

Lynn Hunt

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"I saw that everything depended fundamentally on politics."
—Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*

With this line from Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Lynn Hunt opens her book *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (University of California Press, 1984). The French revolutionaries and various Enlightenment thinkers, especially Rousseau, have inspired Lynn Hunt to try to answer an essential question: what are the origins, characteristics, and problems of modern democratic politics? For the last thirty years, she has worked undauntedly on this fundamental question while remaining dissatisfied with her inability to answer it completely. The seeming impossibility of ever reaching that goal—deciphering the conundrum of democracy—has spurred her restless and creative struggle to unpack democracy's complex and fascinating roots, its frustrating shortcomings and failures, the contours of its power relations, its ties to changes in gender and sociability, and, ultimately, the essence of its dynamism. Open to using any theoretical tool that will shed light on her central question, Lynn has drawn eclectically from social scientific, symbolic, feminist, anthropological, psychoanalytic, literary, and, most recently, neuroscientific frameworks. In the process, she has reshaped our understanding of democratic politics in the age of the French Revolution. She has also stimulated lively interest in new fields, such as the history of political culture, and has contributed to inventing new methodological perspectives, such as the "new cultural history." In the past decade, Lynn has broadened her own research on democratic politics to include the Atlantic world and entered into dialogue with other scholars about human rights worldwide.

In some ways, it is not surprising that a babyboomer, who came of age in the hyperpolitical 1960s, became invested in studying politics. But her family relationships and her Midwest origins had already set the stage for an interest in political culture. Born in Panama in 1945, Lynn shared a keen interest in foreign cultures with her father, Richard Hunt, an electrical engineer who at age 94 still communicates with people all over the world via his ham radio. Her family soon returned to Saint Paul, Minnesota, where Lynn's mother, Ruby Hunt, a native of St. Paul, became a local political leader within the Democratic party and held various elected positions, eventually rising to the post of county commissioner. Growing up with her sisters Jane and Lee, Lynn witnessed the unique style of Minnesotan politics, with its tradition of grassroots activism, eclectic populism, and penchant for

outsider politicians. Her parents taught her that ideas as well as actions matter and that daughters have all the same resources and opportunities as might be imagined for any son. She was also exposed to the richness of the Germanic tradition through visiting her maternal grandparents, German immigrants who lived first on a farm in western Minnesota and then in a German-speaking community in Saint Paul.

As an undergraduate at Carleton College, Lynn majored in history and then went to Stanford University in 1967 to study German history. But already at Carleton, the French Revolutionary historian Carl Weiner had diverted her attention to events on the other side of the Rhine. At Stanford, she was increasingly drawn to the history of the French Revolution. Inspired by Philip Dawson, a preeminent French social historian, Lynn and her fellow students were captivated by the exciting new historiography of early modern France. One has only to think about the work of Fernand Braudel, Natalie Zemon Davis, George Rudé, and Albert Soboul to recall what a fruitful time it was. Events outside of the classroom, such as the antiwar protests and civil rights demonstrations at campuses throughout the country gave further immediacy to the historian's mission. In the highly charged political atmosphere at Stanford, Lynn remembers, for instance, going to a party that was also attended by Jean Genet and his militia-like bodyguards. It was also while a graduate student that Lynn came to realize that she was a lesbian, making her all the more keenly aware of the importance of contradictions within democratic society, especially when it came to gender relations.

Lynn's dissertation analyzed the outbreak of the French Revolution in Troyes and Reims, two neighboring textile towns in Champagne. She reacted against the tendency of the two dominant groups within French historiography, the *Annales* school and the Marxists, to ignore the study of actual politics. At the same time, her study cleverly appropriated their social history techniques as well as their sources, from tax rolls to notarial documents, to re-inscribe politics as a social practice. In particular, she asked how the different economic structures and social makeup of the elites in the two towns influenced the nature of mobilization and political alignments in 1789–90, as leading merchants in Reims quickly took advantage of the Church's decline in power, while Troyes fell prey to divisive battles between counterrevolutionary and radical forces. While revising her dissertation for publication, Lynn held a three-year postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Michigan and was appointed as an assistant professor at the University of California at Berkeley in 1974. In Ann Arbor she benefited from the faculty's renowned expertise in political sociology and quantitative history and became a regular participant at the intellectual soirées of Louise and Charles Tilly. Ultimately, *Revolution and Urban Politics in Provincial France: Troyes and Reims, 1786–1790* (Stanford University Press, 1978) used a social history framework to highlight above all the centrality and novelty of the political structures and consciousness of 1789. Awarded the

Prix Albert Babeau from the Société Académique de l'Aube, Lynn's first book laid the foundation for her lifelong interest in the nexus between sociability and democratic political practice. Yet it was in many ways a traditional monograph, and only when read in retrospect does it offer glimmerings of the wider interests that took shape during her Berkeley years. After her first book Lynn began to undertake a much more wide-ranging, quantitative study of urban politics and republican geography during the Revolution. But even as she pursued the initial research for this new project and produced several important articles on political sociology, she began to consider alternate methods of fathoming the character of the French Revolution. Intrigued by François Furet's innovative attention to political discourse, Lynn Hunt developed her own set of questions and approaches to republican political culture. As she explored the nature of revolutionary rhetoric and imagery, she benefited from dialogue with an interdisciplinary group of fellow scholars at the University of California at Berkeley who were wrestling with the issue of how poststructuralist methods might inform their study of culture. Lynn would soon collaborate with this group of colleagues, including Thomas Laqueur, Svetlana Alpers, and Stephen Greenblatt, to found the journal *Representations*. These theoretical questions increasingly informed her own research.

In *Politics, Culture, and Class*, she drew on techniques from literary criticism and cultural anthropology to conduct a brilliant analysis of the practices, rhetoric, and symbolism that gave the Revolution its peculiar political power. The book argued that the construction of a new culture and new forms of representation underpinned and shaped the politics of the 1790s. While capturing the dynamism of revolutionary self-invention, Lynn also dissected the profound contradictions within revolutionary attempts at representation. For example, in a fascinating chapter on the battle over whether Hercules or Marianne should best represent the new Republic, she demonstrated how the tension between authority and democracy worked itself out in discourse, action, and gendered imagery. Lynn also integrated her earlier research on revolutionary geography and the social backgrounds of local leaders; she examined both quantitatively and qualitatively the "new political class" of urban culture brokers and outsiders who embraced and developed revolutionary political culture.

While some critics may have faulted the book for failing to make tighter connections between the social and cultural modes of analysis, *Politics, Culture, and Class* bore testimony to Lynn's hallmark traits: her boldness in bringing together disparate historiographical methods, her persistent desire to probe the complex intersections between politics and society, and her keen interest in the practice of representation as both politics and culture. The book made a compelling case for the role of the French Revolution in laying the foundations for modern democratic republicanism. It also succeeded in turning attention away from the Marxist-revisionist debate over the

Revolution's origins and played a critical role in stimulating the historical focus on "political culture"—an approach that quickly came to dominate the field of French revolutionary studies and was widely embraced in other fields as well. The Pacific Coast Branch of the American Historical Association chose this book as the best monograph by a younger scholar. Meanwhile in Paris, French scholars of the Revolution paid early tribute to the book's success in an unexpected way. Shortly after the book was released, a group of Marxist historians from the Sorbonne, who ordinarily never set foot in the "revisionist" halls of the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, made their way across Paris to the *École* to hear Lynn Hunt articulate her novel interpretation. This young outsider from across the Atlantic had a knack for speaking across the divides of politics and of disciplines, and she became one of the first American scholars whose work had to be acknowledged by leading French revolutionary historians in France.

In fact, no matter where she is, Lynn has an amazing ability to bring people together, to create and foster a "republic of letters." Like the *salonnières* of the eighteenth century, she understands that intellectual sociability is greatly enhanced by fine food and excellent wine. As former graduate students at the University of California at Berkeley, where Lynn taught from 1974 to 1987, we share rich memories of the Bay Area French History Seminar, organized by Lynn and her colleague in modern French history, Susanna Barrows. Bringing together faculty and advanced graduate students from Berkeley, Davis, Santa Cruz, Santa Clara, and Stanford, this seminar demonstrated what a scholarly community should and could be. Every month, Lynn welcomed everyone into her home and fostered a penetrating discussion of one participant's work in progress. Although she invited a wide range of scholars to present their work, from the most famous historians to newly minted PhD's, we were particularly struck by her dedication to bringing in scholars at the early stages of their careers. If these sessions enabled many anxious young French historians to think hard and differently about their own work, the Berkeley French History Group also helped Lynn to come of age as a leader within the field. Discussions within her own living room helped her to transcend her innate reserve and to develop the style that became trademark Lynn: matter-of-fact directness, incisive criticism that cuts to the heart of the matter, but always (almost always!) tempered by intellectual generosity, humor, and encouragement for younger scholars. And we always joked that we did not have to worry about overstaying our welcome because Lynn, with her invariable directness and efficiency, would bring out her vacuum and start to clean around our feet when it was time to go home.

In 1985 Lynn held a visiting teaching appointment at Beijing University. Her fascination with the aftermath of the Maoist Cultural Revolution had made her acutely aware of the difficulties inherent in understanding or categorizing the relationship between revolutionary politics and cultural

transformation. In pursuit of new methods for analyzing cultural change, she soon organized a conference on the "new cultural history" during Roger Chartier's month-long visit to Berkeley in 1987. Participants debated how recent historiography had been influenced by key figures, such as Clifford Geertz, Marshall Sahlins, Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra, Natalie Zemon Davis, and E. P. Thompson. In the edited volume that came out of the conference, *The New Cultural History: Essays* (University of California Press, 1989), Lynn helped to give shape and definition to the blend of anthropological, literary, and poststructuralist methods that characterized the cultural turn within history and the historical turn within other disciplines. To encourage new work in this vein, she and Victoria Bonnell inaugurated a book series at the University of California Press, *Studies on the History of Society and Culture*. Never one to rest content with existing approaches, Lynn revisited the paradigms of the new cultural history from a more critical angle ten years later. In 1999 she and Victoria Bonnell edited the thought-provoking volume, *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (University of California Press, 1999). The authors in this volume trace and critique the impact of linguistic and postmodern influences in history, history of science, anthropology, sociology, and feminist studies and provoke dialogue about alternate methodologies. A similarly comprehensive project, *Histories: French Constructions of the Past* (New Press, 1995), co-edited with Jacques Revel, offers excerpts and analyses of the dominant works within French historiography from the early twentieth century to the present.

Energy: Lynn Hunt gives the word new meaning as she tackles one historical project after another, volleys back e-mails with astounding efficiency, and squeezes in a game of tennis before churning out her next book review or letter of recommendation. She injects energy into classroom lectures that radiate with clarity, into critical readings of her students' and colleagues' writings, and into her own avid enjoyment of Monday night football, a vacation at Sea Ranch or Périgord, or a bottle of Meursault. Lynn has a habit of predicting worst case scenarios: catastrophe, she warns, may lie just around the corner, and every car ride is a study in anxiety control. But behind the foreboding lies a dynamic optimism, a profound belief that the latest problem just might be solved by simply attacking it with renewed zeal. She exhorts and expects her friends and her students to embrace their challenges with this same tireless commitment. Out of awe and affection, her graduate students nicknamed her "la Générale." One even has the sneaking suspicion that she may be drawn to the French revolutionaries not just because of their messy and fascinating politics, but also because they at least had enough energy to keep up with her and to present her with problems not so easily solved. For all of her dynamism and unstoppable forward motion, Lynn has a remarkable ability to focus on friendships, family, students, and issues that matter. Her openness about her own sexuality and relationships

provides crucial support for students and colleagues who do not quite fit the social mold. Her inclusiveness and sensitivity stem from deeply personal politics. As a friend, colleague, and mentor, Lynn pays attention. Within the whirlwind of activity that defines her very essence, she knows how to stand still and to listen—to her students, to her sources, to her fellow historians, and to scholars in other disciplines. This ability to listen creatively has enabled her to become an imaginative historian and teacher.

As Annenberg Professor of History, Lynn brought this same energy and dedication to the University of Pennsylvania, where she taught from 1987 to 1998. Broadening her interests beyond French history, she served as the co-organizer of a faculty seminar on cultural studies. She also built upon her interest in gender history, which she had already started to explore in *Politics, Culture, and Class*. Not one to shy away from controversial subjects, Lynn organized conferences in the early 1990s on the politics of eroticism and then on the history of pornography in early modern Europe. Taking the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France as its case study, the first conference volume, *Eroticism and the Body Politic* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), incorporates a series of sophisticated readings by art historians, literary critics, and historians. As they address topics ranging from Fragonard's paintings to Marie-Antoinette's diamond necklace affair to the fin-de-siècle New Woman, the authors illustrate how erotic portrayals of women's bodies were fundamentally intertwined with the creation of modern, republican politics and also analyze how women's place within the body politic was problematized by these sexual representations. Lynn's next conference explored the links between the origins of modernity and the birth of pornography, with particular attention to the Italian Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment in the Atlantic world, and the French Revolution. To underline the political significance of this topic, Lynn took the daring step of screening pornographic movies on a television monitor at the conference reception. Taken together, the essays in *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800* (Zone Books/MIT Press, 1993) demonstrate the paradoxical relationship between democracy and pornography. Pornography provided a launching pad for attacks against absolutist politics and society in early modern Europe, but as it became an increasingly democratized and widespread genre, it lost its most critical, political edge and often served to reinscribe modern gender differentiations.

In *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (University of California Press, 1992), Lynn returns to the French Revolution to examine the political psychology and gendered imagination that developed in tandem with revolutionary politics. Her boldest methodological work, *The Family Romance* draws on an eclectic mix of Freudian psychology, René Girard's anthropology of violence and the sacred, literary theory, and feminist studies. She sets out to discover the "collective political unconscious" of the

revolutionaries and argues that they used family imagery to conceptualize and act out politics. Once the revolutionaries had, in effect, killed the father by killing their king, they simultaneously called into question the nature of familial relations and politics. In Lynn's account, familial metaphors—such as the band of brothers, disorderly women, the good mother, and the rehabilitated family—emerged as imaginative categories informing not just revolutionary politics but also gender ideals and republican attempts at social reform. She suggests, for example, that male revolutionaries mistrusted women's political activism because they feared social disorder and sexual dedifferentiation after the patriarchal models of politics and family had been overthrown. Her book set off animated debate, spurred forums in multiple journals in the United States and abroad, and had a lively influence on the growing field of gender studies.

In May 1989 at a bicentennial conference at The Hague, Lynn met Margaret Jacob, a professor of history at the New School for Social Research and author of numerous books on the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment. Lynn and Peg soon discovered that they shared a love for dogs, travel, things Dutch, and good dining, as well as a passion for the eighteenth century. Their personal relationship has resulted in a productive scholarly partnership: together, they have promoted both intellectual sociability and writing about the historian's craft. Their most famous, albeit controversial, collaboration, *Telling the Truth about History* (Norton, 1994), was written with their close friend and colleague, Joyce Appleby. Disenchanted with poststructuralist approaches to history, *Telling the Truth* calls for forging a pragmatic model of inquiry to meet the demands placed on history by a multicultural world. In late 1998, Lynn and Peg moved, with their handsome dog Reilly, to the University of California at Los Angeles, where Lynn holds the Eugen Weber Chair of Modern European History. They immediately set up a veritable salon at their house near the campus, and Lynn has already sponsored several conferences in the history department and at the Clark Library. In 2000, for instance, she cohosted a conference at the Clark on homosexuality in the eighteenth century. Bringing in scholars in art and music history, comparative literature, and history, the conference focused on a topic still in its infancy, and the exploration included not only Europe and British North America, but also the Ottoman Empire, Japan, and China.

As part of her ever active schedule, Lynn Hunt has held visiting positions at the École des Hautes Études in Paris, Beijing University, the Universities of Utrecht and Amsterdam, and the University of Ulster. Her numerous fellowships and awards have ranged from a Guggenheim fellowship to a university-wide teaching award at the University of California at Berkeley. She has held residencies at the Institute for Advanced Study, the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. A former president of the

Society for French Historical Studies, she has given talks in the most prestigious lecture series, including the Gauss Seminars in Criticism at Princeton University. Her books have been translated into French, German, Japanese, Italian, Korean, Chinese, Polish, Portuguese, and Turkish. Throughout her career, Lynn has maintained a steadfast commitment to broaching not just scholarly issues but also questions of teaching and the historical profession. Never one to sidestep difficult matters, Lynn has used the president's column in *Perspectives*, for example, to foment debate on key challenges facing historians today, such as the reluctance of aging faculty to retire, or the disparity between adjunct "have-nots" and tenured and tenure-track "haves." Many readers will not agree with her arguments, but Lynn won't mind too much. Her characteristic straightforwardness blends with a flair for the dramatic, and she has always been less interested in generating unanimity than in provoking thought and productive controversy.

Like the French revolutionaries, Lynn believes in the centrality and political importance of education. In addition to having supervised more than twenty dissertations, she provides inspiration for students at all levels. At Berkeley, Penn, and UCLA, for example, she has remained committed to teaching introductory survey courses. She produced a popular textbook, *The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 1995, 2001), coauthored with Thomas Martin, Barbara Rosenwein, Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, and Bonnie Smith. This text interrogates the notion of the West, looks at subaltern as well as dominant groups, and puts the history of western and eastern Europe into a global perspective. Though not exactly a whiz at computers (the stories behind this observation must remain untold), Lynn has a longstanding addiction to the latest tricks of technology. Enticed by the pedagogical possibilities of the digital revolution, Lynn recently coauthored a CD-ROM textbook on the French Revolution with Jack Censer. *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution* (Penn State University Press, 2001) combines a written text with a source-rich CD-ROM. Students used to synthesizing dizzying amounts of information online now can navigate their way through the Revolution, listening to its music, examining political imagery, and analyzing a truly impressive array of primary sources.

Most recently, Lynn has turned her intellectual curiosity to the eighteenth-century origins of human rights ideology. As always, her scholarship is entangled with teaching, with conversation with other scholars, and with a politics both personal and public. She began the project by editing a primary source document collection for the classroom. *The French Revolution and Human Rights: A Brief Documentary History* (Bedford/St. Martin's, 1996) invariably stirs up student interest with its spotlight on the issues of religious freedom; race and slavery; and the rights of women, slaves, and religious minorities. Next, she co-edited *Human Rights and Revolutions* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000) with Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom and Marilyn B. Young. Focusing on diverse countries and time periods, from postcolonial

Africa to revolutionary China to seventeenth-century England, this volume grapples with the paradoxical yet fundamental relationship between rights discourse and revolution. Although revolutionary regimes often have abused human rights, these same revolutions have repeatedly played the crucial role in generating human rights discourse. Fortified by dialogue with sources, students, and fellow scholars, Lynn is currently working out her own interpretation of this paradox of human rights in its eighteenth-century context. She has found a new angle from which to probe the complexities of modern democracy and politics. Lynn Hunt may never solve the conundrum of democratic politics, but her efforts will continue to challenge, entertain, and provoke us.

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