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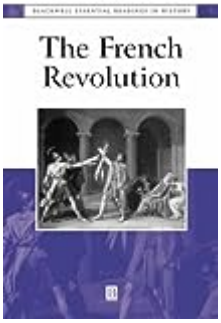

Ronald Schechter, ed. *The French Revolution: The Essential Readings.* Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 2001. viii + 344 pp. $62.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-21271-3.

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Entitling a book of readings on the French Revolution "essential" is a dangerous gambit, especially as at least two other such collections have come out in the last five years, and there is very little overlap between their choices.[1] As one would expect, a few key names do circulate between all these volumes: FranÃ§ois Furet, Keith Michael Baker and Lynn Hunt most notably, with Colin Jones, Colin Lucas, Robert Darnton, Mona Ozouf, Sarah Maza and Roger Chartier all also showing up in more than one selection. What is interesting is that, with the exception of a few pages of Furet, there is no direct repetition in the Schechter volume of pieces reproduced elsewhere. Of course, there is a simple explanation for that in Schechter's editorial foreknowledge, but this does also expose the wide choice available when seeking out a limited number of "essential readings".

Schechter's stated unifying principle of selection is that the pieces chosen "implicitly or explicitly address questions that Furet raised" a generation ago in *Interpreting the French Revolution* (p. 8). Those questions are, of course, most notably ones about the political and linguistic articulation of relationships of power and authority, posed in contradistinction to approaches which articulated revolutionary change within a Marxian framework of class conflict.[2] It is certainly the case that the excerpts chosen focus on language and conceptualisation–the only three to consider actual political events/incidents within the Revolution are Joan Scott's textual analysis of Olympe de Gouges's "Declaration of the Rights of Women", Lynn Hunt on the psychological implications of the king's trial, and Mona Ozouf on the "transfer of sacrality" involved in the elaboration of revolutionary festivals. Furthermore, as that last sentence implies, six of the ten extracts here are actually concerned with the "Origins of the Revolution", not with the events of 1789 and after at all–the passages from Furet must also fall into this category, since they offer such a general and historiographical critique that one could not acquire any significant information on revolutionary events from them.

For the study of the Revolution's origins, Schechter has chosen some very good pieces. Keith Michael Baker's reflections on the different discourses of power operating in the late eighteenth century, Roger Chartier on Enlightenment, public opinion and political judgment, and Robert Darnton on "forbidden bestsellers" will probably have been on any conscientious teacher's reading-list for this subject for a while now. To this are added two pieces which serve to give greater texture to any understanding of the pre-revolutionary mentality: Colin Jones on the commercial, materialist and "modern" worldview exposed by a study of provincial newspaper advertising,

and Sarah Maza with a powerful piece, deserving of wide circulation, explaining some of the grounds of social critique in use in the late Old Regime, and why they were in no sense "class" based. The final "pre-revolutionary" piece is by Dale Van Kley, originally published way back in 1979, and concerned with the ideological content of debates within the French clergy in the late 1760s. Although at first sight a quixotic selection, this piece in fact does good work in demonstrating how "political" were the languages of public debate a generation before 1789, and how broad were the resources of critique on which revolutionaries were able to draw, even while affirming, as do most of the other pieces, that there was no single current of thought which preceded what were to become "revolutionary" ideas.

It will be clear by now that this collection has been produced with a very strong slant towards political language, and perhaps towards ideological and conceptual language as a subset of that. There is no question but that a student would have to look elsewhere to get a clear sense of what actually happened during the decade from 1789, and that, moreover, the main impetus of this selection is to strip away any one clear view on how France reached "1789" in the first place. The last point may be no bad thing, as the origins of the Revolution deserve to be treated as a complex subject in their own right, but overall, the approach taken by this collection may well be less useful for teaching purposes than that of some of its predecessors. Although Schechter ably, if somewhat sanctimoniously, dissects Gary Kates's problematic attempts to construct a linear spectrum of historical views on the Revolution (p. 5), one would have to note that Kates's collection includes pieces by Timothy Tackett, John Markoff and Olwen Hufton, which do show the impact of political/ideological languages on social/political conflicts. Likewise, the Peter Jones edited volume, although its extracts are somewhat more condensed, provides students with the opportunity to read a wide variety of historians' view on actual revolutionary events, circumstances and movements.[3]

It is questionable whether the practice of providing students with excerpts from "high-level" academic debates, repackaged as if they were intended for teaching purposes, is a good one. Certainly, it makes available within one set of covers some of the leading scholarship of the present generation, but any but the smallest college library ought to hold the originals of the standard texts and international journals from which most of these pieces come. Without wide and careful background study, many of the statements in such pieces will be literally meaningless to students (notwithstanding the perfectly good editorial work of Schechter, or any of his predecessors), and if a conscientious teacher arranges for students to acquire that background, she or he could probably arrange for students to see these "essential" pieces without paying for this packaging. The counter-argument, of course, is that the students might not wish to go looking in more than one place, but I decline the counsel of despair.

Notes.

1. G. Kates (ed.) *The French Revolution: Recent Debates and New Controversies*, New York and London: Routledge, 1998; and P. Jones (ed.) *The French Revolution in Social and Political Perspective*, New York and London: Arnold, 1996. A collection of articles reprinted exclusively from the *Journal of Modern History* has also appeared: T.C.W. Blanning (ed.) *The Rise and Fall of the French Revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

2. For more discussion of Furet's views see the forum on "FranÃ§ois Furet's Interpretation of the French Revolution" in *French Historical Studies*, 1990, pp. 766-802.

3. See note 1 above.

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