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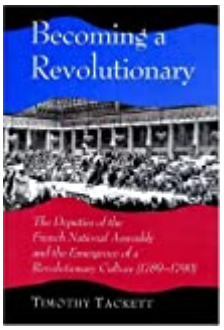

Timothy Tackett. *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790).* Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996. xvi + 355 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-04384-5.

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Published on H-Review (July, 1997)

Surviving Revision

The title of this review is taken from the last chapter of Eric Hobsbawm's *Echoes of the Marseillaise* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1990), a defense of the Liberal/Jacobin tradition and a response to the revisionist historians who came to dominate French revolutionary studies in the seventies and eighties. Revisionism supplanted the Jacobin tradition in time for a timid and tepid observance of the bicentennial in France, during which even the Socialists seemed embarrassed to discuss the Revolution's contemporary political relevance. In the United States, the revisionist wave crested the same year as the publication–and considerable popular success–of Simon Schama's elegant screed *Citizens*, which was equal parts paean to the *ancien regime* and lamentation against the whole tawdry affair that was the Revolution. We have seen in recent years a mounting counterattack on revisionism, the best of which recognizes its contributions while challenging its weaknesses.[1] Timothy Tackett's *Becoming a Revolutionary* should be seen in that light, as part of what will eventually come to be known as the post-revisionist school of interpretation. Before proceeding with an analysis of Tackett's book it might be helpful to review the revisionist case against the Liberal/Jacobin/Marxist tradition.

According to the revisionists, the destruction of the Old Regime was an inside job. It was mortally wounded in 1787 in what was apparently a mercy killing by the aristocracy. It was subsequently placed on life support and kept alive long enough to write its last will and testament in the form of the *cahiers*, and for the representatives of the nation to gather for the inquest. It was finished off for good not on July 14, but on August 4, 1789 by (who else?) the nobility, who cheerfully surrendered their feudal privileges. Jacobin historians, they argue, moved the corpse, and tampered with the evidence to make it appear that unwashed and ungloved hands were responsible for the demise of the Old Regime. In other words it was long dead before the arrival on the scene of the 'people.'

If the Old Regime succumbed in 1787, then the role of popular action need not occupy the attention of historians. Since the absolute state collapsed on its own, no impulsion from outside forces was necessary. Other matters the revisionists downplay are counterrevolution and the bad faith of Louis XVI, repeatedly excused by the

revolutionaries. Since the principle of aristocracy was already dead in 1789, violence directed against actual aristocrats was senseless overkill, regardless of how reprehensible their behavior may have seemed at the time. Revisionism thus conjures up an amoral universe where discourse dominates and individual choices, motivations and actions are irrelevant. By pointing out (often justifiably) the apocryphal nature of some aristocratic plots, the revisionists sidestep the issue of counterrevolutionary behavior. If the counterrevolution didn't exist, they contend, it would have been invented. In fact, they argue, it already existed in discourse before it developed in reality. By focusing on the tendency of revolutionary orators to apostrophize the people they reduce real people to mere stand-ins. For Francois Furet et al., social antagonisms do not explain the Revolution because by the late eighteenth century elements of the bourgeoisie and aristocracy had converged into an elite which shared a common culture. The Revolution was propelled by a radical Rousseauian discourse of the general will which precluded political pluralism or compromise.

Tackett's method is to chip away the revisionist synthesis while incorporating their contributions in the area of cultural analysis. His sources are the writings of the deputies of the Estates-General (at least 129 of them, about 10% of the total). His intent is to describe the "collective psychology" of this sample and to investigate what the experience and interactions of these men can tell us about the dynamics of the Revolution. He operates on "the assumption that culture is 'produced' not only through intellectual experience, but through social and political experience..." (p. 13). In direct opposition to the revisionists, however, he claims intellectual experience is the least reliable indicator of ideological affiliation in the Revolution. The book is divided into three parts: the first offers a pre-revolutionary profile of the deputies, the second deals with their experience between May and November of 1789, and the third carries through to the Fete de la Federation in June of 1790. He begins with a collective biography of the Estates by order. They are broken down according to age, regional origin(s), occupation and economic status. He points to potential sources of social tension within each order, e.g. the disproportionate representation of parish priests in the First Estate, and the domination of the Second by the wealthy warrior nobility. He argues that "despite the veneer of common eighteenth century culture" there was a significant socioeconomic gulf between the representatives of the nobility and those of the commons in which provincial lawyers and magistrates proliferated. An important contention of the revisionists is that the forms of wealth held by the Second and Third Estates were indistinguishable, hence the Marxist tradition is wrong to speak of the Revolution as being made by the bourgeoisie in order to establish capitalism. Tackett's analysis supports this observation, but his use of the marriage contracts and estimated fortunes of his subjects indicates that there was still a significant difference in the amount of wealth held by the representatives of the Second and the Third. "Whatever their theoretical relationship to the means of production," he concludes, "most of the commoner deputies lived in a substantially different economic universe than their colleagues of the nobility" (p. 41). The revisionists, following the path marked out by Alfred Cobban, have examined the relationship of the notables of the Old Regime to the means of production and shown how it does not correspond to Marxist schema. But this does not refute the argument that there was a connection between material interests and politics in the Revolution. By insisting on a rigid application of Marx's categories, the revisionists have created a straw man. "To challenge a class explanation of the Revolution," Tackett observes, "is not to put into question all social explanation–as the revisionists would seem to suggest" (p. 306). Repairing the marriage between ideology and interests, torn asunder by revisionism over the last thirty years, will be one of the primary projects of post-revisionist historiography.{2] Tackett makes a preliminary step in this direction by devoting attention to the issues of lobbying and constituent relations, two areas which have received scant attention in recent years.

The prevailing revisionist analysis portrays the representatives arriving at Versailles, heads already stuffed with the abstract ideas of the *philosophes*. Investigating their pre-revolutionary literary output, Tackett concludes that they were no more likely to be conversant in the language of the Enlightenment than their unelected peers. A survey of the literary output of the future deputies (Chapter 2) turns up nothing resembling a coherent, unified Enlightenment culture. Nor was there a ready-made revolutionary language or ideology. The writings in their early months in Versailles similarly reveal no special preoccupation with the Enlightenment. Their cultural frame of reference still tended toward the classical, as demonstrated by the most prominent event of this period, The Tennis Court Oath, performed, as Marx observed, "in Roman costume and with Roman slogans." A question that remains to be answered is how quickly the "school of the Revolution" instructed the deputies in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Tack-

ett suggests that the language of the *philosophes* began to make inroads into the speeches, letters and diaries of the deputies by the summer of 1789. A similar examination of the output of the members of the Legislative and Convention Assemblies will be required to test Furet's assertion that success in revolutionary politics was a function of one's mastery of Enlightenment discourse, which he sees as the key to Robespierre's genius. Tackett cites Roger Chartier, who has suggested that "a cohesive concept of the 'Enlightenment' was as much a product of the Revolution as the Revolution was of the Enlightenment" (pp. 308-09).

Tackett argues that the members of the Third Estate had as much political experience as their privileged colleagues in 1789. It was acquired not only in their professional lives as lawyers and magistrates, but in the "pre-revolution" of 1788 and early 1789. The revisionists–conveniently selective in whose utterances they accept at face value–have leaned heavily on the testimony of Sylvain Bailly, the first President of the National Assembly, who described himself and his colleagues as political neophytes. In response to the revisionist charge that the primary stock in trade of radical revolutionaries was empty verbiage, Tackett demonstrates, by listing the forty most frequent speakers in the Assembly, that one's emergence as an orator was more closely linked to pre-revolutionary occupation (often lawyer or *parlementaire*) than ideological orientation. One of Tackett's strengths is that unlike Schama, who found it necessary to demonize the heroes of the Jacobin tradition in order to rehabilitate its villains, he treats his subjects and their testimonies with respect, regardless of what position they took in the Revolution.

For Schama the events of the pre-revolution in the Dauphine are inscribed in future events while for Tackett they represent only one of several possible outcomes. That outcome was still in doubt late in 1789. It is instructive to focus on the different treatments of the Dauphinois magistrate and early revolutionary leader Jean-Joseph Mounier by Tackett and Schama. For Schama, the events of the pre-revolution in the Dauphine are inscribed in future events while for Tackett they represent one of only several possible outcomes. For Schama, Mounier's pre-revolutionary radicalism is useful and his subsequent conservatism is inconvenient and irrelevant. The revisionists underestimate the power the moderates and monarchists still possessed late in 1789 and even into 1790. Mounier's abandonment of the Assembly was not necessarily an indication of the hopelessness of his cause, Tackett asserts, but can more accurately be attributed to his own temperament and perhaps to his inability to make himself heard in the acoustically challenged salle des Menus Plaisirs at Versailles. Also Tackett, in an attempt to understand Mounier, apparently performed the radical exercise of reading Mounier! Mounier is a key figure for Tackett because of the prominent role he plays in the period covered by the book. He appears within the context of the "municipal mobilization" of 1788-89 which was part of the "political apprenticeship" traced by Tackett in response to the charge made by Furet and others that the men of 1789 were men of no practical political experience. Tackett demonstrates how differences on the local level in power relations and personal relations gave rise to the varying models of political organization and affiliation that would compete within the Estates-General and the National Assembly. Dauphine offered an example of relative harmony and cooperation among the three orders, while Brittany represented the possibility of conflict. Which, if either, of these models would eventually prevail was anything but a foregone conclusion in 1789. But Tackett shows that the conciliatory approach of Mounier and the Dauphinois "clearly exercised a major influence on the proceedings of the Third Estate during the first weeks" of the NA (p. 125). Later they formed the core of the *monarchiens*, the moderate-conservative faction that emerged after August 4. This group maintained power in the NA well into the fall of 1789.

According to Schama (p. 277), Mounier "was a product not of bourgeois frustration with the old regime, but of its effortless escalator to social promotion." And an ungrateful product at that. Schama suggests that he should have known better than to throw in his lot with the 'Patriots', thus biting the (invisible?) hand that fed him. In addition, it was Mounier, according to Schama, who by proposing the motion that became the Tennis Court Oath, "set the vessel of state off on a sea of abstraction." Mounier later briefly reappears in *Citizens* as a pragmatist during the debates on the Declaration of the Rights of Man. Schama offers as a partial explanation Mounier's growing fear of the masses. But we know where this is leading. Mounier is now reaping in Paris what he sowed in Grenoble. In the end the only attitude Schama can muster toward Mounier is condescension. He only reluctantly confers the label 'moderate' upon him, placing it in quotation marks. This is at least preferable to the scorn he reserves for others. How futile are human actions for Schama. Mounier's early actions are objectively "wrong," while his subsequent change of course is futile. Is there any context in which human intervention is legitimate?

In Part Two, Tackett takes on the question of the nature of the Revolutionary dynamic and the vexing issue of

radicalization. He writes of a "culture of intransigence" among the representatives of the Second Estate which still adhered to a "military-aristocratic ethos." This view is commonly derided as hopelessly old-fashioned, and Tackett needs to provide more evidence to sustain it. For the revisionists the solution to the problem of radicalization is simple. 1792 is inscribed in 1789–even before–in the Abbe Sieyes 1788 pamphlet "What is the Third Estate?", which cast the privileged orders outside the nation. For Furet, the Terror merely reveals the Manichean mind, the eschatological essence of the Revolution. For the revisionist, the details of the factional struggles which resurfaced very quickly after the night of August 4 are of little interest, because the outcome is predetermined, but Tackett takes these debates on the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the King's veto seriously, and narrates them effectively. The cautious wording of the Declaration demonstrated the influence still wielded by conservatives, especially the *monarchiens*, led by Mounier, who soon made an alliance with the extreme Right. But it was only in the context of these debates, Tackett asserts, that the emergence and appeal of a discourse of popular sovereignty can be understood. Part Two ends with the formation, but not the victory, of the Jacobins. Contrary to Furet, who declares that by this time the Revolution was already won by the Left, Tackett asserts that things were still very much up for grabs. It is interesting to note the extent to which Furet, who decries 'commemorative' histories of the Revolution, himself commemorates and reenacts the frustrations of the *monarchiens* in his analysis.

What in Tocqueville is a sobering observation of the gulf between revolutionary intention and outcome, in Schama becomes an oddly ahistorical and arguably illiberal skepticism concerning the role of human agency in history. Furet pointed in this direction, alluding to "the tyranny of the historical actor's conception of their own experience..." and "the nearly unbridgeable gap between human action and its real meaning that characterized the French Revolution. (*Interpreting the French Revolution* p. 16). Even if the meaning of action is difficult to discern, it does not follow that action is meaningless. Where the revisionists have thrown up their hands, settled into their armchairs and sought the solace of a few sacred texts to explain the entire phenomenon of the Revolution, post-revisionists must roll up their sleeves and renew the investigation. Another challenge facing post-revisionists will be giving due credit to the actions of people without overly romanticizing them a la Michelet. While Marxists have frequently been guilty of too generously apostrophizing the people, the parsimony of the revisionists in this regard has become so pronounced that I can recall as a graduate student listening to Furet speak for an hour about the night of August 4-5 (when the nobility surrendered its feudal rights) without mentioning the 'Great Fear' which swept the countryside in the summer of '89. Simply because one finds the spectacle of the people out of doors distasteful does not mean they are not worthy of our attention. To exclude popular action as a legitimate form of political expression is a transparent attempt to keep people out of the streets. What William Scott refers to as "retrospective wishful thinking" among revisionists sometimes extends to a kind of retroactive *gendarmerie*. One can almost envision Schama and Furet on the night of the Women's March to Versailles standing in the road–mud up to their britches–imploring the crowd, "Ladies, please, return to your homes, the Monarchy is reforming itself."

Because we live in a 'post-everything' period, when it often appears that we no longer are active participants in, but merely detached observers of, the making of history, it is even more important not to succumb to the historical defeatism of the revisionists which has supplanted the historical determinism of Marxism. That feeling of detachment should be received as an invitation to reengagement now disencumbered of both the ponderous armor of orthodox Marxism and the baggage of anti-communism. There have been essentially two periods of Revolutionary historiography over the last 125 years. For the first seventy-five, scholarly debate took place within the context of the Third Republic's struggle for legitimacy against continued and entrenched resistance. "France in the 1940's," Furet acknowledges, "was still a country whose citizens had to...choose between the *Ancien Regime* and the Revolution" (*Interpreting the Revolution*, pp. 4-5). The last fifty years have been influenced by the triumph and debacle of communism in Eastern Europe. Just as the Russian Revolution did not justify the French, neither does the fall of communism invalidate it. The Revolution can stand on its own, independent of the historical boosterism of the Jacobin tradition or the historical defeatism of the revisionists. Tackett's book is an encouraging indication of what we can expect from post-bicentennial, post-Cold War, post-revisionist revolutionary historiography. For post-revisionists, a recognition that the Revolution spawned its own mythology need not lead to the conclusion the Revolution was only a myth. A recognition that historians have sometimes lazily leaned on an abstraction called 'the people' does not preclude an investigation of actual people. The revisionists have

replaced the 'democratic despotism' of the Terror with a discursive despotism in which freedom of historical action is proscribed. This is an impediment to our historical comprehension of the Revolution which must at least be partially understood as an event made and experienced by willful (if not always willing) participants, the vast majority of whom were not among the intellectual elite.

NOTES

[1]. See Francois Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 1981). For a consideration and critique of the work of Furet, the most important revisionist historian, see William Scott, "Francois Furet and Democracy in France," *HIstorical Journal* 34 (1991): 147-71.

[2]. William Scott has suggested the contours of such an undertaking in "The Pursuit of 'Interests' in the French Revolution: A Preliminary Survey," *French Historical Studies* 19:3 (Spring 1996), 811-851.

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