

**The past is never quite past:
thoughts on Roger Chartier's lecture at EHESS
"Do Books Make Revolution(s)?"**

By Daniel Benson, PhD (NYU), student at the EHESS summer school 2017

Halfway through the EHESS summer school of 2017 "Rethinking the concept of revolution," Roger Chartier brought us back to the contentious historiography of the French Revolution, a debate in which Chartier intervened over twenty-five years ago in *On the Cultural Origins of the French Revolution*. He began by noting the irony that his talk took place in the amphitheater François Furet, named after the great historian of revolution who also happened to be a ferocious critic of Chartier's book. Chartier explained the difficulty in walking the narrow path between Furet's approach to understanding the French Revolution, inspired by political philosophy, and socio-historical approaches that emphasize economics and class. Chartier's own cultural approach was at the center of his talk, "Do Books Make Revolution(s)?"

The entry point to his discussion was the relationship between the revolution and the Enlightenment which preceded it. Reversing historical causality, Chartier's provocative claim is that the question to ask might be less: "how did the Enlightenment shape the Revolution?", but rather "how did the Revolution shape the Enlightenment?" The creation of canonical texts and authors as precursors to the event was an important way for the actors of 1789 to legitimize their activity, as for example when the remains of *philosophes* such as Voltaire and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were transferred to the Pantheon as forefathers of the Revolution.

Although Chartier's talk was based on the Revolution of 1789, his goal was to provide ways of thinking about the visibility of revolutionary events in general: from the period immediately preceding them, to the revolutionary moments themselves, on to their later reception, memory and historiography. Indeed, the issue of elaborating a comparative history of revolutions was one of the recurring themes of this year's summer school, given the diverse historical, geographical, and methodological interests of the participants' research. To this end, Chartier presented the three elements central to his cultural approach to Revolution, an approach which 1) takes into account not only conceptual production, but collective representations and forms of belief; 2) considers institutions and forms of sociability as dynamic and changeable, rather than seeing them as static and deterministic elements of revolutionary events; 3) refuses to reduce non-discursive practices to discourse, for such a reduction tends to eliminate the plurality, possibility, and choices of the actors of an event into a single, monolithic ideology or explanatory structure.

He concluded his talk by relating it to the participants' projects of the 2017 summer school, which included a discussion of the ambiguous nature of security and surveillance in revolutionary periods, the tension between different forms of violence and emancipatory hopes, the relationship between media and revolution, and the question of women and their exclusion from rights or political activism. Students had many questions, from the utopian aspect of the Declaration of the Rights of Man, to the translation of books from one revolution to another, to the relevance of books in revolutionary contexts today. Indeed, the interest and discussion generated by Chartier's talk revealed that the French Revolution, its historiography, and its meaning are still central concerns for the new generation of scholars that came together for this year's summer school at the EHESS. This is perhaps to be expected, for revolutionary history is one in which the past is never quite past.