

Reinterpreting the French Revolution: A Global-Historical Perspective

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This work complements the author's previous study on the longer-term origins of the French Revolution ([1](#) [2]), and like that text, makes a forceful case for Stone's 'global-historical' conception (what was an 'interpretation' in the earlier text becoming a 'perspective' in this.) That conception is quite simply stated: in Stone's own words, 'the men dictating French destinies in this period were driven in their politics

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The work is organised into five substantial chapters, and a briefer conclusion. These proceed essentially chronologically: the problems of the Old Regime; the pre-revolutionary crisis and the eruption of summer 1789; the work of the National Assembly in 1789-91; the radicalising period of 1791-94; and the whole post-Thermidorian era of 1794-99. The third and fifth of these are characterised as two attempts to stabilise the Revolution, divided by a period when events were revolutionising it.

The approach taken is unashamedly synthetic, and makes no bones about its grounding in the reading of

other historians' work. Stone frequently makes use of the telling words of eighteenth-century observers, but his sources are in every case the works of those who have trodden this ground before, and historians such as these are cited alongside the luminaries of the Old Regime and Revolution. Stylistically this is effective, and the work as a whole is clear, cogent, and often trenchantly expressed. At some points there is perhaps an over-reliance on a limited range of sources – Timothy Tackett's work on the Constituent Assembly is referenced seventeen times in eleven pages (pp. 144-55), and at other points the work of Robert Harris on Necker and T. C. W. Blanning on the origins of the revolutionary war are similarly leant upon extensively. However, this must be balanced against an extremely wide range of other reading, from detailed studies of the central European diplomacy of the period, to engagement with the domestic reforms of the revolutionaries, and the politics of the Terror at regional level.

One of the most convincing elements of the argument, to this reviewer, is the relation of the 'critical geopolitical context' (p. 65) of the French state in the years and months prior to July 1789. The crisis of the pre-Revolution within France coincided appallingly (for the French elite) with the collapse of French influence across Europe – a new Anglo-Prussian alliance that put paid to a pro-French party's agitation in the United Provinces in 1787, and a Russo-Austrian cabal in 1788 to make war on Turkey, a traditional French ally, symbolic of her claim to influence in the Levant. Such new arrangements of influence seemed to cut France, the self-styled 'arbiter of Europe' (p. 66) out of the ruthless diplomatic game, and her bankrupt inability to make even the pretence of significant intervention was a wounding humiliation. Crowning this with the apparent total collapse of internal authority made the task of bringing France back to a position of national strength not so much urgent as desperate.

Where Stone's interpretation is particularly noteworthy is in the demonstration that all the sections of French society that were caught up with the internal remodelling of the state also understood the urgent need for a reconstruction of its external position. The alarm over foreign brigands manifested in the Great Fear may not have been the most analytical of associations between these different issues, but there were plenty of observers – in print, in the Constituent Assembly, in the other nascent organs of revolutionary political sociability – who could make a more studied, if sometimes no less hysterical, call for vigilance and strength against foreign counter-revolution. Manifestly, from early in the evolution of the new politics of the period, concerns of national strength, negative comparisons with other states, and a perceived choice between vulnerability and greatness were built into revolutionary culture.

It is in this context that the ultimately catastrophic attempt to preserve the capital of the fief-owning (and now tax-paying) classes, by denying the peasantry to complete abolition of 'feudal' dues they had come to demand, begins to make sense as more than merely bourgeois ideological commitment to private property. Coupled with the equally socially-exclusionary decision to sell off church lands in large lots, the agrarian policies of the Constituent Assembly were as much devoted to maintaining land values – for taxation, and direct debt-repayment through those sales – as they were to preserving any vision of social order. The unfortunate fact that such policies came to require a hostile and confrontational approach to many rural communities' grievances, and that those grievances were sharply enhanced by the religious changes that followed the confiscation of church assets, can be seen in this light as contingent consequences of policies intended to have their effects in a very different realm.

Stone's focus on this realm does sometimes lead him to a certain disingenuousness about social conflict. He discusses the anti-corporatist bias of the Constituent Assembly by rolling all its enactments (erroneously) into the Le Chapelier Law of June 1791 (p. 138), and thus is able to claim that this measure, which was a quite blatant, and long-lived, attempt to deny working people the right of self-organisation, was actually a wider abolition of corporate economic privilege. That privilege had in fact been ended by the d'Allarde Law of several months earlier, and the later enactment came at a time of explicit conflict over wages and conditions in the Paris trades, and was to be extended in scope to cover agricultural workers a month later, when they too showed signs of troubling militancy⁽²⁾

It is, ironically, at the very point where a global-historical approach ought to have most impact – at the outbreak of war – that one begins to feel that the emphasis placed on external factors may be a little strained.

Stone sets up something of a straw man by referring to the most summary, and thus in some senses most extreme, of François Furet's expositions of his 'revisionist' position on the domestic political origins of the war. Stone argues, by contrast, that war came 'in the final analysis at the behest of diplomatic tradition and in response to concrete challenges' from other powers (p. 162). This interpretation is based very heavily on a reading of T.C.W. Blanning's work on the subject, and is at odds with many other seasoned commentators. (3) It is further questionable in the light of what Stone himself goes on to present as evidence.

As is well known, it was the bellicose rhetoric of the 'Brissotin' grouping in the new Legislative Assembly that turned French thoughts explicitly towards war from October 1791. Stone illustrates the use of fervent appeals to glory and honour alongside repeated invocations of the terrible plot being worked from outside French borders against the Revolution, and notes the particular value of appeals to revenge on Austria for the disastrous entanglement that had dragged France to a position of international impotence. Xenophobic rage and patriotic pride were mixed in an explosive cocktail, topped off with a healthy dose of revolutionary optimism about the military prowess of the unfettered French. With this weapon in their hands, the Brissotins were able to turn a majority in the Assembly towards war, ably assisted from behind the scenes by the royal court's own desire for the revolutionaries to lose such a war.

None of this is in any real sense disputable, but what is in question is the extent to which any of this counts as 'the splendid raiment of Gallic diplomatic tradition' (p. 166). Within the space of just less than a year, France would hurl herself into war against every major power of western and central Europe, and most of the minor ones, and embark on a process of expansion that was indiscriminately acquisitive – even if, until Napoleon, the fiction would be maintained that populations were being liberated from despotic monarchs. It is certainly the case that France, as a nation, an object of patriotic devotion, was in a physical sense mostly the same France that had existed before 1789; but in a political sense it was unquestionably not the same entity. The glory of France that had been so savagely lost in the 1760s was a glory that reflected the honour of the monarch and the military aristocracy – even if state administrators and educated commentators also worried about the debilitating effects of defeat on the economy. France in April 1792, and decisively after August 1792, was fighting for a very different set of ideological goals. To argue, as Stone does, that xenophobic rhetoric demonstrates that the new Republic's leaders 'were Frenchmen before they were revolutionaries' (p. 174) is to raise the danger of absurdity (notwithstanding the obviousness of the superficial point). The instance he cites here is the hope of Prieur de la Marne that the 'new Carthage', England, will be destroyed by the power of the Revolution, and that French troops will be in London by the spring (of 1794, presumably, though this is left unclear).

There is no reason to suppose, however, that a commitment to the success of the Revolution should preclude hatred of others – especially when they are explicitly portrayed, as here, as 'ferocious ... insatiable for gold', and generally as the enemies of humanity from the 'Indies' to Bengal. The fact that anglophobia had been a strong current of eighteenth-century French international reflections does not disqualify the French from developing genuinely 'revolutionary' reasons for hating the followers of the infernal Pitt. (4) The choice that sometimes seems to be presented here is of the revolutionaries as either pacific angels or the prisoners of diplomatic tradition; the notion that revolutionary patriotism could be highly aggressive and still remain eminently 'revolutionary' is not given serious consideration.

One of the ironies of this approach is that it has the effect of reviving the good old-fashioned *thèse de circonstances* to account for the Terror. If international war was such an overriding priority, then the effective civil war that the country underwent in 1793, and the repressive consequences that rolled on up to and beyond the fall of Robespierre, were part of a larger package in which the French state was just doing what states do, and the rest was merely unfortunate. It is seriously to be doubted whether Stone would actually subscribe to this view, but it does lurk at the margins of what is otherwise an excellent summary of how the Terror operated as a war-fighting instrument. 'Revolutionary xenophobia' (p. 180) is made a priority in accounting for the treatment of refractory priests. Even the final end of the seigneurial system of 'feudal' obligations on the peasantry is presented as being beholden to the needs of war. The notion, to which the facts are equally amenable, that only the pressure of emergency could produce sufficient political momentum to overcome the prejudices of property-holders in favour of justice for the peasantry, is only

noted in order to make what amounts to an opposite point – that private property never succumbed entirely to such pressure.

Whatever the limitations of Stone's detailed interpretation of the revolutionary years themselves, it is a view that merits consideration, even if, in the opinion of this reviewer, it tends to simplify to an excessive degree the complex political dynamics of the Revolution's middle years in particular. However, the book does have a distinct tendency to overstate its case, and this is particularly noticeable in the brief ten-page conclusion. Here a thumbnail survey of modern French history is invoked to make the point that France has always had external pressures and ambitions, and that many dimensions of the country's internal history have been conditioned by those very external influences – as the particularly telling example of the 'natalist' concerns of the Third Republic demonstrates. It is the very obviousness of this point that ends by grating somewhat. Although socio-political thinkers for some time have been concerned with 'bringing the state back in' (5), the dangers of this process should also be apparent. Keeping the state out, or at least on the margins, of our attention, can be at least as important, for such is the organising power of states that it is far too easy to arrange historical narratives around them, thus neglecting all the internal political and social factors that make a state what it is.

It would be going too far to accuse this book of taking the French state entirely for granted, or of decisively downplaying social change in favour of state-centred continuity. Indeed Stone is at pains throughout to moderate any drift in that direction. Nevertheless, it is the very repeated insistence on the need to moderate the interpretation which gives one pause for thought about its ultimate value. It is too easy to write the history of states, and it has taken a lot of hard work in the past two generations for historians to set out all the other dimensions of human experience as legitimate historical objects. Stone has done historians a valuable service by producing a very readable text, summarising a broad range of work, and making what are undeniably important points about the internal-external dynamic of revolutionary politics. What he has not finally done is to demonstrate conclusively that we must always frame our interpretations around such dynamics, or do so in a way which, as here, repeatedly gives explanatory priority to the external dimension.

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Notes

1. Bailey Stone, *The Genesis of the French Revolution; a Global-Historical Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1994). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See David Andress, *Massacre at the Champ de Mars; Popular Dissent and Political Culture in the French Revolution*, (Boydell Press for the Royal Historical Society; Woodbridge, 2000); chapter 5, and Anatoli Ado, *Paysans en révolution; terre, pouvoir et jacquerie 1789-1794* (Société des Études Robespierriennes; Paris, 1996); pp. 241ff. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. See, for example, William Doyle, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Oxford University Press; Oxford, 1989); pp. 177-80; and D. M. G. Sutherland, *France 1789-1815; Revolution and Counterrevolution* (Fontana; London, 1985); pp. 135-9. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Norman Hampson, *The Perfidy of Albion; French Perceptions of England during the French Revolution* (Macmillan; Basingstoke, 1998). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer & Theda Skocpol, eds, *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1985). [Back to \(5\)](#)

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