

H-France Review Vol. 12 (February 2012), No. 30

Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley, eds., *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011. xi + 345 pp. Notes and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-80-4772808; \$25.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-80-4772815. \$25.95 (e-bk). ISBN 978-0-80-4777193.

Review by David A. Bell, Princeton University

Thirty-odd years ago, according to François Furet, the French Revolution was finally “over.” Now, according to Furet’s student and successor Patrice Gueniffey, it is “dead, along with its myths.”[1] The pronouncement echoes uncomfortably some of the funereal observations made by several other eminent historians of the subject in a *French Historical Studies* forum two years ago.[2] But in *From Deficit to Deluge*, Thomas Kaiser and Dale Van Kley have responded to this gloom in the American accents of Mark Twain: reports of the subject’s demise have been much exaggerated.

To be sure, the French Revolution is a more placid field of research than in the two decades before the Revolution’s bicentennial in 1989. Then, it was not unheard of for scholarly talks to dissolve into shouting matches, and for the tenor of book reviews occasionally to recall R. H. Tawney’s remark that “an erring colleague is not an Amalekite to be smitten hip and thigh.”[3] While the contributors to the Kaiser and Van Kley volume do allude to the old battles between “revisionists” and defenders of the Marxist “social interpretation,” their own tone is resolutely post-polemical, and their conclusions unlikely to arouse many ideologically-grounded critiques.

One reason for this relative placidity is that the book addresses the origins of the Revolution, rather than its course and radicalization. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, debates on the Revolution largely turned around the question of origins, and their social basis (or lack thereof). But with the publication of Furet’s *Penser la Révolution française* in 1978, the controversies, along with a large share of scholarly attention, passed largely into the area of what happened after the convocation of the Estates General in 1789.[4] In France itself, apart from a profusion of textbook publishing, historians have shown remarkably little interest in the origins of the Revolution during the past generation (Jean-Clément Martin’s edited 2005 volume, *La Révolution à l’oeuvre*, which aimed to survey work on the Revolution published since the bicentennial, barely even mentioned the subject).[5]

On this side of the Atlantic, Furet’s questions did provoke new interest in the political culture of the Old Regime. But the research in this area, which made heavy use of Jürgen Habermas’s insights into the “bourgeois public sphere,” never really gave rise to a strong, easily-summarized thesis about why the Revolution occurred, and the debates around it remained relatively unfocused. In some ways, a clearer “school” emerged in Britain, where a group of historians adopted what Kaiser and Van Kley here call a “neo-Namierite” perspective, focused on the play of faction in the royal court and the high administration. It is a perspective well represented in Peter Campbell’s 2005 collection *Origins of the French Revolution*, although Campbell’s own idiosyncratic essay in the volume moves away from it.[6] Kaiser and Van Kley take some time to acknowledge this school, and Kaiser himself interacts closely with it while going over some of the same territory in his fine essay on the court and French foreign policy. But its narrow attention to high politics, and what Kaiser and Van Kley call its “excessive

valorization of the contingent” (p. 13) have limited its appeal, and historians working in different *chantiers* have felt little need to structure their arguments against it.

The contributors to *From Deficit to Deluge* represent a good slice of the leading American historians of eighteenth-century France (along with Jack Goldstone, a welcome interloper from historical sociology). But readers here will not find a major new “American” interpretation of the Revolution’s origins. Instead they will find a series of illuminating, clearly-written essays that largely summarize and bring together the results of work conducted since the bicentennial. Although specialists will find the material and arguments relatively familiar, they will nonetheless appreciate the thoughtful *mises à point*. And anyone who teaches the history of the French Revolution on a college or graduate level will find the essays particularly helpful for students. Gail Bossenga’s essay on the financial origins of the Revolution, in particular, deserves a place on many reading lists, not simply because of its insightful arguments, but because of the clarity with which Bossenga explains this horrifically tortuous and complex subject. Still, no one will doubt the extent to which the editors and contributors alike have eschewed innovation after reading this sentence: “If, therefore, this book’s principal thesis is that the Revolution arose out of the politicization of multiple origins, one of its major subthemes is the reciprocal permeability of these origins” (p. 7). After finishing the volume, it is hard to resist the feeling that the editors and contributors alike could have ventured out a little further into less well-plowed territory.

Inevitably, some of the essays speak more directly to the problem of the Revolution’s origins than others. Jeremy Popkin, for instance, has to stretch his arguments in places to assert a strong connection between slavery in Saint-Domingue and the Revolution’s outbreak. The essay is characteristically lucid and well-researched, and in the course of tracing the place of Saint-Domingue in French politics in the late 1780’s, Popkin does make two very valuable arguments. First, he shows that the Société des Amis des Noirs amounted in many ways to the first revolutionary club, and therefore served as an important model for revolutionary politics. And secondly, he notes that anti-slavery agitators, both inside and outside the club, helped promote the language of natural rights before the Revolution. But without demonstrating that other clubs directly copied from the Société, and without comparing the invocation of natural rights by abolitionists to their invocation by others (tasks that would, admittedly, take more space than Popkin had available here), it is hard to say how much weight we can ultimately put upon these points.

Jeffrey Merrick, meanwhile, daringly asserts that gender had much *less* to do with the origins of the Revolution than the current generation of historians has thought. Looking particularly at the language used by litigants in cases of marital separation and alleged abuse, Merrick argues that the line between “traditional” and “modern” discourses of gender and family roles (Merrick himself puts the words in quotes) was in practice a remarkably flexible and porous one. The same lawyers could stress the duty of men to behave as good fathers and denounce “despotic” abuses when defending a wronged wife, and then turn around and stress the duty of wives to obey proper authority when representing an aggrieved husband. Merrick sees the “reconstruction of male authority” after 1794 less as the triumph of a new, Rousseauist ideology of separate spheres, than a “reaction against laws that resolved pre-revolutionary frictions in favor of subordinates” (p. 219). The argument is intriguing, but grounded in a small, very Parisian source base, and doesn’t engage much with the sort of literary texts that Lynn Hunt deployed so well in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* and *Inventing Human Rights*. But the article will certainly provoke further research and debate.[7]

Of the essays that do make large arguments about the Revolution’s origins, the three by Van Kley, Keith Michael Baker and Jack Goldstone mostly summarize previously-published and well-known work. In fact, Van Kley’s essay on the Revolution’s religious origins, besides providing an overview of his classic 1996 book on the subject, itself already appeared in Campbell’s 2006 volume, and is reprinted here in only slightly longer form.[8] It stresses the way in which the French monarchy’s rituals and self-justifications became so bound up in a Catholic “royal religion” that the religious controversies of the

eighteenth century—particularly around Jansenism—proved exceptionally dangerous to it. Van Kley thereby illuminates a key element of the unraveling of the Old Regime, and one that had remained largely forgotten until his own pioneering work. Given the length and complexity of Van Kley's book, the overview is very welcome, particularly for students.

Baker's essay, meanwhile, achieves the feat of concisely summarizing, in lucid prose, the arguments about the Revolution's linguistic origins that he has been developing over the course of most of his career. To material that readers of his path-breaking *Inventing the French Revolution* of 1991 will find familiar, he has added observations drawn from more recent work on classical republicanism in France, on the language of "society," and on the political languages of the Revolution.^[9] Readers familiar with Baker will find no significant departures from his contention that revolutionary action was fundamentally shaped by the range of meanings available in the rapidly-evolving political languages of the day. Occasionally, the concision of the essay feels jarring, as in Baker's overly-compressed attempt to argue that even an event as unexpected and contingent as the flight to Varennes could only have had its shocking meaning for French observers because of the "symbolic complex" available to them: "Without that symbolic complex, indeed, the glimpse of a fat man heading towards the French border in a lumbering carriage would not have generated a revolutionary event" (p. 167).

Baker somewhat awkwardly sidesteps the issue that the King's decision to flee, and the fact that he was just barely caught, were both extraordinarily contingent, and that both hugely influenced the course of the Revolution, and thus its symbolic complex as well. But at many other moments Baker hits on felicitous and memorable phrasings: "the new revolutionary language was not an immaculate conceptualization" (p. 184, and adapted, with full credit, from Marshall Sahlins); "Once a purge of the National Assembly by the people failed to achieve that end [of reconciling representation and the general will], it was time for the Assembly to purge the people" (p.191). And there is this brilliantly economical pair of sentences: "The problem facing the absolute monarchy in the last decades of the eighteenth century was that it could neither abandon its traditional ideological foundations in a particularistic society nor retreat from the newer administrative practices upon which it increasingly depended. It was beset by a fundamental contradiction irresolvable without a radical transformation of its principles and practices" (pp. 179-80).

Jack Goldstone's essay on social origins also largely harkens back to a well-known major work, in this case his 1991 *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World*.^[10] As in that book, Goldstone here rejects older, *marxist* interpretations that put the emphasis on class conflict. In what he call his "new social interpretation" (although by now it is surely approaching middle age) he asserts that "context replaces class" (p. 70). In particular, he looks at the way that demographic growth and price inflation, experienced by a regime incapable of reforming its social and financial structures, created broad pressures on the distribution of resources, and the social reproduction of elites. Goldstone recognizes that France in the late eighteenth century did not face the sort of massive economic crisis, featuring Malthusian population limits and commercial and industrial stagnation, envisioned half a century ago by *Annales* historians. As we now know, in some ways the French economy grew impressively in the eighteenth century. But Goldstone notes that the new wealth was concentrated in particular areas—commercial farming, trade (especially overseas trade), and the urban professions. Traditional agricultural elites suffered by comparison, as did smallholding peasants, many of whom fell into poverty. And the crown proved woefully incapable of generating revenues from the successful commercial and manufacturing sectors. The resulting pressures did not, by themselves, trigger revolution—indeed, they were not unique to France. But Goldstone argues that they made the French state "brittle and vulnerable" (p. 103), creating the conditions under which a major political crisis had the ability to destroy the regime as a whole. It is a trenchant argument, but limited in its reach. Older, class-based social interpretations not only tried to explain why the Old Regime broke down, but also why the Revolution took the form it did. Goldstone's contextual model, by contrast, aims to explain only the political collapse of 1787-89. Moreover, it admits that the revolutionary crisis itself had autonomous

political and cultural origins, rather than social ones. As a result, rather than reviving a “social interpretation,” the essay validates the shift that has occurred from social to political and cultural explanations.

Of all the essays, it is Thomas Kaiser’s and Gail Bossenga’s that do the most to bring new arguments about the origins of the Revolution to the table. Kaiser, it is true, has already published extensively on the broad subject of “Austrophobia”—especially in relation to the most visible Austrian native at the court of Versailles—and how it helped to radicalize French politics both before and after 1789.^[11] But in this article, he makes the fresh and important points that Austrian meddling in French foreign policy was in point of fact both brazen and extensive, and that French public opinion clearly blamed it for France’s spectacular foreign failures in the late 1780’s, in particular the perceived abandonment of Turkish and Dutch allies. Indeed, Kaiser concludes that “1789 entailed, among many other things, to be sure, a kind of referendum on the Old Regime’s foreign policy” (p. 164). Kaiser makes little use of German-language Viennese sources, and it would be interesting to know how the story looks from the perspective of the Habsburg court. But he draws on important new research in French sources, especially in the foreign ministry archives, using the evidence of correspondence to link the Austrian court to the “Queen’s party” at Versailles, and the Queen’s party to French foreign policy decisions. One only wishes that Kaiser had done more in the essay to link this rich material to broader changes in French political culture. After all, fears of foreign influence, connected to powerful foreign-born women at court, were hardly new in France—think of the opprobrium heaped on Catherine de Médicis, Marie de Médicis and Anne of Austria. In comparison with Austrophobia, the Anglophobia that developed in eighteenth-century France represented something far more novel, because it did not invoke the enemy court and ruling dynasty, but the entire English nation, and therefore helped shape ideas of what a nation should be. If the charges of Austrian meddling in French affairs provoked such a sharp reaction, it was not only because the charges were true, but because in the France of the 1780’s, court politics itself had come to appear by definition corrupt and illegitimate to a wide segment of elite opinion. One hopes that in his long-awaited book on the subject, Kaiser will bring these elements of the story together.

Gail Bossenga is also no stranger to her subject, the financial origins of the Revolution. But in her essay, she provides a trenchant and lucid new perspective on this vexed and complex subject. Against a long tradition in the historiography, she maintains that it was not simply the baroque and inefficient nature of state finance under the Old Regime that made it impossible for the French administration to pay its bills, thereby provoking the revolutionary crisis. Rather, it was the combination of this system, and “the monarchy’s own attempts at financial modernization” (p. 66) which led France over the cliff. Like many historians before her, Bossenga compares France to Britain, which, from 1694, established a rationalized credit system centered on the Bank of England, in which state debt was backed by the full faith and credit of Parliament. In France, by contrast, “in an absolute monarchy lacking accountability financial capitalism was grafted onto privileged patrimonial structures: France modernized within traditional institutions” (p. 48). In particular, the monarchy continued to rely on the revenue provided by venal offices, and on elite corps of privileged financiers. In the later eighteenth century, however, even as the fiscal demands on the state accelerated because of the cost of globalized warfare, these traditional mechanisms proved incapable of generating the necessary revenue. As a result, the government of Louis XV came to rely ever more heavily on issues of *rentes* (annuities), as well on the direct taxes that his great-grandfather Louis XIV had instituted (especially the *vingtième*). Even so, it had to declare a partial bankruptcy in 1770. Afterwards, with Parisian lenders writing off their government as a bad risk, there was a turn towards the ruinously expensive international money market. In the late 1770’s, director of finances Jacques Necker attempted a “process of administrative rationalization” (p. 55) that would have partly demolished this jerry-rigged system, and saved close to 100 million *livres* a year. But his fall in 1781 brought the full return of the older system, and a further explosion of state debt.

As Bossenga demonstrates, by the late 1780's, matters had reached a point where another bankruptcy loomed—but this time, bankruptcy would effectively have spelled the end of France's great power status. With the state debt now heavily internationalized, the directors of finance could not risk a severe downgrading of French credit, especially given the Dutch and Turkish failures pointed to by Kaiser (Bossenga nicely quotes Thomas Jefferson writing, in November of 1788, that France had suffered a “temporary annihilation in the scales of Europe”—p. 61). The state therefore had no choice but to try and dissolve the inefficient system of patrimonial finance and move towards a system of credit guaranteed by the crown and some sort of national legislature. Public opinion was increasingly ready to accept such a system, but the *parlements* steadfastly refused to play the role of a true parliament, instead blocking reform measures. In short, all factors led inexorably towards the calling of the Estates General. It is an elegant and impressive synthesis.

Together, Bossenga, Goldstone, Kaiser and Van Kley's essays provide a picture of remarkable political failure. By the late 1780's, matters in France had reached a point where the state could not function, financially, as a great power without root-and-branch reform. But the monarchy, whose own traditional forms of legitimacy had been deeply undermined by religious contention, and whose Austrian-influenced leadership was widely viewed with suspicion, no longer had the standing to carry out such reforms. Therefore, again, the crown had no choice but to summon the Estates.

But why did the resulting crisis result in the French Revolution? It is here that the essays in the book provide less guidance. Baker's observations on the new political languages available provide a crucial part of the story, but they are not the whole story. Why do particular political languages and formulations have such an appeal? It is not simply that they allow groups to form, and press claims in new ways. It is because they resonate with readers on a deep, visceral level, because they fit in with those readers' experiences, frustrations, fears and desires. The new ways of viewing politics that Baker charts so well only became a “script” for Revolution because the older languages of politics, and the institutions they were so closely bound to, had come to seem not merely insufficient, but harmful and corrupt. The new languages appealed because of the way they spoke to a population that was experiencing enormous social, economic and cultural changes. It was this potent combination of factors that turned a crisis of a regime into a revolution. And it still remains poorly understood.

LIST OF ESSAYS

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Gail Bossenga, “Financial Origins of the French Revolution”

Jack A. Goldstone, “The Social Origins of the French Revolution Revisited”

Dale K. Van Kley, “The Religious Origins of the French Revolution, 1569-1791”

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Jeremy D. Popkin, “Saint-Domingue, Slavery, and the Origins of the French Revolution”

Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley, "Conclusion: From Old Regime to French Revolution"

NOTES

[1] Patrice Gueniffey, *Histoires de la Révolution et de l'Empire* (Paris: Perrin, 2011), p. 26.

[2] "Forum: Twenty Years after the Bicentennial," *French Historical Studies*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2009): 647-706.

[3] Cited in Adam Sisman, *An Honourable Englishman: The Life of Hugh Trevor-Roper* (New York: Random House, 2010), p. 219.

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

[5] Jean-Clément Martin, ed., *La Révolution à l'œuvre. Perspectives actuelles dans l'histoire de la Révolution française* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2005).

[6] Peter Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution* (Houndmills: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2005).

[7] Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).

[8] Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution: From Calvin to the Civil Constitution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996); Dale Van Kley, "The Religious Origins of the French Revolution," in Campbell, ed., *Origins*, pp. 160-90.

[9] Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Keith Michael Baker, "Enlightenment and the Institution of Society," in Sudipta Kaviraj and Sunil Khilnani, eds., *Civil Society: History and Possibilities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 84-104; Keith Michael Baker, "Transformations of Classical Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 73, no. 1 (2001):32-53; Keith Michael Baker, "Political Languages of the French Revolution," in Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 626-59; Keith Michael Baker, "The Idea of a Declaration of Rights," in Dale Van Kley, ed., *The French Idea of Freedom: Origins of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 154-196.

[10] Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolution and Rebellion in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

[11] Thomas E. Kaiser, "Who's Afraid of Marie-Antoinette? Diplomacy, Austrophobia and the Queen," *French History*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2000):241-271; Thomas E. Kaiser, "Ambiguous Identities: Marie-Antoinette and the House of Lorraine from the Affair of the Minuet to Lambesc's Charge," in Dena Goodman, ed., *Marie-Antoinette: Writings on the Body of a Queen* (New York: Taylor & Francis., 2003), pp. 171-198; Thomas E. Kaiser, "From the Austrian Committee to the Foreign Plot: Marie-Antoinette, Austrophobia, and the Terror," *French Historical Studies* vol. 26, no. 4 (2003), pp. 579-617; Thomas E. Kaiser, "La fin du renversement des alliances : La France, l'Autriche et la déclaration de guerre du 20 avril 1792," *Annales historiques de la Révolution française*, no. 351 (2008), pp. 77-98; Thomas E. Kaiser, "Entre les mots et les choses : Le fantôme du 'comité autrichien,'" in Annie

Duprat, ed., *Révolutions et Mythes Identitaires: Mots, violences, mémoire* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2009), pp. 31-47.

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ISSN 1553-9172