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Yehuda Cohen, *The French: Myths of Revolution*. Brighton, UK and Portland, Ore: Sussex Academic Press, 2011. xviii + 212 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. £49.95/\$74.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-84519-390-4.

Review by Jeff Horn, Manhattan College.

This work is Yehuda Cohen's second contribution to a series of six books entitled "Heritage, Society and National Identity in the European Union." [1] Although four chapters of this study concern the era of the E.U. or consider what will happen next, the bulk of the book discusses either the end of the old regime and the French Revolution (eight chapters) or the period from Napoleon Bonaparte to the end of the Third Republic (four chapters). Cohen presents a three-part argument. For him, "the French Revolution was more myth than reality,...an imaginary affair...manipulated and canonized to address societal needs and a political agenda" during the late nineteenth century. In the second half of the twentieth century, this "imagined community...prompted the French to join the European Union" (p. xiv).

The linked underlying questions Cohen purports to address concern the type of union that Europeans have created, competing styles of leadership and the sustainability of this institution. As the final four deeply comparative and heavily self-referential chapters make clear, this book is conceived in tandem with the German volume (p. xv). In Cohen's understanding of "European Selfhood," the critical difference between France and Germany revolves around the relationship of citizens to the state (chapter twelve). Cohen follows up this argument with a number of provocative observations about divergent French and German styles of European leadership focusing on issues related to ethnicity, immigration, integration, demographics and political models (chapters thirteen and fourteen). This is the more original part of the book and is clearly where Cohen's heart and head come together. The book's final chapter is a summary of the arguments. It finishes with a series of important questions about the future of the E.U. and France's place in it. After raising these significant issues, Cohen concludes that, "[i]t is still too early to tell. Only from the perspective of developments over the next generation or two can one expect to gain definitive answers." Given the pugnacious and pedantic tone of the rest of the book, this is a surprisingly half-hearted ending note.

Cohen begins his study with a brief and somewhat skewed examination of historiography based, in part, on Peter Campbell's fine edited collection *The Origins of the French Revolution*. [2] He then presents what he describes as factors that Campbell has not "taken into account" (p. 4), namely the role of Protestants and the judiciary (chapters one and two). Short chapters are devoted to explorations of "Tax Farming," "The Monarchy and the Church," "The Language of Rioting," "The Third Estate," and "Ideas on Nationality and Sovereignty," before concluding part one with portraits of the Bourbon kings of France (chapters three to eight). Cohen emphasizes the existence of a "Language of Rioting" beginning in the fourteenth century and lasting until the present day that he describes as a "breakthrough tenet" that is "ignored or underrated in the research literature to date" (p. 28). The version of events surrounding the fall of the Bastille and the emergence and actions of the National Assembly is tied deterministically to the long-term rise of the middle class. Cohen minimizes the role of ideas in favor of what he calls practical, material considerations that had nothing to do with democracy.

Cohen spends almost no time considering either the era of revolutionary government or the Directory. He moves rapidly to Bonaparte who he understands as wholly pragmatic and devoid of any ideology (p. 77). The Empire's patronage system is characterized as "shrewd totalitarianism" (p. 83). Beyond some description of a French preference for strong leadership referring to the First and Second Empires, chapter nine dismisses the nineteenth century until 1870. Curiously in a work emphasizing the language of rioting, the events of 1830, 1832, 1848 and 1851 either go unmentioned or receive very short shrift. It was only after the fall of Napoleon III that the French became interested in a new kind of politics, claims Cohen. He argues that "[u]ntil 1870, the French exhibited no real interest in democracy. They wanted a strong, monarchic or imperial government" (p. 64). Only then did the myth of the French Revolution begin to be "constructed in earnest" (p. 47). "[E]xternal factors" were behind this construction because "[t]his myth answered both the need of the intellectuals to strengthen the democratic system of government in France and to build French intellectual hegemony" (p. 119). Cohen then explains why, for practical purposes, the French needed this myth at critical junctures in the twentieth century before turning to the era of the European Union.

Readers will note that I began this summary with the last section of the book. I did this to emphasize the part of the book that seems the most reasoned and relevant. In my judgment, some interesting observations and perspectives are displayed in these four chapters, though certainly not enough to sustain a monograph. The first two-thirds of the book are deeply problematic. As I read this work, these two initial parts thoroughly undermine the worth of the project. Had Yehuda Cohen either read the primary sources or consulted the proper secondary ones, he would have realized the questionable nature of some of his arguments and the lack of innovation in others. In the course of my review of the shortcomings of this book, I seek to raise broader issues of the provision of evidence, historiographical argumentation and the responsibility of editors.

This book is based entirely on secondary works, almost exclusively in English, Hebrew and German. There are only three French-language works in the bibliography and not a single one in the notes, although a number of French authors appear in translation. This lack represents one of my basic criticisms of Cohen's approach. I believe that such a wide-ranging book with sections that treat "French Historical Scholarship Re-Examined," and "The French Collective in Historical Context," not to mention "A Lack of Consensus" on the causes of the French Revolution, simply cannot ignore untranslated accounts in French without profoundly skewing its account of the state of the field.

My second fundamental critique of Cohen's book also relates to sources. It is certainly possible for a book to advance a powerful argument about the *longue durée* of French history and its implications for the future without reference to primary sources. However, to do so, an author has to be at pains to read both broadly and deeply in the secondary literature, consulting the recent work of the various experts in the field, especially when making claims about discovering a "breakthrough tenet." Here Cohen's book falls shockingly short of the mark.

For his historical data, Cohen admits that he relied almost exclusively on Roger Mettam and Douglas Johnson's *French History and Society: The Wars of Religion to the Fifth Republic* (p. 189).<sup>[3]</sup> This little book (168 pages) was published in 1974. It is clearly intended for a student audience, with short bibliographic essays rather than notes. Cohen overuses the authority of this outdated work to buttress his ideas by citing Mettam and Johnson's views in the text on thirty-two different pages (p. 211). At the same time, Cohen had difficulty getting his facts right. Without trying very hard, I found a startling number of factual errors (pp. 6, 8, 17-18, 20, 28, 32, 35, 37, 39, 42-43, 46, 52, 54, 60, 61, 63-69, 78-81, 84-85, 93, 100, 110, 112, 114, 118, 121, 125-126, 145-146, 150-151, 158, 176, 186 and 210). These errors are not matters of interpretation; mostly they concern straightforward names, dates and places. Louis

XIII was not Henri IV's grandson (p. 6). The royal head tax, the *taille* was not assessed at over 50 percent of income (p. 37), etc., etc. I suspect that if I was as familiar with later periods of French history as I am with earlier eras, I would have found more glitches. This sloppiness made it difficult for me to credit Cohen's analysis.

The issue of sources goes deeper. Cohen did undertake some research. There are recent works listed in his five-page bibliography, but the gaps are profound. How can you ignore Orest Ranum on the Fronde, Timothy Tackett on the National Assembly, Michael Fitzsimmons on the night of 4 August, William Sewell on Sieyès, Michael Kwass on tax collection, Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret on the nobility and elites, Theodore Zeldin on the liberal empire, Sanford Elwitt on the founding of the Third Republic or Robert Paxton on Vichy?<sup>[4]</sup> Among this partial list of works that Cohen should have consulted, it is apparent that some missing books are more distressing than others. For someone emphasizing the language of rioting, perhaps the most egregious oversight is Charles Tilly who made a (better) version of this argument more than twenty years ago, but William Reddy and Natalie Zemon Davis are also missing.<sup>[5]</sup> I also speculate that Cohen might have modified his depiction of a middle class takeover at the end of the old regime, along with his denigration of the democratic content or practice of the French Revolution, had he consulted Vivian Gruder, Jean-Pierre Gross, Lynn Hunt, Isser Woloch, Adeline Daumard, Ted Margadant and Malcolm Crook.<sup>[6]</sup> That there are far more references to the *Encyclopedia Hebraica* than to French sources is a methodological predicament that Cohen does not resolve.

Other blind spots undermine Cohen's argument. For example, he repeatedly raises contemporary issues of immigration and how France integrates people who are not "ethnically" French. Algeria is no longer French, but it was from 1848 to 1962, yet he does not consider their experience except in a sentence or two. Guadeloupe, Martinique and the other overseas departments remain part of France, yet there is no consideration of how people from these territories fit into the mythic imagined community he posits. This absence is conceptually troubling and contributes to Cohen's negative evaluation of the Revolution. He makes no mention of the Revolution's abolition of slavery, forced and temporary though it was. Given the current historiographical emphasis on the colonies and overseas territories and their experiences, this blind spot makes it hard to envision how this book could be used either in a classroom or by specialists. In short, Yehuda Cohen did not do enough research to make the points he wishes to make convincingly.

Finally, I must take issue with Sussex Academic Press. This work is part of a series edited by Moshe Sluhovsky, who has written on mysticism and rituals of devotion in late medieval and early-modern France. He also wrote the foreword and the endorsement on the cover. Had this book been sent out for review by experts in the time period, they likely would have caught the vast majority of the problems noted above. Nor did the copy editing do Cohen any favors. Spelling Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's name wrong (two errors in the name, consistently) at several reprises or referring to Michael Baker's work on the French Revolution (pp. 10-11, 22, 191, 207) should have been caught, since the footnote properly refers to Keith Michael Baker (p. 190). Again, without looking very hard, I found a troubling number of typographical or editing errors (pp. 10, 13, 22, 39-40, 42-43, 48, 52-55, 57-58, 63, 77, 79, 84, 99, 107, 111, 117-119, 131, 123-124, 134, 136, 141, 145, 151, 163, 170, 174, 176, 185, 190, 196 and 210). Given the considerable expense of this short book, I expected a greater degree of professional attention.

It might be argued that the historical shortcomings of this work matter less in other disciplines. I beg to differ. When the theories, models and conclusions of politics and government or any other social science are based on limited reading that ignores relevant issues and expert opinion, such a shaky foundation will not stand the test of time. The significant number of factual errors and typographical mistakes also send the wrong message to students and casual readers. Sloppiness is not acceptable, either materially

or intellectually. Yehuda Cohen's *The French: Myths of Revolution* cannot be taught and will be of limited value—at best—to academics. It should not be purchased by libraries. The few interesting observations found in the latter parts of the book are more suitable for an article: the problematic historical and historiographical frameworks damage rather than support them.

## NOTES

[1] Yehuda Cohen, *The Germans: Absent Nationality and the Holocaust* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2010).

[2] Peter R. Campbell, ed., *The Origins of the French Revolution* (Houndsmills, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[3] Roger Mettam and Douglas Johnson, *French History and Society: The Wars of Religion to the Fifth Republic* (London: Methuen, 1974).

[4] Orest Ranum, *The Fronde: A French revolution, 1648-1652* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993); Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); Michael P. Fitzsimmons, *The Night the Old Regime Ended: August 4, 1789 and the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003); William H. Sewell, Jr., *A Rhetoric of Bourgeois Revolution: The Abbé Sieyès and What is the Third Estate?* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994); Michael Kwass, *Privilege and the Politics of Taxation in Eighteenth-Century France* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Guy Chaussinand-Nogaret, *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: From Feudalism to Enlightenment*, trans. William Doyle (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985 [1976]); Theodore Zeldin, *Émile Ollivier and the Liberal Empire of Napoleon III* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963); Sanford Elwitt, *The Making of the Third Republic: Class and Politics in France, 1868-1884* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975); and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940-1944* (New York: Knopf, 1972).

[5] Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1989); William M. Reddy, "The Textile Trade and the Language of the Crowd at Rouen, 1752-1871," *Past & Present* 74(1977): 62-89; and Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France," *Past & Present* 59(1973): 51-91.

[6] Vivian Gruder, "The Society of Orders at its demise: The Vision of the Élite at the end of the *Ancien Régime*," *French History* 1/2(1987): 210-237, Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All: Jacobin Egalitarianism in Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Adeline Daumard, *Les bourgeois et la bourgeoisie en France depuis 1815* (Paris: Aubier, 1987); Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007); Isser Woloch, *Jacobin Legacy: The Democratic Movement under the Directory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Ted W. Margadant, *French Peasants in Revolt: the Insurrection of 1851* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979); and Malcolm Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution: an apprenticeship in democracy, 1789-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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