Dancing on a Volcano: The Crisis in French Historical Studies

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It is a pleasure to be in this community of talented historians of France and to be part of a self-reflective discussion about the growing crisis in French Historical Studies. This is a paradoxical conversation because we are talking about a crisis while we participate in a conference that clearly shows how the scholarly field of French history remains both creative and provocative amid the many transitions in contemporary American culture and higher education. When I attend this kind of well-organized academic conference, I feel both intellectually stimulated and optimistic about the vitality of French historical studies.

But I am also reminded of Louis Philippe’s comment shortly before the Revolution that would make him “King of the French” in 1830. “We are dancing on a volcano,” he reportedly said after attending a politically charged opera when he was still merely the Duke of Orleans.¹ The phrase became one of Louis Philippe’s few memorable comments, even if he never exactly said it, and I remember reading somewhere that another French aristocrat later repeated the comment with an additional consoling thought, “but at least we’re still dancing.” The German statesman Gustav Stresemann used the same volcanic image as he discussed an economic crisis in Weimar Germany, and the English rock band Genesis revived it again in their popular twentieth-century song “Dance on a Volcano” (1976).²

¹ Louis Philippe’s comment has often been quoted, though accounts of its specific historical context differ. For a recent description of Louis Philippe’s volcanic imagery, see Göran Blix, From Paris to Pompeii: French Romanticism and the Cultural Politics of Archeology (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 230.
² Gustav Stresemann’s volcanic allusion is noted, among other places, in Andreas Höfele, No Hamlets: German Shakespeare from Nietzsche to Carl Schmitt (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 123. The lyrics to the song “Dance on a Volcano,” are available at
I am therefore evoking a metaphor that others have used to describe different crises and historical eras, but “dancing on a volcano” might well be the best way to summarize the current situation for those of us who work generally in the liberal arts and specifically on French history. With a nod also to the work of Edmund Burke, I would thus like to offer some “Reflections on Volcano Dancing in French Historical Studies.”

We should begin with the historical recognition that we are passing through a transitional upheaval in the wider cultural and political contexts that constantly influence our work. This volcano will not subside soon, and there is no way to return to the “good old days” before the current cultural and political eruptions. Our teaching and research in French history is still valuable work, but we need to change some of our familiar intellectual dances if we are going to remain “cool” in the increasingly hot cultural climate of the twenty-first century.

Above all, we have to expand our engagement with evolving student and public communities both within and beyond our academic institutions. We need to affirm and sustain (French) historical studies in American universities by looking for dance partners in new places—and we must develop imaginative new steps to keep French history on the dance card of rising student generations, faculty colleagues, and administrative leaders. Dancing with new partners should not be viewed as dancing with wolves.

The Causes of the Crisis in French Historical Studies

We know how to analyze the causes of big events such as the French Revolution, so we can also identify multiple causes for what we are now calling “the crisis in French historical studies.” The convergence of these causal factors has created our volcano, and each cause requires analysis as well as active responses.

We work within a political culture whose leaders often question the value of the liberal arts, with particular skepticism about the humanities. The former governor in my own state, for example, has questioned why the state's public universities should "subsidize" liberal arts disciplines that are perceived as mostly useless for people who want good jobs. Like many politicians, he believes that higher education should focus on computer technology, engineering, business management, and the natural sciences. Such views also influence parents who, as we know, often steer their children away from courses in the humanities because they fear that these subjects do not provide the skills that employers want. These concerns help to explain why History enrollments have declined at most universities and why interest in Europe has especially waned as students turn toward other global or non-European subjects. France itself seems less important to students who think strategically about the future, perhaps because global

http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/g/genesis/dance_on_a_volcano.html, and the musical recording by Genesis can be heard here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBcnjx05a1s
commerce is more likely to flow in the coming decades from China, India, and other Asian societies or from Latin American countries such as Mexico and Brazil.

These expected economic transitions understandably affect student interest in European history courses, and declining enrollments reduce the administrative financial support for new faculty positions in French history. The growing skepticism about France’s economic relevance is reinforced by journalists and political pundits who downplay France’s significance in contemporary global politics. Journalistic assessments of the French “decline” connect with a longstanding popular distrust of France, which has always been particularly influential among American conservatives. The well-known French tendencies to mobilize public demonstrations, organize disruptive labor strikes, and criticize American foreign policy have added modern ideological fuel to anti-French sentiments that go back as far as the eighteenth-century American hostility for French Catholicism or the radicalism of the French Revolution. France is America’s oldest ally, but it is also one of the most enduring “others” in the history of American nationalism. This view of French “otherness” leads to distorting stereotypes about French culture and also affects the popular interest in French history.

In addition to the long-developing American hostility for French and European (state-centered) economic, educational, and social policies, there are structural patterns in graduate education and professional historical studies that are now weakening the academic and public position of all historians, including those who study Europe. Our methods for training History Ph.D. students emerged within the late nineteenth-century culture of scientific research and European Positivism. This research paradigm carried the assumption that each scientist would add small pieces of specific knowledge to help explain the natural world, but a similar scientific conception of knowledge also shaped other kinds of scholarship in modern universities. Humanists and social scientists drew on the model of scientific truth to explain how they also discovered small pieces of specific knowledge and therefore provided essential research for universities and the whole society. Natural scientists described the evolving material realities of

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the natural world, whereas historians and other humanistic scholars described the evolving political, social, and economic realities of human cultures. Scientists, scholars, and teachers in all academic disciplines thus believed they were producing knowledge that contributed to human progress toward a more enlightened management of both nature and social institutions.

Many of us went through Ph.D. programs when this belief in the intrinsic value of knowledge flourished among our graduate mentors; and this paradigm still offers a theoretical framework for training students who want to become professional historians. This theory of knowledge and scholarly achievement also continues to shape our system of career advancement and professional rewards within history departments. Over the last several decades, however, a new rationale or paradigm has emerged to explain or justify the value of higher education and the public mission of Universities. This more recent paradigm (which is by no means altogether new) emphasizes that universities make essential contributions to economic development, technological innovation and job training. Responding perhaps to political calls for “accountability,” savvy university leaders often seem to agree that higher education’s main social purpose is to produce graduates who can enter immediately into business enterprises and technologically advanced global commercial systems. This kind of training is now described as “STEM education,” and its focus on science, technology, engineering and mathematics does not even offer the Arts or Humanities a letter in its educational acronym.

Humanists and social scientists have responded to this economic paradigm by arguing that knowledge of history, literature, philosophy, political science and other related subjects is also essential for professional and commercial creativity. These subjects help develop the key skills that businesses need and successful leaders use in every kind of organization: analytical abilities, communication of complex information, knowledge of cultural diversity, and innovative responses to changing historical situations. But French history has no

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5 For good examples of the economic rationale for higher education, see the foreword and the chapters on employment, university research, and economic growth in Jason E. Lane and D. Bruce Johnstone, eds., foreword by Nancy L. Zimpher, Universities and Colleges as Economic Drivers: Measuring Higher Education’s Role in Economic Development (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012). The index includes a number of foreign countries (Australia, China, Korea, Singapore, United Arab Emirates, etc.), but France is not on the list.

6 One of the persuasive arguments for the value of the liberal arts stresses that the humanities help students become effective, knowledgeable leaders. See, for example, Robert M. McManus and Gama Perruci, Understanding Leadership: An Arts and Humanities Perspective (New York: Routledge, 2015). This book’s striking front cover uses a full reproduction of Eugène Delacroix’s iconic painting “Liberty Leading the People” (1830), thus drawing imagery from Louis Philippe’s volcanic upheaval to suggest
obvious rationale or claim to significance within this general, pragmatic argument for the utility of the liberal arts. France is not currently viewed as a center for economic innovation or as a dynamic model for how to manage future economic transitions. In fact, French society is more often viewed in America as lagging behind or as resisting the inevitable expansion of global capitalism. Most Americans now go to France to visit museums and learn about the past rather than to find new ideas for the coming century.

American historians of France are thus working in political, economic, cultural and institutional contexts that place less value on the search for knowledge itself, give more emphasis to the economic use value of higher education, and portray France as marginal to the main concerns of contemporary Americans. These converging cultural and economic patterns suggest why we are having conference panels on “the crisis in French Historical Studies” and why we cannot find obvious or simple solutions for the challenges we face inside and outside our universities.

**New Arguments for the Value and Interpretation of French Historical Studies**

The intellectual history of higher education never stands still, however, and there is now another rationale for University teaching and research that goes beyond both “scientific knowledge” and “economic utility.” This most recent paradigm describes “Entrepreneurial Universities” where people are looking for new ways to solve the world’s greatest problems—which actually go far beyond economics.7 These problems include climate change, environmental degradation, inadequate health care, global immigration of displaced persons, poor schools, political violence, declining confidence in democratic institutions, ethnic or religious conflicts, and many other issues that defy even the wisest public leaders.

This view of universities as incubators for solving problems raises a new question for anyone who believes that historical studies are essential for human knowledge and social progress: how does your research, teaching and writing help to solve the world’s most pressing problems? This is not yet a common question in graduate seminars, but it actually offers a much better framework for French historians than questions about immediate economic utility. Every big problem has historical origins and historical precedents, which means that no significant personal or public problem can be understood or solved without knowing where it comes from. History and other kinds of humanistic knowledge thus carry a “utility value” that is as important for solving big problems as the

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7 For an excellent example of this “problem-solving” argument for the value of contemporary universities, see Holden Thorp and Buck Goldstein, *Engines of Innovation: The Entrepreneurial University in the Twenty-First Century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
knowledge that comes from science, business schools, and medical research centers. All major world (and personal) problems, in short, have complex historical and cultural components.

Placed in this broad analytical framework, French history offers one of the most interesting, provocative entries into the main issues of our time. This history opens multiple pathways for students, scholars, and non-academic readers to explore modern issues and conflicts that include: the revolutionary or repressive uses of political violence; the idealistic aspirations for political democracy; the causes and phases of revolutionary change; the development of authoritarian threats to democratic institutions; the history of citizenship and immigration; the impact of industrialization (or deindustrialization) on social communities and natural environments; the role of art and literature in national societies; the emotional power of nationalism; the social and economic effects of warfare; the ideologies and colonial systems of imperialism; the emergence of postcolonial states; and the conflicted interactions between religious groups and secular governments.

It would therefore be entirely plausible for French historians to say to our skeptical contemporaries: “If you want to see how others have responded to your kinds of problems, you should explore the history of France since 1500. The French have struggled to solve variants of every problem you are now facing. France is of course not the only country that struggles with the big issues of historical change, but it is one of the best places to examine the history of such issues; and the French still produce some of the best food and wine in the world.”

We could also use the ongoing analysis of big issues to rethink how we train graduate students in French history. We could ask students to explain, for example, how their dissertation research might help people understand a specific social-cultural issue or a recurring pattern in human history. We could refer to such issues (and their enduring implications) in our teaching, but this is not an argument for “presentism” in our historical pedagogy or research. In fact, students often gain the most imaginative insights into their own cultures and lives by examining distant places and historical conflicts that took place hundreds or thousands of years ago.

Thinking critically about the connections between research, teaching, and the world’s big problems could help Ph.D. students develop new formats for their dissertations and also help them to frame their projects with broader intellectual questions. Sidonie Smith, who teaches in the English Department at the University of Michigan, has recently published a book called Manifesto for the Humanities: Transforming Doctoral Education in Good Enough Times. She

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published her *Manifesto* as both an open access digital work and as a conventional print book, thereby providing a more direct technological connection between authors and would-be readers. Calling for new approaches to graduate training and dissertations that would move away from the classic monograph, Smith argues that students should be encouraged to produce shorter dissertations, embrace new media, and learn how to communicate with non-academic audiences (every student, for example, could be asked to write op-ed columns or blogs about an aspect of his or her work).

Historians of France might draw on these same ideas, including Smith’s proposal to help students communicate more effectively with non-academic public audiences. One example of such public engagement among French historians appears in David Bell’s recent book *Shadows of Revolution: Reflections on France, Past and Present*, which brings together book reviews and commentaries on French history that he has written for non-academic magazines, newspapers and digital publications. Bell’s writing for such publications uses the kind of accessible prose style that graduate students could begin to develop as they are also learning how to pursue advanced archival research and to write carefully argued academic papers. As Bell suggests in *Shadows of Revolution*, historians should convey the ideas and public issues of French history to readers who have no professional stake in historical studies or in France. In most general terms, the goal is to show these readers how they can gain new insights into their own big issues, cultural problems, or personal experiences by examining the history of France.

We need to give more attention to this kind of engagement with non-academic audiences as we train graduate students to become professional historians. Students could learn more about the methods for presenting historical knowledge in museum exhibitions, radio interviews, bookstore talks or documentary films. They also need to learn how to write book reviews for readers who are not professional historians or academic scholars. They need to learn how to discuss history with people who never visit universities or read books with footnotes; and they need to bring these skills to both the classroom and public media. In short, future graduate students (and hence future historians) will need to connect their well-researched historical knowledge to important big issues and to ongoing public debates about such issues. I would reiterate that this research and big-issue reflection does not have to focus only on recent history.

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because there is a pressing need for much broader historical perspectives throughout every level of our current political culture.

We can thus respond to the evolving political contexts, university priorities, and student cultures by stressing that French history offers highly engaging cultural resources for understanding and helping to solve the world’s greatest problems. Such engagement with the “public humanities” goes against our scholarly grain and the traditional methods of graduate education, but we have to show both students and the wider public why historical studies are as useful and empowering for our society as science, technology, and economic growth. The knowledge that comes from STEM education will never provide the cultural perspectives, analytical skills, or human communications that are needed to deal successfully with immigration issues, economic disparities, political violence or the current anger in democratic societies. Historical analysis helps people explain such problems and think creatively about how to develop more effective responses.

French historical studies have long been an innovative field within professional historiography and humanistic scholarship. Historians of France have often used interdisciplinary theories, introduced new research methodologies, and affirmed the Enlightenment tradition of public intellectual engagement. We can therefore help to lead the way as humanists in all fields seek to expand the themes and methods of the “public humanities.” We can build on the achievements of H-France and develop other electronic platforms to participate in the digital humanities. We can also follow the example of long-ago French writers such as Voltaire and Diderot and of modern historians such as Natalie Zemon Davis, Robert Paxton, Joan Wallach Scott and others who have shown how careful historical thinking contributes to public debates and public history.

Revising our approach to dissertations, engaging with new public audiences or insisting on the public value of historical knowledge will not end the “crisis” in French historical studies. Changing some of our professional practices or priorities will not remove the challenges of teaching, writing, and interpreting history in an anti-historical public culture. Rethinking and recalibrating our traditions, however, may keep us dancing on the volcano—especially if we can help future students, university administrators, and others in the wider public culture better understand why French history matters for their lives as well as our own.