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Colin Jones, *The Great Nation: France from Louis XV to Napoleon 1715-99*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. xxix + 651. Maps, introduction, notes, further reading, and index. \$34.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-231-12882-7.

Review by Howard G. Brown, Binghamton University (State University of New York).

What went wrong? How did it all unravel? How could the most powerful, most populous, and most influential country in Europe, the heartland of the Enlightenment and the avatar of absolutism, suddenly collapse? From what hidden depths of social and political dysfunctionality did the paroxysms of revolutionary violence spring? These questions have obsessed historians of eighteenth-century France for two hundred years; however, they no longer obsess Colin Jones. After several brilliant contributions to the debate over the origins of the French Revolution, Professor Jones has decided that the history of eighteenth-century France is better viewed from the perspective of François Fénelon than François Furet. François de Salignac de La Mothe-Fénelon was archbishop of Cambrai and author of *Télémaque* (1699), an allegorical script for transforming Louis-Quatorzian absolutism into a paternalistic polity that favored prosperous peasants over dynastic *gloire*. Jones considers *Télémaque*, rather than the Enlightenment or the Revolution, the best platform from which to observe France's trajectory through the eighteenth century. The irreverence is irresistible.

The Great Nation is published in Great Britain by Penguin Books as a replacement for Alfred Cobban's venerable *A History of Modern France*, volume 1, *The Old Régime and Revolution, 1715-1799*, first published in 1957. Though the publisher and the period remain the same, *The Great Nation* takes silent aim at the title, structure, and content of Cobban's classic. Jones' premise is that the history of eighteenth-century France has been written backwards. That is, that having separated the period into the Old Regime and the French Revolution, historians almost always view the former through the lens of the latter, and, in Cobban's era at least, predominantly in terms of incipient social fissures. Thus, in conscious antithesis to the work he set out to replace, Jones seeks to present pre-revolutionary France in terms of its past and not its future, eschews the term *ancien régime* until it is invented in 1789, and shifts his focus away from social tensions to a political narrative. The result is a refreshing synthesis glittering with incisive analysis, a "must-read" for anyone lecturing from yellowed notes.

Jones draws on the recent trends that have enriched and expanded the notion of eighteenth-century politics. Anyone whose expertise lies outside the period will find this book an indispensable introduction to the dynamic scholarship in the field. Jones makes fine use of new works dealing with factional alignments at court and in the ministries, the interplay of foreign and domestic politics, the administrative structures of the monarchy and republic, the tensions raised by Jansenism, and the political culture of republicanism. He is especially responsive to the literature on cultural trends and public opinion. This wealth of innovative work provides the basis for a more far-ranging "political" history than ever imagined before. Whether the Holy See or the *Encyclopédie*, convulsionaries or revolutionaries, bubonic plague or *buveur de sang*, all have their part in shaping the political culture of the period. But Jones is not content merely to manage the intellectual estates of others, he introduces his own methods of farming. Though he suggests that readers may want to skip the scholarly part of his introduction, this is not advised, for it is here that Professor Jones lays out his approach. In his enthusiasm to repudiate a teleological version of the eighteenth-century, Jones asserts that "the political culture of the period from 1715 to 1789 was basically unitary" (p. xxi). Fortunately, Colin Jones is too good a historian to let this programmatic statement run roughshod over his later narrative. His account of the monarchy's eighteenth-century tribulations is replete with evidence that the political culture of

the period experienced substantial change. For example, although his introduction downplays the widespread notion of a fracture in the monarchy's political culture around mid-century, he later notes a marked shift "after around 1750" (and starting with disputes over Jansenism) in the government's willingness to disregard politics as essentially "the king's secret" and to take its cause into the "public sphere" where *philosophes* and men of letters had staked their claims. This "quest for public justification transmuted almost insensibly into a stress on 'public opinion' ... as the impeccable and objective source of political legitimacy" (p. 223). Numerous other critical moments are recounted with this same admirable awareness of their longer-term implications for monarchical independence and an evolving political culture.

As this example illustrates, the greatest innovation in eighteenth-century studies in the last generation has been wide acceptance of the concept of an emergent public sphere. Unlike many scholars, Jones insists on the initial Habermasian formulation of a "bourgeois public sphere." This is the social referent that gave substance to the rhetorical claims made in the name of public opinion. As he astutely points out, the rise of a literate, urban, non-noble elite was the product of successful capitalism that did not always take classic forms. Rather, it adapted to its environment. In eighteenth-century France, this meant that the non-ennobling venal offices that saw the greatest increase in value were in vocations that allowed exclusive access to a commercial market: notary, surgeon, hairdresser, etc. Economic growth saw urban bourgeois more than triple in numbers during the century. When they met in coffee shops and masonic lodges and, above all, when they read the products of a booming print culture—which ranged from works by *philosophes* to unregulated *mémoires judiciaires* to politicized pornography—they became the "bourgeois public sphere." Thus, having successfully used cultural analysis to challenge revisionists' assumptions about eighteenth-century capitalism, Jones deftly changes horses and uses social history to challenge cultural historians' emphasis on the independence of the public sphere. Whereas the public sphere was first conceived as a "space" outside the monarchy and the corporative structures of society, Jones emphasizes the extent to which it was a territory invaded and at least partly occupied by the existing polity. Only the crisis of the late 1780s made it more than a commensal of the body politic. Thereafter, however, it took on truly staggering dimensions, morphing into the "terrorist public sphere" by 1793. By this time, its social referents became members of Jacobin clubs, surveillance committees, and *sans-culottes* militants. Thus, from being the fledgling basis for civil society, the public sphere suddenly became the revolutionary state; only after Thermidor did it re-emerge as the "bourgeois public sphere." In this account, the trampling on liberal democratic principles and the human toll of the Terror are largely attributed to overweening claims to embody public opinion and a zeal to regenerate society (apparently untainted by social envy, political ambition, or revolutionary recklessness). This is the most convincing case to date for the conceptual value of the "public sphere" and offers a seductive narrative continuity. Social historians will no doubt object, however, that it takes "patriots" (both pre and post-1789) too much at their words.

As its title suggests and Jones' framework requires, *The Great Nation* presumes a national political culture throughout the eighteenth century. Jones' beautifully uses the collapse of John Law's ever-more grandiose financial schemes in 1720 to illustrate the combination of factionalism, administrative monarchy, parliamentary politics, pamphleteering, and public opinion that twisted together to form Bourbon political culture well before the Damiens Affair of 1757 or the Maupeou coup of 1771. And yet, even in Louis XV's early reign, politics were largely personal—the product of individual arrangements, family interests, direct deals, and so forth. After being carefully managed by Cardinal Fleury for two decades, this system gradually gave way to politics as an arena of common interests in which the failure to subordinate private ambition and greed to public good became increasingly reprobate. The transition accelerated rapidly in the frenzied years of 1787-9. Similarly, although Jones pays due attention to pre-revolutionary patriotism, he says little about the distinctive regional identities that the monarchy sought to soften and the revolutionaries tried to crush. By stressing the continuities in the domestic impact of foreign policy, Jones strips the Revolution of some of its revolutionary quality. This perspective makes it harder to see the truly novel power of revolutionary nationalism and republican

militarism. Although it was the Directorial republic that coined the concept of *La Grande Nation*, this appears almost as a belated recognition of a long-standing reality. In this way, the emphasis on continuity in order to escape teleology continues into the chapters on the Revolution.

Historians usually plump for either the Old Regime or the French Revolution. It is rare to find in the same book both a sympathetic portrait of monarchical efforts to cope with the demands of great power rivalry and domestic reform (“hamfisted” and “clumsy” as these often were) and a favorable interpretation of the revolutionary cataclysm, even in its deadliest phases. On the latter point, Jones writes, “The *buveur de sang* was also the super-patriotic citizen in arms” (p. 462) and during the Terror “attacks on hoarders and big producers” were part of a “quest to seek fair shares for all those contributing to the war effort” (p. 488). Thus, it is the obstructionist Girondins of early 1793, and not the terrorist representatives on mission in year II, who receive the harshest judgment in the book. Jones provides a masterful treatment of the new political culture from the revolutionaries’ perspective. His emphasis on the triumph of “civic professionalism,” especially in the military and politics, superbly captures the emerging alternative to a corporative polity. Although the mixed impact of the Revolution at the village level is duly noted, as is the divisiveness of Directorial politics, the political culture of resistance remains elusive. This makes it difficult to discern why the political culture of liberal democracy failed in the 1790s. The answer to this question may have emerged more clearly had Jones followed his iconoclastic impulses and eschewed 1799 as his terminal date. After all, the momentous transition from Brumaire to the Life Consulate, that is, from yet another coup d’état to save the republic to a personal dictatorship that ended the republic in all but name, took just as long to craft as the Constitution of 1791. It is in the course of this later transition that the disruptive issues of democracy, anti-clericalism, and emigration, as well as many of the tensions exposed by Bourbon reformism, were largely resolved.

The Great Nation sparkles with brio and wit. Jones has a gift for exploiting emblematic incidents. The small tempest raised by Beaumarchais’ *The Marriage of Figaro*, for example, serves to draw out the complicated status of the nobility in the late eighteenth century, both in relation to the monarchy and in the eyes of the public. Other complex matters are presented with an unusual mix of subtlety and clarity. Personality traits are captured with startling pithiness e.g. Louis XV’s “morose hedonism” (p. 84) and events regain their drama through talented phrasing e.g. “the gadarene rush into war” in 1792” (p. 456). Though not as allergic to cliché as his countryman Martin Amis, Jones shares the novelists’ excitement for language and verbal daring-do. (*Caveat emptor* for North Americans: those unfamiliar with British colloquialisms may occasionally be left puzzled.) Just as Cobban’s classic went through several editions, Jones’ bold and engaging survey will surely appear in a second edition. Its value as a course text will be further enhanced if future editors spot the few statistical inconsistencies and verbal slips that escaped the attention of the current ones. In the meantime, *The Great Nation* is a great stimulant for anyone interested in eighteenth-century France.

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