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## *Learning the Scholar's Craft*

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Becoming a historian of Europe was not a surprising career choice for me. I was born into an academic family, and grew up in a world of books, foreign travel, and schools that treated European culture as the cornerstone of a proper education. I spent a year in a British school founded under Queen Elizabeth I, and a teenage summer learning French by living with a family in Brittany. In college, I flirted for a time with the idea of a career in journalism, and after graduation even spent a year working as a "reporter-researcher" (translation: poorly paid intern) for an opinion magazine in Washington, but when Princeton admitted me to its History Ph.D. program in 1985, I could not resist giving it a try. I was then lucky enough to finish my Ph.D. in one of the rare years in the past half-century when the number of tenure-track jobs on offer in History exceeded the number of people receiving doctorates in the field. I got one of those jobs and have been a History professor ever since.

My decision initially to specialize in the history of eighteenth-century France was also fairly predictable. An infatuation with France born out of that teenage summer, and bolstered by my fluency in the language, led me to focus on its history and literature in college. My senior year, one of my favorite professors, the historian of Britain John Brewer, advised me that if I went to graduate school, early modern France was the field to choose. The French specialists in the field were doing the most exciting work of any historians in the world, he said, and the archives were incomparably rich. And if all that was not enough, on my twenty-first birthday my parents gave me a book by the Princeton historian Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*.[1] Gorgeously written, filled with gritty and colorful details about a lost world of writers and printers and booksellers, it utterly enthralled me. It left me in no doubt about where I would want to go to graduate school.

But if choosing a field was relatively easy, choosing a dissertation subject was not. Nothing in graduate school, except possibly the job market, made me more anxious. From the first day in Princeton's dissertation prospectus seminar onward, the simple, innocuous question "what are you working on?" could reliably trigger a feeling of ice water trickling through my intestines. Even after I had been working on my dissertation for years, and had a well-honed, well-practiced answer to the question, any reaction to that answer other than an enthusiastic endorsement could send me into paroxysms of anxiety and doubt. It did not help that through several of these years I was dating a journalist in Washington and spending a lot of time socializing with young reporters, lawyers, policy-analysts, and Congressional aides. "So what do you do?" they would ask. "I'm writing a Ph.D. in eighteenth-century French history." Even before I had finished the short sentence, I could see their eyes glaze and wander, their shoulders start to turn.

Defining my dissertation subject was a slow process. During my reading for my general exams, at the end of my second year in graduate school, my attention was caught by several books and articles that emphasized the importance of law and lawyers to the political society of Old Regime France. I had always thought of the "litigious society" as a peculiarly modern

[1] Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

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phenomenon, and it struck me as odd that a pre-industrial society, governed by a monarch whose word was literally law, was in some ways *more* litigious than its modern counterpart—even as far back as the sixteenth century. In 1789, France probably had more lawyers per capita than it does today. A very high proportion of the leading French revolutionaries were lawyers or had some sort of legal training. But while the points stuck in my head, they didn't immediately trigger any desire to do research on the subject. One problem was that small word "law." Back in my senior year in college, seeing several of my friends announce their intentions to apply to law school, I had idly taken a practice test for the LSAT, and few things in my life had left me so bored and confused. By the time I had taken my general exams, several college friends were practicing law as associates in large New York City firms, and everything they told me about their work deepened my desire to stay as far as possible away from anything associated with law and the legal profession.



But at the same time, for my generals, I was also reading new work on what was coming to be called "the political culture of the old regime." Historians were moving in this direction for several reasons. The *marxisant* "social interpretation" of the origins of the French Revolution, with its emphasis on class conflict, had come close to collapsing in light of new empirical research. The influential French historian François Furet had made waves with a 1978 book arguing that the revolution was not a rupture in the structure of French society, but in culture and political thought.[2] Jürgen Habermas's notion of the "public sphere" seemed to provide a new framework for understanding this cultural and political rupture.[3] And new cultural approaches to history, grounded in anthropology and postmodern literary theory, were gaining ground in the discipline in general. So historians were turning back with enthusiasm to the complex political and cultural history of France before 1789. Stanford's Keith Michael Baker, who was about to publish his landmark study *Inventing the French Revolution*, described the territory as "terra incognita."[4]

In one of the books on my reading list, Jean Egret's study of pre-revolutionary agitation, I came across a particularly fascinating piece of that territory.[5] Egret mentioned, without developing the idea, that in the Parisian riots of 1787-88 that had done a great deal to drive France into crisis, a leading role had been taken by the clerks of the Paris high court, who belonged to a confraternity they called the "Kingdom of the Basoche." I was intrigued by the odd title. After the exams were over, I went into the library and quickly found that the Basoche was an organization that dated back to the late middle ages. Its members called themselves knights and carried swords. They staged mock trials and other ceremonies in the Paris Palace of Justice. And whenever the high court came into conflict with the King, they would go into the street and stage disruptions. In 1789 they formed one of the nuclei of the new, revolutionary National Guard, and took part in the storming of the Bastille. No contemporary historian had ever devoted a book to them, and I was entranced. Here, it seemed to me, was a colorful, "Darntonian" subject, and one just begging for the application of the anthropological approaches so in vogue at the time. From the old secondary sources, it was clear that the French archives had a wealth of information on the Basoche. And a thesis on it would also illuminate a piece of that terra incognita, the political culture of the old regime.

My excitement lasted only a brief moment. A few days later, coming out of the Princeton library, a pile of books on subjects related to the Basoche under my arm, I ran into one of Darnton's senior students, Carla Hesse, now a distinguished professor at Berkeley and possessor of the sharpest intellect I have ever come across in academia. We chatted, and out came the dreaded question, what are you thinking of doing your dissertation on? For once, I was not flummoxed, and enthusiastically burbled on about the Basoche. Carla didn't look impressed. It's interesting, she said, but is this really an

[2] François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

[3] Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1962).

[4] Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[5] Jean Egret, *La Pré-Révolution Française; 1787-1788* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962).

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important enough subject to write a dissertation on? The bubble of my enthusiasm popped. Maybe the Basoche wasn't all that important, I thought mournfully as I stumbled home with the books. What could I really say about it? I spent the next few days reading through the books with a sinking heart. Yes, the Basoche was a colorful topic, but did it really have much significance, in the end? Despite its role in the Parisian riots, it wasn't as if this one small group could necessarily provide some great, previously undiscovered key to understanding the French Revolution. It was similar to other confraternities that had received copious attention in recent years, including in William Sewell's pathbreaking studies of the "language of labor" in eighteenth and nineteenth century France.[6] Carla was probably right.



Yet I didn't want to give up on the Basoche entirely, either. Was there a way to make it part of a larger and more ambitious dissertation project? As I pondered the question, an obvious point occurred to me. The clerks were *law clerks*. They worked in the offices of *procureurs*—lawyers whose title translated into English at the time as "attorney," but whose closest modern equivalent are British solicitors. When the clerks went out into the streets to cause mayhem, they did so on behalf of the magistrates of the high court (the *parlement*), who constituted one of the most important institutional restraints on—and forms of opposition to—the eighteenth-century French monarchy. The magistrates themselves were already receiving copious attention from historians interested in the political culture of the Old Regime. The American historian Dale Van Kley had recently published a superb book on their defiance of the monarchy in the 1750's, and one of Darnton's senior students, Shanti Singham, was already writing a dissertation on another major conflict in which they had played a starring role.[7] But the lower-ranking personnel of the courts—the lawyers, clerks, bailiffs, and the like—had attracted far less research. And in musing on this point, I remembered my general exam reading about lawyers, and their prominence in the French Revolution. Where had this taste for revolution among legal professionals come from? The older, *marxisant* histories had often attributed it to little more than bourgeois class identity. But the recent shifts in the field had revealed the inadequacy of this explanation. What had the political role of lawyers been before 1789? How had they acquired their political education? Was their story similar at all to that of the clerks of the Basoche? What about a dissertation on the subordinate personnel of the law courts—the lawyers and law clerks—and their place in the Old Regime's political culture? Here, I thought, was a subject that would satisfy the "importance" criteria, while still allowing me to include the Basoche, and its colorful story. I dove back into the library, and found many more secondary works, above all on the history of the *avocats*—barristers—out of whose ranks so many of the leading French Revolutionaries, including Maximilien Robespierre, had emerged. The books themselves were mostly old, and narrowly conceived, but they pointed to an abundance of archival sources on the subject. My old hesitation about doing anything connected to "the law" melted away. I made an appointment with Robert Darnton and asked him what he thought. Did it matter, I added nervously, that my dissertation would not the investigate history of publishing, the field he had so spectacularly made his own? His reply was very simple (and overly flattering). "You have a good nose," he said. "Follow your nose."

Of course, this was just the start. As with any dissertation, there was an enormous amount of initial background work to do, reading all the relevant secondary sources and printed primary sources, and I spent most of the next year doing that, and applying for grants to continue my research in Paris. But I also had the chance to make an initial exploratory trip to Paris and found that the archival sources for the topic were indeed incredibly rich, and largely untapped. The grant applications were successful, boosting my confidence further (in fact, the grant money was flowing very freely that year, and everyone I knew who applied got a fellowship).

My main research year in Paris, 1988-89, did not always go smoothly, to say the least. I wrote to the most prominent historian of the Paris high court, François Bluche, asking if I could consult him about the dissertation, only to receive in response a one-sentence postcard from his secretary saying he did not have time. I found an amazing trove of sources in a

[6] William H. Sewell, Jr., *Work and Revolution in France: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

[7] Dale Van Kley, *The Damiens Affair and the Unraveling of the Ancien Régime, 1750-1770* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Shanti Marie Singham, "'A Conspiracy of Twenty Million Frenchmen': Public Opinion, Patriotism, and the Assault on Absolutism during the Maupeou Years, 1770-1775," Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University (1991).

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small private library on the Left Bank, but it was only open six hours a week. I had been taking notes for the dissertation on handwritten note cards, but since I typed much faster than I wrote by hand, I begged the kindly librarian to let me bring my primitive Toshiba laptop along so as to make the best use of the time ("it won't explode, will it?" she asked nervously). I also found that no fewer than three other scholars, two French and one American, were working on subjects uncomfortably close to mine—but not close enough, I finally decided, to torpedo the project. I discovered that an important cache of documents pertaining to one of the most important barristers of the late Old Regime remained in the hands of one of his descendants. I went to meet the man, who looked at me suspiciously and asked me so many questions about my background that I finally just told him, flatly: "My ancestors were Polish Jews." The next day he sent me an exquisitely polite letter informing me that he did not wish to show me the documents.



But at the same time, the research was the sources of some remarkable pleasures. In the archives, I found material that gave me a clear sense of the political history of the French legal professions in the eighteenth century. And despite Bluche's (non-) reply, I met with enormous kindness from many other French researchers and archivists. The new librarian of the Paris Lawyers' Library, Yves Ozanam, pointed me to source after source and discussed them with me in detail. The historian Michel Antoine, who had worked for decades as an archivist, led me to crucial documents that had never been properly catalogued by the Archives Nationales, and also invited me on several occasions to his apartment to talk about the research. An archivist who had done his thesis on Parisian barristers and now directed the Municipal Library of Dijon invited me to see him, and treated me to a spectacular lunch, complete with a bottle of excellent Mercurey. I met many other doctoral students, both French and American, working on eighteenth-century topics, and became fast friends with many of them. I worked for days on end in the beautiful, grand old reading room of the Bibliothéque Nationale in central Paris, a stone's throw from countless good cafes, cheap restaurants, and the lovely gardens of the Palais Royal (it has long been replaced, alas, by the sterile new national library in one of the most sterile *quartiers* of the capital). I made a series of discoveries that had little historical importance, but amused me to no end, such as catching out minor eighteenth-century authors in hitherto-undiscovered acts of plagiarism. Once, I spent the whole day in the Bibliothèque Nationale, reading intensely with only a half -hour break for a sandwich, and stumbled out of the reading room at 5:30 to find myself face to face with a man in perfect eighteenth-century costume: stockings, breeches, embroidered waistcoat, cravat, wig. That's it, I thought. I've cracked. I can't tell the difference between past and present any longer. Then I noticed he was smoking a cigarette. "Are you making a film?" I asked. In fact, he was: one of the new versions of *Dangerous Liaisons*.

The question "what are you working on" could still produce that old ice-water-in-the-intestines feeling. I had a sense that I was working on something significant, and had found interesting material, but I still wasn't sure what it all added up to. Maybe, I thought, the key lay in the relationship between professionalization and politics, and I raced to call up stacks of sociological texts about professionalization. Or maybe the lawyers of the Old Regime could be seen as elements of a new civil society in the making? Civil society was a much-discussed topic in the social sciences at the time, and I dove into that literature as well. I couldn't decide what direction to proceed in, and at times I lost confidence in the dissertation almost entirely. And matters didn't improve when I returned to Princeton in late 1989 to start the writing process in earnest. I was renting a grim studio apartment in a grim apartment block right off the busy, soulless highway that connected Princeton to the rest of the world. My relationship with the Washington journalist seemed perennially on the rocks. Days would go by in which I would not go out the door, or shave, or change out of sweatpants and t-shirt. I made a huge desk out of a door laid atop a pair of file cabinets, set up my computer there and spread out my file cards, and tried to make sense of the masses of notes I had taken.

In the end, neither professionalization nor civil society turned out to be particularly useful explanatory prisms for me. Instead, I went back to the literature that had first drawn me in, on the political culture of the Old Regime. I had met Dale Van Kley in Paris, in the small library on the Left Bank, and he had taken an interest in my work, shown incredible generosity, and pushed me to think about what my material meant for what he called the "unraveling" of the French monarchy. In the early spring of 1990, Keith Michael Baker came to lecture in Princeton and was also warmly encouraging (and this despite the fact that I accidentally spilled coffee all over him at our first meeting). His articles, soon to be collected in *Inventing the French Revolution*, provided an absolutely brilliant model for how to think about language and political change in general, and I practically memorized them. Having turned in this direction, I eventually realized that the overall argument of my dissertation was staring me in the face. The French monarchy governed through law. Legal institutions

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were the oldest and most prominent elements of what the French, in the eighteenth century, were coming to call "government." But to function properly, these institutions needed a degree of autonomy from the crown, and in the eighteenth century this autonomy allowed even relatively ordinary members of the legal world—barristers, solicitors, even the law clerks of the Basoche—the freedom to create a space of relatively free debate and critique. Indeed, it was here, within the ambit of the French state itself, more than in spaces like the salons and coffee houses emphasized by Habermas, that the most effective criticism of the monarch developed. And, not surprisingly, it was this space, as well, that provided the political training ground for so many of the figures who would go on to lead the French Revolution. I finished the dissertation in the fall of 1990 and published it in book form four years later as *Lawyers and Citizens*.[8] Looking back more than a quarter-century later I see its flaws and limits all too clearly, but there are also things there that I am glad to have written.



Since then, I have published several other books, but the process of defining a subject, and then of crafting an argument, has never gotten easier. With each successive project it has taken time – years in some cases – to craft a really workable topic, and then, after finishing the research, to decide what the research means. The question "what are you working on?" still elicits the same familiar and unpleasant feelings of anxiety and doubt, deep in the gut. But over the years I have perhaps become more accepting of those feelings, and more tolerant of the inherent messiness of history-writing. Finding a good subject is not easy. It can take a lot of stumbling about before you hit on something workable. Be tolerant of the stumbling and keep moving forward. Keep reading.

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[8] David A. Bell, *Lawyers and Citizens: The Making of a Political Elite in Old Regime France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

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