

The Role of Presentism and Nationalism in the Historiography of the French Revolution

From Marxist Interpretation to Conspiracy Theory

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Faculty Introduction

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Barbieri's paper masterfully deals with the very complex historiography surrounding the French Revolution. This history has been rewritten several times over the last two centuries to support political or moral ambitions of the given era. Truly understanding a violent and bloody revolution is very difficult, particularly when considering the events that catapulted France into revolution. In her paper, Barbieri carefully identifies many of these issues and illuminates the reasoning behind them. She also very carefully examines the work of many modern historians, some written in French, and what they are doing to rectify these issues. This is an exceptionally good historiography of the state of the field.

Abstract

During the twentieth century, the interpretation and conceptualization of the French Revolution shifted from a traditional Marxist interpretation of the revolution as a class movement to new interpretations focused on irrationality and conspiracy. The people's fear became the primary justification for a social behavior that revealed an ancestral predator instinct behind modern high ideals of democracy. This essay retraces the evolution of the interpretation of the French Revolution in historiography, focusing on the reasons behind the extraordinary appeal of the conspiracy theory, in particular the role that nationalism and presentism had in influencing and biasing historians' perspectives. Finally, the essay argues the need for a revision of the French Revolution. Focusing on the practical necessities of the masses of French peasants and the *sans-culottes*, instead of their foolish credulity, can help historians to reconnect empathically with the past, avoiding the dangerous filter that their anxiety for the present and their political ideology provide.

In the first French experiment with democracy, the subversion of the Old Regime was realized through a series of empirical and often irrational attempts charged with their actors' anxiety, frustration, and doubts. The intensity of human feelings and passion in a society still deeply imbued with Enlightenment rationality made of the French Revolutionary Era not only a pivotal moment in European history but also one that polarizes the attention of generations of philosophers and historians. Interpreting and conceptualizing the French Revolution became especially challenging during the twentieth century when the traditional Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution as a class movement began to crumble because of new evidence of heterogeneity in the middle class' composition.

Looking for an alternative frame able to explain the French struggle for democracy, historians of the 1900s interpreted the past through the powerful filters that their rapidly changing contemporary realities imposed on perception. At the end of the 1960s, a new historiographical focus on the violence of the revolutionary mob favored the emergence of an interpretation that made the people's irrationality the *fil rouge* of the revolution. Following this reasoning (in the late 1970s) historians developed conspiracy theories to explain, in a fascinating and coherent perspective, the French Revolution, from its eve to the radicalization during the Reign of Terror. The people's

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Over the last two decades, some scholars have criticised the central role that historians have given to conspiracies, especially as the underlying cause of the revolution. In particular, the arguments of Timothy Tackett appeared compelling, supported with a rigorous analysis based on both specific evidence and the political and philosophical interpretation of the revolutionary ideology.¹ More recently, however, in a collection of essays, *Conspiracy in the French Revolution*, the editors Campbell,

¹ Timothy Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792,” *The American Historical Review*, 105, no.3 (June 2000): 291–713.

Kaiser, and Lipton challenged Tackett's assertions, once again giving conspiracies more than a contingent role in the origins and sustainment of the revolution.² Retracing the evolution of the interpretation of the French Revolution in historiography not only provides an understanding of the reasons behind the extraordinary appeal of conspiracy theory but also offers an opportunity to rethink the role of historians as biographers of the revolutionary era. The fact that nationalism and presentism consistently influenced and biased historians' interpretations allows us to claim that a new revision of the interpretation of the French Revolution is not only possible but necessary. Focusing again on the practical needs of the masses of French peasants and the *sans-culottes*, can help historians to reconnect empathically with the past, avoiding the dangerous filter that their anxiety for the present and their political ideology provide.

Philosophers and liberal thinkers, contemporary to the revolution, focused their attention on how the French people rethought their roles as citizens, challenging old assumptions of monarchic absolute sovereignty, in doing so, embraced the Enlightenment's ideas of government. Already during the period of the *Restauration*, however, the bourgeoisie, a new class of citizens that on the eve of the revolution had become aware of their role in French social and economic reality, occupied a central stage in the historical analysis of the revolutionary process. In the mid-1850s, the spread of Marx's dialectic, based on the antithesis of capitalism and the proletariat, propelled the interpretation of the revolution as a capitalist attempt to deconstruct a social hierarchy in which the unproductive nobility enjoyed exclusive privileges, while a frustrated middle class supported the economy. According to the Marxist interpretation, with the revolution, the Third Estate claimed their role as rightful protagonists of French society, instead of inferior and unprivileged subjects. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the historian Jean Jaurés gave coherent organization to this social interpretation, in a masterpiece of French Historiography, the *Histoire Socialistes de la Révolution Française*, and in doing so sanctified the social perspective of the French Revolution.³

²Peter R. Campbell et al., eds., *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007).

³Jean Jaurés, *Histoire Socialistes de la Révolution Française* (Paris: Libr. de "l'Humanité," 1923).

In the 1920s, Georges Lefebvre, promoter of the idea of a scientific, comprehensive, and sociological approach to history (the “total history” of the Annales School), for the first time included the rural masses as real agents of the revolution.⁴ In the previous historiographies, the French peasants had been relegated to a marginal role by the dramatic actions of the “urban commoners” and the beguiling acts of self-affirmation of the Parisian middle class.⁵ The Annales School’s approach gave the peasants agency, and outlined how they actively become citizens of a democratic nation. In doing so, the Social History scholars added to conceptualizations that the revolution was a class struggle, a new complexity that had been previously denied. Similarly, in the 1950s, Albert Soboul focused his attention on the urban working class. He gave a new role to the Parisian *sans-culottes*, who traditional historiographers had interpreted as “passive instruments of the bourgeoisie.”⁶ Soboul argued that the *sans-culottes* shared a common mentality with the peasants of rural France.⁷ In doing so, Soboul transformed Paris into a case-study of the revolution that embodied the various mentalities of the French people.

Not all historians agreed with Soboul’s social perspective. In 1957, Sydney Seymour Biro published two volumes on the French foreign policy at the end of the eighteenth century. In these volumes, Biro minimized and almost ridiculed the role of the commoners in the revolution.⁸ Two years later, the French historian Samuel Bernstein identified fundamental flaws in Biro’s work. Accusing the American historian of being unable to forget his German origins, Bernstein denounced Biro’s logic as based on stereotypical assumptions that depicted the French revolutionaries as predators and the Germans as victims of French greed.⁹ In Bernstein’s opinion, Biro’s misperceptions of the popular movement as “a dishonorable, pilfering lot” was the result of a nationalist thought that made him an unreliable judge of French history.¹⁰

⁴ Albert Soboul, “L’Historiographie Classique de la Révolution Française,” *Réflexions Historiques*, 1, no. 2 (Hiver 1974): 143.

⁵ Samuel Bernstein, “New Directions in French Revolution Historiography,” *Science & Society*, 23, no.4 (Fall 1959): 333.

⁶ Bernstein, “New Directions in French Revolution Historiography,” 351.

⁷ Bernstein, “New Directions in French Revolution Historiography,” 337.

⁸ Sydney Seymour Biro, *The German Policy of Revolutionary France: A Study in French Diplomacy During the War of the First Coalition, 1792-1797* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).

⁹ Bernstein, “New Directions in French Revolution Historiography,” 334.

¹⁰ Bernstein, “New Directions in French Revolution Historiography,” 336.

Bernstein's critique did not remain an isolated episode. In the late 1950s, in separate publications, the American Robert Roswell Palmer and the British Alfred Cobban openly opposed the classic interpretation of the French Revolution as a social struggle. There were, indeed, several contradictions in the rigid historiographical definition of classes in revolutionary France. In fact, the aristocracy included some liberal thinkers who sided with the Third Estate in their demand for equality. The Third Estate itself included members who had acquired a role in government through purchasing titles. Finally, the *sans-culottes* lacked a profound class-consciousness, and the peasants in rural France were often conservatives, if not counter-revolutionary as in the Vendée.¹¹

French historians, however, welcomed with disdain a new interpretation that considered the French Revolution as the final expression of a global Atlantic revolution that started in the English colonies in 1763.¹² In 1974, in an extensive review of the historiography of the French Revolution, Soboul argued that twentieth-century presentism and a nationalist ideology were the real reasons for the change in the American and British conceptualization of the French Revolution. In particular, Soboul appeared incapable of forgiving a ruthless slaughtering of more than two centuries of French and continental scholarship that deprived the French Revolution of its profound meaning and the “*intensité dramatique de ses luttes sociales et politiques*.”¹³

Although Soboul's indignation was understandable, Cobban, and successively George V. Taylor, should be acknowledged for identifying the bourgeoisie as not just capitalists led by economic interests but, instead, office-holders, professionals, and liberal intellectuals who actively sought juridical (and political) power that the aristocracy denied them.¹⁴ The new interpretation that Michel Vovelle beautifully summarized as “*Du Tout Social au Tout Politique*” transformed the

¹¹ Sidney Tarrow, “Red of Tooth and Claw. The French Revolution and the Political Process—Then and Now,” *French Politics, Culture & Society*, 29, no.1 (Spring 2011): 95.

¹² Albert Soboul, “L’Historiographie Classique de la Révolution Française,” *Réflexions Historiques*, 1, no. 2 (Hiver 1974): 145.

¹³ Translation: The dramatic intensity of its social and political struggle. Albert Soboul, “L’Historiographie Classique de la Révolution Française,” *Réflexions Historiques*, 1, no. 2 (Hiver 1974): 146.

¹⁴ Soboul, “L’Historiographie Classique de la Révolution Française,” 165.

French Revolution into a political affirmation of identity.¹⁵ While it is undeniable that the controversy would arise about the difference in the conceptualization of government and citizenship—American individualism versus European socialism—it is also not coincidental that the new chapter in the historiography of the French Revolution emerged when the 1950s Red Scare facilitated the Americans’ refusal of constructs that could appeal to communist ideology. Thus, both nationalism and presentism influenced the shift from a social interpretation into a political interpretations of the French Revolution.

Cold War revisionism lacked strength in proposing a valid and unifying alternative to the interpretation of the French Revolution; in fact, different focuses emerged, none entirely satisfactory.¹⁶ The British historian Richard Cobb, for example, returned to a practical analysis of the popular protest, paying special attention to the violence of the mob in Paris. François Furet, in contrast, outlined the utopian idea of popular sovereignty and popular will applied to the Jacobins’ actions in the rise of a new political culture.¹⁷ Overall, however, a new trend of thought emerged in the 1960s and the 1970s: the idea that the

“Denying that the masses sought democratization and equality was a way for historians to communicate to their contemporaries that the protesters of the 1960s were not new, glorious revolutionaries.”

forces that determined and sustained the revolution were irrational and related to contingent circumstances.¹⁸ In his review of the French Revolution, Soboul theorized that contemporary conceptualizations of the

revolution were simply the right-leaning historians’ answer to the leftist social protests of the 1960s. Denying that the masses sought democratization and equality was a way for historians to communicate

¹⁵ English Translation: From All Social to All Political. Michel Vovelle, “Du Tout Social au Tout Politique,” *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 310 (Octobre-Décembre 1997).

¹⁶ Vovelle gave a nice picture writing of “the difficulty of the actual historiography in managing the new construction sites” (*la difficulté de se courrant historiographique à gérer de nouveau chantiers*). Michel Vovelle, “Du Tout Social au Tout Politique,” *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 310 (Octobre-Décembre 1997): 548.

¹⁷ Michel Vovelle, “Du Tout Social au Tout Politique,” *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 310 (Octobre-Décembre 1997): 551.

¹⁸ Albert Soboul, “L’Historiographie Classique de la Révolution Française,” *Réflexions Historiques*, 1, no. 2 (Hiver 1974): 166.

to their contemporaries that the protesters of the 1960s were not new, glorious revolutionaries. Moreover, by reminding the public that an unrestrained mob can act beastly, right-wing interpreters of the French Revolution proposed a message of caution aimed at maintaining political and social stability at any cost. In this complex historical context, the conspiracy theory offered a new, extraordinary, and fascinating conceptual frame able to satisfy historians' need for a new perspective on the revolution.

To properly evaluate the use of conspiracy theory, it is necessary to explore the evolution of the concept of conspiracy along with the changes in the political, social, and economic reality during those revolutionary times. Before the revolution, the bourgeoisie believed that the debt of the state (that Louis XVI had for long kept as a well-guarded secret) was due to the wrongdoing of the tax collectors of the Farmers-General who shamelessly appropriated money owed to the treasury.¹⁹ Moreover, the peasants appeared convinced that the shortage of wheat was not explainable by the long-lasting famine; they believed, in fact, that the *seigneurs* were purposely starving the ordinary people to increase market prices.²⁰ The luxurious lifestyle of the nobles was, for the commoners, a proof of maleficence of their intent.²¹ During the revolution, various events were interpreted as the evidence of existing conspiracies: for example, the temporary and unexpected closure of the building where the Third Estate gathered during the Estates General on June 17, 1789; the hate for the *émigrée* that fueled the people's paranoia of an aristocrats' plot to invade France with the support of a foreign army; the flight in disguise of the royal family from Paris on July 20, 1791; the insurgency of the royalists in Vendée and Toulon; and, finally, the denunciation of numerous plots that the Reign of Terror used to reinforce its power, from the alleged Austrian Committee mingling in French internal politics to the little daily conspiracies among common people who lost their heads because of fear or envy of a suspicious neighbor.

¹⁹ Sylvia Neely, *A Concise History of the French Revolution* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 9.

²⁰ Timothy Tackett, "Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792," *The American Historical Review*, 105, no.3 (June 2000): 695.

²¹ Neely, *A Concise History of the French Revolution*, 12.

One of the first French historians to openly embrace conspiracy theory was most likely Furet in the 1970s.²² In *Interpreting the French Revolution*, Furet wrote that “the idea of plot in revolutionary ideology ... served as a reference point for organizing and interpreting action.”²³ Under the umbrella of conspiracy, hence an irrational fear of unprovable events, the inexplicable happenings of the French Revolution suddenly acquired new meaning and justification. By establishing an imaginary line between the French people as either “friends” or “enemies” of the nation, Furet argued that the new politically dominant class dictated to the people a simple criterion that could be used to justify actions outside of accepted moral behavior. Events that attempted to confuse the new boundaries and instill doubts into the revolutionaries’ minds fell under the French term of *complot* (conspiracy).

In a recent critique of conspiracy theory, Timothy Tackett challenged the idea that conspiracy-based plots were the real cause of the revolution. In particular, he noted that those “beliefs [of conspiracy] were not widespread and were probably far less central to the thinking of the educated classes than they were in the Anglo-American world.”²⁴ Tackett argued that the role of conspiracies in the French Revolution was an American construct that had also been applied to the American Revolution. He found in the Protestant focus on evil’s role in people’s actions the reason for Americans’ susceptibility to conspiracy theories, a mentality that was uncommon in France.²⁵ Tackett opposed the idea that the masses were credulous populists, presenting instead the people as subjects still deeply connected to their authority, the king, on both an emotional and rational level, and confident in the Second Estate’s willingness to collaborate in the compensation of the government’s deficit.²⁶ The king’s flight to Varenne, in June 1791, became the moment of change in the level of trust of the people and the leading elite.²⁷

²² Peter R. Campbell et al., eds., *Conspiracy in the French Revolution* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 3.

²³ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*. Cited in: Timothy Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792,” *The American Historical Review*, 105, no.3 (June 2000): 694.

²⁴ Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution: French Elites and Origins of the Terror, 1789-1792,” 698.

²⁵ Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution,” 699.

²⁶ Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution,” 698 and 710.

²⁷ Tackett, “Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution,” 713.

Tackett's analysis of letters written by French deputies clearly confirmed this periodization. He also outlined that as soon as an ideology of conspiracy spread among the political class, real plots were attempted to halt the revolution, thereby justifying the "paranoid style [that] was coming to dominate ... the rhetoric."²⁸ Tackett's claim found further support in the memoir of Madame Roland who wrote: "the just and generous spirits, who aspired to the welfare of their country and dared attempt to establish it ... have been at last sacrificed by ignorance and fear to intrigue and speculation."²⁹ Madame Roland identified the turning point of the revolution as occurring when the Montagnards purged the Convention of the Girondins as "the sole work of a small number of human tigers drunk with wine and blood [marking] the triumph of crime by the apathy of the Parisians. From this date crime and anarchy grow apace."³⁰

In 2010, conspiracy theory found a new defender in Philippe Münch, who reevaluated the French historiographical representation of the Jacobins as *animaux primitifs* (primitive animals), and argued that, during the revolution, conspiracy acted both as propeller and justification of violence. In line with the historiography of the Université de La Sorbonne, Münch focused on the fact that the imagination of conspiracy was mainly an emotional one.³¹ In the historian's analysis, on the eve of the revolution, the theory of an aristocratic conspiracy was the only one able to make sense of the institutional and political crisis in which France was plummeting. However, Münch also believed that, behind the idea of plots "existed a political, social, and economic logic that supposed the existence of at least some rationality in its actors."³²

²⁸ Tackett, "Conspiracy Obsession in a Time of Revolution," 708.

²⁹ Madame Roland, Edward Gilpin Johnson ed., *The Private Memoirs of Madame Roland* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and co., 1901), 106-107.

³⁰ Roland, Johnson ed., *The Private Memoirs of Madame Roland*, 110.

³¹ Philippe Münch, "La Foule Révolutionnaire, l'Imaginaire du Complot et la Violence Fondatrice: Aux Origines de la Nation Française (1789)," *Conserveries Mémoires*, 8 (2010). Online.

³² Translated from French: "Il exist des logiques politiques, sociales et économiques qui supposent une parte de rationalité des acteurs." Philippe Münch, "La Foule Révolutionnaire, l'Imaginaire du Complot et la Violence Fondatrice: Aux Origines de la Nation Française (1789)," *Conserveries Mémoires*, 8 (2010), abstract. Online.

The main issue that emerges when addressing conspiracy theory is how the term conspiracy has been used in scholarship. Should conspiracy theory be an explanation of the causes of the revolution or of the way it evolved? Secondly, and more importantly, was conspiracy theory related to plots that were only imagined or concrete? Richard

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Hofstadter, the first to critically address the role of conspiracies in history, made a crucial distinction between “locating conspiracies in history” and “saying that history is, in effect, conspiracy.”³³ While

Tackett’s stance was in line with Hofstadter, Münch, instead, denied the importance of distinguishing between real and alleged plots. But if a conspiracy is real, then it becomes historical fact and not just a theory. Real plots in history had never been framed as conspiracy theories, and there seems not to be a clear reason for changing attitudes towards this perspective when examining the French Revolution. Finally, since during the revolution different people, at different times, were involved in ideas of conspiracy, there should be not just one conspiracy theory, but, if any, multiple. The historians who support conspiracy theory, instead, often fail to identify to which conspiracy or group they refer: the peasants starving in the fields of rural France? The urban people in Paris? The elite at the power during the Reign of Terror? The military in fear of foreign armies’ invasion? Without an agreement on the answers to those questions, the interpretation of the revolution as the effect of conspiracies seems an easy solution to historians’ anxious need to “explain the inexplicable.”³⁴

In *The Journal of a Spy in Paris During the Reign of Terror*, the English spy Raoul Hesdin lamented that he was in Paris “to discover the secrets of a Government which has none, to unriddle mysteries when everything is but too patent, to assign causes to effects when *famine, hideous famine*, is the cause of everything.”³⁵ Hesdin’s plain words sound

³³ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (New York: Knopf, 1955), 70-72.

³⁴ Philippe Münch, “La Foule Révolutionnaire, l’Imaginaire du Complot et la Violence Fondatrice: Aux Origines de la Nation Française (1789),” *Conserveries Mémoires*, 8 (2010). Online.

³⁵ Raoul Hesdin, *The Journal of a Spy in Paris* (London: John Murray, 1895), 31.

as a warning of the risks of misperceptions in the interpretation of the French Revolution. The past, in fact, should not become a mere projection of a historian's personal beliefs or present concerns. In 1997, Michel Vovelle proposed that we rethink the French Revolution, freeing our minds of all the “*scories du passé*,” the stratified interpretations that departed from the original Republican-Marxist prospective.³⁶ It is indeed possible to reunify the social, political, and cultural interpretations in a new outlook that is deprived of “either/ or ontologies” to rediscover the “political process ... that invented the modern state.”³⁷

Although Vovelle's powerful call for a rediscovery of previous analysis of the French Revolution limits the role of presentism in the historical interpretation, his prospective remained undeveloped because of its intrinsic challenges. The interpretation of the French Revolution is indeed just one aspect of larger dilemmas about how historical knowledge arises and how historians develop a productive relationship with the past so that a “concern with history stands, not in service to pure knowledge, but to living.”³⁸ It is indeed an issue related to what Marc Bloch called “historical sensitivity” that is the ability to “understand the past by the present,” “borrowing from our daily experiences ... the elements which help us to restore the past.”³⁹ Indeed, after an initial interpretation focused on a socioeconomic perspective, the historiography of the French Revolution continually evolved during the twentieth century, following the changes in politics, culture, and ideology in both Europe and the United States.

The exceptionality of the French Revolution, charged with meanings that went beyond historical events, saw scholars struggle to establish a relationship with the past capable of balancing their role in the historical process and the boundaries of their evidence. Sentiments of nationalism, identification, pride, and cultural differences defined the way in which not only the historians interpreted the revolutionary times but also the way scholars related one each other in the

³⁶ Michel Vovelle, “Du Tout Social au Tout Politique,” *Annales Historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 310 (Octobre-Décembre 1997): 552.

³⁷ Sidney Tarrow, “Red of Tooth and Claw. The French Revolution and the Political Process—Then and Now,” French Politics, *Culture & Society*, 29, no.1 (Spring 2011): 93-94.

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations, 1874, On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, translated by Ian C. Johnston. Online.

³⁹ Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Alfred A. Knopf, Inc: 1953), 43-45.

discussion of controversial theories, often unable to find common ground or, at least, agree on terminology. Any reasoning about the French Revolution cannot escape from acknowledging *in primis* the extraordinary novelty of the French experiment with democracy in Europe, an experiment that had no script and was intensely charged with doubts and anxiety.

It is possible that a different approach, focused on individual perceptions of the actors of the revolution instead of on a collective ideology and imagination, can reward the historian with a new understanding. Following the recent evolution of the historian's perception of the past that shifts the attention toward the ordinary people, instead of the glorification of extraordinary heroes and anti-heroes, the interpretation of the French Revolution could be enriched and even rewritten in a new, fascinating way. After all, the French Revolution was not just the history of the French citizens as a whole, but also a story of individuals who pushed the boundaries of their ethicality, while still bearing moral responsibility, at least with themselves. ■

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<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41916234>.

Student Biography

Serena Barbieri graduated summa cum laude in history from Sam Houston State University in spring 2017. As an undergraduate, she was involved with the History Club and is a member of Phi Alpha Theta, the National History Honor Society. When Serena enrolled in Dr. Jeremiah Ross Dancy's course on the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, she was surprised to learn that the interpretation of the French Revolution had radically changed since she was a high school student, almost thirty years ago. The curiosity to understand the reasons behind the failure of the Marxist theory of the revolutionary era and a recent passion for historiography pushed Serena to research how historians re-conceptualized and interpreted the revolution in the twentieth century. In the fall of 2017, Barbieri will pursue a Masters in History at Sam Houston State University, and she hopes to complete her graduate studies with a PhD in American History with a focus on labor and immigration.