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Sanja Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France: Perceptions of Time in Literature, Culture, Politics*. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-107-02595-0.

Review by Noah Shusterman, Temple University.

The first thing to note about Sanja Perovic's *The Calendar in Revolutionary France: Perceptions of Time in Literature, Culture, Politics* is that its title is somewhat misleading. There is indeed plenty in the book about the calendar and about perceptions of time. There is also far more than anyone might expect to find about Sylvain Maréchal, an author whose Old Regime writings helped inspire the Republican calendar and who later took part in Babeuf's conspiracy of equals. This is not completely random. Any study of the Republican calendar needs to pay some attention to Maréchal, whose 1788 *Almanach des honnêtes gens* introduced the ten-day week. Perovic's study goes well beyond that, however, devoting somewhere between one quarter and one third of the book to interpreting Maréchal's works. For literary scholars, such attention will be welcome, as Maréchal's work has not received much consideration. For readers hoping to learn more about the Republican calendar or other aspects of the history of time during the French Revolution, these sections are a distraction. These are, to be sure, readings that highlight the temporal aspects of Maréchal's work, but they do not succeed in establishing the case for including so much material on Maréchal in the book. Perovic's argument for the intertwined narratives of Maréchal and the Republican calendar is tenuous, and Perovic also tends to overemphasize Maréchal's importance, although that tendency is not unique to her treatment of Maréchal.

Focusing on those parts of the book that do deal with the calendar, Perovic's is the latest among several recent works on the Republican calendar and on the larger issue of the history of time during the French Revolution. Studies of the Republican calendar tend to fall into one of two categories. On one side are those studies that use calendar reform as a way to get at the history of daily life during the Revolution. Despite some recent competition, Isser Woloch's "Republican Institutions" remains the standard bearer of this approach.[1] On the other side are the works of authors like Daniel Milo and Eviatar Zerubvel, whose studies use the Republican calendar as a way of thinking through broader questions of time, temporality, and rhythms of life.[2] Perovic is squarely in the latter camp. She takes a literary and theoretical approach to the history of the Republican calendar, which, given the empirical bent of the other recent works, has the potential to make a real contribution to the discussion.

Perovic begins her account well before the birth of the Republican calendar. In what is the best study yet of Old Regime discussions of the calendar, Perovic covers the writings of Antoine Court de Gébelin, Bailly, Rabaut de Saint Etienne, Volney, and others, showing that for these writers, the idea of "a natural calendar enabled Enlightenment reformers to... overturn feudal hierarchy by eliminating the church's control over time and to maintain that a natural order still organized social relations" (p. 32). While Maréchal's calendar stands out among these projects for its radicalism and its attempt to "destroy... the fusion of sacred and secular time that reinforced the social hierarchy of the ancient regime" (p. 51), Maréchal was nevertheless part of a larger discussion about the possibilities of altering the calendar. This approach fits well with Matthew Shaw's recent claim that for the elite, "the existing Gregorian calendar... was not seen as necessarily natural, or indeed fixed." [4]

The Revolution would open new possibilities for reforming the calendar. In explaining why the revolutionaries chose to put such a radical reform in place, Perovic pays close attention to the events of 10 August 1792, and the gap between those events and the start of the Convention in September 1792, which the Convention would later retroactively declare the start of year I. Perovic sees a double origin to republican time—not the metric system and the de-Christianization movement, as it is normally understood—but history and nature, or more specifically “the historical violence that brought about the rupture of 10 August and the natural or ‘utopian’ time that heralded the birth of the new Republic on 22 September” (p. 124). Perovic also focuses on the differences between Gilbert Romme’s original project and the modifications that Fabre d’Eglantine made to the final, official version of the calendar. It was Romme who first designed the calendar, with its ten-day weeks, thirty-day months, and its five to six leftover days. His project also included names for months rooted in the history of the Revolution (p. 113). Fabre d’Eglantine then altered the calendar’s nomenclature, giving the now famous seasonal names to the months (Brumaire, Germinal, Thermidor, etc.) and assigning agricultural terms to individual days. In doing so, Fabre d’Eglantine’s calendar, even more than Romme’s, “excludes almost all traces of the events of August-September 1792, that is, all references to the actual historical genesis of the new Republic” (p. 123).

A creation of the Radical Revolution, the Republican calendar would live on until 1806, though without the utopian enthusiasm of its early days. As Perovic notes, “instead of founding a new civilization, the Republican calendar became increasingly identified with the failure of allegory to trump historical experience” (p. 125). Explaining the continuation of the Republican calendar after the fall of Robespierre (and especially its revival under the Fructidorian Directory, which Perovic underplays) has always been a challenge for historians. As Perovic points out, however, not only did the Republican calendar succeed “in accruing historical meaning even as it failed to provide a unity of time” (p. 175), but it provided a useful middle ground: “if the calendar continued... to be a central feature of the government it did so as a purely civil calendar that signaled the victory of Enlightenment ideology over two forces: those who wanted to destroy the Revolution by returning to monarchy and those who wanted to destroy the Revolution by insisting on a return to natural equality” (p. 184). The Republican calendar was not out of the woods, however: “the accumulation of new historical events, each of which was different from all preceding events, made it impossible to subsume the narrative of revolutionary history under cyclical time” (p. 209).

Finally, when explaining the Republican calendar’s ability to last into the Empire, Perovic makes several points, most notably the counterintuitive claim that “once shorn of its lyrical dimension the Republican calendar proved to be an essential tool in the reconciliation with the Catholic Church that terminated in the Concordat” (p. 222). Perovic then discusses some of the changes Napoleon did enact, including the final elimination of the new calendar, and his attempt to graft the celebration of Saint Napoleon onto the Catholic festival of Assumption.

Again, this is not an archival work, nor does it claim to be. Its methods are far closer to those of literary analysis, as shown by Perovic’s claim in the conclusion that “the desire for total revolution needs to be understood in the wider context of literary agency” (p. 244). Not everyone would agree that literary agency is a “wider” context, however, and taking a literary approach to history has its limits.

There are times when this approach is successful, and where Perovic’s insights are strong. The claim that “in trying to undo the old calendar the revolutionaries ended up reoccupying a solar myth associated with absolutism” (p. 112) is an intriguing version of a Tocquevillian understanding of the Revolution. Unfortunately, as with so many of Perovic’s insights, the point is not sustained. Indeed, the book does not have any one central argument that unites it. There is a recurring interest in the relationship between history and nature, though this interest disappears for long stretches. Perovic also has a tendency to create and then resolve dichotomies that had never previously existed, or to pose

questions rooted only in the book's arguments and Perovic's understanding of cyclical versus linear time. This tendency is especially strong—and especially problematic—in Perovic's discussion of the “secular” nature of the Republican calendar. For Perovic, Romme's key achievement was “[S]ecularizing an essentially Christian view of time...” (p. 113). Perovic later asks, “[H]ow was a secular calendar, based on natural patterns, to enable the same sense of rupture and renewal as a religious calendar?” (p. 155) This idea of the Republican calendar as “secular,” though, is problematic at best. The Republican calendar was hardly the victory of abstract time over the traditional cycle of saints. In many ways it can be seen as an attempt to re-sacralize time, as Baczko has argued, and as Perovic implicitly acknowledges when she writes that “originally the Republican calendar had been conceived as analogous to the religious calendar” (p. 209).^[5] This is not the only place where Perovic mischaracterizes the religious history of the era. Perovic also makes the claim that the Republican calendar “reproduced a distinction between public reason and the private time of religion inherited from absolutism” (p. 21, see also p. 168), but Old Regime religious practice was anything but private. For a literary or theoretical approach to the Republican calendar to be successful, it has to be able to recognize the historicity of the categories it uses, rather than implicitly treat them as timeless abstractions.

The most fundamental weakness of the book, though, is not that it is too abstract, but rather that for the points that Perovic makes the book is not abstract enough. There is nothing wrong with tracing the development of an idea or a set of ideas across a set of obscure texts and events. Such an approach has always been a staple of intellectual history and would seem well-adapted to Perovic's more literary method. Nor is any study required to limit itself to the canonical events or actors that have already been covered. Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* is successful because it uses the obscure and seemingly irrelevant Menocchio to shine light on the society from which he came. Perovic's story takes place in an awkward middle ground, though, as if Ginzburg had tried to place Menocchio into the mainstream of Italian political history. Perovic discusses events that, while hardly obscure, did not overly matter at the time, and then argues repeatedly for those events' importance.

This tendency comes out in several places, starting with Perovic's claim that calendar time played a “crucial role in transforming the French Revolution from an event within the history of the French nation into a world-historical dividing line” (p. 3) and with the book's “central claim” that “the French Revolution, while often studied as a political, social, or cultural event, instead poses *primarily* a problem in the history of representations of time” (p. 4, emphasis mine). It continues through Perovic's account of the Revolution, where the author pulls off the nearly impossible task of overemphasizing the events of 10 August 1792, which were a crucial transformation of the Revolution but did not, on their own, represent the “end of the old world” (p. 88) any more than the Old Regime's Rose Girl festivals were “a full-fledged social movement” (p. 162). Related to this is Perovic's tendency to present her own interpretations of events as if they were ones that people held at the time. It is possible to argue that the republican calendar's shortcomings represent “the failure of allegory to trump historical experience,” but to argue (as quoted above) that “the Republican calendar *became increasingly identified*” with that failure (p. 125, emphasis mine) requires some sort of documentation of who was doing this identifying.

Nor did the gap between 10 August 1792 and the birth of the Republic on 22 September constitute the existential crisis of meaning that Perovic makes it out to be. It was, to be sure, a period of nearly unparalleled crisis for the Revolution, matched only by June and July 1793, but the causes of the 1792 crisis lay in the rivalry between the Legislative Assembly and the Commune and the resulting power vacuum, along with the threat posed by Austrian and Prussian armies, not the “curious lag” between the end of the historical world on 10 August and the start of the natural world on 22 September (p. 88). Nor does the description of 10 August as a time when the center of the Revolution shifted from Lafayette to Anarchis Clootz make much sense. There is plenty to be said about the role that both men played in the Revolution, but there is no inherent link between either of these men and the history of the calendar. If either turns out to have something to say about the Republican calendar's history or

other matters of temporal interest, fine; but in Perovic's account the men become somehow crucial not only to the Republican calendar's history, but to the history of the Revolution itself. This is a plausible enough claim for Lafayette, although he was out of favor well before 10 August, so it is unclear what role he should play in this account; meanwhile, the idea that Cloutz "all of a sudden appeared as a privileged figure of consensus" (p. 99) feels arbitrary.

Perovic's extended discussion of Marie-Antoinette's trial has similar tendencies. While the trial belongs in any history of the Revolution, its place in a history of the calendar and perceptions of time is less clear. For Perovic, though, the continued existence of the queen after the "symbolic" act of regicide reflected a "profound crisis in the revolutionary self-image" (p. 128). Did the Queen's continued existence in the fall of 1793 seem anachronistic? Yes. But that anachronism was hardly a "profound crisis," especially considering the large number of more urgent crises the Montagnard government was facing. Nor was the trial and execution of Marie Antoinette "one of the most memorable trials of the French Revolution" (p. 127) for contemporaries, any more than there was an "acute" need for Maréchal's play *The Last Judgment of Kings*, which opened the next week (p. 127). Again, there are parallels to be made between the once-queen's trial and Maréchal's play, but neither was viewed by contemporaries as particularly remarkable. And while there was a significant amount of "anxiety" at the start of the Year II—as at almost any time during the Revolution—that anxiety can hardly be attributed to the start of the calendar, and especially not to "the divergence between the Revolution's real and ideal time" which Perovic claims (with no supporting evidence) "had become apparent to all" (p. 131).

Perovic's treatment of the festival of reason and the goddesses of reason who presided over those festivals is similar. These festivals do have a closer link with the Republican calendar, sharing their origins in the wave of de-Christianization that swept France during the time the Republican calendar became law. But Perovic's claim that the festivals of reason "*would long be remembered* as the high mark of inventiveness in revolutionary culture" (p. 151, emphasis mine) is a stretch, and the claim that "the failure of living goddesses to internalize the abstract time of the state thus raises fundamental questions about the whole project of calendar reform" (p. 156) reflects nothing quite so much as Perovic's tendency to reify her own arguments.

As with the trial of Marie Antoinette and the festival of reason, so too, Perovic tends to overstate the case for Maréchal's importance. Again, it would be entirely plausible to argue for Maréchal's ability to capture the spirit of the times, or to have presented an alternative understanding to his contemporaries' views of the Revolution. But Perovic's claims that one of his plays "holds the key to understanding the Terror" (p. 150) is a stretch, though less of one than the claim that "as misunderstood as he often was, Maréchal had an impact on post-Thermidorean culture that extended farther than it is normally assumed" (p. 207).

There is the potential in this book for a real contribution to our understanding of the Republican calendar. The empirical tendencies of other recent studies have left the door open for a more literary or theoretical approach to the calendar and its history. There is simply too much material in this book that drags it down, however, and prevents any clear sense of the stakes of "the most ambitious attempt to regenerate the life of the human species" (p. 13). For scholars interested in readings of Maréchal, this is a welcome addition to a thin literature. Perovic's book, however, will be of only limited value to historians.

NOTES

[1] Isser Woloch, "Republican Institutions," in Colin Lucas, ed., *The French Revolution and the Creation of Modern Political Culture*, v. 2, *The Political Culture of the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

[2] Eviatar Zerubavel, *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Daniel Milo, *Trahir le temps* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1991), pp. 195-221.

[3] Matthew Shaw, *Time and the French Revolution: The Republican calendar, 1789-Year XIV* (Suffolk: Boydell and Brewer, 2011), p. 20.

[4] Bronislaw Baczko, "Le Calendrier Républicain: Décréter l'éternité", Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire*, v. I: *La République*, (Paris : Gallimard, 1984), p. 53.

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