

# What's after Political Culture? Recent French Revolutionary Historiography.

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## What's after Political Culture? Recent French Revolutionary Historiography

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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What's after Political Culture?  
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In 1989, amid the bicentennial's swirl of celebrations, new books, conferences, and special editions, many historians on both sides of the Atlantic discerned a pattern within the whirlwind. In historiographic terms, the bicentennial marked not just an intense outpouring of new publications, especially in France,<sup>1</sup> but also the triumph of the "revisionist" over the "classic" or "Marxist" social interpretation. François Furet, in particular, seemed to emerge the victor from the bicentennial, both in the media and in historiographic debates. Two sets of publications combined to crown Furet's interpretation as "the new orthodoxy": *Le Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française*, edited with Mona Ozouf, and the conference series *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, directed with Keith Baker and Colin Lucas.<sup>2</sup> Furet's success could be read in a variety of ways. Especially within France, his interpretation held considerable political resonance, made even more loaded by the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. He inevitably ignited controversy by proclaiming that the Revolution was over and insisting that the democratic impulse within the Revolution had in fact led toward the Terror. In the realm of methodology, his minimizing **[End Page 163]** of social factors not only reinforced the revisionist attack on the classic historiography, but also dovetailed with a broader questioning of social structural interpretations in French history in the late 1980s. In addition, Furet's success in 1989 highlighted the interpretive "return to politics" in the French expression (the "political cultural approach" in American terminology). The bicentennial only capped off a trend building throughout the 1980s: Furet's often brilliant analysis of political discourse had inspired other historians to carve out a whole new set of questions regarding revolutionary political culture.<sup>3</sup>

Ten years later, from the vantage point of 1999, it makes less sense to conceive of French revolutionary historiography as a debate pitting "classic social history" against "critical" or "revisionist history." Even before 1989 the field was undergoing transformations that defied this categorization. The bicentennial itself and its particular political context heightened the tendency to articulate French revolutionary historiography as a battleground. By 1999, "classic social history" has not staged an astonishing comeback, but neither has Furet's approach continued to define the contours of the field. Neither France nor the United States has witnessed the emergence of a new paradigm; no new dominant model or synthesis takes the place of the old debate.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, at an initial glance, the field of French revolutionary historiography may seem in disarray, or at least exhausted in the aftermath of bicentennial debates and publishing frenzy. Institutional transformations accentuate the moment of intellectual searching. With the death of Furet and the retirement of Michel Vovelle, no prominent scholars in France dominate the field. Nor do the former Sorbonne and the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales retain their established preeminence as centers of French revolutionary historiography; dynamic scholarship at universities across France rivals the Parisian centers. Arguably, revolutionary studies are also decentered in another way. For paradoxically, Furet, who did so much to generate interest in the revolutionary dynamic and its fascinating politics, also left revolutionary **[End Page 164]** historians on the defensive in proving the importance of their topic. More broadly, the Revolution has been somewhat displaced from its traditional position as the premier historical touchstone for posing questions about French national identity and modern politics. Appropriately, it must share the stage in the 1990s; other historical issues, especially twentieth-century topics and questions regarding colonization and global politics, have become vibrant arenas for debating French identity and modernity.<sup>5</sup>

The downswing of dominant interpretations creates spaces for experimentation and innovation on both sides of the Atlantic. The political culture approach is open to a diverse set of challenges. In his overview of French revolutionary historiography, Gary Kates cites a "neo-Liberal" reaction to the "neo-Conservative" strands within Furet's and Keith Baker's thought.<sup>6</sup> Kates is...

## REVIEW ESSAY

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<sup>1</sup> *Profitez, hors série* (May 1989), reviews some 150 books out of over thirteen hundred that had appeared by mid-1989 in conjunction with the bicentennial. For an overview of bicentennial projects and publications, see *Recherches sur la Révolution: Un bilan des travaux scientifiques de l'histoire*, ed. Michel Vovelle (Paris, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> François Furet and Mona Ozouf, eds., *Le Dictionnaire critique de la Révolution française* (Paris, 1988); Keith Baker, François Furet, and Colin Lucas, eds., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, 4 vols. (Oxford, 1987-94).

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