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Jean-Luc Chappey, *Des naturalistes en Révolution: Les procès-verbaux de la Société d'histoire naturelle de Paris (1790-1798)*. Paris: CTHS, 2009. 352 pp. Annex, bibliography, and two indexes. €28.00 (pb). ISBN 978273550707.8.

Review by E. C. Spary, University of Cambridge.

Jean-Luc Chappey, best known for his acclaimed study of the Revolutionary Société des Observateurs de l'Homme, begins his introduction to this edition of the minutes of the Parisian natural history society which flourished in the 1790s with a challenge to existing historiography on that organisation. Noting that the Société d'Histoire Naturelle has long been viewed as “one of the products of the counter-offensive headed by lesser scientific practitioners and other socially ‘frustrated’ individuals against dedicated academic institutions” (p. 15), he calls for closer attention to the society as a prime example of the conditions of scientific practice during the French Revolution. Eschewing the sharply politicised interpretations of Hahn, Duris and others, Chappey offers a more moderate view in which conflicts over natural knowledge do not directly map onto political divisions, either in the sense of the micropolitics of scientific life, or in the macropolitical sense.[1] He points out that naturalists with very different institutional circumstances, political and scientific commitments associated peacefully within the Société, for all the world as if there were no disagreements dividing them.

Beneath this serene surface, however, a more complex picture emerges. Discussing the discrepancies between notes taken by the society's secretary at its meetings, and the formal minutes that were subsequently written up, Chappey argues that unanimity was a strategy which allowed the Société d'Histoire Naturelle, despite deep political and epistemological divisions, to “construct an institutional unity and a scientific coherence which is by no means as solid as it appears” (p. 37). As I have elsewhere argued for the case of the Jardin du Roi, public displays of unanimity and harmony were indeed invaluable strategies for Revolutionary scientific practitioners concerned to secure ongoing political support for a programme of enquiry into nature, which had at all costs to be defended as the subject of assent and union, in keeping with the foundational assumption of major political groups within the Assemblée and Convention.[2] The portrayal of Parisian scientific spaces as forums where “individual wills” were silenced, and of the sciences as apolitical, continued into the new institutions of the post-Revolutionary years.[3] To be a credible public expert in matters natural now involved—among other things—drawing attention to the universal and consensual quality of natural knowledge, and thus to its reliability as a basis for the reform of society.

Most of the book is devoted to a transcription of the Société's minutes from documents held in the archives of the Bibliothèque Centrale du Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris. Chappey's introduction and the generous preface contributed to the volume by Pietro Corsi offer interpretative standpoints on the question of the relationship between knowledge and power, and are both well worth a read. Chappey makes a signal and long-overdue contribution to the literature on Revolutionary natural history by finally dispatching implausible renderings of the Société d'Histoire Naturelle as an organisation whose raison d'être was to overturn the tyranny of Buffonian natural history. Such portrayals make absolutely no sense when the membership and activities of the Société are considered as a whole. Instead, taking up a more recently established view of scientific practitioners as equally

vulnerable to the reversals of political fortune as anyone else, Chappey suggests that scientific societies of this sort represented a new form of association offering shelter from increasing political attacks against Old Regime institutions, particularly frequent in the summer of 1790 when the Société was founded. Such societies also provide interesting insights into the ways in which savants might navigate the loss of readerships and audiences which, for some of them, had been a major or perhaps even the only source of income sustaining scientific practice.

Corsi's preface, perhaps, extends Chappey's cautious conclusions a touch too far. To say that naturalists were experimenting with new forms of scientific sociability which might tide them over the collapse of the Old Regime structures of scientific practice, as Chappey does, is one thing. But even in 1790, and particularly in 1793 after the foundation of the new Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, there were salient and important distinctions between naturalists in institutions and those outside, who made a living by some other means—distinctions Corsi rather downplays. Natural history had only recently gained enough public support in Paris to allow the development of a market in specimens, books, herborisation trips or lecture courses. Newspapers reveal the significant growth in commercial natural history that occurred between 1760 and 1790 in the increasing numbers of advertisements for natural history specimens, books and courses

The multiplication of pamphlets submitted to the Assemblée Nationale between 1789 and 1793 concerning the future of the Jardin du Roi indicates the attention, both positive and negative, attracted by the old institutions. The naturalists holding posts at the Jardin were acutely attentive to tone, self-presentation, audience and symbolism in attempting the difficult feat of converting the King's Garden into a Republican Temple of Nature. The subsequent dealings they had with countless unaffiliated and impoverished naturalists left stranded by the Revolution, including Olivier, Adanson and other less well-known figures, attest to the power they held in their capacity as members of an institution. True, many of the naturalists who fled the capital in the mid-1790s went on to great things in the institutional world of the sciences. But at this particular political moment, the stakes of belonging were higher than perhaps at any other time before or after the Revolution. If the Société d'Histoire Naturelle offers one important historical lesson, it is surely that the terms of natural historical practice altered sharply as the conditions affecting it changed: the shifting boundaries of public interest and political power affected naturalists quite differently depending on their political affiliations and dependency on institutions or private incomes for support. For these reasons, it is essential to write the history of scientific practice in the Revolutionary period with very close attention to chronology, to the exact situation of individual practitioners at particular political moments.

What then of the long-standing view of the Société d'Histoire Naturelle as a heavily politicised organisation? While we have histories of the popular societies in the Revolution, we still lack a comprehensive study of non-State-funded scientific practice through the same period, as Chappey notes.<sup>[4]</sup> Those studies which consider the 1790s address institutions, or at best individual societies, while those which have looked at societies tend to stop short at the complexities of the Revolutionary decade.<sup>[5]</sup> The turbulent and rapid succession of regimes meant that a number of "free" organisations of this sort had an ephemeral existence, so that many are poorly known or easily confused with one another. And, lastly, the exigencies of surviving the political purges of the Jacobin period onwards meant that virtually all savants who remained in the capital through the 1790s subsequently rewrote their role in the Terror as victims or exiles rather than actors.<sup>[6]</sup> The Société's survival for some eight years is thus unusual.

The Société members' strategy for surviving the extremes of Revolution was thus not dissimilar to that of the naturalists at the Jardin du Roi (and there was substantive overlap between the two groups). Yet the conversion of the Jardin into the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle in 1793 was facilitated in part by formulating a very carefully developed relationship with its public, one which was elaborated at professorial meetings and implemented in guidebooks. This involved controlling access to specimens

and expertise in new ways, so that not just anyone could be seen to be making natural truth.<sup>[7]</sup> This was also the moment when the term ‘amateur’ shifted from meaning ‘a lover’ of natural history (and from applying equally to institutional naturalists, commercial naturalists and private connoisseurs) to its present meaning of ‘a non-expert practitioner’. Thus Chappey’s account of the Société as working according to norms controlled by a group of “specialists” rather than a “public of amateurs” (p. 28) deserves careful reconsideration.

It is problematic to advance a syllogistic account of public scientific expertise in which those within an organisation are scientific experts, therefore membership of that organisation confers scientific expertise, therefore scientific expertise is what is produced within that organisation...for who grants expertise to the organisation and its members in the first instance? When we acknowledge that the membership of the Société included, besides the naturalists of the Jardin du Roi, also doctors, journalists, tax officials, Crown postholders, prosecutors, and so on, it becomes more evident how hard it continued to be in the early 1790s to define recognisable categories of scientific experts. Many members were amateurs by today’s standards; almost all would probably have described themselves, as Lamarck and Broussonet explicitly did, as amateurs in the eighteenth-century sense—people drawn to investigate nature for the love of it, rather than because it was a condition of their employment. So an opportunity to investigate the dynamic relationship between public scientific expertise, private connoisseurship and sociability is somewhat missed, here.

In the final analysis, one of the most interesting facts to emerge from the minutes of the Société d’Histoire Naturelle does not concern the organisation’s own importance in relation to other sites of Revolutionary scientific practice, but rather the extent to which the membership of a whole range of scientific organisations—formal and informal, governmental and apolitical, institutional and private—overlapped between 1792 and 1795: the same group of individuals populated the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle, the Société d’Histoire Naturelle, Charles Desaudray’s Lycée des Arts, and the Convention Nationale’s Commission temporaire des Arts and Commission d’Instruction publique. This was a tightly-interwoven network—think chain-mail—which stretched between public lecture halls, collections, private meeting rooms and government commissions. The ties between the government of France and scientific advisors—in and out of institutions—were at this very moment being forged in such a way as to join the two in an enduringly close relationship, even more so than under the Old Regime.

It is this invisible manoeuvring, this complex web of interrelations, involving brokers like Antoine-François Fourcroy or Gilbert Romme, who moved between government, scientific practice and public instruction, which many accounts of the sciences in mid-1790s France have overlooked, marginalised or outright denied. Only the publication of archival materials and studies based upon them, like this book, can bring to light the cohesiveness of this pool of scientific experts and the extent of the new State’s dependency upon them—a dependency which continued through the Napoleonic period. Chappey observes that by the end of the century, and the end of the proceedings published here, the Société d’Histoire Naturelle’s administration was dominated by the professors of the Muséum d’Histoire Naturelle, while independent naturalists like Aubin-Louis Millin de Grandmaison or Jacques-Martin Cels had become adjunct members. The society now seemed to “undergo the fate of the majority of learned societies, which became offshoots of the large institutions” (p. 57). Even so, in or out of institutions, in or out of the Société, many of the members continued to play important roles as advisors to successive regimes. The exact form and location of association, therefore, may in the long run have been less important than the original boast of the Société to represent an “association of nearly all the Naturalists currently in Paris” (quoted, p. 21).

## NOTES

[1] Jean-Luc Chappey, *La société des observateurs de l'homme, 1799-1804: des anthropologues au temps de Bonaparte* (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 2002); Roger Hahn, *The Anatomy of a Scientific Institution: The Paris Academy of Sciences, 1666-1803* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1971); Pascal Duris, *Linné et la France (1780-1850)* (Geneva: Droz, 1993).

[2] E. C. Spary, *Utopia's Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Chapter 4; Hans-Christian Harten and Elke Harten, *Die Versöhnung mit der Natur: Gärten, Freiheitsbäume, republikanische Wälder, heilige Berge und Tugendparks in der französischen Revolution* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1989).

[3] Dorinda Outram, *Georges Cuvier: Vocation, Science and Authority in Post-Revolutionary France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), especially chapter eight; Toby A. Appel, *The Cuvier—Geoffroy Debate: French Biology in the Decades before Darwin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), chapter one.

[4] For the former, see, in particular, Michael L. Kennedy, *The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution: The Middle Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988); Michael L. Kennedy, *The Jacobin Clubs in the French Revolution, 1793-1795* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000); Albert Soboul, *Les sans-culottes parisiens en l'an II. Mouvement populaire et gouvernement révolutionnaire, 2 juin 1793—9 thermidor an II* (Paris: Clavreuil, 1958).

[5] On scientific practice in the Revolutionary period, see especially Denis Guedj, *La Révolution des savants*, Paris: Gallimard, 1988; Patrice Bret and Marcel Dorigny, eds., *Sciences et techniques autour de la Révolution française* (Vandoeuvre-les-Nancy: Société des études Robespierristes, 2000; *Scientifiques et sociétés pendant la Révolution et l'Empire, actes du 114<sup>e</sup> Congrès national des sociétés savantes*, Paris: Editions du CTHS, 1990; Roshdi Rashed, ed., *Sciences à l'époque de la Révolution française: recherches historiques* (Paris: A. Blanchard, 1988); Nicole Dhombres and Jean Dhombres, *Naissance d'un pouvoir: sciences et savants en France, 1793-1824* (Paris: Payot, 1989). On Old Regime scientific societies, see especially James E. McClellan III, *Science Reorganized: Scientific Societies in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Michael R. Lynn, *Popular Science and Public Opinion in Eighteenth-Century France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006).

[6] Dorinda Outram, "The Ordeal of Vocation: The Paris Academy of Sciences and the Terror, 1793-95", *History of Science* 21 (1983):251-273; Roger Hahn, "The Problems of the French Scientific Community 1793-1795", *Actes du XII<sup>e</sup> congrès international d'histoire des sciences* 3 (1968):37-40.

[7] E. C. Spary, "Forging Nature at the Republican Museum", in Lorraine Daston and Gianna Pomata eds., *The Faces of Nature in Enlightenment Europe* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2003), pp. 163-180.

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