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**Jean-Clément Martin**, *Violence et Révolution: Essai sur la naissance d'un mythe national*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006. 339 pp. Bibliography and index. 23.00 Euros (pb). ISBN 2-02-043842-9.

Review Essay by Lynn Hunt, University of California Los Angeles.

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Although responses to the Terror mark out the major lines of division in modern politics, that dramatic set of events has not commanded the same level of attention in every epoch since it ended in 1794. We are clearly now in the midst of a sustained revival of writing about the Terror with recent works by Arno Mayer (2000), Patrice Gueniffey (2000), Sophie Wahnich (2003), and David Andress (2005). Jean-Clément Martin's book shares certain, ultimately superficial, similarities with these authors; like them, he builds his reinterpretation on an analytical narrative of revolutionary events, rather than on the claim for new evidence. In most other respects, however, his approach could not be more distinct. The title itself throws down the gauntlet, for Martin makes no mention of the Terror (which is present in the titles or subtitles of the others), and by implication, its very status is called into doubt (might the Terror itself be a "myth"?).

At first glance, deconstruction of the entire notion of the Terror does seem to be Martin's goal, for he reminds us that the Convention never actually voted to put Terror on the agenda, and he cogently argues that the cascade of unpredictable and sometimes contradictory events cannot be interpreted as reflecting a single, coherent, revolutionary doctrine. Martin thus essentially shifts the terrain of possible answers by reframing the question. Rather than asking why the Terror happened and then either condemning (Gueniffey and before him François Furet and Keith Baker) or justifying (Mayer, Wahnich, Andress) it, Martin questions the nature of the phenomenon itself.

Nevertheless, he does not advocate eliminating the term altogether. He recognizes that a label loaded down with this much political and ideological baggage cannot be expected to slip away quietly into the night of historical oblivion. His key section on the session of September 5, 1793 is entitled "La terreur a été et n'a jamais été à l'ordre du jour," and one of his most important chapters is called "Réalités de la Terreur." In that chapter, the main lines of Martin's overall argument are clearly set out: the weakness of the revolutionary government, rather than its overweening power, opened the door to various, often cross-cutting, forms of violence. Conflicts over legitimacy fostered competing institutional structures (committees of the Convention in Paris, representatives on mission, revolutionary armies, national guards, regular armies, local officials) that in turn created space for autonomously generated bursts of violence and in some places, especially in the Vendée, civil war. In this scenario, Robespierre appears, not as the mediocrity who ventriloquized the Revolution's semiotic vortex (as in Furet's account), but rather as a determined and cunning politician who maintained an uneasy tension between dogmatism and pragmatism, radical language and measures designed to contain volatile outbreaks of violence. His isolation from the factions ensured his ascendancy and also, ultimately, his downfall.

Martin's rereading changes the entire tenor of the debate, not only about the Terror, but also inevitably about the Revolution as a whole, since the Revolution has so often been reduced to the Terror. If Martin is right, then both the Tocquevillian and proto-totalitarian interpretations (brought together by Furet) are wrong; the Terror does not represent absolutism in democratic disguise but rather what Martin calls the "défaut d'État," the absence or weakness of the state. In this respect, Martin's line of argument echoes that of J. Arch Getty on the Stalinist terror (J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* [1999]) and might be seen as part of an ongoing re-evaluation of state breakdown as a cause of political violence. [1] Surely the killings in

Bosnia, Rwanda, and now Iraq (not to say that they are identical in cause or effect) have made this reconsideration more compelling<sup>2</sup>.

Many important corollaries follow from Martin's energetic sweeping of the interpretive decks, but I want to draw attention to only two: political violence has a kind of internal logic that will play itself out unless restrained by a superior political force, and political maneuvering trumps ideology when violence is legitimized as a tool of gaining power. By paying close attention to the internal structure of political violence, Martin is able to highlight the role of bodies and emotions (which take priority over ideology), from the relative mildness of pro-revolutionary women spanking nuns who refused to leave their orders to the full-scale fury of internecine warfare in the Vendée and the Caribbean islands. The same vacuum of power that Furet saw filling up with democratic rhetoric operates very differently in Martin's view: it sucks in gender, religious, social, economic and regional differences and allows them to combine, disaggregate, and then recombine in explosive fashion. In this situation, rivalry and conflict lead to a spiral of persecution, hatred, retribution, and ever-escalating revenge, opening the way in the end to sadistic and voyeuristic carnage, violence, as it were, for its own sake.

While ideas and ideology may melt away in the heat of this boiling cauldron, the political stakes involved do not. Thus, for example, the September massacres of 1792 "représentent un tournant politique et politique" in the delicate negotiations between revolutionary officials on the one side and militant sans-culottes on the other (p. 141). The *montagnards* ended up defending the massacres, even though they did not themselves provoke them or even want them, because the killings quickly came to define the line dividing *montagnards* from *brissotins* or *rolandins*. The *montagnards* had to embrace the bloodbath to establish their difference from their political rivals. Martin similarly relates most of the Revolution's turning points to a combination of the confusion of events and the rivalries for control of what passed for the apparatus of power. This strategy can sometimes lead to inconclusiveness. When he reaches 9 Thermidor, for instance, Martin admits that even though the fall of Robespierre initially changed little in the form or composition of government, the event nonetheless marked an essential turn in the life of the nation. But rather than explain how such a paradoxical outcome could have emerged, he immediately jumps to a description of the "great confusion" in which this development took place. (p. 237).

The two forms of the adjective political--*politique* and *politicien(ne)*--recur frequently in Martin's argument, underlining the weight he gives to the political context. Yet he does not argue that the French Revolution is simply a political revolution with social consequences rather than a deep-seated, Marxist-style social revolution with political ones. His vision of politics, while not Marxist, is not a narrow one. He eclectically employs perspectives from ethnography, gender history, art history, and political, social, and cultural history as well. Still, his use of the adjective *politicien(ne)* is telling. It suggests that personal calculations and political maneuvering need to be given serious causal weight. The history of the term in French is interesting to consider in this context. According to ARTFL, *politicien* was defined for the first time in French in Émile Littré's *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1872-1877). The word comes from the English *politician*; according to Littré "this word was first used exclusively in talking about the United States but now begins to enter into our common parlance."<sup>[2]</sup> Thus it is perhaps not altogether surprising that Martin concludes by drawing a comparison with the American revolutionaries. Like their American counterparts, Martin insists, the French revolutionaries should be seen "less as ideologues, applying abstract ideas, than as political men called upon to urgently respond to previously unimagined questions." (p. 305) Whether George Washington or Thomas Jefferson bears much comparison with Chicago's first Richard Daley – the archetype of the politician in this sense for most Americans – might give pause for thought.

I have barely scratched the surface here of the issues that might be discussed after reading this provocative book. In particular, I have passed too quickly over the comparisons, and even the parallels, that might legitimately be drawn between Martin's analysis and those of Wahnich and Andress, in

particular, but they are much better placed to undertake those assessments than am I. Another reviewer might well have been tempted to make more of Martin's systematic eclecticism, if I may risk that oxymoron. Martin cites historians writing in English, Italian, and German and makes every effort to incorporate discussion of women and especially events in the colonies. Anglophone readers might have expected him to take account of the work of Joan Scott, for example, but who would have imagined that the holder of the prestigious chair of the history of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne would cite Judith Butler too? On view here, in short, is Martin's tireless, and sometimes thankless, endeavor to open a truly global conversation. If that eclecticism leads him to mobilize these diverse references only insofar as they support his position rather than confronting some of the very real disagreements that lie behind them, then perhaps that is the price to be paid for opening up rather than shutting down a discussion. Or perhaps it is itself a *manoeuvre politicienne*. If it is, then it is a sure sign that not all political jostling is bad. Though Martin often evokes that negative sense of politics as manipulation, scheming, and deliberate deceit, he also forcefully reminds us what life is like in the absence of political routine and a stable state power.

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## NOTES

[1] J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

[2] ( <http://colet.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/dico1look.pl?strippedhw=politicien> ).

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See also the Review Essays on this book by David Andress, Sophie Wahnich, and D.M.G. Sutherland, as well as Jean-Clément Martin's response to all four Review Essays.

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