

HISTORIANS AND THE ORIGINS OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

An essay in applied epistemology

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Introduction

The origin of the French Revolution has long been a controversial subject. Given that this memorable event of French history was at the centre of many political debates throughout the 19th century and even afterwards, the reasons for these disagreements can in a way be easily understood. But, on the other hand, the historians who fought about the causes of this event for more than two centuries sought to depict the past as best they could; which means that historical narratives were considered by their authors not as political manifestos with a patina of history, but as faithful depictions of what actually happened. This means that seeing the disagreements between historians as a mere problem of political opinion, as is often the case, leaves unexplained the fact that historians were taken in by their own desire to be objective. Anyway, to emphasize that historians are spurred by political deep-seated motives doesn't show that *everything* in their reconstructions of the past is determined by these motivations. As a result we must ask: is it possible to explain the historians' disagreements in their interpretation of the origins of the French Revolution in any way other than by their political opinions? If yes, how? To reach an answer, we propose to analyse their texts and to trace their complex arguments, in order to understand the constitution of their reasoning and to see, beyond the bias generated by their ideological stances, on which questions they stand divided. Then, we will also question how these historians come to see their own stories as faithful depictions of past events. Thus, what we would like to do is to reveal the "logic of proof" used by the historians of the Revolution. What will we achieve? Perhaps a better understanding of the origins of the Revolution; more