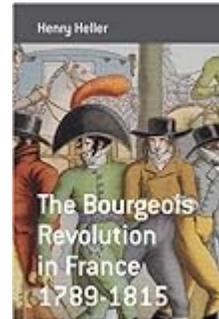




Henry Heller. *The Bourgeois Revolution in France, 1789-1815.* New York: Berghahn Books, 2006. 184 S. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-169-1.



Reviewed by Bertel Nygaard

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H. Heller: The Bourgeois Revolution in France, 1789-1815

This new book by Henry Heller, Professor in History at the University of Manitoba, is a Marxist defence of the traditional social interpretation of the French Revolution as bourgeois and capitalist. It is thus an attack on the widely-debated wave of *révisionisme* that has gained a strong position within historical studies of the French Revolution since the 1960s, denying any significant connections between the French Revolution and the transition to capitalism and generally opting for political, cultural, ideological or discursive modes of interpretation rather than social ones.

In this respect Heller continues the older tradition of *la social interpretation* of the Revolution, associated particularly with Georges Lefebvre and Albert Soboul. These older Marxists, however, studied history *à partir de la base*, focussing mainly on the lower classes. In their accounts, the capitalist bourgeoisie was not the main agent of revolutionary change, but was rather reaping a capitalist harvest sown by *sans-culottes* and the poorer peasants as an unintended consequence of their anti-feudal, and often anti-capitalist, actions. Heller instead stresses the class agency of the bourgeoisie and its class con-

sciousness rapidly emerging through the revolutionary process. In doing so, his analysis of the Revolution is radically different from those of other contemporary Marxists who have accepted core elements of revisionist critiques while retaining an insistence on heterodox social modes of interpretation *à la* George Comninel or Florence Gauthier.

Heller's book is a concise account of historical developments, stressing the gradual emergence of capitalist social relations during the years 1789-1815, but at the same time a contribution to a long-standing polemic. This dual character surfaces in the recurring criticisms of the specifics of *révisioniste* interpretations, as well as in the overall design of the book. A general critique of *révisionisme* is followed by six chapters covering, within a basically chronological framework, the gradual, but dramatic, emergence of capitalist relations until the fall of Napoleon.

This periodization is a challenge not only to revisionism but also to two trends within Marxism. On the one hand, this differs from the older tradition of charting the *bourgeois-démocratique* French Revolution *à la*

until the fall of Robespierre in 1794 — an interpretation codified by Soviet Marxism. On the other hand, it differs from more qualified Marxist attempts at connecting the French Revolution with capitalism, such as that of E.J. Hobsbawm, whose *Age of Revolution* (1962) presents the lack of economic upsurge in France during the immediate post-revolutionary years as a “gigantic paradox”, or Colin Mooers, whose *The Making of Bourgeois Europe* (1991) regards the growth of French industrial capitalism during the 1860s as the long-term result of the institutional and social changes resulting from the Revolution. Heller’s analysis of a significant capitalist breakthrough within the socioeconomic, political and cultural spheres of France during the years 1789 is more radical and more focussed — and, one might say, more directly empirically committed — than either of these.

In stressing the agency of the bourgeoisie in the Revolution, Heller’s defence of the classic social interpretation may in some regards seem more faithful to historiographical tradition than even those historians often considered as the very embodiment of that tradition. Yet, the empirical grounds for his assertions derive largely from a synthesis of the results of “post-revisionist” scholars of the Revolution: Colin Jones, Gwynne Lewis and others. Yet, while these have cast severe doubt on some of the main claims made by revisionists, none of these earlier “post-revisionist” scholars share Heller’s preoccupation with appreciating the Revolution as a whole, and none of them summarize as concisely as he some of the main recent discussions on proto-industrialization, agrarian reform and the politico-social theory of the revolutionary age within one single synthesis.

By these properties alone the book provides a considerable contribution to the ongoing discussions about the character and significance of the French Revolution. Its rather sharp thematic focus and polemical style does not make it suitable as a first introduction to the subject. Heller tends to assume readers already familiar with the basic events of the Revolution. On the other hand, this thematic focus and the compact size of the book make it quite suitable for more specific courses on Revolutionary history, and a counterweight to “revisionist” scholarship.

Rather than a textbook, however, this is a concentrated and quite well-structured counterattack on revisionism. Herein lies the strength of the book, but also one of its main weaknesses: While Heller does prove that capitalist (proto-)industrialization did emerge in Revolutionary age France and bourgeois revolutionary agent did develop forms of social consciousness reflecting such de-

velopments, the framework of this book allows him only to prove that some examples of such economic and ideological developments may be found. Somewhat belying both its title and its initially stated methodological commitment to writing social history as a whole (that is, as a totality), this book is not in fact a presentation of the total history of the French revolution, nor does it really claim to be. By itself, of course, this non-completeness is quite permissible in a book of less than 200 pages covering two and a half decades of world-historical turmoil. But Heller might have confronted more systematically the question: How representative within French or European society at the time were the economic and cultural trends that he identifies? His failure to do so provides an obstacle to judging the real significance of this book’s message, and it may provide the very revisionist scholars whom Heller has set out to attack with far too easy excuses for dismissing the message of his book as simply a dogmatic voice from the past.

A no less substantial point of criticism would be Heller’s overall framework of analysis. By analysing the Revolution solely within the immediate intra-social and intra-national contexts, he neglects the important questions of the international context of the Revolution, including the role of international commercial and military rivalry, colonial production etc. He does not confront the fundamental question of whether the French Revolution in the narrow sense provides the proper level of abstraction for a discussion of the relevance of the category “bourgeois revolution”. In my view, the basic importance and justification of this category derives primarily from world-historical developments of which the French Revolution itself is important part, but only a part. Similarly, his discussion of the transition to capitalism does not explicitly confront such important macro-historical contributions as those of Immanuel Wallerstein, Robert Brenner or Perry Anderson. Finally, a somewhat more thorough (self-)critical approach to the older traditions of social interpretation might have been beneficial.

Nonetheless, this book is a significant enrichment and reinvigoration of the traditional Marxist explanation of the French Revolution and a fine synthesis of the many contributions to criticism of revisionist theses from especially the last two decades. Possibly this book may even provide the starting point for more synthetic re-introductions of socio-economic explanations within the historiography of the Revolution, which might also imply a more discerning reevaluation of the older Marxist contributions of Albert Soboul and others. At the very least, such social interpretations of the French Revolu-

tion would deserve a constructively critical reconsideration, now that the era of revisionist euphoria generally seems to be a thing of the past.

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