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Jean-Luc Chappey, Bernard Gainot, Guillaume Mazeau, Frédéric Régent and Pierre Serna, *Pour Quoi Faire la Révolution*. Marseille: Agone, 2012. 200 pp. 15.00€. (pb). ISBN-10:2748901614.

Review by Micah Alpaugh, University of Central Missouri.

“Why study the Revolution?” ask the faculty of the Sorbonne’s Institut d’histoire de la Révolution française (IHRF). In this little red book, many answers for a broad, educated *grand public* are asserted across five wide-ranging essays—with each attempting to illuminate the Revolution’s importance across broader historical processes and for the better comprehension of contemporary trends. The collectively written introduction, “La Révolution comme la politique des égaux,” finds common ground through reasserting the importance of the French Revolution in light of the global revolutions and upheavals of 2011. Opposing François Furet and his fellow “Cassandre médiatiques” who around the 1989 bicentennial attempted to declare the Revolution dead and irrelevant beyond the Soviet model, the Sorbonne authors assert that the continued power of revolutionary models and traditions gives French Revolutionary historians “nouvelles responsabilités” (p. 10) in the contemporary world.

The authors declare that what follows will demonstrate a “champ de recherché en profonde mutation,” particularly as the study of the Revolution’s origins, process and legacies increasingly “dépassé largement les frontières hexagonales” (p. 13). In so doing, the Sorbonne faculty recognize the increasingly tenuous nature of their own authority, as the bicentennial-era rivalries between the Fureted École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales and the Michel Vovelle-era Institut (“les milieu franco-français entre le Quartier latin et boulevard Raspail” [p. 13]), have in certain respects been surpassed by a much broader range of international researchers and further-ranging concerns.

The volume boldly begins not through treating the Revolution in France, but rather its origins in and effects upon the wider world. Pierre Serna’s opening essay, “Toute révolution est guerre d’indépendance,” serves as an enthusiastic affirmation of *histoire globale*, placing the French Revolution within a much broader continuum of early modern revolts against centralizing states. For Serna, the centuries after the Dutch Revolt of 1579 constitute a period of “contre-pouvoir permanent” (p. 26) contesting the age of absolutism, while American resistance against Britain from circa 1770 forward accelerated a “dynamique révolutionnaire” (p. 27) which moved from the periphery of the European imperial system into its centers by 1789. Even though the French Revolution led to new forms of domination—Serna notes as “le plus cruel des contradictions” how a revolution desiring to be “universelle et fraternelle” became “colonialiste et xenophobe à la fois” (p. 24)—he nevertheless sees the era as furthering “une spirale non terminée” of movements, in which “la révolution ne se répète jamais” (p. 49).

Serna’s incorporation of the Atlantic World into the history of the French Revolution—as already evinced in his 2009 edited volume *Républiques soeurs: le Directoire et la Révolution atlantique*—represents a major and welcome departure from the almost uniquely domestic telling common at the IHRF until recently. [1] Robert Palmer’s classic *The Age of Democratic Revolutions* received a scathing review in the 1960s from then-Sorbonne chair Marcel Reinhard, declaring Palmer had not established the existence of a direct influence between eighteenth-century revolutions, while asserting that “la puissance

révolutionnaire de la France dépasse de loin, dès la première étape, tous les mouvements qu'on lui a comparés.”[2] Though following contemporary international trends does not necessarily constitute leadership, the growing participation of French scholars in Atlantic history represents a significant change in outlook.

Frédéric Régent’s “Pourquoi faire l’histoire de la Révolution française par les colonies?” explores the complicated relationship between the French and Haitian Revolutions. Régent intriguingly begins by quoting Aimé Césaire on how each colony had a “révolution spécifique” yet possessed a similar “rythme” (p. 51). The text which follows, however, largely concerns the effects of the French Revolution in Saint-Domingue. Régent’s view of 1793-99 as a “période d’affirmation universelle de la liberté et de l’égalité” (p. 80) seems to overly limit the pragmatic side of France’s abolition of slavery (as Jeremy Popkin has highlighted) as well as Haitian Revolutionaries’ often only superficial interest in the Rights of Man (as David Geggus has recently described).[3] In spite of Regent’s opening invocation of Césaire, little is done to treat the course of the Revolution in France’s other colonies (ignoring, for example, Laurent Dubois’s work on Guadeloupe).[4] The tensions between the local, regional and Atlantic contexts of the French Caribbean during the Revolution remain difficult to navigate.

The volume’s last three essays return to issues in the metropole. Here tensions between interpretations rise, as Guillaume Mazeau in the third chapter declares a “mythe de la ‘révolution atlantique’ libérale” (p. 113) and implicitly asserts (much like the subsequent authors) that the Revolution’s chief legacies arise from the political models French Revolutionaries created for adoption elsewhere. Mazeau’s “La ‘Terreur’ : laboratoire de la modernité” looks to provide a more nuanced treatment of the Revolution’s most radical period, asserting the existence of not one, but many “terrors” amidst a broader attempt to develop a Republican civic order and direct the national war effort. Mazeau contextualizes political terror itself as an outgrowth from older European state practices, while noting that the Revolutionaries’ vengeance was never blind: indeed, the majority of those brought before Paris’ tribunal were acquitted (pp. 112-113). Terror’s Revolutionary uses, Mazeau argues, often derived not from state strength, but rather from state weakness. Revolutionaries engaged in broad efforts to radically transform society while simultaneously needing to preempt counterrevolutionary attacks on many fronts. The Jacobins’ efforts during the Terror also served as a “politique antiterroriste” (p. 103), attempting to preempt counterrevolutionary action. Declaring 1793-1794 “[T]rop souvent caricaturisées” (p. 113), Mazeau issues an important call for normalizing our understanding of the period of the Terror, emphasizing its positive legacies for politicization and democratization, and avoiding the implied legitimization of violence that more lurid accounts of the time sometimes suggest.

Jean-Luc Chappey’s “Révolution, régénération, civilisation: enjeux culturels des dynamiques politiques” approaches the era’s cultural “régénération” as a “mission civilisatrice” (p. 117) of Revolutionary elites. In certain respects, this is a more surprising imposition of French imperial terminology—“mission civilisatrice” is usually employed historiographically to denote attempts to impose French culture on colonized peoples—than either of the *histoire global* chapters.[4] Yet also, of course, it re-imposes an elite French master-model. Drawing off Enlightenment educational beliefs in the perfectibility of the individual, elites looked to develop a “vaste programme de pédagogie nationale” (p. 124) from the Federations to dechristianization to the expansion of democratic politics and military service. Chappey ably demonstrates the genesis of modern French governing elites’ attempts to impose a republican culture both at home and abroad. Yet his model appears overstated when applied to popular politics, declaring them “en rien ‘autonome’” from elite politics—seeing popular politics as a reaction to elite measures, rather than oftentimes the inverse. Popular politics (from anti-feudal revolts to subsistence concerns) repeatedly did fundamentally re-shape elite programs, and the widespread failure of measures like dechristianization highlighted the weaknesses of elite coercion. Chappey also fails to define his *élites* precisely or explain their origins, which would necessitate a far more complex model.

The volume closes with Bernard Gainot's "La République comme association de citoyens solidaires: Pour retrouver l'économie politique républicaine (1792-1799)." Republican experimentation did not end in 1794, Gainot strongly asserts, but rather continued under the Directory. Though turning away from communal rights and social protections, the Directory nevertheless endorsed liberal reforms and experimentation in agriculture and commerce, valorizing a new triad of "la liberté, le travail et la propriété" (p. 166). Liberalization also promoted inverse innovations in egalitarianism, from Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals to attempts at communal industry similar to the English Owenites. The tensions of the Directory period, particularly "l'individu contre le social," remain essential for the study of political economy.

These five semi-connected essays, demonstrating the heterogeneity of French Revolutionary studies, show the richness of the field but also the absence of any clear paradigm. Furet's endurance as a neoliberal strawman thirty-five years after he proclaimed "La Révolution est terminée" points to the paucity of major recent debates.[5] Indeed, debating Furet's ghost has remained a regular activity: Michel Biard chose to title his thirty-contributor 2010 state-of-the-field edited volume *La Révolution française: une histoire toujours vivante* (to which Serna and Gainot also contributed).[6] In other respects, however, the lack of a dominant French Revolutionary interpretation has allowed the scholars here to borrow as widely as they have from world history trends, colonial studies, and elsewhere.

Yet if either looking to relate to or inspire those from "De Tunis à Caire," as the introduction begins, the Institut's attention needs to be focused more strongly upon the Revolution's social and popular bases. Despite the authors' strong words against Furet in the introduction, the essays which follow appear to owe more to his intellectual history-centered *école* than they do to the paradigms of Vovelle or Albert Soboul (the latter not being mentioned until the final essay). None of these essays can explain either the social movements which abolished feudalism and overthrew two regimes in the Revolution, nor the popular discontent and course of events which constituted the Arab Spring. In spirit, however, the volume's call to engage with contemporary politics and better understand their revolutionary origins is a welcome one. With their unsurpassed resources and geographic position, the Institut's little red book demonstrates significant potential for the revitalization of French Revolutionary studies.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Serna, ed. *Républiques soeurs: le Directoire et la Révolution atlantique* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

[2] Marcel Reinhard, "Robert R. Palmer, *The Age of Democratic Revolutions* (review)," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* 32(1960): 220-223.

[3] Jeremy D. Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); David Geggus, "The Caribbean in the Age of Revolution," in David Armitage & Sanjay Subrahmanyam, eds., *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760-1840* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), pp. 83-100.

[4] Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

[5] See especially Alice L. Conklin, *A Mission to Civilize: The Republican Idea of Empire in France and West Africa, 1895-1930* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

[6] François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).

[7] Michel Biard, *La Révolution française: une histoire toujours vivante* (Paris: Tallandier, 2010).

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