



Echoes of the Marseillaise: Two Centuries Look Back on the French Revolution (Mason Welch Gross Lecture Series)

Professor E.J. Hobsbawm

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We can learn a great deal from studying the French Revolution itself, but we can also learn from studying the ways in which scholars have interpreted the French Revolution, and from the ways their views have changed. For over a century following the Revolution, commentators and scholars spoke of it in glowing terms. But in the past three decades, revisionist historians have become skeptical. Eric Hobsbawm reiterates the centrality of the Revolution for history on a global basis. He argues that those who wrote about the Revolution in the nineteenth century were convinced it had changed their lives dramatically, improving the economy and the lot of peasants. They saw the Revolution as a prototype of the bourgeois revolution, enabling the middle class to gain power from the ruling class of aristocrats. Many believed proletarian revolutions would inevitably follow. In the years between 1917 and the 1960s, Marxists continued to use the French Revolution as a point of reference, paying increasing attention to the social and economic factors in the Revolution, not only to the political factors. In the 1970s and 1980s, many historians began to argue that the Revolution achieved modest results at disproportionate costs. Hobsbawm argues that this massive historiographical reaction against the centrality of the Revolution reflects the personal politics of those contemporary historians for whom Marxism and communism are now out of favor. They are, he maintains, wrong. The Revolution transformed the world permanently and introduced forces that continue to transform it.

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