

## Tim Tackett Q&A

### What Happens Next – 01.16.2021

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks Tim, my first question is about the lack of institutions in the pre-revolutionary period. There was no legislature or a single meeting of the Estates-General for nearly two centuries. There were no institutions available to establish norms of behavior for the legislative branch. How do you think about those lack of institutional norms as potentially the precursor for the revolution's violence?

Tim Tackett:

Wow, that's a good question. A tough question. There had indeed been no Estates General since 1614 in that pre-revolutionary period, especially beginning in 1788, there was a huge debate over how the Estates General should be organized and what it should discuss. Once Jacques Necker came to power as a minister in Louis 16<sup>th</sup>'s government, a circular was sent out to all the municipalities of France and asking everybody to offer their suggestions, how should this new national assembly be organized?

There were hundreds, (laughs), of responses, many of them published. And by 1789, there was quite a considerable discussion and reflection, a real positive experience.

In addition, among the other reforms that had been instituted in 1788 were provincial assemblies in which people all over France were brought together, through elections and began discussing various issues.

And thirdly in the process of the election to the Estates General there were several levels of elections.

Larry Bernstein:

The French Revolution was very different from the American revolution and our founding fathers were divided on supporting their French allies during their revolution. Specifically, I'm thinking about the John Adam's perspective who recognized the potential for violence and Thomas Jefferson's, who encouraged revolution every generation. I think Jefferson's quote is "God forbid we should ever be 20 years without such a rebellion." Why do you think some of our founding fathers looked unfavorably at the French Revolution?

Tim Tackett:

Initially, it was really widespread support for the French Revolution. But there was a great turning point came with the violence that began in France, especially the massacre of September 1792, and then of course the terror.

Jefferson continued to support the revolution but a considerable number of people in America turned their back on the revolution said they'd gone too far.

Larry Bernstein:

Edmund Burke wrote about the French Revolution and his fears were based on the destruction of the strongest institutions in France, like the church, the aristocracy, and the monarchy among others. And as a natural conservative, Burke put great stock in the endogenous complexity on how institutions evolved and that historically grounded ways should not be cast aside for an untested utopian society. How do you think about Burke's antipathy towards the French Revolution?

Tim Tackett:

I think he had it wrong. He did not realize the extent to which the French Revolutionaries were trying to empirically build a new system. It was not utopian. They didn't throw out everything. They were trying to reorganize some of the major institutions to be sure, but it wasn't, like imagining France should go back to the forest or something as in some of Rousseau's descriptions. Burke says this, "The revolution is made by a series of lawyers who don't know anything about government or complete amateurs."

Well, that's not true at all, they had considerable experience in meetings and considering the possibilities of what should and should not be reformed.

Larry Bernstein:

Some of the ideas that were implemented during the revolution such as changing the names of the months, switching the number of days in a week. I mean, how do we think about when revolutionaries says, "Let's have a 10-day week?"

Tim Tackett:

Well, that came much later, didn't it? Then I've been talking about-

Larry Bernstein:

Fair enough. Some wanted to undermine the power of the Catholic church in French society.

Tim Tackett:

They were basically anti-Christian, they were going after the church when they reorganized the days of the week, and so on.

Larry Bernstein:

And getting rid of Christian holidays and festivals.

Tim Tackett:

Absolutely. Yeah. There was an extensive anti-clericalism and anti-religion that swept over France, but it was always pushed by a minority. In this book I recently wrote about Adrien Colson in the Glory and the Sorrow when he began to realize that the revolution was turning against the church. It was a tiny minority that went to those extremes. I've seen much this same in a new biography that I'm working on and it will come out in a year or two. Most of the French were appalled by many of these many of these

radical changes, but they were at war against all of Europe. They were being invaded from every direction. And under those conditions, it was possible for some of the most radical individuals to become more powerful than they had been before.

Larry Bernstein:

Your latest book that you just mentioned is *Glory and the Sorrow*. This is a story about a single Frenchman Adrien Colson. You examined a thousand of Colson's letters addressed to his best friend to figure out his views of the French revolution and how these attitudes evolved over time.

Historians are challenged in ascertaining evolving political opinions, but why do you think there is much to learn from the views from a single individual?

We just lived through COVID, and it would be interesting to see how people's views about masks, vaccinations, and quarantines changed over time. But if you focused on just me as an example, I don't know if we can learn much from my personal views as it relates to society at large. Sociologists have used surveys and other metrics to evaluate changing public opinions. So how do you think of the strengths and weaknesses of analyzing Colson in particular for changes in public opinion of the French Revolution?

Tim Tackett:

I found the story of Adrien Colson, the focus of the book, fascinating in its own right. And then I was quite attracted to the art of storytelling. I think historians responsibility is to tell, (laughs), tell good stories, or at least that's the way I look at it. I would argue that the petty lawyer, Colson because of his family origins as a tanner's son dwelling in one of the most impoverished sections of Paris is quite a wonderful cultural intermediary for understanding. And to some extent, giving a voice to the people who lived around him, many of whom were radical *Sans-culottes* during the revolution.

So, yes, I look at one person, but I look at one person in the context of the neighborhood in which he lived. And I spent a long time trying to integrate him into that neighborhood and figure out who lived with him and what his relationships were. And the fact that he, coming from very humble origins was able to talk with his neighbors. Artisans and shopkeepers, that many other lawyers would not have been able to do.

He was a witness to what was going on in the society. His life would've utterly disappeared along with the witnessing of his neighborhood. If it were not for these little over a thousand letters written to his best friend over a period of 20 years before and during the revolution, which were miraculously preserved. And (laughs), history always has to be based both on ideas and on documents, on evidence that is available that makes possible an analysis of the questions you would like to ask. Not every question can be answered, but this seemed like a great approach to looking at some of the questions that have long been difficult for historians to broach.

Larry Bernstein:

Colson discusses in his letters the storming of the Bastille. Colson did not participate in the violence, but he saw those who had stormed it. They returned with the heads of the losers on top of pikes and they

paraded through Paris. Colson was pleased with the result. What lessons can we take from Colson's willingness to accept violence and mob behavior at that time in Paris?

Tim Tackett:

Well, he simply thought that the individuals inside the Bastille deserved what they got.

Colson's descriptions of what's going on in the neighborhood. It widely believed that the shortage of grain for example, was a plot foisted upon the people by the government and that the government was ready to see large numbers of the population die rather than to lose power.

And in retrospect, this seems crazy, but that was the widespread belief. He believed that the crowds when they gathered around and were peacefully asking that the Bastille be opened and that the people be given guns and munitions to defend themselves. Paris at this time was surrounded by a mercenary army. And, people were terrified and were trying to arm to protect themselves. And they approached the Bastille in a peaceful request to petition to the governor of the Bastille to simply open the door and give them arms. Instead, at least in the account that Colson heard and believed, people mocked them from the top of the Bastille.

They turned and exposed their (laughs), their rear ends to the people, and then began shooting at them from way high up, and killed over a hundred local citizens, died in those few hours. So, he believed that they started it. They were the ones who were violent first.

Larry Bernstein:

The modern and contemporaneous opposition to the French Revolution often focused on mob violence such as the storming of the Bastille.

And, not only, did Colson support that behavior, but Bastille Day has become a holiday in France commemorated annually. Why do you think that Bastille Day takes on positive attributes, in support of mob violence and as you describe it the public demand for firearms and the killing of the royal troops?

Tim Tackett:

I wouldn't accept the phrase, "Mob violence." It was a collective action of the people trying to get guns and ammunition to defend themselves. And they didn't start it at the Bastille, when people up high above them started shooting at them, and killed many of their neighbors and friends, they became very angry.

Bastille Day wasn't celebrated at first, but it came to be celebrated as the key event in which the population had armed themselves and taken over Paris. They took over the municipal government in order to organize the defense of the city.

And it was when the King heard what was going on that he agreed to go into Paris himself and accept what the National Assembly had done.

The National Assembly themselves had no army. And it was this action by the people in Paris that preserved the National Assembly.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's use another example, the King was at Versailles and there were food shortage in Paris, and a delegation of women marched to Versailles to demand bread. And then things got violent and the protesters demanded that the King leave Versailles and come to Paris. And they dragged him, kicking and screaming, to Paris. How would you describe that? Would you call that mob-like behavior?

Tim Tackett:

(laughing) well they didn't drag him kick- kicking and screaming-

Larry Bernstein:

He did go in a carriage.

Tim Tackett:

He went in a carriage and it was only after he had invited a delegation of the women to come and talk to him, and tell him what they wanted. It was after the National Guard of Paris came on the heels of the women. Let's see if we can't get you to go and talk to the King and tell the King what you want." And the King agreed that he would do everything possible to increase the food supply.

This being said, the next morning there was a pretty violent mob action. A few violent people broke into the castle killed a couple of the guards, and went racing down the halls of the palace looking for Marie Antoinette, (laughs) who was not in good graces with the population. That was the closest that that day came to what one might call mob violence. But I preferred crowd violence, (laughs) as the proper way to look at it.

At that point when Marie Antoinette went fleeing for what she thought was her life down the Hall of Mirrors in her nightgown (laughs) with a few of her women in waiting, to the King's side of the palace. They didn't sleep even on the same side of the palace. And that was what terrified the King. And the King who was always extremely worried about the protection of his family. And at that point, he agreed to people outside calling for the King to come to Paris. Kicking and screaming, no. Unhappy, yes. But, it was certainly a traumatic experience for the royal family, that's for sure.

Larry Bernstein:

Years later, the King tries to flee France with his family. This is the title of one of your other books, When The King Took Flight, which tells the story of when Louis 16 attempts to escape from France by carriage. But he's caught and then he's dragged back kicking and screaming.

Tim Tackett:

No, no, dragged is not the right word. But, Convinced. Coerced, how about coerced?

Larry Bernstein:

... Sent back to Paris.

Tim Tackett:

(laughs)

Larry Bernstein:

In your book *The Glory and the Sorrow*, you describe how Colson's opinion of King Louis 16th changed over time. When the King is brought back to Paris after his attempted escape in humiliation, Colson does an about face. Colson previously had expressed his love and concern for the King. But now, Colson's view of the King changed on a dime. The king was now a traitor unworthy of his title, and then this quickly led Colson to abandon the monarchy as an institution.

Can you explain how the King's act of desertion undermined the role of the monarchy in French society?

Tim Tackett:

Yeah, it is important to remember that in the early French Revolution, most people greatly admired the King and were perfectly ready to maintain the monarchy as long as it was underwritten by a constitution. And the King had taken several oaths pledging allegiance to the constitution. But then, when he and his family slipped out of the palace and attempted to flee toward the Austrian frontier, which was the territory ruled by the family of his Queen Marie Antoinette, that itself was shocking.

But even worse, he wrote a letter and left it on his desk, in which he formally renounced all the oaths he had taken previously. In the ethos of the revolutionaries, perjuring your oath was tantamount to treason. He had committed perjury, this is what comes back again and again in the rhetoric of the time. So, that the flight set in a motion a call for his overthrow and demands for the overthrow of the monarchy.

The King came back. And he subsequently issued a kinda mea culpa and he announced he would sign the new constitution, and he was maintained on the throne.

But no one was ever quite sure they could trust him. Colson was never quite sure he could be trusted. If he had perjured himself in three or four oaths previously, how could one really depend on his remaining true to this new oath of 1791?

Larry Bernstein:

In your opening remarks you commented about conspiracy, fears and uncertainty resulting in violent behavior against opponents. For students of the French Revolution to see the nuance, fiction can sometimes help by letting us get inside the heads of characters to appreciate that fear.

When you teach the French Revolution, do you incorporate fiction. I recently re-read *A Tale of Two Cities* and Victor Hugo's *Ninety-Three*. How do you think about using historical fiction?

Tim Tackett:

I think really good historical fiction, can be extremely valuable. I'm very unimpressed by Dickens and by Hugo. I think they get so much wrong. Dickens view of the popular masses as mobs, which is a term-

Larry Bernstein:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Tim Tackett:

... that you seem to prefer. But, (laughing)-

... I don't I think that does not present the situation as it evolved in France at all. Hugo's picture of Ninety-Three is interesting, but maybe he goes too far in the other direction. The best historical fiction for the Revolution is Hilary Mantel's book.

Larry Bernstein:

That Hilary Mantel book is entitled A Place of Greater Safety. The French Revolution was a major topic in the American high school curriculum when I was a student there. But, Western civilization has taken a backseat to world history. How do you feel about the reduced focus on French history specifically, and the Revolution in particular?

Tim Tackett:

Well, I'm very much in favor of a global approach to history. There have been attempts, notably by my colleague Ian Collier, to write a more global history of the French Revolution. The French Revolution did not exist in a vacuum.

On the one hand, the French Revolution would influence, as I argued in my six minutes, all of Europe eventually all of the world. But there were things going on outside France which influenced the Revolution. Certainly the uprising in Haiti had a powerful influence on the debates in The Assembly.

Let's not throw out the baby with the bath water. I think we need to maintain both European history, French Revolution, and other parts of the world.

Larry Bernstein:

Each generation of historians looks anew at the French Revolution, but always in the context of what's going on in the world at that time. What do you make of current events as it affects judgements?

Tim Tackett:

Well, it's inevitable isn't it? All history is, in a sense, contemporary history that was Benedetto Croce the Italian philosopher. We invariably see the past, at least to some extent, through the lens of the present. But we also advance on the shoulders of the past, and history is at least in part a science. Where interpretations, the hypothesis of the scientific method must be based on an accumulation of evidence. So, one's present experience helps us to ask new questions, and that's good. Push the historian to seek out new evidence to answer those new questions.

I put aside the classic question of why revolutions begin, and usually portrayed in a very abstract way these influences: the enlightenment, and the social setting, and the changes in the weather and whatever. And I prefer rather to ask how individuals became revolutionaries. I like to focus on individual

experience. And this is how I became to be exploring the great mass of contemporary day to day correspondence.

The fall of the Soviet Union brought a sharp and pretty rapid end to the Marxist interpretation of the revolution. There's a trend towards a more empirical history beginning with the opening up of numerous new sources, and asking questions that don't really fit in the old Marxist or even an anti-Marxist paradigms towards women's history, and ethnic history, and global history of the revolution. Towards a new interest in biography, and micro-history, these are some of the new trends that have come out.

Larry Bernstein:

What are the current generation of historians looking into the French Revolution? What are the young academics working on?

Tim Tackett:

The global history of the Revolution and women's history in the Revolution. There's a return to biography and microhistory.

Larry Bernstein:

What does microhistory mean?

Tim Tackett:

It was basically a geographic thing in its origin. But I would interpret it in a biographical sense. By looking at one individual, if we're careful to put that individual and follow him or her in context, we can have a microhistory that tells us a great deal about the macrohistory.

Larry Bernstein:

When you talk about the biographies I am reminded of R. R. Palmer's book about the dozen contemporaries of the period. And your initial six-minute discussion highlighted the factionalism among the 12, the lack of trust, the demonization, and the killing of each other. How do you explain that extreme form of factionalism that resulted in murder?

Tim Tackett:

Well, that's what I tried to outline (laughing) in my book called *The Coming of the Terror*, I devoted (laughing) two or three chapters to just that question. I still love Robert Palmer's *Twelve Who Ruled* was the title of the book.

I do think that the conspiracy obsession was very prevalent during this period. And it was hard to know who one could trust. Several of the great early revolutionaries had turned out to be traitors, in the view of later revolutionaries. The great Mirabeau was found out to be in cahoots with the king. Lafayette fled to the Austrians. These people who everyone thought had been great heroes of the revolution turned

out to be traitors. How could you trust anyone? And this, this lack of trust was a major element in fomenting a fear of hidden conspiracy.

Certain politicians mobilized these fears for their own political purposes. Conspiracy fears was a major element in the factionalization.

Larry Bernstein:

Do you think that the particular individuals were important? Robespierre, who was viewed as the incorruptible, he had a vision of what society should be like. And people who didn't see eye to eye, he thought opposed the revolution, and like the Queen in Alice in Wonderland, "Off with his head." How important was ideological purity as part of this factionalism?

Tim Tackett:

If you look at what these people believed the Girondins on one side, and the Montagnards, who supported Robespierre on the other side, their fundamental ideologies are not that different. They're all Republicans, none of them wants to bring back the king, they're all pretty much anti-clerical. It's hard to understand on many levels why they began killing one another. I don't think it's a question of ideological purity per se, it was a question of individual hatreds for sure. Robespierre, and Brissot absolutely hated one another.

Larry Bernstein:

Immediately after the French Revolution, Napoleon takes power. The monarchy is replaced by a dictator and then after Napoleon by a return of the monarchy. How, how do you think about the social changes, and individual rights as to whether the French Revolution was a success or a failure?

Tim Tackett:

I think in the short term it, one could argue that it was a failure, declarations of rights that had been instituted early in the revolution were pushed aside, especially by Napoleon. But not everything. The revolution remained as a model by reformers.

Larry Bernstein:

What do you think of the role of the artist in commemorating the ideals of the Revolution? And in particular, I'm thinking of the great revolutionary artist Jacques-Louis David, who painted numerous important moments in the Revolution. What role did his art play in defining, both for his generation and future generations the French Revolution?

Tim Tackett:

Jacques-Louis David played an enormous role. I mean the guy I'm studying right now, a guy named Roux, each year writes his brother and says, "Come and see the latest paintings by David. They're so inspiring." And once the Revolution took place the Tennis Court Oath-

Larry Bernstein:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tim Tackett:

... and maybe above all, the Death of Marat. They're wonderful pieces of art. If you go in the Louvre today, you'll see all of these presented on some of the biggest walls in the museum. How much did they influence people's views and so on, who can say?

David, took a truly radical turn in the Revolution. He became a member of the Committee of General Security. He was a terrorist.

He was a close friend of Marat and nearly lost his life for that. And changed his ways, became a court painter for Napoleon after the Revolution.

Larry Bernstein:

Which way was the wind blowing at the time, I suppose.

Tim Tackett:

Exactly. Well, he spent several years in prison and then painted another magnificent painting of the coronation of Napoleon. That was perhaps more successful as propaganda.

And we have to think that they had a certain influence, but it's hard to say what.

Larry Bernstein:

So, do you think the French revolution was a consequence of the incompetence of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette as leaders? If the monarchy had been in the hands of a more dynamic, more thoughtful, more enlightened leader, that this would've resulted in a normal constitutional monarchy like in England, or is there something specifically incompetent related to this regime?

Tim Tackett:

Yes and no. Certainly a more competent king could've made a huge difference. He lost control of the situation. There were certainly economic problems. The American Revolution probably far more important in France, as it caused a near bankruptcy of the royal government.

The American Revolution was a world war. It was very expensive. And, it was very successful for the French.

They got revenge against the English. They were quite pleased with that, but it had cost a fortune. And, they had great difficulty balancing the budget. And so much of the pre-revolution began as the king with his ministers tried to find a way of balancing the budget. It's partly an economic crisis born of a geopolitical crisis and certainly partly a question of the mediocrity of the king with a power grab of the nobles and parliament.

Larry Bernstein:

I think of it as winning the battle but losing the war. Tim, I end each program on a note of optimism.

Tim Tackett:

(laughs) Well, my general feeling is pretty pessimistic right now in terms of America's situation. Biden and the Democrats might get together somehow and bring about some changes that the terrible factionalization of the political scene could be overcome. It's every bit as bad as the 1850's and even the Civil War.

There was a bit on public television the other day about little local societies that are trying to do just that, get people together to talk. It's very hard to hate someone when you sit down in their living room and chat with them.

Some optimism, maybe.

Larry Bernstein:

Tim, thank you very much.

Tim Tackett:

Larry, thank you so much for your great questions. Terrific questions, actually.