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Clifford Conner, *Jean Paul Marat: Tribune of the People*. London: Pluto Press, 2012. xiii + 178. Notes and index. \$85.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7453-3194-2; \$21.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7453-3193-5

Review by Stephen Miller, University of Alabama at Birmingham

In this well-written and gripping biography, Clifford Conner argues that “without Marat, the French Revolution may well not have resulted in the social transformation of France, Europe, and the world” (p. x). Under the influence of revisionism in the 1980s, historians ceased to see great value in the radicalism of the Revolution and in consequence stopped paying much attention to Marat’s influence on events. In contrast, Conner argues that Marat’s writings did not simply reflect prevailing moods but actually went in advance of them and won over his readership at crucial stages of the Revolution.

Marat wrote a few books and essays in the 1770s, one of which, *De l’homme*, came out with Marc Michel Rey, a major publisher in the Netherlands, and placed him among the cultural elite. In the 1780s, Marat became well-known and respected as an experimental physicist among several notable personages in Paris, though the intellectual elite of the Academy of Sciences considered him a charlatan. Conner notes that his scientific career petered out in the latter part of the 1780s, when physical ailments probably would have caused him to fade from public view if not for the social ferment preceding the Revolution, which revived him and enabled him to change his career from scientist to radical journalist and politician.

In September 1789, Marat began to publish the daily newspaper which made him famous, *L’Ami du peuple*. The publication distinguished itself from others of the time in its attacks on the National Assembly and Paris Commune. While everyone else saw these institutions as embodiments of the Revolution, Marat saw them as beholden to the wealthy classes and enemies of the people. Conner writes that Marat persistently but vainly urged his fellow citizens to overthrow the current system in a second revolution devoted to social justice.

Marat was much more successful a month later in his agitation against the supposed famine plot. Indeed, one of the assets of Conner’s biography is how crucial it shows Marat to have been to the events of October 1789. *L’Ami du peuple* affirmed that the Subsistence Committee of the Paris municipality, rather than bring down the price of bread, would actually make it more expensive by concerting with the profiteers of the millers’ guild. Marat also accused the Committee of conspiring with Jacques Necker, the royal finance minister, to hoard grain and drive up prices, and in so doing to discredit and destroy the Revolution. Based on information obtained from his sources, Marat asserted, in an article published on October 5, 1789, that a number of officers of the royal army, together with the leaders of the National Guard, participated in a reactionary orgy in Versailles where they insulted and threatened the Revolution. The Parisian population, perceiving a constant threat of being massacred by royalist troops, became greatly alarmed. Marat called on the people to rise up, march on Versailles, extricate the king from that nest of intrigue, and make him permanently reside in Paris. People responded in force the same day.

Conner also shows the perceptive, albeit unpopular, political positions staked out by Marat over the following three years. In May and June 1791, Marat denounced the Chapelier laws. He stated that the prohibition on associations, coalitions, or organizations of wage workers would serve the purpose of driving down the earnings of the population. Marat stood alone on this issue against the rest of the prominent opinion-makers. The population refused to mobilize against these laws, and Marat remained completely isolated.

A year later, Marat opposed the drive to war. He wrote that the generals in control of the war effort were not interested in victory. They preferred defeat, the reestablishment of the Old Regime, and the massacre of Parisian revolutionaries. Marat saw a plot in the king's decision to appoint the saber-rattling Brissot. He used *L'Ami du peuple* to argue that Brissot's ultra-left demagoguery endangered the Revolution by leading the people down the path of reactionary nationalism and diverting their attention from the traitors at home. These arguments did not win Marat much sympathy among the mass of Parisians eager for war.

Another quality of Conner's biography is its sketch of the political context of Marat's political activism and journalism. The police sought to take Marat into custody on October 8, 1789 after *L'Ami du Peuple* had appeared openly on the streets of Paris for a month. But Marat had been tipped off and went underground, where he remained clandestinely, and at times semi-clandestinely, until August 1792. He gained mystique by repeatedly frustrating the attempts to arrest him. He succeeded in evading the police, Conner argues, thanks to his multitude of active and passive supporters, the intelligence-gathering networks he cultivated, and his many contacts who kept him one step ahead of the authorities. Many patriotic citizens eagerly provided Marat shelter. Thousands of sans-culottes willingly took to the streets to defend him. Printers tended to become bolder about putting out his banned material. Marat carefully planned and organized his operations so that intermediaries always worked with the printers, and distributors could claim truthfully never to have come into contact with him. Through it all, *L'Ami du peuple* attained a maximum daily run of 6,000 copies, which, the author notes, required three to five printing presses working constantly for an entire week.

Conner shows that Marat differed from the political leaders of his time in his commitment to economic equality. In a book-length essay, *Plan of Criminal Legislation*, written over a decade prior to the Revolution, Marat expressed his conviction that anything beyond what was indispensable for our existence could not be considered ours so long as others were in need. This maxim, Marat wrote, represented the sole legitimate basis of property both in society and in nature. Toward the end of August 1789, Marat published a pamphlet entitled *The Constitution, or Proposal for a Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*. He took the politically moderate line that monarchy remained the sole government suitable to France. Yet, he also developed the argument that freedom meant nothing to a starving person. Marat did not challenge private property in this pamphlet but argued that inequality should be reduced by limiting the accumulation of wealth or by guaranteeing subsistence to citizens bereft of assets.

Connor writes that in the early summer of 1790, Marat had a disagreement with Camille Desmoulins when the latter did not publish an article he submitted. The reason for the disagreement was Marat's advocacy of social revolution, namely the political effort to lift the majority of the people out of abject poverty. The Revolution meant little to Marat if it did not meet this goal. While Desmoulins and other revolutionary journalists sought to put an end to aristocratic privilege and royal power, they showed little concern about the plight of the urban poor.

In the Convention, Conner argues, Marat differed from Robespierre and his allies in the Mountain, who like all Jacobins promoted radical democracy and sympathized with the urban poor, but did not represent the Parisian masses. Marat, by contrast, had won the admiration of the sans-culottes through three years of writing and fighting on their behalf. The first and only time he sought to restrain the

egalitarian charge of the urban lower classes was when the *Enragés* confronted the Convention in February 1793. Marat thought that the *Enragés* would confuse the sans-culottes and prevent him from forging an alliance between them and the Mountain to consolidate the gains of the Revolution. Both Marat and Robespierre planned on summoning the sans-culottes to impose themselves on the Girondins since they believed that the growing military difficulties would eventually lead the people of the provinces to see that the general Dumouriez and the Girondins were working with France's enemies and should be eliminated. At the beginning of March 1793, however, Marat thought that the actions against the Girondins urged by the *Enragés* were ill-timed, because they would unite the provinces against Paris and permit the victory of counterrevolution.

Marat's influence on the course of events peaked on May 31 – June 2, 1793 with the expulsion of the Girondins. Afterwards, according to Conner, leaders of the Mountain such as Danton no longer saw any need for Marat's influence over the Paris population and resented having had to rely on him. On June 17–18, 1793 Marat roused himself from a debilitating sickness, which had led him to retire to his apartment after the purge of the Girondins, but his effort to make his voice heard at the Convention was too much for him, and he returned to his apartment never to leave.

Conner argues that Marat's polemics often seem harsh and unduly violent to the current generation of historians, because they take his writings out of the historical context of Paris in the throes of rebellion from 1789 to 1793. Marat did not celebrate violence for its own sake. According to Conner, he saw it as the only possible means of defense against counterrevolution and a natural response to hunger, poverty and social discrimination.

If there is one problem with Conner's book it is that he does not always allow his readers to make up their own minds. For a biography of Marat, whose life revolved around *L'Ami du peuple*, the book contains remarkably few direct quotes from the newspaper. This reviewer suspects that if Conner had included numerous quotes, even sympathetic readers might be turned off. Radicals in this period acted within a political culture, stretching across the Atlantic world, very different from subsequent revolutionary eras. The culture of Marat's time made revolutionaries particularly inclined to believe in nefarious conspiracies. In France, the admixture into this cultural context of the spiraling cost of living, the real threat of reaction, and revolutionaries' unprecedented emphasis on remaking their society made for especially intense suspicions of parties, factions, and interest groups and generated a violent language of politics.[1]

Conner has written a fine book for the general reader and one useful for undergraduate courses on the Revolution. He also demonstrates, for specialists, that bringing figures such as Jacques Roux, Hébert, and Marat into histories of the Revolution helps us understand the nuances of the urban popular movement. Indeed, Conner's book shares some of the virtues of R. R. Palmer's *The Twelve Who Ruled* in its captivating depiction of the context.[2] Conner sets out the nuances of the social revolution in which Marat operated, the logic of the political problems he faced, and the pressures of the fateful partisan conflicts surrounding his life after 1789.

NOTES

[1] Lynn Hunt, *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 39–43. Bronislaw Baczko captures the unsettling language of the revolutionary period in *Ending the Terror: The French Revolution after Robespierre*, trans. Michel Petheram (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[2] R. R. Palmer, *Twelve Who Ruled: The Year of the Terror in the French Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1941).

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