protestant Christians — the democratic experiment was doomed to collapse into totalitarianism.³⁵ According to Van Kley the traumatic and dislocating effects of rapid political change without concurrent, or prior, changes in religious convictions were surely visible enough in our day to lend Quinet’s argument weight.³⁶ Where he parted ways with Quinet was that in his own argument Jansenism, while remaining discernibly Catholic, transmitted an element of Protestantism to eighteenth century France. For Van Kley the failure of the Revolution was in its inability to nurture the spiritual revolution of that Protestantism, already there to some degree in its political ideology, in such a way as to reform the Church rather than to polarize debate and drive potentially sympathetic Christian opinion into the arms of the counter-revolution.

³⁴ Van Kley, p.370.

³⁵ Van Kley, p. 370.

³⁶ Whatever particular example Van Kley is thinking of here is an ambiguity I will leave for the reader to sort out.

Van Kley's argument, however, was out of joint. The theoretical frame he used was a poor fit for the type of evidence he produced. The variety and scope of philosophical, political and theological work he analyzed did not suggest a polarized conflict between two monolithic worldviews but a dynamic, almost dazzlingly creative, period of ideological fragmentation. He described a period in which individuals and groups struggled to articulate their psychological, social and political interests using whatever cultural material was handy. That one of the axes of political debate in Revolutionary and pre-Revolutionary France was religion is undeniable, as is Van Kley's argument that even the most virulently anti-Christian ideologue was influenced by, and even exploited Jansenist theology. But the very fact that the meaning of Jansenist arguments and concepts changed so rapidly depending on who was bending them to their will, suggests they were not so much beliefs as tools, and that they were put to use by self-conscious political actors and not cultural automatons.

Conclusion

I have been arguing that there was a pre-existent theory underlying Ozouf's problematization of religion and revolution, and that this theory was also an important, if largely implicit, element in the work of Tackett, Desan and Van Kley. If Ozouf, Tackett, Desan and Van Kley all identified quite different historical problems as their subjects, their solutions to those problems are strikingly similar. They all began by suggesting that historians who gave social and economic explanations of ideology and religion were too reductionist and that by excluding the role of culture in general, and religion in particular, from their accounts they were unable to resolve certain crucial issues. *Ozouf et alia*

hoped to reintroduce religion as a subject into the historiography of the Revolution by analyzing it as a cultural structure. Religion, in their arguments, was represented as a set of shared and persistent beliefs about the world that predicted, rather than rationalized, political and social behaviour.

The problem with such an approach was in how it accounted for cultural change, particularly rapid change, such as that which occurred during the French Revolution. The way these historians accounted for it was to contrast ideology with *mentalités*. They argued that the ideology of the revolutionaries could only be defined in relation to a pre-existing worldview or cultural mentality, that ideology always followed from culture rather than preceded it. Unlike such massive cultural structures as Christianity or Modernity — structures that determine political, social and economic behaviour over long periods of time — ideology is a superficial reading, or a misreading altogether, of the processes of history. The revolutionaries may have attempted to force cultural change on the people of France but that attempt ended in violence and failure because cultural history moves at a slower pace than political history. This point was made most explicitly by Ozouf but Tackett, Desan and Van Kley also all relied on that contrast between cultural and political time; for Tackett counter-revolutionary phenomenon in the Vendée was explained as a clash between an older rural religious culture and a recent urban revolutionary ideology, for Desan the resurgence of Catholicism in Yonne was the re-emergence of an older local religious culture as an imported revolutionary ideology lost its grip on the community, and for Van Kley revolutionary ideology was a passing cultural deformation caused by the failure of the Reformation — as the midwife of

Modernity — to stimulate proper cultural development in France. In each case the Revolution ceased to be a crucial link in the causal chain of French history and became instead a passing, if important and interesting, misinterpretation of that history.

This representation of the Revolution is, as I shall show in the following chapters, also that of the High Revisionists. But there is a tension between the classic High Revisionist teleology as it appears in Furet and Ozouf — religion begets ideology begets modernity — and the attempts made by Van Kley, Desan and Tackett to redeem religion as a subject. Van Kley for one, made the interesting qualification to this formula that there was nothing irreversible about the transition between religion and ideology. Van Kley, like both Tackett and Desan, relied on Revisionism to provide him with a general theory that allowed religion to occupy a special and privileged place that was distinct from, and indeed transcended, its political context. Van Kley is the only one of the three however, who seemed aware of a tension between his intent of making religion a contemporary concern, and the Revisionist model of a gradual secularization that reduces religion, along with Marxism, to anachronism. Certainly a few years after the publication of *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* he began to express reservations about how the Revisionist model put constraints on the study of religion:

The post-Marxian effort to avoid materialist reductionism in the study of religion has hence led by degrees to the nearly total subordination of the social experience of disaffected religious minorities to a neo-enlightened narrative of the progressive secularization of thought and the advent of a post-Christian modern world.³⁷

³⁷ Dale Van Kley, "Introduction," *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe*, eds Dale Van Kley and James E. Bradley. (Notre Dame: 2001) p. 17

Van Kley was suspicious of Revisionism's reduction of religion to a relic of the past but he did not want to submit religion — or at least Christianity — to the violating gaze of unsympathetic Marxist critique. He was caught between the Devil and the deep blue sea. But at the time of *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* Van Kley appeared to have not yet fully realized the dead end of Furet's theories and was still trying to accommodate his sympathy for the religion to a Revisionist approach. In their anxiety to avoid socio-economic reductionism Van Kley, Tackett and Desan all fell prey to a cultural determinism that banishes religion to the past.

A further problem Tackett, Desan and Van Kley faced is that the theory they chose to frame their re-conceptualization of religion as religion, is compromised by the data their research produced. The Revisionist model of Revolutionary change, which they are using as an antidote to the social interpretation, relies on a conceptualization of ideology and religion as cultural mind sets that produce and mediate political behaviour. Yet, as I have shown, Desan, Tackett and Van Kley all produced evidence which suggests that the ideological and religious claims of the Revolutionary period were not the product of culturally monolithic *a priori* mind sets. It seems much more likely that those claims were the products of a complex and changing set of relations between how people perceived their social and cultural positions vis-à-vis the Revolutionary state, and what they desired those positions to be. Whatever the ultimate nature of those relations — economic, political, social or cultural — they were not merely the products of a clash between adherents of an ideological worldview and those of a religious worldview. The questions of why Ozouf, Tackett, Desan and Van Kley chose such a theory as the their

conceptual foundation, and where they found that theory in the first place, are questions I will answer in the following chapters.

Chapter Two: The Historiography of the French Revolution

High Revisionism is the label I have given to a group of historians who postulate the existence of a profound rupture in the historiography of the French Revolution. The origin of this rupture can be found in the general revisionism of the 1950s and 1960s but its definitive moments occurred in the 1980s. The High Revisionists locate their historiographical revolution within the work of a number of historians, but it is associated in particular with that of François Furet. Furet showed how the politics of the French Revolution so interpenetrated its historiography that the histories of the event had, in a very real way, become its extension. It was his ultimate aim to help bring an end to a Revolution that continued to perpetuate itself through historiography and ideology. While most historians of the French Revolution would agree that they work in a field with an extraordinarily volatile historiography, and would acknowledge that the history of their subject continues to follow the contours of contemporary political debate, the High Revisionists imagine that they have made a break with the overtly politicized histories that preceded them. This break is represented in High Revisionist texts as an overcoming of ideology.

The key similarity in the texts I have identified as High Revisionist is the notion of pre- and post-revisionist epochs. These epochs are divided not only by technical or interpretive differences between historians but by what are essentially differences of worldview. While this is the most important commonality there are a handful of other closely related High Revisionist tropes that can also be used to identify them as a historiographical school. These include the use of religious metaphors in identifying

French Marxism with an institutional orthodoxy and Anglo-American revisionism with iconoclastic reform; the conflation of socio-economic methodology with Marxist ideology; a certain unself-consciousness about the political ramifications of the Revisionist's own historical claims; and a tendency to look optimistically forward towards the future of historiography rather than critically at its present. Nonetheless, the defining characteristic of High Revisionist historiography is that it postulates the existence of a rupture between earlier ideological histories and contemporary non-ideological histories.

The texts I have selected for consideration as examples of High Revisionism in this chapter were written between 1989 and 2000, after the definitive Revisionist triumphs of the 1980s but close enough to those victories that they remain polemical in tone.³⁸ As such they are more historiographical in nature than historical, which suits my purpose well for they tend to be formulations about the proper conduct of historians rather than efforts at original research. I am not interested in arguing the existence of a formal High Revisionist school as such, but rather in identifying a group of family resemblances that not only link a group of historiographical texts in appearance but in function as well. By identifying Marxist historiography as an anachronistic ideological delusion High Revisionist historians marginalize not only a type of history, but any political attitude that is concerned with the reconstruction of a more just socioeconomic

³⁸ Suzanne Desan, "What's after Political Culture? Recent French Revolutionary Historiography," *French Historical Studies* 23 (Winter 2000); Vivienne Gruder, "Whither Revisionism? Political Perspectives on the Ancien Régime," *French Historical Studies* (1995) pp. 245-85; Gary Kates, *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and Controversies*, (New York, 1998); Sara Maza, "Politics, culture and the origins of the French Revolution" *Journal of Modern History*, 61 (1989) pp. 703-23.

order.

I will also give examples of two non-Revisionist accounts of the movement that do not rely on the same model of radical historiographical change but emphasize the continuity of ideological attitudes across the Revisionist rupture. They are written by Michel Vovelle and Claude Langlois, both French historians who operate well outside the influence of High Revisionism.³⁹ To begin however, I will present a quick overview of pre-Revisionist historiography of the French Revolution in the Twentieth Century. In it I will show how prior to High Revisionism most historians, even the early revisionists, considered themselves to be part of an ongoing debate that was delimited, not by ideological boundaries, but by the shared values of their discipline.

The purpose of this section, in regard to my larger arguments about religion and the French Revolution, is to delineate the general historiographical context in which more specialized texts are constructed. High Revisionist historiography provided most Anglo-American historians writing about the French Revolution in the 1980s and 1990s with a set of assumptions and presuppositions from which to begin their work. It is certainly the case that the historians I discussed in the first chapter — Ozouf, Tackett, Desan and Van Kley — were all part of what could, and has been characterized as a “political turn.” That overtly methodological shift from socio-economic to politico-cultural concerns coincided with a critique of Marxist ideology that imposed severe limits on the analysis of religion.

³⁹ Claude Langlois, “The French Revolution and “Revisionism,” *The History Teacher* 23 (August 1990) pp. 395-403; Michel Vovelle “Reflections on the Revisionist Interpretation of the French Revolution.” Translated by Timothy Tackett and Elizabeth Tuttle, *French Historical Studies* 16 (Fall 1990) pp. 749-755.

The political contours of the historiography of the French Revolution prior to the twentieth century are relatively easy to map. From the time of the event itself historians have generally taken one of three attitudes toward it: Conservative, Liberal or Radical.⁴⁰ The Conservative attitude holds that the Revolution was, and is, an abominable crime against God, Monarchy and the natural order of society; the Liberal attitude admits the political necessity of the reformist stages of the Revolution but regrets its slide into social, cultural and economic experimentation; and the Radical attitude sees the Revolution as the first step toward a universal democracy that was, and continues to be, betrayed by the interests of a wealthy capitalist or capitalist bourgeoisie.

After the end of World War II the Conservative account to some degree faded from the field. Few professional historians were willing to suggest that modern France should reintroduce the monarchy and François Furet, for one, considered such traditional Conservatism to be entirely discredited by the horrors of right-wing totalitarianism. But there were other forms a Conservative historiography could take. American academics who were hostile to social and economic revolution for instance, hardly relied on monarchist counter-narratives to invalidate them.⁴¹ Nonetheless, the general perception

⁴⁰ The labels of 'Liberal and 'Conservative' are common to virtually all historiographies of the French Revolution but the term 'Radical' is often exchanged for 'Democratic', 'Republican' or 'Marxist'. I have chosen to use 'Radical' because of the four it is the most generally descriptive term. It can be applied to a variety of left-wing positions that are defined primarily by their support for the radical Revolution and their opposition to Conservative and Liberal interpretive traditions.

⁴¹ I have in mind here the work of scholars such as Crane Brinton and Barrington Moore Jr. who, while perhaps on the outskirts of professional academic history, not only contributed to the American historiography of the French Revolution but did so from a sociological perspective that had much in common with early revisionism. See Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York, 1938); Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1966).

was that in the years following World War II Conservative interpretations of the French Revolution were at best embattled and Radical interpretations in the ascendancy.

Revisionist historians have certainly argued that in the twentieth century the historiography of the French Revolution was dominated by the proponents of a social interpretation. A Marxist orthodoxy, whose seat of power was the University of Paris, determined not only the research methods which historians were to use, but also the theory of class conflict into which their research must fit. The successive holders of the Chair of the French Revolution at the University of Paris from the turn of the century until the 1970s, when the Revisionist storm finally and fully broke, were Albert Mathiez, George Lefebvre and Albert Soboul. That all three had methods, theories and politics in common was a given among Revisionists; and it is certainly true that they all had similar political inclinations, were all interested in sociological and economic analyses, and all represented the Revolution as the political culmination of socio-economic developments.⁴²

The general acceptance of a social interpretation along Marxist lines meant that for the most part the historiography of the Revolution was robustly and self-consciously politicized. While methodological and theoretical developments were important, their influence was not so great that they could entirely overcome what was perceived to be the essentially political nature of historical research and writing. If Liberal historians, such as early revisionists Alfred Cobban and William Doyle, were uncomfortable with the notion

⁴² For a classically Revisionist account of the orthodoxy see Kates introduction to *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and Controversies*, (New York; 1998) or the summary of his account in this work pp 32-40.

that history always carried ideological freight, they nonetheless acknowledged that the history of the Revolution was a particularly charged subject. Unlike either the later High Revisionists, or their Marxists colleagues for that matter, whose work turned on definitions of ideology that were applicable to both revolutionaries and historians, Doyle and Cobban struggled with how to incorporate their politics with their history. They argued, perhaps naively, that scientific methods of sociological and economic analyses should be used to defuse overtly ideological debate, rather than politicize it further, or rupture it entirely. Regardless of their solution Cobban and Doyle were clearly identifying problems within a historiographical tradition to which they considered themselves to belong. They were not interested in disposing of social history *per se*, but in disposing of a particular interpretation of social history they argued had grown dogmatic and sterile. In the following chapter I will briefly outline their proto-Revisionist historiographies of the French Revolution as well as the more orthodox historiography of George Rudé.⁴³

George Rudé

For George Rudé, the Radical, Conservative and Liberal attitudes toward the Revolution continued to dominate and inspire a debate that was transformed in the twentieth century by methodological progress. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, interpretations of the Revolution were focused on the ideas and personalities that seemed to determine its direction. Such an approach is called top-down or political history. Around the turn of the century historians began to use social and economic

⁴³ Alfred Cobban, *Historians and the Causes of the French Revolution*, (London:1946); William Doyle, *Origins of the French Revolution*, (Oxford: 1980); George Rudé, *Interpretations of the French Revolution*, (London: 1972).

analysis of the Revolution that did not merely contextualize its political story, but transformed how it was understood and, in a sense, turned the top-down approach on its head.⁴⁴ That socio-economic approach to the Revolution was spearheaded by the historians revisionist historiographers identify with a Marxist orthodoxy.⁴⁵ For Cobban and Doyle this coincidence of method and politics was just that: a coincidence. If technical developments produced a few Pyrrhic victories for the Left they also produced the data that ultimately undermined Marxist categories of class. For Rudé however, the new methods went hand in glove with the unprecedented flowering of Radical historiography.

For Rudé historians prior to the Twentieth Century, for all the ideological differences that divided them, invariably produced accounts of the French Revolution “from above.”⁴⁶ They described events from the vantage points of the political elites in large part because they relied on documents that were written by that elite. This meant even the most radical histories of the Revolution were skewed toward a Liberal or Conservative bias, simply because the people who stood to benefit the most from a true social and economic revolution—the poor and illiterate, the working classes and the peasants—remained silent. For Rudé, a Radical interpretation that was truly sympathetic

⁴⁴ Rudé, *Interpretations of the French Revolution* p.16

⁴⁵ Rudé acknowledged that de Tocqueville preceded this methodological shift with a socio-economic analysis of his own by some fifty years. De Tocqueville was however, Rudé explained, ‘altogether somewhat of a freak.’ (*Interpretations of the French Revolution*, p. 16) This is not a very satisfying explanation particularly in the light of the important role de Tocqueville plays in later Revisionist critiques of the Marxist orthodoxy.

⁴⁶ Rudé, p. 15

in attitude toward the Revolution could only be fully realized with the modern sociological and economic tools that would give the masses of humanity a voice. These methods, for Rudé, transformed history from the art of political narrative to a discipline with scientific pretensions. What ultimately made historians such as Jean Jaures, Albert Mathiez, George Lefebvre and Albert Soboul radical was, however, neither the new methods, nor the social nature of their interpretations. What made them radical were their political sympathies with the peasants, the urban poor and the Jacobin party.⁴⁷

Rudé began his discussion of the Conservative interpretation at a much earlier date than the Radical; with the return of the *émigrés* to France after the restoration of the Bourbons to power. The *émigrés* condemned the Revolution as a series of crimes against society, church and state that led inevitably to regicide, the Terror and the dictatorship of Napoleon. For these earliest Conservatives the Revolution was either a terrible accident, or the result of a conspiracy of Illuminati, Freemasons, *philosophes*, and Jacobins.⁴⁸

By the twentieth century Conservative historians were no longer representing the French Revolution as a crime against God and King and were instead characterizing it as a deviation from the normal process of modernization. The French Revolution had, for them, become the precursor to the evils of contemporary radicalism. Rudé identified Frantz Funck-Brentano, Pierre Gaxotte and J.L. Talmon as twentieth century interpreters of the Revolution who attempted to modernize a Conservative accounting of it but failed to do so convincingly. Gaxotte writing in the thirties, and Talmon in the fifties, both

⁴⁷ Rudé, p. 15-24.

⁴⁸ Rudé, p. 9.

viewed the Revolution through the lens of the Russian Revolution and tried to understand the relation of the two events. In so doing Talmon, in particular, produced an account of the French Revolution that fits quite neatly into the secular Conservatism of High Revisionism. In his book *The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy* Talmon argued that totalitarian ideas originated with Rousseau, evolved into the political extremism of the French Revolution and eventually produced the Communist governments of the Cold War. Modern Conservative historians, such as Talmon, condemned the Revolution not because it was a criminal act against established order, but because it was the product of a distorted worldview that failed to understand the true nature of history.⁴⁹

For Rudé, historians like Gaxotte, Talmon, and even Furet, whose name is mentioned in the last pages of *Interpretations*, remained very much part of an established Conservative tradition that, despite shifts in tone, perspective and methodology, maintained a moral and political opposition to both the Revolution and revolutionary politics.⁵⁰ From such a perspective High Revisionism does not mark a radical break with the Conservative interpretive traditions of the past but an extension of them.

Liberal historians have traditionally argued that while the Revolution was justified, and its roots firmly set in France's past, its most embarrassing excesses occurred because historical circumstances and overwrought ideologues conspired to radicalize it. Early Liberals such as Madame de Stael and Francois Mignet saw the Revolution as ushering in an inevitable era in the progress of social order. Despite the violence of the

⁴⁹ Rudé, p. 27.

⁵⁰ Rudé, p.30.

Revolution and the irrationality of the mob, its ultimate goal and justification was the establishment of constitutional monarchy and representative government.⁵¹ Such progress was in constant danger, however, of being betrayed by the forces of both reaction and radicalism.

Perhaps the most original of the Liberal historians, and certainly the one Rudé discussed in the most detail, was Alexis de Tocqueville.⁵² For de Tocqueville, the Revolution was merely the logical sequel to the administrative reform carried out by Louis XVI. He emphasized the continuity of ideas and institutions linking the Revolution to the *Ancien Régime*. On the eve of the Revolution, according to de Tocqueville, France was experiencing both political and administrative reform as well as unprecedented economic growth. It was this combination of prosperity and enlightenment that made the survivals of feudalism and their constraints on liberty seem so onerous to the people and led to their violent eradication. In an anticipation of Revisionism, de Tocqueville argued there was no authentic social or economic revolution in the late eighteenth century, and that the radical excesses of the political Revolution were unnecessary to the long process of slow change.

Rudé's historiography ends with a nod toward Alfred Cobban and his entrance into the debate about the origin of the Revolution. Cobban, according to Rudé, began questioning the validity of that social interpretation of the French Revolution which had dominated the field for the previous fifty years. Cobban called for a less theoretical and

⁵¹ Rudé, p. 4.

⁵² Rudé, p. 8.

more empirical approach to the writing of social history and for the abandonment of such concepts as the “overthrow of the feudalism” and the “bourgeois revolution.” He argued that the Social Interpretation, and in particular the work of Soboul, was too strongly colored by Marxist-Leninist political assumptions.⁵³ Cobban, in Rudé’s view, wanted a Liberal or Conservative social interpretation that could challenge that of the Radicals.

The two themes that ran through Rudé’s historiography were that the history of the Revolution was always a politicized history, and that good method provided a medium within which historians — regardless of their political attitudes — could engage in measured and rigorous argument. Far from imagining a rupture of historiographical continuity, Rudé, anticipated a vigorous and energized reaction to the success of Radical historiography on the part of right-wing scholars.

Alfred Cobban

Alfred Cobban published his own historiography *Historians and the Causes of the French Revolution* in 1946. Like Rudé, Cobban differentiated between contemporary and traditional historiographies along methodological lines. Unlike Rudé, however, Cobban was uncomfortable with the role of political interest in the production of history and argued the new methods of social history made a purely objective history possible.

It was only with the turn of the century that what Cobban called “history proper” began, and the literary productions of “the great primitives of revolutionary historiography” came to an end.⁵⁴ For Cobban the exchange of “the brush of the romantic

⁵³ Rudé, p.29.

⁵⁴ Cobban, p.20.

historian” for the “microscope” of the social scientists meant that history could finally conduct its debates guided by facts rather than by politics and speculative philosophy.⁵⁵ The great theme of Cobban’s historiography is “the danger of writing history to a theory,” by which Cobban meant the danger of writing a Marxist history of the Revolution.⁵⁶

That exchange of the brush for the microscope was, like Rudé’s methodological revolution, associated with the same scholars whom the High Revisionists identified as the Marxist orthodoxy. According to Cobban with the professionalization of history, and in particular the use historians began to make of sociological, psychological and economic analyses, left-wing scholars like Jaures, Mathiez and Lefebvre began to produce good history despite their obviously socialist inclinations. For Cobban the conjunction of new methods with the success of the Left may have been mere coincidence, but it was a coincidence whose success meant the social interpretation was in danger of hardening into an unchallenged dogmatic formula.⁵⁷ According to Cobban:

One would think there is no more to be said: The Revolution is neatly parceled, tied up and delivered to the address designated in the historical philosophy of Karl Marx. But Lefebvre is too good a historian to be content with the mere illustration of formula; and his own extensive and penetrating researches have opened a new phase in the history of the Revolution.⁵⁸

Cobban identified a scientific methodological revolution that transcended political bias

⁵⁵ Cobban, p.32.

⁵⁶ Cobban, p.17.

⁵⁷ Cobban, p.34.

⁵⁸ Cobban, p. 36.

with both his own critique of the orthodoxy and the best work of the great French historians with whom he was arguing. While there were certainly historians who belonged to the Right producing important work—Cobban mentions Gaxotte and Funck-Brentano—they were writing histories that were too obviously polemical to compete with the scope and comprehensiveness of the material being produced by Mathiez and Lefebvre on the Left. In Cobban's reading it was up to historians without obvious ideological interests at stake to use the Marxists' own methods against them. According to Cobban, Socialist historians had already proved — albeit unintentionally — that such tried-and-true concepts as class, economic and social causation, and the relation of feudalism to capitalism were much more complex than had been imagined by the socialist theoreticians who first constructed them. Cobban argued that sound methodology was to be the cure for ideology — which was a substantially different position than that of Rudé.

It is important to note that the invisibility of a Liberal interpretive tradition in Cobban's historiography does not mean it is not there: it is merely hidden behind the double refraction of his categories “right-wing/left-wing” and “good history/bad history.” In the light of his larger and more famous works it is safe enough to call Cobban a Liberal as Rudé defines the term. Certainly a High Revisionist such as Gary Kates calls him that.⁵⁹ He quite obviously still considers himself part of a historical debate with the Marxists and not a representative of an alternative world view. For later Revisionists the ideology of the Marxist orthodoxy is a false world view that by definition produces false

⁵⁹ See Kates's introduction to *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and Controversies*, (New York; 1998).

histories, but Cobban wrote as if he had faith that empiricism, data, and the practice of good history can always win an argument — even with a Marxist.

William Doyle

For William Doyle, as for Cobban, the dogmatism of the orthodoxy was not the result of a psychological or pseudo-religious worldview, but of an unwillingness to give up an incorrect theoretical position in the face of facts. Like Cobban, Doyle imagined himself engaged in a dialogue with French historians in which the final arbiter of an interpretive decision was data. Each in his own way made an effort to de-politicize the debate over the origins of the Revolution by appealing to the primacy of facts over theory. Doyle however, unlike Cobban, almost entirely ignored the overtly political aspects of historiography. Doyle published what is perhaps a first effort to organize the arguments of Revisionism into something resembling the history of a movement. In *Origins of the French Revolution* Doyle made, in his words, “an attempt to state clearly and concisely how recent research has altered our view of what caused the greatest of all revolutions.”⁶⁰ Unlike Cobban, who imagined himself as a participant in a debate, Doyle wrote as an observer looking back on a debate that had already been resolved. According to Doyle:

Nobody can undertake a work like this in any confidence of winning general agreement with his conclusions. But if I can persuade my readers to start disagreeing with me rather than with old orthodoxies that are not only dead but in urgent need of burial, then perhaps the debate will have made a permanent advance.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Doyle, p.2.

⁶¹ Doyle, p. 3.

Like Cobban, Doyle identified these orthodoxies with the social interpretation in particular, and French scholarship in general, but by 1980 Doyle felt he could banish the historians from the University of Paris to irrelevance rather than engage them. The “our” of “our view” was for Doyle all those historians that he called “present-day historians,” historians who had incomparably more material upon which to formulate judgements about the Revolution’s origins than the Parisian orthodoxy had access to.⁶² Doyle, at least in *Origins*, presented the orthodox social interpretation as simple misinterpretation, perhaps influenced by ideological factors, but certainly not beholden to them. The persistence of the orthodoxy was not explained away by Doyle as ideological perversity but as a result of the structure of the French university.

Doyle emphasized the national and institutional aspects of the social interpretation. He identified Roland Mousnier, Daniel Mornet, and Ernest Labrousse, along with Lefebvre, as having individually dominated at least some aspect of the history of the French Revolution.⁶³ Their domination resulted not from the clarity of their argument, nor from ideological hegemony, but was due to patterns of institutional power both in France and abroad, that stifled creative new research. Doyle suggested patronage and despotism muffled dissent among younger historians in France and, that until the Anglo-American assault on the orthodoxy began, foreign researchers were too intimidated by an imagined French superiority in the field to put forward their own objections too strongly. For Doyle, if the orthodoxy was the result of the domination of

⁶² Doyle, p.40.

⁶³ Doyle, p.33-40.

the French academy by a handful of Professors, the collapse of the regime was caused by the vitality and rigor of a new generation of scholarship from beyond Calais. Doyle:

Under the onslaught of new research, mainly conducted by non-French scholars, the consensus began to crumble, and in 1962 it was subjected by Alfred Cobban to a frontal attack. After that no part of the old view remained sacrosanct, and by 1970 the occasional skeptical voice was being raised in France itself. Scores of American, British, and other foreign research students invaded the French archives and later proclaimed their dissent — for their own corners of the field — from old orthodoxies.⁶⁴

These young Revisionists led the historiography of the Revolution away from “the apparent certainties of forty years ago,” and into a period of “disagreement, controversy and iconoclasm”⁶⁵ from which, at the time of Doyle’s writing, was emerging a new international consensus.⁶⁶ For Doyle the debates over the French Revolution were not argued between ideologues but between an old, stubborn and conservative French scholarship and a bright-eyed, clear-minded army of largely Anglo-Saxon researchers.

The few skeptical French voices heard in Doyle’s account were certainly those of Furet and Denis Richet, but they were barely murmurs at the time, while in later Revisionist accounts Furet was greeted with hosannas. The very minor role François Furet plays in *Origins*, compared to the parts played by Alfred Cobban and George Taylor, is perhaps a result of Doyle’s emphasis on the Frenchness of the orthodoxy and an essentially Anglo-Saxon revolt. It is also an indication of how unimportant Furet and

⁶⁴Doyle, p.1.

⁶⁵ Doyle, p. 40.

⁶⁶ Doyle, p.24.

his critique of ideology approach remained in 1980.⁶⁷ Doyle did not consider the ideology of an historian nearly so important as the institutional context in which he or she conducted their research. In Doyle's account the orthodoxy was the result of an overly centralized French university system dominated by a handful of powerful professors.

Conclusion

Rudé, Cobban and Doyle produced quite different historiographies of the "orthodox" period but what they do have in common provides a sharp contrast with High Revisionism. Even in Doyle's account, in which the ideological attitudes of historians vanished behind their national, cultural and institutional differences, there was an assumption that any historical interpretation of the French Revolution could be understood as a political interpretation. Such interpretations were not, however, to be simply reduced to political positions but evaluated against the shared values and rules of the historical discipline. If Doyle and Cobban went out of their way to make their own accounts of the Revolution seem less politicized than orthodox accounts such as that of Rudé, they also made sure their readers understood all interpretations of the Revolution were part of the same historiographical tradition, no matter how fragmented that tradition was, or how much in need of reform. Such an approach was fine as far as it went, but what was missing from Doyle's and Cobban's historiographies was a working theory of

⁶⁷ Which is not to say Doyle isn't aware of a dramatic shift of historians interest from the social to the political. If most of his discussion in 1980 was an account of the deconstruction of an orthodox social history of the Revolution one can also find in it the development of George Taylor's radical claim that the French Revolution was not a social revolution with political consequences but a political revolution with social consequences. Doyle's own interpretation ends with the claim that it was not revolutionaries that made the Revolution but the Revolution that made the revolutionaries. But he at no point emphasizes the primacy of political interpretation over social interpretation.

ideology. This was certainly not the case with High Revisionist historians, who as we shall see posited the existence of a profound rupture between the ideological interpretations of the Revolution that preceded them, and the post-ideological age which Doyle and Cobban helped to usher in. Those later Revisionists were to suggest that the origin of the social interpretation of the orthodoxy lay not in institutional structure or political theories, but was deeply imbedded in a particular ideology, and that this ideology was as old as the Revolution itself.

Chapter Three: High Revisionist Historiography

In the following chapter I will construct a model of High Revisionist historiography. I will show how in High Revisionism a set of shared traits do not function simply as rhetorical devices or methodological guidelines, but in a classically ideological sense. High Revisionist historians start their work with the assumption that both Marxist ideology and socio-economic methodology are relics of an historiographical past that need not be taken seriously. From the High Revisionist perspective, ideas about how we organize our societies should be understood independently of the socio-economic contexts in which they are produced. In such a reading High Revisionist historiography masks, rather than reveals, important aspects of historical process. And it does so in such a way as to protect the interests of the status quo. And as I showed in the first chapter that High Revisionist position has serious consequences for the study of religion.

High Revisionist historians reject socio-economic analysis of the Revolution on the basis of a teleological theory of history. In that theory contemporary historiographical attitudes are the final result of a process of evolution that proceeds from the religious worldview of medieval Christendom, through the pseudo-religious worldview of nineteenth century ideologies and ends in a properly secularized Modernity. The primary architect of that theory is François Furet. Furet is cited by all High Revisionist historiographers as the most influential historian of the Revolution of his generation, but his theory of history is rarely, if ever, critically examined by them. It functions instead as a formula that allows historians to bypass serious engagement with methods more overtly materialist, or politicized, than the ones they prefer.

In this chapter I will give some examples of how High Revisionists represent their own history. I will begin with a discussion of Gary Kates's introduction to *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and Controversies*, in which he identified the Revisionist break with ideological representations of the Revolution as a historiographical revolution. I will follow that discussion with a sampling of some other Revisionist historiographies, all of which assumed that the history of the French Revolution had finally transcended its ideological origins.⁶⁸ By the late 1980s these historians imagined that Marxism had been vanquished, and that the social interpretation and the outdated politics of its practitioners had been washed away by a flood of cultural and political histories of the French Revolution. For the High Revisionist, the notion that humanity can transform its socio-political order in a radical and positive way, had become a relic of the Revolutionary past, and ideologies founded on such notions did so on the basis of an unsound and outmoded historiography.

Gary Kates

While Alfred Cobban and William Doyle may have anticipated to some degree the shifts in historiographical attitudes that were to occur in the second half of the twentieth century, there is no evidence that either of them thought of their work as part of a larger post-ideological approach to the study of the French Revolution. Gary Kates however, constructed his version of Revisionism as not just part of the usual and expected revisions

⁶⁸ Suzanne Desan, "What's after Political Culture? Recent French Revolutionary Historiography," *French Historical Studies* 23 (Winter 2000); Vivienne Gruder, "Whither Revisionism? Political Perspectives on the Ancien Régime," *French Historical Studies* 20 (1995):245-85; Gary Kates, *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and Controversies*, (New York, 1998); Sara Maza, "Politics, culture and the origins of the French Revolution" *Journal of Modern History*, 61 (1989), 703-723.

that are inevitable in history, but as a clearing of ideological ground and the beginning of a new historiographical epoch. That this new epoch had its origin in the political attitudes of the past was a given but for Kates it's break with that past was radical and irreversible.

Kates used the same three political categories as Rudé to organize his historiography of pre-Revisionist Revolutionary studies with only minor differences in emphasis. His account of the Liberals was virtually identical to Rudé's in that he defined them as historians who argued that while the Revolution was essential and progressive, it had been thrown off course as it became radicalized.⁶⁹ Kates also, again like Rudé, linked the Radical historiography of the orthodoxy to the professionalization of the discipline and the establishment of the chair of the History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne. The historians that shared that chair also all shared what Kates called a commitment to Marxism. Consequently the history of the French Revolution came to be dominated by "left-wing socialists committed to a particular way of seeing the Revolution and to a special set of values."⁷⁰

Where Kates differed the most sharply from Rudé is in his treatment of Conservative historiography. Kates produced a pre-history of neo-Conservatism rather than a history of Conservative historiography. He acknowledged a rich tradition of interpretation outside the academy — originating with Edmund Burke in 1790 — that viewed the Revolution as unnecessary and indeed, an impediment to the establishment of political liberty. But inside the academy, in Kates's view, Conservative scholars had been

⁶⁹ Kates, p.9.

⁷⁰ Kates, p.3.

isolated and ignored. That exclusion from debate came to an end in the 1950s when what Kates calls “a transformation of an enormous magnitude” began.⁷¹ This transformation was the Revisionist critique of the orthodox Marxist interpretation.

While early Conservatives such as Burke, and Liberals such as de Tocqueville, may have anticipated Revisionism by identifying the Jacobins with historiographical error, Kates was careful not to conflate them with the High Revisionists.⁷² Their histories may have been admirable, even proto-Revisionist, but they belonged to the same ideological era as the scholars of the social interpretation. And if historians like Burke, deTocqueville, Mathiez and Lefebvre all belonged to a grand tradition of ideological historiography that began with the Revolution itself, Revisionists such as Cobban and Furet contributed to the rupture of that tradition. The boundary between pre- and post-Revisionist epochs was not marked for Kates, as it was for Rudé, Cobban and Doyle, by technical developments, but by an overthrow of ideology that he represented as an historiographical revolution.

The Revisionist Revolution

Kates divided the Revisionism into two overlapping phases. The first, led by Alfred Cobban, did not dispute the social nature of the French Revolution, but rather the categories of class drawn from Marxism that the orthodoxy used in constructing its interpretation.⁷³ This Revisionism was largely an Anglo-American affair and it shared

⁷¹ Kates, p.10.

⁷² Kates, p.10.

⁷³ Kates, p.5.

with the Radical historians the view that the Revolution was an agent of progress even if they disagreed about its consequences.⁷⁴ It was in essence a Liberal position that used the same sociological and economic methodologies as the Marxist orthodoxy.

Kates identified the second phase of Revisionism with François Furet. Kates chose to make Furet's 1978 publication of *Penser la révolution française* the moment when this new phase of Revisionism was launched. Furet's criticisms of the orthodoxy were more comprehensive and sophisticated than those of Cobban and Doyle. Furet expanded on Cobban's somewhat naive ideological critique of Marxist historians with the argument that the traditional social interpretation was little more than the anachronistic political dogma of the Revolutionaries themselves. Furet, in Kates's reading, combined his polemic against "Jacobin" orthodoxy with the methodological tools to restore the French Revolution to its most obvious dimension, the political one.

This shift, from merely criticizing the orthodoxy with weapons from their own arsenal to a wholesale deconstruction of the social interpretation, meant that Revisionism could expand the methodological boundaries of the debate to include political theory and intellectual history instead of just the social and economic modes of interpretation that Marxist historians preferred. The methodological differences between these later Revisionists and the Marxists often seem as stark as the ideological differences. If early Revisionists attempted to dismantle the orthodoxy by attacking the evidence they used to support their claims, the High Revisionists turned increasingly to political and rhetorical analyses of the Radical historians to make their arguments. Furet, for instance, scored a

⁷⁴ Kates, p.9

noisy—if superficial—hit on the social interpretation by arguing that Marxist ideology was a developmental stage that lay between the religious and irrational worldview of Christendom and the secular and rational worldview of Modernity. By disentangling what he perceived to be their pseudo-religious conflation of the political with the social, Furet allowed High Revisionist historians to reconstruct the Revolution as a purely political event without paying much mind to social and economic issues.

Even if the Revisionists intent was not political *per se* the results of their critique certainly were. To be able to concentrate strictly on political issues was attractive to Conservative and Liberal intellectuals who were uncomfortable with the ramifications of radical socio-economic critique. Not only did Furet's conceptualization of ideology as a developmental stage mean that Marxist historiography could be written off as pseudo-religious mumbo-jumbo, it also meant Liberal and Conservative historians could no longer be criticized on ideological grounds. Later High Revisionists, like Kates, strengthened Furet's argument that the historiography of the French Revolution had finally transcended its ideological origins by constructing Revisionism as a rupture with the past that erased the old political categories, rather than simply reconfiguring them. Kates emphasized this erasure of the old categories by referring to post-Revisionist historians as neo-Marxist, neo-Liberal and neo-Conservative.

But how real were the differences between the old political categories and the new? There was certainly no difference in their respective attitudes towards the Revolution; the neo-Marxist wished to extend the Revolution, the neo-Liberal to limit it and the neo-Conservative to abort it. Nor, in the case of the neo-Liberals and neo-

Marxists was their any real difference in content between the previous incarnations of the categories and their current manifestations. The only substantial change in the content of these categories occurred in the reconfiguration of the Conservative attitude in suitably modern and secular terms. For neo-Conservatives the Revolution was no longer a crime against God and King, as it had been for the Conservatives. Instead the French Revolution was represented as mutation in the evolution of modernity — the Jacobins were no longer wicked criminals but deluded political degenerates. But that Conservative historians had finally managed to repackage their politics is hardly a convincing argument for historiographical revolution — Rudé's suggestion that Furet's history of the Revolution was simply a new representation of an old attitude was certainly more elegant than a metaphysics of shifting epochs. In Kates's usage the prefix "neo" seemed to serve the largely rhetorical and polemical purpose of imposing a superficial distinction between old ideological discourse and properly historical discourse; a distinction that masked the fact that Conservative attitudes toward the Revolution, and revolution, remained the same.

One of the most significant results of the construction of Revisionism as rupture, regardless of its accuracy, was that it could justify the banishment of Radical interpretations of the Revolution from the historiographical stage. Kates argued that the success of the Revisionist reaction to Marxist orthodoxy, in conjunction with the geopolitical events of the 1980s and 1990s, entirely eliminated Marxism as a serious threat not only to Liberal and Conservative accounts of the Revolution, but as a competitive political ideology altogether. This triumphalist attitude combined with an ever

enthusiastic disparagement of Jacobin anachronisms, meant that any Marxist—or neo-Marxist — response to the Revisionist critique could be written off as little more than the chain-rattling of a lingering specter.⁷⁵ In such a reading Kates’s construction of an intellectual rupture hides the continuity of Conservative political structures. For the Revisionists, with the voice of Radical interpretation silenced, the Revolution was finally over. According to Kates:

François Furet is right that “the French Revolution is over.” We live in another age, and the problems of the late eighteenth century are no longer our own. Nevertheless, the legacy of the achievements and failures of that age are still with us. The French Revolutionaries dreamed of a world (like ours) dominated by democratic republics. They tried — and ultimately failed — to figure out what duties a democratic government had towards its neighbors. Our era may not be theirs but surely how we choose to write about their early efforts will help shape how our readers think about our own political problems.⁷⁶

This epochal attitude—the idea that the Revolution belongs in an impenetrable past, that the concerns and interests of the eighteenth century French are of a different nature than our own, that there was a moment when we entered a new world order in which revolutionary ideology lost its meaning, is one that can clearly be made to perform political functions. It was a profoundly conservative position, and one that Kates acknowledged to have been well suited to the political climate of the Thatcher and Reagan years in which it was constructed.

⁷⁵ Kates acknowledged that there have been ‘neo-Marxist’ responses to Revisionism but he wrote them off in a single terse sentence. Kates, p. 12.

⁷⁶ Kates, p.17

The Characteristics of High Revisionism

High Revisionism then, as it was represented by Kates, provided political reassurances to historians hostile to social or economic revolution, but those reassurances depended on a delimitation of the concept of ideology which was particularly crippling to scholars who analyzed the relation of religion to politics. In Furet's appraisal religion and Radical historiography were both reduced to anachronisms that did not need to be understood as contemporary phenomenon, but were best understood as the expressions of primitives and antiquarians. In a classically teleological position, both phenomena are explained in terms of what occurs after them; they are developmental stages that precede modernity. In identifying Kates's historiographical approach as typically High Revisionist I want to emphasize in particular that epochality. In Kates's account, the breaks between historiographical modes were shifts in worldview rather than the interpretive adjustments or technical developments they are in Rudé, Cobban and Doyle.

Kates's representation of Revisionism as a rupture in historiographic tradition may have been more comprehensive and analytical than most such attempts, but his tone and emphasis were certainly not unique. Numerous shorter, but similar accounts adorned the introductions to a wide range of Revisionist monographs and articles and they all shared the same epochality as Kates's essay. It is a mistake however to think of such historiographical blurbs as reductions of well developed positions. It is more accurate to treat Kates' essay as a philosophical explication of earlier High Revisionist intuitions. An article Kates wrote some ten years before his introduction to *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies* shows how the longer, more sophisticated work,

is the development of a handful of rhetorical and ideological tropes rather than their foundation. In “The Revisionists Come of Age: Reflections on Three Important Recent Works,” Gary Kates reviewed volumes one and two of *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture* and *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*.⁷⁷ The first two books were edited by Keith Baker and Colin Lucas and recorded the proceedings of two colloquia; the first held in Chicago in 1986 and the second at Oxford in 1987. The third book was the text I discussed in the first chapter, a collection of short essays on a wide range of subjects edited by François Furet and Mona Ozouf. Before he proceeded with his review Kates presented the following preamble:

For many years a broad consensus has been emerging that the “Marxist” interpretation of the French Revolution, given classic expression in the works of Jean Jaurès, Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul, is no longer useful in addressing fundamental questions. But until recently the Revisionists, as they are sometimes called, felt more comfortable playing the role of an opposition; they tossed Molotov cocktails at the Marxists in the form of lucid articles, but avoided overwhelming them with an alternative paradigm sufficiently coherent to be accepted throughout the historical profession...With the publication of these volumes—whose contributing authors largely overlap with each other—we are thus witnessing the Revisionists coming of age. Under the leadership of such well-known historians as François Furet and Mona Ozouf in France, William Doyle and Colin Lucas in Britain, and Keith Baker in the United States, the Revisionist interpretation has now become the new orthodoxy.⁷⁸

There are elements of three themes here that appear in all High Revisionist historiography. The first is that the social interpretation was initially identified as an

⁷⁷ Gary Kates, “The Revisionists Come of Age: Reflections on Three Important Recent Works” *French Historical Studies*, 16 (1990) 749-755

⁷⁸ Kates, p.615.

ideological “Marxist” position, and then as a methodologically inadequate model for historians to use. Kates implied a relationship between the ideology of the French orthodoxy and their inability to supply satisfactory answers for fundamental questions about the Revolution, but he did not articulate that relationship explicitly. Nonetheless he represented the social interpretation in both his works as a theoretical construct composed of dogmatically held ideological and methodological positions.

A second Revisionist theme is that these methodological and empirical critiques of the orthodoxy remained just that, a series of criticisms and observations that undermined a particular interpretation of the Revolution, and that until the mid-eighties they did not share a common ideological or theoretical framework themselves. In the eighties a group of historians led by Furet, Doyle and Baker provided an ‘alternative paradigm’ to fill the void left by the collapse of the Marxist social interpretation. The suggestion that the High Revisionist paradigm is the product of ideological conflict is never broached, instead it emerges from the ruins of outmoded historiography and a bankrupt methodology. Unlike the orthodox interpretation, Revisionism is not a theoretical position at all, but a collective attempt to make sense of the facts.

The third theme is that this new paradigm-that-is-not-a-theory, has had such success that it entirely dominates the historiography of the French Revolution. Both Marxist ideology and the social interpretation of the Revolution associated with it, have been dealt such a devastating blow by Revisionism that they cannot recover. These three themes; that the old orthodoxy was both an ideological position and a methodological failure, that Revisionism occurred in two phases—as naive criticism and then as an

alternative paradigm but never as an ideological or theoretical competitor, and that Revisionism has been utterly successful, are common to all High Revisionist historiographies. And what gives them such ideological undertow is their epochal tone. Kates's text is peppered with language suggesting the passing of one age and the beginning of a new one. Phrases such as "coming of age," "overwhelming them with an alternative paradigm," and "the new orthodoxy" may seem harmless little flourishes at first glance, but when they are repeated as often as they were in Revisionist articles during the 1980s and 1990s, they resonate loudly enough that they form an unexamined, and almost unconscious, set of assumptions about the nature of historiographical change — and these assumptions suit the interpretive needs of Conservative historiography.

Sara Maza

Sara Maza's essay "Politics, culture and the origins of the French Revolution," published in the *Journal of Modern History* in 1989, provides another good example of how different High Revisionist historiography is from earlier, more generally revisionist historiography, such as William Doyle's *Origins of the French Revolution*.⁷⁹ Doyle's *Origins*, although canonized by Maza as "the standard Revisionist account," is not by my definition a properly Revisionist work at all. Not simply because Doyle did not use the term 'Revisionist' as a label for the movements he discussed, nor because his text predates that period which could be called High Revisionist, but because the theoretical

⁷⁹ Maza, Sarah "Politics, culture and the origins of the French Revolution" *Journal of Modern History*, 61 (1989), pp. 703-23.

framework of later High Revisionist histories was absent from it.⁸⁰ Maza's 1989 essay on the other hand, was explicitly post-Revisionist; it had the same epochal tone as Kates' work, struck the same "un"-ideological pose, and assumed the same triumphalist airs. Both Maza and Kates, unlike Doyle, imagined that a transition from ideological to historiographical representations of the French Revolution had occurred during the twentieth century.

Maza considered the debate between the orthodoxy and its opponents to be over, and the Revisionists to have won, as did Doyle, but she framed that debate in different terms than he did.⁸¹ For Maza, Revisionism was much more than a new model of the Revolution. She likened the overhaul of the field that occurred in the 1980s to a Kuhnian scientific revolution: before the early 1960s the class-struggle model of the Revolution seemed as commonsensical to historians as the sun's rotation around the earth seemed prior to Copernicus. According to Maza, in both the Copernican and the Revisionist revolutions, an earlier paradigm collapsed beneath the accumulated weight of contradictory evidence and only then did a new paradigm emerge to replace it. The

⁸⁰ What is so striking about the use Maza makes of *Origins* as a seminal Revisionist text is that she fails to mention the complete lack of ideological edge to Doyle's account. In fact, she excises his historiography from the book altogether. Doyle's *Origins of the French Revolution* consists of two halves, the first an overview of writings on the Revolution since 1939 and the second his own attempt to construct a new analysis. Maza's account of *Origins of the French Revolution* however makes the second half of the book the whole book. She ignores the first half, Doyle's historiography, entirely. Such an oversight on Maza's part would be easier to forgive if right before she made it she had not coolly and deliberately drawn attention to what the structure of the book could tell us of the Revisionist paradigm shift. Doyle makes his own arguments only after he has discussed the interpretive traditions which his own work is in dialogue with, but Maza decontextualizes that argument. Doyle's hypotheses about the origins of the Revolution emerge dramatically out of a void in Maza's account as they must if we are to take seriously the notion of incommensurable mental worlds.

⁸¹ Maza, p. 100.

analogy with Kuhn allowed Maza to metaphorically link the orthodoxy of the social interpretation to the medieval Catholic Church — both are represented as institutions that relied on dogma to resist the inevitability of modernization; and the very notion of a shift from a religious to a scientific worldview reinforced the basic structure common to all High Revisionist representations of themselves. For Maza, like Kates, Marxist ideology was responsible for the development and propagation of a rigid model of Revolution that could not be forced to fit the facts.⁸² In Maza's historiography the social interpretation was not simply a misinterpretation, but a set of dogmatically held beliefs embedded in a false, and anachronistic, ideology.

Revisionists in Maza's account were not simply historians who disagreed with an orthodoxy, but representatives of a different and incompatible worldview. Furet in particular, whose presence was so discrete in Doyle and Rudé, was a dramatic figure for Maza; a brilliant iconoclast engaging in "guerrilla warfare against the French Marxist establishment."⁸³ Maza described his ideas as "militantly antitotalitarian (mostly anti-Marxist)" and, while she acknowledged his work and attitudes were products of French political culture, she did not explore what that might mean to our understanding of him. Like Kates, and virtually every other High Revisionist historiographer except Furet himself, she failed to mention Furet's long membership in the Communist Party, or

⁸² Maza, p.104.

⁸³ Maza, p. 103. Has any Revisionist historiographer ever not referred to Furet as an iconoclast? The religious allusions of Revisionism are relentless, no one seems capable of not representing it as a Protestant struggle against a universal and catholic church.

suggest how his personal experience of ideology shaped his conception of it.⁸⁴

Maza's essay, like Kates's historiography, was typical of the Revisionist myth of its own origins. First, in both works Marxism is represented as both a methodological and ideological theory that dogmatically determines how the Revolution should be understood. Second, in both works Revisionism is not ideological, nor even political, but a purely empirical project. Finally, the Revisionist destruction of the social interpretation of the Revolution was so total that even a general socio-economic representation of the Revolution, let alone a more traditional Marxist account of it, had become impossible to maintain.

The repetition in Maza's work of the themes we found in Kates' arguments suggests the existence of shared conceptual structure. This structure is what separates general revisionism — as it had been represented by historians such as Doyle and Cobban — from High Revisionism. High Revisionism consisted of a set of assumptions about the nature of ideology that were common to a wide range of abridged historiographies, and operated in a way that shut down certain types of historical debate.

Suzanne Desan

Suzanne Desan, whom we can recall from the first chapter, reviewed the same three High Revisionist texts in 2000 as Kates did in 1990, and in comparing them it is quite clear how little Revisionist historiography changed in ten years. Desan, like Kates, characterized contemporary French Revolutionary studies as one of diverse and varied approaches that was open to all manner of methodologies and interpretive approaches.

⁸⁴ Maza, p. 104.

She also, again like Kates and Maza, reconstructed Revisionism as an epochal moment that separated one historiographical period from another.⁸⁵

Desan was, however, a little more wary than either Kates or Maza of labelling Revisionism the new orthodoxy. Not only did she handle the term carefully with gloves of quotation marks, she also emphasized that there was no dominant new single interpretation of the French Revolution.⁸⁶ Such claims of diversity were disingenuous however. In the article that followed Desan wrote exclusively about historians who had taken the political turn. While she claimed that historians in the 1990s were searching “for the social within institutional and political practices” she avoided any suggestion of the role vulgar economic interests might have played in such practices.⁸⁷ The combination of Revisionist triumphalism, and the absence from her overview of any approach that was not rooted in what she called “the political culture methodology” suggests a situation that, if not an orthodoxy *per se*, was at least similar to Kates’s and Maza’s representation of it.⁸⁸ Desan’s claim that Revisionism was not an orthodoxy was further undermined by her identification of volumes one and two of *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, and *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, as proof of an “emerging” new paradigm — even if her orthodoxy was not an orthodoxy, it had its canon and its founding fathers.

⁸⁵ Suzanne Desan, “What’s after Political Culture? Recent French Revolutionary Historiography,” *French Historical Studies* 23 (Winter 2000) p.163.

⁸⁶ Desan p. 163-4.

⁸⁷ Desan, p.195.

⁸⁸ Desan, p.196

Desan placed the ideological demise of Marxism in juxtaposition with the methodological demise of the social interpretation but she never explained or developed that juxtaposition in her article. She tantalizingly hinted that the ideological collapse and the methodological failure were somehow connected but she did not explore the relations of political ideology and historical method either in the fall of the orthodoxy or in the success of Revisionism. Instead Revisionism is represented by her as marking a shift in historiographical epochs; The ideological and methodological orthodoxy of Marxism has collapsed and been replaced by the value free historiography of the Revisionists. Desan cleared the stage entirely of the Marxist social interpretation, and filled it with a diverse, not ideological, and properly historical, approach to the Revolution — an approach that is safely limited to the analysis of political culture.

Vivian Gruder

Vivian Gruder's article "Whither Revisionism: Political Perspectives on the *Ancien Régime*" provides us with a final example of High Revisionist historiography.⁸⁹ In her 1995 article Gruder was particularly interested in the periodization of Revisionism. She argued there had been three distinct phases of the movement with a fourth beginning.

Gruder:

In the first phase, "revisionism" brought into question the premises of the dominant "social" interpretation of the French revolution. In the second phase, Marxist and non-Marxist historians alike contested "revisionist" arguments and defended the view that the French Revolution arose as a class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy. Some among them who maintained the primacy of social forces in bringing on the

⁸⁹ Vivian Gruder, "Whither Revisionism? Political Perspectives on the *Ancien Régime*," *French Historical Studies* (1995) 245-85.

Revolution presented a more inventive “neoorthodoxy,” shifting emphasis from class to status or distinguishing a noncapitalist “old regime” bourgeoisie from a capitalist” bourgeoisie. In the third phase of this historiography, most historians embrace “revisionism,” consign the “class” interpretation to the dustbin of history, and race onto the bandwagon of the political interpretation of the French Revolution...The current almost universal acknowledgement of politics as the dominant force and mode of interpretation of the French Revolution does not mean a unanimity of opinion on the character of the politics that brought France into revolution. “Postrevisionism” (or whatever new nomenclature may be devised for this fourth phase) covers a host of quite different arguments, despite their common origin in the critique of the “social” interpretation and their affiliation with a political interpretation.⁹⁰

There is a consistent but unexamined tension in High Revisionist historiography between claims of methodological diversity and the proclamation of the political turn and that tension is particularly evident here. Gruder made the claim that while among historians “politics is almost universally acknowledged as the dominant force and mode of interpretation of the Revolution,” and while current arguments have “their common origin in the critique of the “social” interpretation and their affiliation with a political interpretation,” there is not really any such thing as a Revisionist orthodoxy.⁹¹

For Gruder the destruction of the social interpretation was so total that it did not warrant acknowledgement, let alone review, as a contemporary, or even potential competitor, of political histories of the Revolution. She argued that there was diversity in contemporary historiography by distinguishing between the approach represented best by Furet, Ozouf and Baker — with their emphasis on rhetoric and discourse — and the

⁹⁰ Gruder, p.246.

⁹¹ Gruder, p. 246.

approach identified with Robert Darnton and Lynn Hunt which pays close attention to the scandalous and pornographic writings of the period.⁹² This distinction between “high” and “low” is not uninteresting but it is hardly proof of a panoply of approaches — nor is the epilogue suggesting that legal discourse is a third mode of interpretation. In Gruder’s account, as in Desan’s, the methods of the social interpretation — class and economic analysis — have been replaced by a hermeneutical approach in which cultural meaning is the subject. For Gruder the Revisionist representation of the Revolution, one that was strictly political and cultural, was the only representation. There was simply no evidence in her essay of contemporary historians who took the role of social and economic factors in the French Revolution seriously. But neither Gruder, nor Desan, considered how the choice of method might be connected to the political attitude of the historian. By erasing the arguments, motives and political attitudes of the Revisionists’ Marxist opponents from the debate she purported to describe, Gruder made her new age of the political interpretation entirely free of the taint of ideology.

Like Kates, Maza and Desan, Gruder closely follows the Revisionist myth of origins, as I have described it: There was once an orthodox interpretation that had a Marxist ideology and relied on a socio-economic methodology to provide evidence for its claims. This orthodoxy was utterly destroyed on two fronts. As a political ideology it was destroyed by the failure of the Communist state and the victory of market democracies in the Cold War. As a historiographical ideology the social interpretation of the French Revolution, Marxism’s theoretical centerpiece, collapsed under the weight of

⁹² Gruder, p. 247.

its own contradictions. That interpretation was eventually replaced by a political, and cultural, model of the Revolution. Because the model that replaced the social interpretation was the result of a pragmatic and empirical research rather than the product of political interests the ideological battle over representations of the French Revolution can be declared not so much won as meaningless.

Conclusion

High Revisionist historiography was quite different from that of Rudé, Cobban and Doyle. Rudé, Cobban and Doyle emphasized the continuity of historiographical debate, and the engagement of historians in an intradisciplinary argument about the origins, and consequences, of the French Revolution. For the High Revisionists however, that debate, which was an extension of the Revolution itself, had been rendered meaningless by Furetian insights into the nature of ideology. The historians job, in the Revisionist view, was no longer to unravel the causal chains that bound the Revolution, as an event, to Marxist theory, but to interpret the cultural meaning of the Revolution to its participants. This approach — which was anthropological and hermeneutical rather than sociological and historical — transformed the revolutionary from a fellow political traveler into the exotic other. For the High Revisionist, once the Revolution was reduced to ideology it was vanquished, it was driven from contemporary politics and modern history into the past where it belonged. That Revisionist account of itself, however, is not the only one, and not every historian writing after the 1980s was so quick to pronounce the death of ideology.

Chapter Four: Alternatives to High Revisionist Historiography

Two short historiographical essays by French scholars Michel Vovelle and Claude Langlois provide a contemporary contrast to Revisionist historiography. They do so by emphasizing the continuity of historiographical tradition rather than its rupture; showing the existence of alternative interpretive modes; and pointing to the ideological origins of Revisionism itself. What was represented by Revisionists as a conflict between worldviews was represented by Vovelle and Langlois as a variety of historiographical conflicts that occurred at local, national and international levels. Ideology in their view was not a delusionary mental state divorced from other social and political factors, as it is in Revisionist accounts, but part of a complex web of historical causation. Ideology as such was not something that separated Marxist and Revisionist interpretations of the Revolution from each other, but instead, a concept that could make them mutually intelligible.

Claude Langlois

Langlois' article "The French Revolution and "Revisionism" was published in *The History Teacher* in 1990.⁹³ In it he argued that the term "revisionism" had different meanings in the context of French historiography than it did in Anglo-American historiography. In France, it first appeared as a pejorative way of designating a particular strain of Marxism. More recently it came to be associated with holocaust denial. From "the

⁹³ Langlois, Claude. "The French Revolution and "Revisionism." *The History Teacher* 23 (August 1990) : 395-403

Anglo-Saxon” perspective however “revisionism” designated any form of scholarly protest against a dominant historiographical tradition. In the case of the French Revolution that tradition was the Marxist school that formed around the ideas of Lefebvre, that reached its apogee toward the late fifties, and is identified by Langlois with Soboul, Rudé, Ernest Labrousse and E. J. Hobsbawm.⁹⁴

Langlois divided Revisionist opposition to this school into two phases, as did Kates and Gruder, but these phases are represented quite differently by Langlois. For Kates and Gruder they were developmental stages of a single coherent argument that followed a predictable trajectory. For Langlois however, these phases were periods which were in turn broken up into a variety of different, and even competing, revisionisms. These different revisionisms represented a variety of interests and contexts that Langlois was careful not to conflate into a monolithic whole. The first phase occurred in the mid-fifties and was itself comprised of three distinct parts. The earliest part was entirely internal to the French Marxist tradition and occurred in 1952, in the midst of the Cold War. This revisionism included the young communist Albert Soboul but Langlois did not examine it in any real detail.⁹⁵

The second part of the first phase was the classic Anglo-American revisionism that began in London in 1954. Alfred Cobban, after having taught several years in the United States, presented a lecture entitled “The Myth of the French Revolution” in which

⁹⁴ The inclusion of Hobsbawm and Rudé makes this an internationalist rather than specifically French movement and further differentiates Langlois representation of the school sharply from Revisionist representations.

⁹⁵ Langlois, p.396.

he called the bourgeois and anti-feudal nature of the Revolution into question. He published the text the following year and Lefebvre responded at length in 1956.

The third and final revisionism of the first phase was a joint project of the American historian Robert Palmer and the French historian Jacques Godechot. In a report to the 1955 International Historical Congress in Rome the two historians made the claim that the French Revolution was only one aspect of a trans-national Atlantic revolution which began in the Anglo-American colonies shortly after 1763 and then swept through Europe.

A second phase of Revisionism began in the 1960s and had two points of departure. The first was the publication of Alfred Cobban's *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* in 1964, and the second was the two volume history *La Révolution*, written by François Furet and Denis Richet and published in 1965-66. While the first period of Revisionism had been confined to specialists in the French Revolution, this second, and more polemical phase, rapidly polarized opinion in France. According to Langlois this phase could be characterized by three diverse phenomena. The first was that it occurred during a general decline of interest in France in the Revolutionary model; French history at the time was dominated by Labrousse's models of long-term economic trends and Ferdinand Braudel's *longue durée*. The second feature was that even while the debate was raging between orthodoxy and revision, creative research continued to be pursued along the fringes of the model that the social interpretation provided. Historians, such as Richard Cobb and Marcel Reinhard for instance, made tremendous contributions to Revolutionary studies but have been left out of what Langlois called "the generally

partisan retrospective genealogies inspired by the Revolutionary bicentennial.”⁹⁶ And finally, this wave of Revisionism was played out not in scholarly journals, conferences and monographs, but on the public stage, through popularized and synthetic histories produced for a general public.

This second phase came to be dominated by Furet and his own particular brand of Revisionism.⁹⁷ Langlois identified four central characteristics of that Revisionism: first, it questioned the Marxist interpretation; second, it questioned the leadership of French historians in the field; third, it questioned the unique character of the French Revolutionary model; and fourth, it questioned the absolute primacy of politics and “event” in the Revolution.

This fourth characteristic comes as a bit of a surprise given that High Revisionist accounts of Revisionism we have looked to emphasized a preference for political, as opposed to social modes of interpretation. This discrepancy can be explained by Langlois’ consideration of Furet’s entire career, up to and beyond his membership in the *Annales* and his tutelage under Braudel — a period quietly passed over by the High Revisionists. Langlois divided Furet’s own revisionism into different periods. He separated the first period from the second with the events of May 1968 and the polarization of the French Left. Prior to 1968 there was nothing particularly inflammatory about Furet’s approach to the Revolution, but after 1968 the exchanges

⁹⁶ Langlois, p. 398.

⁹⁷ Although Furet was by no means the only French Revisionist. Langlois offers the work of another French historian, René Rémond, as an example of an alternative, but just as thoroughly Revisionist, assault on the Marxist orthodoxy.

between Furet and his adversaries Albert Soboul and Claude Mazauric intensified as Furet became steadily more disillusioned with radical politics. It was only this second, more conservative, Furetian manifestation that makes an appearance in the annotated historiographies of Anglo-American Revisionists; hence the absence in their accounts of such important factors in his early career as his membership in the Communist Party and, just as importantly, in the *Annales* school.

Michel Vovelle

Michel Vovelle, like Langlois, broke the Revisionist movement up into various movements. The first occurred in the late 1950s, when 'Anglo-Saxon' researchers like Cobban and Taylor questioned the concept of a bourgeois revolution. The second occurred in 1965, when Furet and Denis Richet published a history of the Revolution that described it as skidding off course, away from a reformist consensus between nobles and bourgeois, and toward the radical terrorism of the masses. The third moment occurred in 1978, with Furet's essay *Penser la Revolution française* in which he argued that the Revolution was a unitary political process, destined from the time of its philosophical origins to dissolve into the Terror. It was this most Conservative Furet that had been appropriated by the High Revisionists, the fourth revisionist moment that blossomed in the United States and England. That revisionism — the same one I have been calling High Revisionism — was, according to Vovelle, in constant danger of sliding into a purely Conservative history of denunciation. Vovelle ended his article by suggesting that what is called by turn the Marxist, "Jacobin," or social interpretation, is not only not dead, but a fair alternative to Revisionism:

The “Jacobin” historiography of the Revolution, as it is followed today by those who would link themselves to this heritage, is substantially different from the narrow and dogmatic schema with which the heritage of Albert Soboul—in a clearly oversimplified fashion—has been identified. Mindful of the realms of culture and *mentalités*, Jacobin historiography is by no means indifferent to certain aspects of the rediscovery of politics that characterizes present research, even if it rejects the pendulum swing so much in vogue from the exclusively social to the exclusively political...In the end one wonders if it is still appropriate to maintain such terms from the past, or whether it would not be best to get rid of the labels “Jacobin” and “revisionist” altogether. Rather than crushing the opposing point of view under the weight of polemics or under the scorn of a carefully nurtured silence, it would perhaps be preferable to recognize that no hegemonic interpretation of the Revolution exists today and that this is undoubtedly a very good thing.⁹⁸

The histories of revisionism produced by Vovelle and Langlois are different, and more satisfying, than what I have characterized as the High Revisionist myth of its own origins. They tell the history not of a single evolving Revisionist paradigm, but of a variety of revisionisms, occasionally overlapping, occasionally even competing. The opposition of a Marxist orthodoxy and a Revisionist reaction are not presented as the inevitable outcome of two incommensurable worldviews, but as part of much larger, much more complex, and most significantly, ongoing debate among historians of the French Revolution.

What underlies these differences is that the High Revisionist historiographies rest uncritically on the foundation of Furet’s teleological model of history, and the definition of ideology that his history turns on. In the previous chapters of this section I have mapped out the ideological contours of the historiography of the French Revolution. I

⁹⁸ Vovelle, p.9.

have shown how prior to High Revisionism, historiographers took it for granted that the political attitudes of historians were a factor in the production of their histories, and that modernity in history need not be associated with a particular political attitude, but could be associated instead with the professionalization of the discipline and the development of pseudo-scientific methodologies. The notion that what distinguishes modern historiography from earlier historiographies is not methodology but a transition from ideological interpretations to properly historical interpretations is not only a strictly Revisionist conception, but ideological in its own right.

I have argued that Revisionist historians understood Revisionism as an overcoming of ideology. They imagined the Revisionist relation with its historiographical predecessors as a rupture — as a conflict between two worldviews. Such a historiography does not so much explain the Revisionist/Marxist debate as impose itself on it. Vovelle and Langlois on the other hand, make it clear that Revisionist and Marxist historiography are involved in a more complex and immediate relationship than the Revisionists would have us believe. Furet's career in particular, was far more interesting than any one would guess from the hagiographic blurbs that adorn Revisionist essays. He shifted his own interpretive position on numerous occasions and always did so in the context of his ongoing critique of totalitarian ideology.

Vovelle and Langlois have also suggested that it is inappropriate to represent either the social interpretation, or Marxism, as eradicated simply because it is uncomfortable for some historians to think about the relation between socio-political order and the production of knowledge. Vovelle, for one, argues that the social

interpretation has been oversimplified by the Revisionists for polemical reasons, and has always been at least as fluid and adaptive as the Revisionist movement

My primary argument in this section has been that the High Revisionists have avoided the issue of their own ideological attitudes by conceptualizing ideology in such a way that it applies only to their Marxist adversaries. In so doing they have constructed a teleological historiography that ends in an triumph of Revisionism. The justification for this representation of Revisionism has been lifted uncritically from the anti-Marxist project of François Furet. The manner in which Furet used *Annales* concepts, such as the *Longue Durée* and *mentalités*, to reinvigorate Conservatively ideological interpretations of the Revolution was hinted at by both Langlois and Vovelle, but is largely invisible in High Revisionist historiography itself. Those same *Annales* concepts were imported uncritically, along with High Revisionist assumptions about the nature of ideology, into the texts I discussed in the first chapter.

The manner in which Furet constructed his revisionist project will be the subject of the next section.

Chapter Five: The *Annales* and Marxism

The *Annales* is the term given to a group of historians associated with the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*. The journal was founded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch in 1929 while the two were colleagues at the University of Strasbourg. It was meant to be an antidote to the tradition of historiography in France that produced narratives of strictly political history. Febvre and Bloch carved out a substantial historiographical territory for themselves, not by competing directly with the Parisian elites and the Sorbonne, but by opening up new frontiers of research. The *Annales* approach was an interdisciplinary one, and the pages of the journal provided a fusion of history, sociology, geography and economics that has since been labeled, like Revisionism, a revolution in historiography. Their work was interrupted by World War II, and Bloch's celebrated martyrdom, but in the postwar years Febvre and the journal became institutions of not only the French, but the international historical community.

American money poured into Europe after the war and Febvre established the Sixth Section of the *Ecole Pratiques des Hautes Etudes*(EPHE) with the aid of an initial grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.⁹⁹ The EPHE was a Parisian research institute — and a competitor of the University of Paris — and its Sixth Section was dedicated to the social sciences and history. In the mid-fifties Febvre passed the editorship of the journal and the directorship of the Sixth Section to Ferdinand Braudel. Braudel further consolidated the *Annales* institutional power and became, in his turn, one of the most influential French academics of his generation. After Braudel the two positions were

⁹⁹ Traian Stoianovich, *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm*(Ithaca, 1976) , p. 43.

inherited by Jacques Le Goff, and shortly after him, Furet. Yet in most accounts of the movement its revolutionary force was spent with the passing of Braudel, and by the mid 1970s, when Le Goff took over, it had begun to lose its sense of unity and purpose.¹⁰⁰ There are a handful of concepts and characteristics that are considered to be the inheritance of the *Annales* and included in all accounts of the movement: Braudel's idea of the *longue durée* — that there are different, slower layers of time that lie beneath the traditional historical subject of political events; the idea related to this that it is possible to study mentality — *mentalités* — as a cultural structure that persists over generations; a tendency toward methodological diversity; and a preference for thematic or problem-solving history over narrative histories.

While there is a core of agreed upon facts in all histories of the *Annales* — the basic chronology and the historiographical contributions generally remain the same — the movement is conceptualized quite differently by different historians. A survey of just three historiographers — I have selected Peter Burke, François Dosse and Traian Stoianovich — shows how divergent opinion can be about the nature of this highly influential movement.¹⁰¹ Such a survey is a useful exercise for two reasons. The first is that it provides a reminder that the construction of such schools by historians is an interpretive act in which a collection of facts are arranged and rearranged according to a variety of personal, professional and political agenda. While any history of the *Annales*

¹⁰⁰ Peter Burke, *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929-89* (Stanford, 1990), p.65.

¹⁰¹ François Dosse, *New History in France: The Triumph of the Annales* translated by Peter V. Conroy, Jr. (Urbana, 1994).

is likely to be a history of ideas, the historiographer has a choice of emphases to make. He or she can write a chronological history of institutions, personalities and texts, or take a more philosophical approach that identifies core concepts and ideas as the key to understanding the movement. There is also the related issue of what Peter Novick calls externalist or internalist attitude.¹⁰² Is the historian going to try to understand a subject by analyzing factors external to historical argument such as sources of research funding, the political climate of the time, or its cultural milieu? Or will they focus strictly on the coherence, logic, development and justification of an historical argument? The results of such choices can be seen in Burke's and Stoianovich's representation of the *Annales* as an intellectual revolution and Dosse's account of the *Annales* as a product of, and a contributor to, not only a field of knowledge but the social, cultural and political body of the French academy.

The second reason for engaging in such an exercise is that where accounts of the *Annales* diverge most dramatically is on the subject of Marxism and its role within, or in relation to, the *Annales* school. Burke identified Marxism as an external factor, one that may have minimal influence on the *Annales* but is ultimately alien to it; Dosse identified Marxism as close to a number of theoretical currents that have shaped, and continue to shape, *Annales* discourse; Stoianovich identified it as both an alternative and a companion historiographical approach. Furet's own position was that the *Annales* and Marxism are, if not entirely hostile, at the very least mutually exclusive modes of

¹⁰² Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession*, (Cambridge: 1998) p.9.

historical thought. The relation of Marxism to the *Annales* is clearly a problem that warrants some analysis before I can make the claim that Furet appropriated key *Annales* concepts in the construction of his critique of the social interpretation.

Peter Burke: Intellectual Revolution

Peter Burke's *The French Historical Revolution: The Annales School 1929-89* was published in 1990. Burke's approach was almost exclusively internalist, he paid some lip service to the notion that the political, cultural and professional contexts in which the *Annales* movement occurred helped determine, or at least direct, its development, but he spent very little energy exploring those contexts. Instead Burke described the *Annales* as an almost purely intellectual revolution.

The framework of Burke's discussion is a genealogy. He constructed a family tree that begins with a pair of fathers, Bloch and Febvre, runs through Braudel — Febvre's "son" — and ends when the "third generation" of Le Goff and Furet take over.¹⁰³ While he acknowledged the strong institutional basis of the group in the French academy, and indeed had as the twin trunks of his tree the presidency of the EPHE and editorial positions with the famous journal itself, the larger academic context in which these institutions existed played an insignificant part in Burke's account of the *Annales* story.

Burke produced a long list of conceptual contributions made by the school to the study of history — problem-solving rather than narrative history, comparative history, the *longue durée* — but declared in his conclusion that the interdisciplinary attitude of the *Annales* was the most important aspect of the movement. Their greatest achievement was

¹⁰³ Burke, p.65.

that in the course of three generations they reclaimed vast areas of study for history.¹⁰⁴

This territory was “reclaimed” from areas neglected by traditional historians, areas such as those of social, economic and cultural behavior, but Burke does not pay attention to the consequences of this reclamation. Questions such as at whose expense did this expansion occur?; From whom were these vast territories being liberated?; And what were the results of this expansion for the university community at large?; These questions were not raised by Burke, let alone answered.

Burke consistently skirted issues of institutional and political power in his historiography of the *Annales*. While he relied heavily on a representation of Febvre and Bloch as young revolutionaries, he did not analyze the political body they were presumably trying to overthrow. What Burke called the ‘*Ancien Régime*’ remains a vague nineteenth century positivism that he never really developed. And he certainly did not identify any of the *Annales* contemporary institutional rivals. The criticisms of the dominant history made by Bloch and Febvre were treated by Burke as entirely transparent and he paid little attention to the social and political context of the universities in which they were situated. We learn that Strasbourg was a new university in a city recently reclaimed from the Germans—a quite literal expansion of French history—and we learn Bloch was a martyr for the resistance, but we read precious little else. We do not read about the American funding Febvre, and later Braudel, received during the deep freeze of the Cold War, nor about domestic French politics. For Burke’s *Annales* there is no DeGaulle; no 1968; no Iron Curtain. There is only the development of ideas and their

¹⁰⁴ Burke, p.110.

transmission, like genetic material, from father to son.

Despite his use of “Revolution” as the organizing metaphorical principle of his argument Burke was clearly uncomfortable with the role of radical French politics in the *Annales*. He acknowledged that some members of the school were Marxist, and even points to the moment when Marxism first “penetrated” the *Annales*.¹⁰⁵ But the relations of Marxism and the *Annales* were never clearly established by Burke. His only comment on the subject was the inconclusive one that “in France sympathy with Marxism generally went with a certain detachment from *Annales*, despite the dual loyalties of Labrousse, Vilar, Agulhon, and Vovelle.”¹⁰⁶ That comment raises more questions than it answers. All four of those historians are important — Labrousse and Vovelle tremendously so — to the historiographies of both Marxism and the *Annales*, and to raise the spectre of “dual loyalties” and then turn away from it borders on the irresponsible.

Burke represented the *Annales* as the vanguard of a revolution against bad history. The *Annales* redeemed the discipline, but with that accomplished the school is now fading away as a coherent entity. Burke never identified the *Annales* school as a player in the larger academic community, or in French politics, but reduced it to a set of ideas which have improved the practice of history around the globe.¹⁰⁷ The result of such an

¹⁰⁵ Burke, p.55.

¹⁰⁶ Burke, p.97.

¹⁰⁷ There are some interesting parallels here between the way Burke represents the *Annales* and the way the High Revisionists represent themselves. Both movements emerge out of the ruins of a previous historiographical period in a purely pragmatic and disinterested way, and both movements fade away once the cluttered historiographical ground has been cleared and history is free to develop naturally. The parallel with Revisionism can be extended to include Burke’s repeated use of religious terminology in describing the school. The *Annales* are, as are the Revisionists, represented as a heretical sect that so

ahistorical and highly intellectualized account is that the methodological and theoretical contributions of the *Annales* take on the aura of historiographical givens, they are part of the natural development of the discipline and do not need to be analyzed critically. Marxism in particular, and ideology in general, vanish beneath the placid surface of Burke's account leaving only the faintest of ripples to disturb it.

François Dosse: Interdisciplinary Warfare

In contrast to Burke, François Dosse, in his 1987 book *The New History in France: The Triumph of the Annales*, considered such details as the political implications of Marxist historiography and the institutional relationship of the disciplines crucial to understanding of the movement.¹⁰⁸ While his genealogy of *Annales* patriarchs was identical to that of Burke, and while he used the same generational model to describe their history, Dosse did not shy away from emphasizing the role of institutional and political conflict in their development. According to Dosse, the *Annales* movement was an ongoing response by historians to a Durkheimian challenge at the turn of the century, to the challenge of Levi-Strauss in the 1950s, and to deconstruction and Foucault in the 1970s.¹⁰⁹ For Dosse, the *Annales* did not so much have a conversation with the social sciences as a battle; and it was a battle they won, but at substantial cost.

Dosse, like Burke, argued that after Braudel the *Annales* began to disintegrate as a

successfully opposed an orthodoxy they became a new orthodoxy. The Revisionists and Burke also share a rather deliberate naivete about their own complicity as historians in political, cultural and social programs that are larger than the academy.

¹⁰⁸ François Dosse, *The New History in France: The Triumph of the Annales*. (Urbana :1994)

¹⁰⁹ Dosse, p.217.

group. But for Dosse a contemporary conflict between two opposing camps of *Annales* historians was the cause of that disintegration. On the one side were those historians, some Marxist, who remained loyal to the total history of Braudel and Febvre, and on the other were those historians who proposed a fragmented history that followed the procedures of the social sciences more closely and were uninterested in comprehensive systemization such as that of Braudel's account of European capitalism.¹¹⁰

For Dosse those historians who remained faithful to Febvre and Braudel's vision of a history were an embattled minority in a discipline rapidly losing its coherence.¹¹¹ That internal conflict was largely the result of the external one with the social sciences; a conflict that history won at the price of diluting itself and losing its specific identity.¹¹² It was the *Annales* preoccupation with immobile history and the continued existence of economic, social and cultural structures through time, that had allowed them to engage the social sciences, yet it was this compromise with the structure that led to a rift along ideological lines between historians who remain committed to the event and those committed to the *longue durée*. Dosse argued that the historians in the *Annales* who were closest to Marxism warned against the danger history shattered into genres and insisted on the importance of synthesis.¹¹³ According to Dosse:

Rather than fragmenting history into economic, political, ideological

¹¹⁰ See Ferdinand Braudel *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400-1800*. Trans. Miriam Kochan. (London: 1973)

¹¹¹ Dosse, p.222.

¹¹² Dosse, p.221.

¹¹³ Dosse, p.222.

temporalities, each of which is studied in its own autonomous evolution, historians should prefer a globalizing approach and a conceptual frame that permits the study of causal systems and the marshaling of correlations between different kinds of phenomena. Then history would be a dialectic between a logical, abstract structure and reality; the movement would go from structure to the instance, and vice versa, in order to reconstruct a plausible web.¹¹⁴

What makes Dosse's account so different from that of Burke is that he did not gloss over the role of Marxism in the *Annales* but problematized it. Where Burke described a purely intellectual trajectory for the *Annales* that starts as a reaction to bad history and ends in a halcyon haze of good histories, Dosse saw a crisis within the *Annales*, whose origin lay in the earliest musings of Febvre and Bloch. but whose direct cause had a great deal to do with ideological differences between historians with a debt to Marx, and those in hock to the social sciences.

Traian Stoianovich: A New Paradigm

The third history of the *Annales* I will look at is *French Historical Method: The Annales Paradigm* by Traian Stoianovich. Stoianovich described his study as a social history of ideas but what was social about it is not clear. It was highly abstract and not anchored to any account of either the society of the French academe, or French society in general. Stoianovich was interested in the *Annales* as "a network of historiographical and methodological conceptions."¹¹⁵ He was neither writing a history of an institution nor its sociology, but identifying a number of closely interconnected ideas that defined the

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Stoianovich, p.20.

Annales. That group of ideas was what Stoianovich calls the *Annales* paradigm; an “autonomous disciplinary matrix” that was “profoundly different” from the paradigms that come before it. In contrast to the essentially narrative, story-telling modes of its predecessors, the *Annales* approached history as a problem to be solved. Stoianovich concluded:

The *Annales* paradigm constitutes an inquiry into how one of the systems of a society functions or how a whole collectivity functions in terms of its multiple temporal, spatial, human, social, economic, cultural, and eventmental[sic] dimensions.¹¹⁶

The epitome of this problem-solving *Annales* approach was the work of Fernand Braudel, who sought to integrate that multiplicity of human dimensions into a global whole. The solution Braudel found to the problem such an integration posed was to show how time moved at different speeds. In his most celebrated attempt at such a solution, the massive study *The Mediterranean*, Braudel constructed a regional history that rested on different modes of duration. The most important mode was that of the *longue durée*, duration as structures and traditions that span generations; the next mode was that of conjunctures, of periodic economic cycles of varying lengths; and the least important mode was that of events and politics, the traditional subject of history.

Stoianovich suggested that such an approach had obvious attraction to Marxists because it has much in common with Marx’s model of interacting levels in society.¹¹⁷ Where the two historiographical approaches diverged, however, was in the Marxist

¹¹⁶ Stoianovich, p.237.

¹¹⁷ Stoianovich, p. 111.

antipathy to the determinism of the *longue durée*. Stoianovich suggested that the lack of dialectic dynamism in the *Annales* approach, and its emphasis on social continuity rather than social change, created an inevitable tension between the two approaches. The *Annales*-Marxism relationship was developed and analyzed in far greater detail by Stoianovich than by Burke, or even Dosse, but its ambiguity was still not resolved. Marxism for Stoianovich was both a rival and precursor to the *Annales* paradigm and he was unable to incorporate it convincingly into his historiography as such.¹¹⁸

The reason for this is that like the High Revisionists, and to a lesser extent Cobban and Doyle, Stoianovich's historiography is organized in developmental terms. Stoianovich described history as evolving from narration or chronicle, to history as explanation, and finally reaching maturity as problem solving history.¹¹⁹ Earlier historiographical modes such as narrative and exemplar history were described by Stoianovich as pre-modern cultural phenomenon that the *Annales* transcended. Marxism, as both a narrative and exemplar form of history is pushed to the side by this teleology. Even if Stoianovich was not as overtly hostile to Marxism as the High Revisionists were, Marxism occupied an awkward position in his model as both a precursor and alternative to the *Annales* — it became a deviation from normal development.

For Stoianovich and other historians who constructed their historiographies as developmental teleologies, alternative modes of historiography such as Marxism, can only be understood as aberrations, as at least in some sense, non-historical and

¹¹⁸ Stoianovich, p. 237.

¹¹⁹ Stoianovich, pp. 19-39.

anachronistic. If, however, historiography is approached as Dosse approached it, as always contemporary, always an active and self-conscious engagement of interests, then the present is never banished to the past. The way history is situated by historians vis-à-vis its immediate political and social construct determines not only how ideology is conceptualized, but how history itself is understood. Stoianovich's analysis of the *Annales*, for example, is rigorously apolitical and intellectual. By concerning himself exclusively with conceptual and methodological issues of historical craftsmanship and their development, Stoianovich puts himself in a position where he is unable to understand a conversation that is ultimately political — and any conversation with Marxism is just that.

The *Annales* and Marxism

By emphasizing different aspects of the *Annales*, historiographers can produce a range of essentially ideological effects; Burke effectively silenced radical political critique by excluding Marxism from the *Annales*; Dosse emphasized it by making it a central element of the *Annales*; and Stoianovich, while taking the issue head on, failed to come to terms with it because he positioned his historiography as apolitically as he could. The problem of whether the *Annales* is necessarily anti-Marxist, implicated in Marxism or an alternative to Marxism is not a problem I will be able to resolve here. What I aim to do, however, is show that key *Annales* concepts such as the *longue durée* and *histoire de mentalité* can be made to function not simply as neutral interpretive tools but as politically conservative categories.

According to Stoianovich the key conceptual difference between the *Annales*

paradigm and Marxist historiography lay in their respective attitudes toward the role of economic, social and political factors in the analysis of events. Stoianovich suggested that the Marxists remained bound to a narrative of political history that contextualized its subject using social and economic analysis but did not entirely transcend the mythic storytelling nature of pre-*Annales* historiography. The result of this is that Marxists emphasized the ceaseless interplay between the political, economic and cultural in the construction and destruction of social structure, while in the *Annales* paradigm Braudel's distinction between three temporal modes or rhythms created a model in which these factors become relatively autonomous.

This notion that the political, cultural and economic spheres of human behavior are autonomous is, of course, something the *Annales* had in common with the Revisionists — and in turn what makes Revisionism so attractive a solution to the problem of Marxism for some revisionists. The Marxist historian Albert Soboul, whom we know as one of the authors of the orthodox social interpretation of the French Revolution, defined social structure as not only an ensemble of economic, social and psychological relations of long duration, but also as “a tissue of contradictions” that needed to be analyzed in its dynamic and dialectical aspects as well in its static and continuous aspects.¹²⁰ Fernand Braudel on the other hand wrote that:

For social observers, structure means organization, coherence, and relatively stable relationships between social masses and other realities. For historians, it similarly signifies an assembly and an architecture, but it also defines a reality that time alters little and conveys well. Certain structures persist for so long that they become the stable elements for

¹²⁰ Stoianovich, p. 112.

many generations. They encumber history. They hamper, therefore command its outflow. Other structures molder more quickly. But all are simultaneously props and obstacles. As obstacles, they form boundaries (or *envelopes*, in the mathematical sense) from whose authority people are hardly ever able to free their experiences. Just think how hard it is to shatter certain geographical frames, biological realities, barriers to increased productivity, and even spiritual constraints. For mind sets, too, are prisons of long duration.¹²¹

This notion that a mind-set is a cultural structure that is independent not only of social and economic factors, but also precedes individual psychology, is important to understanding how the *Annales* provided Furet and the Revisionists with a way to replace a Marxist tool like ideological critique. Rather than concerning themselves with the various individual and class interests that produced the politics and culture of the Revolution, historians could attribute the origin of ideas to an unexplained and ahistorical mindset in which culture is grounded. Michael A. Gismondi, in his article “‘The Gift of Theory’: a Critique of the *Histoire des mentalités*,” shows how, when mindsets are treated as larger than ideology, certain important questions such as how such mental structures enter into history in the first place fall to the wayside.¹²² Braudel’s mental structures are virtually immobile; they change so slowly as to seem static to all but the deepest and most penetrating of historical vision — like geological and biological structures, mere knowledge of them does not imply control over them. In such an approach mentalities are indeed prisons people are born into and not the product of individuals attempts to

¹²¹ Stoianovich, p. 108.

¹²² Michael A. Gismondi, “‘The Gift of Theory’: a Critique of the *Histoire des mentalités*,” *Social History* 10 (January: 1985): 211-30.

understand and come to terms with cultural and historical circumstances. Human individuality and political choices become the froth of history, emerging from and vanishing against a backdrop of deep inhuman forces.

It is clear that the crux of any disagreement between Marxists and the *Annales* will be over the respective roles of structure and human agency in the event, and the most important event in French history is the Revolution. Stoianovich cites Albert Soboul as holding “that the historian who aspires to a total history of the French Revolution must shift his emphasis from structure, tradition, repetition and long duration to contradiction, struggle, change and short duration.”¹²³ From Soboul’s perspective the political explosion of the French Revolution is given its dramatic force by the deep, slow swell of socio-economic forces, but it is the relationship between the political event and its socio-economic causes that make the Revolution comprehensible. This does not seem at first glance to be incompatible with Braudel’s cycles. Braudel himself wrote that the mechanism of Revolution was driven by economic and political motivations of relatively short duration.¹²⁴ But some later *Annales* historians stressed the autonomy of political event from economic structure to an even greater degree than Braudel. Stoianovich:

Annales historians François Furet and Denis Richet, on the other hand, maintain that a proper evaluation of the French Revolution requires study of the structures of preindustrial commercial economy, already in place by the middle of the sixteenth century and not undone until the middle of the nineteenth. They argue, in effect, that neither the explanation of a short aristocratic prerevolution nor Labrousse’s explanation of a “intercyclical depression” allows a sufficient length of time to embrace the origins of the

¹²³ Stoianovich, p.127.

¹²⁴ Stoianovich, p.128.

French Revolution. Unlike Marxist historians they interpret it less as a bourgeois revolution than as an “Enlightenment Revolution.”¹²⁵

Furet and Richet widened the abyss between political history and economic history even farther than Braudel, and this in turn polarized, and further politicized, an already tense conversation between Marxist and *Annales* historiography. If the “real” or “true” history of France proceeds slowly, over generations, the attempt by the revolutionaries to erupt into history, to seize it and control it, was doomed to fail.

Stoianovich and Dosse agreed that there was a shift in the relationship of the *Annales* to Marxism that occurred after Braudel. That shift coincided with Furet’s rise to prominence and power in the *Annales* school. For Stoianovich, as for Dosse and Burke, Marxism was difficult to incorporate into the history of the *Annales* because its role changed over time. In the early stages it was an ally in the Revolution against what Burke called the *Ancien Régime* of positivist history, but once that Revolution was accomplished the alliance dissolved and the relationship had to be reconstituted. Stoianovich failed to explain that change in the *Annales*-Marxism relationship convincingly, and Burke failed to notice it altogether. But François Dosse, as we shall see in the next chapter, successfully navigated his way through that turbulent transition by locating it in Furet’s dual role as both the leader of the *Annales* and of the Revisionists. Furet himself, with typical moxy, linked Revisionism to the *Annales* by identifying Marxism as their common enemy; a manifestation of bad, narrative history. Furet’s reconstitution of the relationship had little to do with the relationship that earlier members

¹²⁵ Stoianovich, p. 128.

of the *Annales* had with Marxism and a great deal to do with events that shaped his own career. Which is not to say, as Dosse seemed to, that Febvre, Bloch and Braudel were more authentic manifestations of the spirit of the *Annales*, than were later power brokers such as LeGoff and Furet. It is to say, however, that the repeated claims on the part of historians like Burke, Stoianovich and Furet, that the *Annales* is an essentially apolitical movement that belongs to all of history, are masking a much richer complex of relations than would be convenient for them to admit. Regardless of what the true relations between the *Annales* and Marxism are, we can see how concepts such as the *longue durée* and *histoire de mentalités* can be represented as not only neutral tools of the historians trade, but as politicized concepts that pull the interpretive process towards the right. By producing a model of history in which human choice is essentially irrelevant, the *Annales* contributed to the construction of a historiography in which the possibility of humanity's intervention in its own history becomes a myth. Furet recognized that conservatism and exploited its full potential in his revision of that greatest of all such interventions: Revolution.

Chapter Six: The *Annales* versus Marxism

François Furet is represented in High Revisionist historiography as an historian of ideas whose critique of Marxism is political and conceptual rather than socio-economic and historical. In those representations his membership in the French Communist Party and the *Annales* school of social and economic history are glossed over. In Furet's own brief forays into autobiography he wove his personal and professional lives together into a web of psychological and ideological development that was a reflection of the historiography of the French Revolution; Furet began his career a deluded young Marxist, and ended it as a disillusioned Revisionist. In the following section I will sketch Furet's career in the broadest of outlines, focusing only on those moments that seem the most germane to understanding the relations of his Revisionist project to his membership in the *Annales*. My goal is to show that it was the *Annales* that provided Furet with the tools to revalidate a Conservative interpretive approach towards the Revolution by making that approach secular and democratic, rather than religious and monarchist.¹²⁶

Furet portrayed his historiographical trajectory as an evolution of political views. The child of a Parisian banker raised in the tradition of bourgeois Liberalism, the young Furet turned his back on his class and joined the ranks of the Communist Party.

¹²⁶ The following biographical details are culled primarily from two sources. Michael Scott Christofferson, "An Antitotalitarian History of the French Revolution: François Furet's *Penser la Révolution française* in the Intellectual politics of the Late 1970s" *French Historical Studies* 22 (1999) 557-611; Steven L. Kaplan, *Farewell, Revolution: the Historians' Feud: France, 1789/1989*, (Ithaca:1995). For a more recent treatment of contemporary French intellectual life in general see Perry Anderson's essay. Anderson situates Furet in an elitist and neo-Liberal academic subculture that has grown increasingly disconnected with the interests of the French public. See Perry Anderson "Union Sucrée, Part I." *London Review of Books* (September 2, 2004): 3-9 and "Union Sucrée, Part II." *London Review of Books* (September 23, 2004): 10-16.

Biographers such as Steven Kaplan and Michael Christofferson interpret this act as the result of unconscious, or barely conscious, psychological forces rather than in the political and intellectual framework with which they discuss his later recidivism. Furet's Marxism is represented by them not as the thoughtful choice of an engaged young historian but as an adolescent, even oedipal, reaction against his father. By Furet's own telling the Communist Party functioned as something of an extended family, not only for Furet but for a whole generation of French intellectuals.¹²⁷ Furet claimed he joined the party out of conformism, simply because everybody was doing it; his friends were all members of the Party, he married within the Party, and his social identity was framed by his membership in the Party.¹²⁸ The opportunity the party gave him for political engagement, and any positive influence it will have had on him as an historian, were not considered in any of these accounts. Yet it was as a member of the Communist Party that Furet first entered academic and political life, publishing sectarian articles and engaging in public debate. In contrast to how Furet's membership in the *Annales* and his role in the Revisionist movement are represented, his membership in the Communist Party is not treated as the result of an analytic engagement with history but as a passing moment of irrationalism that must be explained away.

During the 1950s Furet began to grow dissatisfied with the Party. Furet himself identified

¹²⁷ Whether the rest of his *Annaliste* colleagues all joined the parties to spite their fathers is not something either Kaplan or Christofferson address nor is their eventual repudiation of the party explained as some sort of oedipal resolution.

¹²⁸ Kaplan, p.674

his disillusionment with the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 but Christofferson suggested it occurred later than that. Regardless of the precise date, Furet was dissatisfied with the party's doctrinaire political and historiographical attitudes and wanted to approach history — particularly the history of the French Revolution — more experimentally. Coinciding with his disillusionment and rightward drift was Furet's initiation into the *Annales*. He did not finish the state doctorate that would have given him entrance to the traditional corridors of French academic power at the University of Paris and instead took a research position offered to him by Fernand Braudel. The combination of those two factors, according to Christofferson consigned him to a career of academic marginality. That marginality however, says Christofferson, meant it was possible for Furet to respond more creatively to foreign influences such as revisionists like Cobban and Taylor than he would have been able to as a more typical French historian. How marginal membership in the *Annales* made one is arguable; certainly, by the 1950s, when Furet had his big anti-totalitarian moment on the road to Damascus, Braudel had consolidated the power of the not inconsiderable institutions he had inherited from Febvre and Bloch. To be taken under the wing of Braudel, perhaps the most influential French historian of his generation, is not likely to have had too negative an effect on the career of the young Furet.

Furet himself identifies the *Annales* as the most important landmark of twentieth-century French historiography. The *Annales*, and its relation to Marxism, even if they make only the briefest of appearances in most Anglo-American histories of Revisionism,

are critical to Furet's own history of Revisionism.¹²⁹ They offered Furet an alternative to Marxist commitment that he enthusiastically pursued, but he is reluctant to describe the school as a cohesive intellectual or political entity. In Furet's analysis the *Annales* are the mature alternative to the adolescent energy and optimism of Marxism — more a stage of psychological development in the life of an historian than a set of ideas. They represent to Furet a disengagement of historical thought from social criticism of any sort — Conservative, Liberal or Radical. He maintains in *In The Workshop of History* that it is a mistake to define the *Annales* as a group sharing a common or unified approach for two reasons. The first, is that as an approach it does not belong to a particular institutional home but to all of history: it is in his words “the common property of historians.”¹³⁰ The second, is that even within the institutional structures associated with the *Annales* approach, historians were working in directions much too diverse for them to be characterized as a single school. For Furet the single most important aspect of the *Annales* approach was its lack of dogmatism, it freed history to wander in every field. The patrimony of Febvre, Bloch and Braudel for Furet's “generation” was an open-mindedness that allowed them to escape from the narrow political perspectives of Marxist historiography:

From our point of view, the *Annales* offered an almost boundless range of

¹²⁹ Furet's separation from his Communist family and his adoption into that of the *Annales* is so total, and the integration of his personal and professional lives so complete, that it has as its delightful counterpoint a bitter divorce from his Communist wife and his marriage to the sister of another *Annales* historian Pierre Nora. It would be much more interesting to oedipalize Furet's relationship to the Communist Party than to engage in the almost banal imposition of that triangle onto his biological family as other biographers have done.

¹³⁰ Furet, *In The Workshop of History*, p.2.

topics and methods—a heaven sent oasis on the path away from Stalino-Marxist historicism, whose power to mystify we had only recently come to recognize.¹³¹

For Furet this disentanglement from ideology was as much the result of cultural development as the direct result of the *Annales* influence as an institution. It was only in the mid-twentieth century that the delusions of totalitarian ideology become impossible for historians to maintain, and the *Annales* were as much a manifestation of that development as its cause. One of Furet's first acts as a mature *Annales* historian, in fact, was to join the Revisionist assault on the conceptual foundation of Marxist ideology: the social interpretation of the French Revolution.

In 1965 Furet and Denis Richet, another young *Annaliste*, published *Penser la Révolution française*, the history of the French Revolution to which both Stoianovich and Dosse refer. This book, and the heated debate that followed its publication, marked Furet's emergence as not only a Revisionist but as *the* voice of Revisionism in France. Furet and Richet were not simply making criticisms of the social interpretation, as Anglo-American revisionists like Cobban and Taylor had been doing, but offering an alternative history of the Revolution. *Penser la Révolution française* was followed by a series—a career in fact—of subsequent publications that were all framed in a theoretical structure provided by the *Annales* and couched in anti-Marxist rhetoric. That alternative history was nothing if not timely. Christofferson situated Furet's Revisionism in a larger anti-totalitarian trend in French intellectual society that occurred in the late 1970s. He

¹³¹ Furet, *In The Workshop of History*, p.3.

argued that by 1978 a critique of totalitarianism that emphasized its origins in revolutionary ideology had become hegemonic among intellectuals of the non-communist left.¹³² According to Christofferson:

Having with his peers rejected the possibility that Revolution could be a viable and reasonable alternative to a world gone wrong, Furet wrote a history of the Revolution that was the history of the illusion of revolutionary politics. In projecting his present consciousness onto the past, Furet wrote not only the Revolution's history in the shadow of the gulag but also in light of the foundation myth of French antitotalitarianism. By locating the origins of totalitarianism in the foundational event of modern French history and giving intellectual credibility to the attempt to link French revolutionary culture and Jacobin political culture with totalitarianism, Furet confirmed antitotalitarian intellectuals in their belief that a threat of totalitarianism existed within the French Left and provided them with historical ammunition in domestic political struggles.¹³³

This anti-totalitarianism became a particularly virulent critique when it was coupled with the methodological authority of Furet's *Annales* approach to the Revolution. Concepts such as the *Longue durée* and *mentalités* provided Furet's Revisionist project with both an historical explanation for the dogmatic ideology of the Left and a reason to ignore it. In *Penser la Révolution française* Furet and Richet placed the political events of the Revolution within a long enough duration that they appeared ridiculous and out of phase with the general cultural, social and economic trends of the period between 1750-1850. In the long, slow and inevitable rise of Liberalism in France, the Terror seems an incongruous monstrosity that can only be explained as a terrible mistake, as an outburst of violent irrationality. Dosse, for one, read Furet and Richet as suggesting that a slow

¹³²Christofferson, p.569

¹³³ Christofferson, p.572

cultural transformation that began with the Enlightenment was thrown off course by Revolutionary excess. The radical turn of the Revolution occurred after it was hijacked by messianic and utopian ideologies -- ideologies that were naive misinterpretations of history. How, after all, could the ideologues of the Revolution hope to understand the true nature of history and the slow impenetrable forces that drove its engines? They did not have the *longue durée* to guide them, only blind hope.¹³⁴

In Dosse's reading of it *Penser la Révolution française* was itself completely ideological at every moment.¹³⁵ Furet and Richet may have attempted to situate themselves outside the history of the Revolution but they were not the innovators they pretended to be; they were simply repeating a traditional Liberal argument about the dualism of the French Revolution.¹³⁶ But the theoretical sophistication of their *Annales* background gave them a considerable advantage over their Revisionist predecessors such as naive empiricists like Cobban and Taylor. By making the socioeconomic processes that drove history so much slower than the political, the actors of the Revolution, and the radical historians who followed them, were made by Furet and Richet to seem absurd and out of touch, prisoners of an outmoded *mentalité* that did not connect with reality.

For Furet there is no question that it was the *Annales* that provided him with the means to shatter his own dogmatic preconceptions of the Revolution. He goes much further than other historiographers in emphasizing the rupture that separated the *Annales*

¹³⁴ Dosse, p. 204

¹³⁵ Dosse, p.204

¹³⁶ Dosse, p.204

from earlier historiographical traditions in France. It is in his analysis of this rupture that one first gets an inkling of how deeply his Revisionism is dependent on a imagined evolution of worldviews that runs from the religious through the ideological and to the modern. Furet writes that “history became secularized even as it turned into the study of nations” and that the history of the nation-state stood, as a developmental stage, between the apocalyptic narrative histories of the Middle Ages and the *Annales* style of problem-solving history exemplified by Braudel.¹³⁷ According to Furet in the course of the eighteenth century “the history of France replaced God as the guardian of the original contract, of the rights of the French, and of the secrets of the social compact.”¹³⁸ He identified the political battles waged between 1787 and 1789, on the eve of the Revolution as the struggle between competing histories of the nation; a religious history and an ideological history. It is not an exaggeration to say that for Furet the Revolution is the ideological moment *par excellence*, the moment when historiography erupts into history. Furet:

The Revolution is not so much a topic in modern history as one of its chief manifestations, in that it embodies a mode of change and human action that is fundamental to its significance. While it is true that, from its very outbreak, the Revolution has occupied a central position in the historical imagination, all the histories of the Revolution deal with a topic far vaster than the Revolution: they are actually constructing a meaning for time itself. That is probably why history-as-a-social-science has dealt so cautiously with this historical object. It does not know how to avoid a practically spontaneous chronological—that is, narrative—approach.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ *Passing of an Illusion*, p. 122

¹³⁸ *Passing of an Illusion*, p. 126

¹³⁹ *Workshop of History*, p. 11

Furet imagines the great weakness of the ideological histories to be the way they constructed themselves as both teleological and religious; teleological because it always explained the past in terms of how it produced the present, and religious because it functioned both as an origin myth, a millennial promise and a normative model. These histories provided narratives that undergirded political arguments about authority and power by replacing God's omnipotent role in man's destiny with man himself. In a reversal of the usual Revisionist claim, that the ideological history of the Revolution is a social history, Furet claimed that in these ideological histories "the social dimension of the event has been whittled down, smothered by its political dimension."¹⁴⁰ While the Marxist orthodoxy may have imagined it was conducting a social history, Furet maintained that from the long view it did the opposite. Rather than looking for social structures that survived through time the orthodox view was so invested in the Revolution as an originary moment it actually erased those structures by imposing contemporary political concerns on them:

The social[orthodox] history of the Revolution does not consist in describing or analyzing the changes that took place in late eighteenth century French society in order to measure the relation between political and institutional upheaval and the actual fabric of society. That relation is taken for granted as being wholly deducible from political history...In the first case, the aim [of this "social" history] is to assemble the or expand the collection of "causes" within a chronological framework whose turning point is 1789; in the second case, the aim is instead to examine, after 1789 and within brief time spans, *who* made the French Revolution. But the common element of these two approaches is that both implicitly subscribe to a vision of the Revolution as a political event that cuts French history in

¹⁴⁰ *The Passing of an Illusion*, p. 30

two.¹⁴¹

What Furet wanted to show above all was the continuity of social and economic structures in French history, and the ideological nature of an imagined Revolutionary rupture. Furet suggested that it was the structural and social science elements of the *Annales* approach that lie at the heart of his critique of a Marxist political history, and not a desire to rehabilitate the political. He argued that to interpret socio-economic structures as the results of political decisions; to see them in any other context than the *longue durée*; to study the Revolution as an ordinary event; is to make an unconscionable mistake. But the distinction between history-as-event and history-as-structure that Furet always referred back to was one that he himself acknowledged is not innocent.¹⁴² Furet shared a fatalism and a pessimism about politics with Braudel. For both historians the structures of geographical and economic phenomena weighed so heavily on historical man that to struggle against them was to be crushed. Braudel wrote “What I do goes against human freedom” and this deeply conservative sentiment was echoed by Furet:¹⁴³

[I] will willingly accept that this history (the history of long durations and of the average man) has a conservative vocation because right from the moment you begin to compare, not the events that mark a change but the elements that are always the same through a period, it is obvious that, in theory and by definition, you risk finding inertia. Consequently, this kind of history seems to me to

¹⁴¹ *ibid*

¹⁴² Furet, *In the Workshop*, p.72

¹⁴³ Dosse, p.129

be a good antidote to, let's call it, the Marxist-Manchesterish history of the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁴

By the 1980s Furet had achieved his antidote and High Revisionism was firmly established as the dominant historiographical approach in North America. That decade was the apogee of Furet's career as well. He received a professorship at the University of Chicago, became the subject of a great deal of flattery in academic publications and even received a media coronation as "the King of the Bicentennial." By then the High Revisionists were confident enough to turn their backs entirely on the social interpretation of the Revolution. Jacobins and Marxists were dismissed as fanatical representatives of an absurd ideology and the social interpretation of the Revolution ignored as a distortion of historical facts — the Revolution became a strictly political and cultural phenomenon, a way people thought about history rather than a link in a causal chain that led to Capitalism. In the years that followed that apogee, up until his death in 1997, Furet published less and less about the French Revolution *per se* and more and more about what he deemed its twentieth century heritage, the twin totalitarianisms of Communism and Fascism.

The Passing of an Illusion, a history of totalitarian ideas in the twentieth century, is one of Furet's later attempts to make sense of his own political and historiographical trajectory. In it Furet referred to a moment in the 1950s when he passed from the illusory world of Marxist ideology and gained from that passage the "immunity to pseudo-

¹⁴⁴ Dosse, p.189

religious investment in political action” that allowed to become a genuine historian.¹⁴⁵

Furet on Marxist ideology:

It was a different type of illusion from one based on a calculation of ends and means or issuing simply from belief in a just cause; for people lost in history, an illusion of this kind not only gives their life meaning but offers them the comforts of certainty. Unlike an error of judgement, which, with the aid of experience, can be discovered, appraised, and corrected, the Communist illusion involved a psychological investment, somewhat like religious faith even though its object was historical.¹⁴⁶

For Furet the attractiveness of ideology was the promise that a political engagement with history was possible, that the world could be changed, and history shaped by human hands, but for Furet that view was, and is, a terrible illusion. It was in that false hope Furet imagined the seeds of Stalinism and Nazism to have been planted. For Furet it was only the inevitable progress of history that finally brought an end to the devastations wrought by the promises of the Revolution. According to Furet:

The end of Communism has brought the individual back into the antimony essential to bourgeois democracy. It has revealed, as if something quite new, the complementary and contradictory terms of the liberal equation—individual rights, and the market—thus compromising the very foundation of what has constituted revolutionary messianism for two hundred years. The idea of *another* society has become almost impossible to conceive of, and no one in the world today is offering any advice or even trying to formulate a new concept. Here we are, condemned to live in the world as it is.¹⁴⁷

Furet here has taken the long view, the *Annales* view, of social and economic structure.

¹⁴⁵ Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion*, p. xi

¹⁴⁶ Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion*, p. ix

¹⁴⁷ Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion*, p.502

The modern world would have arrived in France without a Revolution, in fact it eventually arrived despite the Revolution. Once we realize this, he claimed, we will have outgrown the hubris of ideological politics, of a historiography driven by utopian and messianic fantasies.. We are left with what he imagines to be a historical reality, and we now have the tools to know this reality unimpeded by the irrationality of political, psychological and religious desire. If that is the historiographical lesson of the *Annales* for Furet, its political lesson is that we already live in the best of all possible worlds.

Conclusion

I began this thesis by identifying what I perceived to be a general problem in post-Revisionist studies of the French Revolution: the conception of ideology as a pseudo-religion. I analyzed the use of that concept as it occurred in the contexts of three distinct but overlapping historiographical projects.

The first project was that of Ozouf, Van Kley, Desan and Tackett. Although by no means a formal school, they were trying to analyze religion and its relation to the Revolution in a way that did not reduce religion to other factors. They also all framed their work with a theory of religion and ideology that was inadequate on two counts. It was at odds both with their intent — to redeem religion as a subject fit for historical study — and with the data they produced in support of it.

The next project was that of the broader historiographical context in which those studies of religion were constructed. The anti-Marxist project of High Revisionist historiography provided most Anglo-American historians writing about the French Revolution in the 1980s and 1990s with a set of assumptions and presuppositions from which to begin their work. It is certainly the case that the historians I discussed in the first chapter — Ozouf, Tackett, Desan and Van Kley — were all part of the post-Revisionist “political turn,” a methodological shift that piggy-backed on a critique of Marxism which defined ideology as a pseudo-religious worldview.

That critique was the project of François Furet. Furet implicated the *Annales* in the revision of the French Revolution by identifying Marxism as their common enemy. The *Annales* provided Furet with the tools to reformulate a Conservative history of the

Revolution. He used concepts such as the *longue durée* and *histoire des mentalités* to produce a model of history in which the possibility of humanity's intervention in its own history became a myth. It was Furet's history — a history both modern and Conservative — that made him so useful to High Revisionists and provided them with justifications for the claim that their political and cultural histories of the Revolution, unlike the social and economic histories of the Marxists, were not ideological.

Each of these three overlapping projects — that of the religionists, that of the High Revisionists and that of Furet — is in some way a disputation with Marxist historiography. And each of them in some way relies on the same problematic conception of ideology; that ideology is a mode of understanding the world determined by pseudo-religious psychological factors, rather than by a perception of facts. Problematic as it was, this concept was forced to perform in turn as part of an ideological critique by Furet, a methodological critique by the High Revisionists and as an analytic category by religionists. Furet put the concept to good use as a rhetorical device in his polemics; the High Revisionists stripped it of its theoretical framework and wrenched it out of its political context to meet the ideological requirements of the North American academy; and finally, the religionists applied it uncritically to their social, political and economic data in an effort to protect their subject from the violating gaze of reductionism. This definition of ideology as pseudo-religion is the singular weakness of the High Revisionists' approach.

The question that follows from this conclusion is that if the Revisionist definition of ideology is ultimately sterile, what does one put in its place? The answer to that

question is not one I attempted to develop in this thesis but has, at least as an intuition, informed my work. If Revisionism suffers to some degree from cultural determinism — that is from the assumption that history is determined by a cultural mindset — then anthropology might offer some direction for escaping from that impasse. Certainly Clifford Geertz's popularization of "thick description" comes immediately to mind as an influential factor in the development of cultural history.¹⁴⁸ In Geertz's use, "thick description" is the technique of treating culture as a "connected document" which the anthropologist must read and interpret.¹⁴⁹ While "thick description" might seem useful as an approach to culture for the historian who has to deal with archival remnants of a community rather than living people, it suffers from deficiencies similar to those of High Revisionist historiography.

Culture, for Geertz, is an autonomous system of signification embedded in a frozen, structuralist account of history.¹⁵⁰ Geertz writes about cultural patterns as if they are programs that determine human social behaviour in the way genetics determines the behaviour of birds.¹⁵¹ For Geertz, like Furet, ideology "is precisely the point at which a

¹⁴⁸ Such eminent cultural historians as Robert Darnton and Lynn Hunt acknowledge the influence of Geertz. Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York, 1999), p. xiii; Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, 1986), p. 87.

¹⁴⁹ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York, 1973), p.10.

¹⁵⁰ Geertz's work can be read as an attempt to overcome such problems but Donham, among others, has argued that Geertz's insistence on the centrality of interpretation in the human sciences fails to account for the way people deliberately produce culture. Donham, p.57.

¹⁵¹ Geertz, pp. 218-219.

political system begins to free itself from the immediate governance of received tradition."¹⁵² Ideology for Geertz, as for the High Revisionists, is the result of a breakdown of traditional cultural systems — it is an inadequate “map of problematic social reality” that is produced from a cultural deficit.¹⁵³

A more fruitful way for historians to think about ideology could be borrowed from Marxist anthropologist Donald Donham.¹⁵⁴ Donham pays more attention than Geertz to the problem of an ideology’s correspondence to other social, political and economic realities. He argues that ideologies are successful because they are always at least partially true.¹⁵⁵ They persist not only because they explain, but because they work. Donham emphasizes the way ideologies are produced by self-conscious, politically engaged and competing actors. Ideologies in his view are not products of a historical transition from traditional to modern societies, as they are for Geertz and the High Revisionists, but a product of political conflict in all societies.

The benefit of such an approach to ideology for historians is that it helps avoid the trap of teleological thinking. For Donham modes of thought are not categorized and

¹⁵² Geertz, p.220.

¹⁵³Geertz, p. 220. Geertz's interpretation of the French Revolution is instructive: 'The reason why the French Revolution was, at least up to its time, the greatest incubator of extremist ideologies, "progressive" and "reactionary" alike, in human history was not that either personal insecurity or social disequilibrium were deeper and more pervasive than at many earlier periods-though they were deep and pervasive enough-but because the central organizing principle of political life, the divine right of kings, was destroyed.':Geertz, pp.219-220

¹⁵⁴ Donald Donham, *History, Power, Ideology: Central Issues in Marxism and Anthropology* (Berkeley: 1999)

¹⁵⁵ Donham, p.49.

understood in terms of their position in a sliding scale of modernity, but strictly in terms of the way they function in a particular context. The question of how the historian can use such anthropological tactics has to some extent already answered by the work of Italian microhistorians. In his introduction to *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, Edward Muir contrasts the immobile history of the *longue durée* with an ethnographic microhistory that describes the social relationships and interactions of actual persons rather than analytic categories.¹⁵⁶ According to Muir microhistorians conduct close readings of a small number of related texts and then seek to reconstruct the meanings of those texts with as little recourse to grand theories of history as possible. Historical causation in such an approach is no longer a trophy in the battle between materialists and idealists, but a property that emerges from the study of historical minutia — it is to be found in the interplay of individual lives.

Scholars like Desan, Van Kley and Tackett, who hoped to bring respectability, and even dignity, to the religious claims of their subjects, would have been better served by borrowing from the Marxism of Rudé, Soboul, and Donham, or turning to the microhistorians, than by relying on the crippling teleology of High Revisionism. Historians grappling with a subject as notoriously slippery as religion after all, need both a method that is rigorously empirical, and a theory which has the latitude to take into account the wide variety of interests — psychological, social, economic, political *and*

¹⁵⁶ Edward Muir, *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe* (Baltimore, 1991) pp.vii-xxi.

cultural — that play a role in its construction. The High Revisionist conception of ideology offers neither.

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