

In Defense of Criticism

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In the first issue of *The New Republic*, in November 1914, the British writer Rebecca West published an essay entitled “The Duty of Harsh Criticism.” “Now,” she wrote, “when every day the souls of men go up from France like smoke [...] we must lash down humanity to the world with thongs of wisdom. [...] And that will never be done while affairs of art and learning are decided without passion, and individual dullnesses allowed to dim the brightness of the collective mind.”¹ While the essays in this *Salon* examine many topics, several of them address the question of harsh criticism, mostly treating it as something to be discouraged. Among the contributors, only Colin Jones ventures the opinion that “too much positivity can be a bad thing all round,” while David Smith, speaking as the editor-in-chief of *H-France*, reminds us that “negative reviews serve an important purpose within the profession.” In this short comment, I would like to elaborate on these last remarks and, in the spirit of Rebecca West, offer a defense of criticism that is passionate, lively, engaging, and even—when called for—harsh. I’ll also say a few words about the place of such criticism in our rapidly changing professional environment.

My argument is, inevitably, something of an *apologia pro vita sua*. Over the past thirty years, I have written many book reviews, including quite a few that were negative and several that could fairly be called harsh.² In 2008, I called Graham Robb’s *The Discovery of France* “a distressingly bad book.”³ In 2014, I said Jonathan Israel had written about the ordinary men and women of eighteenth-century France with “unfortunate condescension” and compared his *Revolutionary Ideas* to the conspiracy fiction of Alexandre Dumas.⁴ I have also received harsh criticism myself. In her essay, Annie Jourdan reminds readers of the issue of *H-France Forum* in which she had some very strong things indeed to say about my book *The First Total War*.⁵ In that same forum, Jeremy Black called the book a “deeply flawed [...] disappointment.”⁶ Obviously, I disagreed. But Jourdan and Black had every right to say what they thought. If I faulted Jeremy Black for anything, it was not for his review *per se*, but for republishing it

¹ Rebecca West, “It is Our Duty to Practice Harsh Criticism,” *The New Republic*, November 7, 1914.

² A large selection of my reviews is forthcoming in David A. Bell, *Shadows of Revolution: Reflections on France, Past and Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

³ David A. Bell, “Bicycle History,” *The New Republic*, February 13, 2008.

⁴ David A. Bell, “A Very Different French Revolution,” *The New York Review of Books*, July 10, 2014.

⁵ Annie Jourdan, review of *The First Total War*, by David A. Bell, in *H-France Forum*, vol. 2, issue 3 (Summer 2007), #2: 54-59, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.h-france.net/forum/h-franceforumvol2.html>.

⁶ Jeremy Black, review of *The First Total War*, by David A. Bell, in *ibid.*, 60-62.

verbatim in two other venues (he *really* didn't like the book!).⁷ In some ways I was actually glad to have provoked such strong responses, which at least indicated that these critics believed serious issues were at stake in what I had written. Better to have the book attacked as “deeply flawed” than praised as something like “a solid contribution which fills a gap in the literature and which, despite the reservations noted herein, will be usefully consulted by specialists in the field” (why buy Ambien when sentences like this are free for the taking?).

So why is vigorous and even harsh criticism so important? I can offer three reasons. First, we should never forget what the Persian traveler Rica says in Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*: “La nature semblaît avoir sagement pourvu à ce que les sottises des hommes fussent passagères, et les livres les immortalisent.”⁸ In other words, there really are such things as bad books. Some of these bad books, so to speak, condemn themselves. Their errors, fallacies, and poor evidence draw the eye like gaping wounds. They do not even require a mercy killing to fall silently into the oblivion of remainder piles and off-site library storage. But in other books the badness is harder to spot and does more damage. The fallacies come cloaked in elegant prose. The errors perch atop vast piles of footnotes. The hammering assertions compel assent, while the false assumptions slither unnoticed into the brains of unwitting readers and take up permanent residence. These sorts of books positively demand harsh criticism. The reviewer who feels compelled to summon up some words of praise for them along with gentle reproofs is not much different from the political reporter who provides ingenuously “even-handed” coverage of climate change (scientific fact or liberal conspiracy?) or Donald Trump's latest whopper.

Indeed, when the prose is especially elegant, the footnotes especially intimidating, and the author's position especially exalted, it is not enough simply to say a book is bad. The case should be made with every weapon in the reviewer's rhetorical arsenal: evidence and logic, but also irony, humor, sarcasm, and perhaps even, on occasion, fury. To quote the *Lettres persanes* again (Usbek, this time): “Il y a de certaines vérités qu'il ne suffit pas de persuader, mais qu'il faut encore faire sentir.”⁹ If the reviewer does not make the case in a forceful, visceral manner, many readers may not even notice. Obviously, there will never be any agreement as to which books are bad. Jourdan and Black thought that my *First Total War* was a bad book and reached deeply into their own rhetorical arsenals to shoot at it. But good for them! (Black's subsequent auto-plagiarism was another matter). It is for the reader to judge.

Most books in our field, thankfully, do not call for or receive such treatment. But if truly harsh criticism is an elixir to be doled out with restraint, vigorous criticism should be the common currency of our realm. After all, as scholars, we have an obligation constantly to challenge ourselves, to test our assumptions, and to push as hard as possible against arguments to see how well they stand up. Faint, muffled, ultra-polite criticism tests nothing and challenges no one.

⁷ Jeremy Black, “Jeremy Black Reviews Recent Work in Military and International History,” *The Social Affairs Unit* blog, January 16, 2008, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.socialaffairsunit.org.uk/blog/archives/001694.php>; and Jeremy Black, review of *The First Total War*, by David A. Bell, in *The English Historical Review* 123:502 (June 2008): 765-66.

⁸ Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1964), 114 (letter 66).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 37 (letter 11).

In theory, of course, there should be no contradiction between rigorous critique and norms of civility. As Ann Blair notes in her instructive essay, a concern to distinguish strong but respectful criticism, on the one hand, from logomachy, on the other, goes back to the very origins of modern scholarship in the Renaissance. I doubt very much that G. Matthew Adkins, whose essay pleads most insistently against “hostile” criticism and for “collegial restraint,” has any desire to stifle lively scholarly interchange.

The problem, as readers of Norbert Elias will remember, is that practices of politeness and civility can take on a life of their own and quickly become uncoupled from their original underlying rationality.¹⁰ Indeed, they can easily undermine the system they are supposed to moderate. A good example, cited by Colin Jones in his essay, is the contemporary American system of letters of recommendation, a large portion of which has devolved into an absurd exercise in coding and decoding (“unapologetically assertive” = “unbearably obnoxious”; “markedly reserved” = “catatonically shy”; “amazingly brilliant” = “smart”; etc.). If vigorous and even harsh criticism survives in some areas of academia today, other areas sometimes seem in danger of becoming a Land of Mush, where blatant flaws in logic are treated as “an intriguingly disjointed argument” and a gaping absence of evidence becomes “a promising direction for further investigation.” Such criticism, even when subjected to decoding, does little to challenge scholarly arguments or to goad authors into doing a better job the next time. The more flaccid the reproof, the easier it is to ignore. In an academic climate where “harsh” or “hostile” criticism is treated as a grievous breach of the unwritten rules, most reviewers will naturally step back several feet from the perceived borderline, lest they unwittingly transgress it. This gesture, in turn, can set in motion a collective backwards shuffle, until any criticism that might usefully advance a line of inquiry can no longer be seen except through a telescope. In practice, preserving a lively and vigorous climate of criticism means tolerating occasional instances of gratuitous harshness.

Finally, it is worth keeping in mind that sharp arguments—even angry, hostile arguments—can do a great deal of good for an academic discipline. They attract attention and remind both insiders and outsiders that serious things are at stake: things worth getting angry about. Harsh criticism can cut through the padding and gauze of hypocritical faint praise to reveal the core of a matter with singular clarity (this is, admittedly, not always the case). At a time when enrollments in humanities programs are plummeting, and a vocal part of the general public considers the tenured professoriate a club of coddled, complacent layabouts, vigorous and passionate arguments, in lively and engaging language, are hardly things to be avoided. Historians often quote R.H. Tawney’s protest after Hugh Trevor-Roper savaged his protégé Lawrence Stone in Britain’s “Gentry Controversy” of the early 1950s: “An erring colleague is not an Amalekite to be smitten hip and thigh.”¹¹ But this angry controversy formed part of what is now considered a golden age of British social history, and it helped to attract huge numbers of readers and students to the profession. It is worth quoting what the Marxist historian Christopher Hill wrote about the distinctly non-Marxist Trevor-Roper in 1957:

¹⁰ Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon, 1983), esp. 78-116.

¹¹ Quoted in Adam Sisman, *An Honourable Englishman: The Life of Hugh Trevor-Roper* (New York: Random House, 2010), 219.

His convictions are passionately held, and his wit is never kindly when dealing with what he believes to be Error. When one agrees with him (as the present reviewer often does) this is enjoyable. When one is sent down to the Amalekites (as the present reviewer, alas, often is) feelings are more mixed. But always the manner is grand, the range enviable [...] It is not for his philosophy that we read Professor Trevor-Roper. We read him because energy is eternal delight. He never writes boringly, because he is never bored. And how he can write!¹²

Precisely.

To be clear, I don't think that scholars should practice harsh criticism for the sheer savage joy of disemboweling an opponent in print or for no reason other than to demonstrate their own rhetorical virtuosity (temptations that Hugh Trevor-Roper succumbed to more than once). Scholars should resist personal attacks, and they should be particularly leery of harshly criticizing young, professionally vulnerable colleagues. Professional missteps are things from which young scholars, in particular, should have the chance to recover. I will note that the two harsh criticisms of mine that I mentioned above were aimed at a *New York Times* best-selling author (Graham Robb) and a Professor at the Institute of Advanced Study (Jonathan Israel). Neither of them liked what I had to say, but neither of them suffered any grievous professional harm from it (nor did I, for that matter, at the hands of Annie Jourdan and Jeremy Black). But again, in a climate of vigorous, passionate criticism, some critics are going to overstep their bounds. And better they do so than that we all shuffle back towards the Land of Mush. Rebecca West described this land well: "There is now no criticism in England. There is merely a chorus of weak cheers, a piping note of appreciation that is not stilled unless a book is suppressed by the police, a mild kindness that neither heats to enthusiasm nor reverses to anger."¹³

The changes currently taking place in the profession as a result of the digital revolution are making vigorous criticism—and even harsh criticism—both less destructive and more necessary than ever. It is less destructive because increasingly, as publishing moves to the web, it has become easier for periodicals to offer the targets of negative reviews a *droit de réponse*. Back in the twentieth century, there were few more depressing spectacles in the profession than the letters column of *The American Historical Review*, where the aggrieved victims of harsh book reviews wrote in to complain about the unfair treatment they had received. Often appearing a year or more after the critique in question, and sharply limited in space, the letters mostly seemed to do little more than plangently register their author's hurt feelings. Today, however, publications like *H-France* routinely offer the authors of books under review a *droit de réponse* at whatever length they want, and the response appears in tandem with the review itself. In *H-France Forum*, an author's response is in fact required. The format turns assassination attempts into strictly moderated duels, allowing authors far more protection than before.

I myself have benefitted from these changes. Thanks to the rules of *H-France Forum*, I had the chance to respond immediately to Jourdan's and Black's harsh criticisms, rather than having to

¹² Christopher Hill, "Among the Amalekites," *The Spectator*, October 25, 1957.

¹³ West, "It is Our Duty to Practice Harsh Criticism."

leave it unanswered for many months (again, it is up to the reader to judge who had the better arguments).¹⁴ Several authors have responded in writing to my own reviews in *H-France*, and generally the exchanges have been productive.¹⁵ As for Jonathan Israel, when I criticized his *Revolutionary Ideas*, he responded with a letter to the editor of the publication in question that was considerably longer than the review itself (not the first time he has done this; nor the last).¹⁶ The editor forced him to edit his counterblast down to 750 words and allowed me the last word in the printed exchange that was subsequently published. But Israel posted his entire, uncut missive on the *History News Network* website within a month of the original review's appearance.¹⁷

Having not read G. Matthew Adkins's *The Idea of the Sciences in the French Enlightenment, a Reinterpretation*, I cannot say if Jeremy Caradonna's review on H-Albion, which Adkins calls "profoundly hostile," was unfairly and unduly hostile (full disclosure: Caradonna was my Ph.D. student). But I do fault H-Albion for not even informing Adkins of the review, let alone offering him a *droit de réponse*. While I don't share Adkins's concerns about the dangers of harsh criticism, I do think that with the disappearance of material obstacles to the practice, authors should always have the chance to defend themselves against their critics in a format that places the two on an equal footing.

Meanwhile, other changes in the profession are making vigorous (and even harsh) criticism more necessary than ever. Despite the apocalyptic warnings that circulated at the turn of the century, the internet has not destroyed academic publishing. To the contrary, monographs continue to appear at a daunting rate, while a plethora of new online journals have arisen. Historians frequently despair about being able to keep up with what appears, even in their own narrowly-defined fields. I don't have time to read all the book reviews posted on *H-France*, to say nothing of the books themselves! In this brave new online world, I want to read reviews that make their points clearly and forcefully, not reviews that come so thoroughly wrapped in polite padding that they turn into the prose equivalent of the Pillsbury Doughboy. And having limited time, limited

¹⁴ David A. Bell, response to reviewers, in *H-France Forum*, vol. 2, issue 3 (Summer 2007), #5: 54-59, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.h-france.net/forum/h-franceforumvol2.html>.

¹⁵ See, for example, my exchange with James Livesey on his *Making Democracy in the French Revolution*, in *H-France Review*, vol. 2 (2002), # 32 and 33, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.h-france.net/vol2reviews/vol2no32bell.pdf> and <http://www.h-france.net/vol2reviews/vol2no33livesey.pdf>; and my exchange with Hervé Drévilleon on his *L'individu et la guerre*, *H-France Review*, vol. 14 (2014), #209 and 210, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.h-france.net/vol14reviews/vol14no209bell.pdf> and <http://www.h-france.net/vol14reviews/vol14no210drevillon.pdf>.

¹⁶ Jonathan Israel and David A. Bell, "The French Revolution: An Exchange," *The New York Review of Books*, October 9, 2014. See also Jonathan Israel's response to Lynn Hunt, "Was Louis XVI Overthrown by Ideas?" *The New Republic* online, July 31, 2014. Accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118811/jonathan-israel-response-lynn-hunts-review>; See also Israel's response to Samuel Moyn, "What Samuel Moyn Got Wrong in His *Nation* Article," *HNN: History News Network*, June 27, 2010, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/128361>; and his response to the reviewers of *H-France Forum*, "A Reply to Four Critics," *H-France Forum*, vol. 9, issue 1 (Winter 2014), #5, 77-97, accessed November 1, 2015, <http://www.h-france.net/forum/forumvol9/Israel5.pdf>.

¹⁷ Jonathan Israel, "'Conspiracy Fiction' versus the French Revolution. A Reply to David Bell's Critique in the *New York Review of Books*," *HNN: History News Network*, July 15, 2014. <http://historynewsnetwork.org/article/156341>.

energy, and a limited attention span, I want reviews that are thought-provoking, engaging, and perhaps even (dare I say) fun to read.

Partly in response to this problem of scholarly hyper-production (and partly for reasons of pure revenue-seeking), academic publishers are developing a greater number than ever of reference tools with which to navigate the new oceans of scholarship. Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press are only the most prominent houses to be flooding the market with *Companions*, *Handbooks*, *Research Encyclopedias*, *Online Bibliographies*, and other works of guidance, summary, and synthesis. More and more historians are devoting time and energy to these Big Reference projects, for which university libraries have a powerful appetite (often at the expense of purchasing monographs, alas). But these works, by their nature, are not much given to strong opinions. Encyclopedic authority, at least in our own age, demands the appearance of impartiality (the original *Encyclopédie* was distinctly superior in this respect). At their exquisitely even-handed worst, reference guides of this sort amount to little more than well-organized mush, and this makes it all the more necessary for readers to have ready access to more forthright opinions. In practice, however, vigorous criticism and serious impartial reference can not only co-exist, but mutually reinforce each other. The author of a guide to modern French history, for instance, can include a non-judgmental note about my *The First Total War*, but then add a link to Annie Jourdan's review and (hopefully) my response.

Even with all the problems the world faces today, we are thankfully not on the edge of the sort of civilizational abyss into which Rebecca West stared in November 1914. On the other hand, the writings of women and men are wafting by the gigabyte into an ever larger, ever more confusing Cloud through which it can sometimes be almost impossible to find a clear path. Staring into this Cloud, I cannot resist the conclusion that vigorous and even harsh criticism is indeed more necessary than ever. Yes, standards of decorum, politeness, civility, and generosity are important things. But they are not absolutes. They can and should be violated when the situation calls for it. And we should do everything in our power to promote a climate of vigorous, lively debate, even at the price of having to put up with the occasional instance of hostile, mean-spirited, gratuitous criticism. "Decidedly," Rebecca West wrote, "we shall not be safe if we forget the things of the mind. Indeed, if we want to save our souls, the mind must lead a more athletic life than it has ever done before."¹⁸

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¹⁸ West, "It is Our Duty to Practice Harsh Criticism."

H-France Salon
Volume 7 (2015), Issue 20, #14