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Olivier Coquard, *Une histoire personnelle de la France: Lumières et révolutions 1715-1815*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2014. 232 pp. 14€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-13-062015-0.

Review by Henry Heller, University of Manitoba

In this work Olivier Coquard offers a brief survey of the century of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution (1715-1815). Its vivid and crisp style, brevity, handy paperback format, excellent maps, clear outline of the chronology, and many vignettes and examples make for an engaging narrative that will help to attract readers. According to the author, historical manuals in French usually separate the Enlightenment from the Revolution and the Napoleonic period. Rightfully claiming that those who made the Revolution were raised under the sign of the Enlightenment, the author instead offers what he calls a personal view of events from the death of Louis XIV to Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in which the Revolution is presented as working out the ideas of the Enlightenment.

Coquard organizes his work in four chronological parts: the eighteenth century, the onset of the crisis, the Revolution proper, and the Napoleonic period. A fifth analytical section provides a more in-depth view of the revolutionary period focusing on the religious question, the violence of war and politics, the Terror and the changes in social relations, political identity and administration brought about by the Revolution. The work opens with two scintillating chapters devoted to economic and cultural progress which marked the first part of the eighteenth century. In particular the author convincingly shows how improved agricultural output led to somewhat longer life spans, demographic expansion, urban growth, and even a more optimistic outlook in which more emphasis was given to the possibilities of personal experience and heightened sociability than the certainty of death. He also notes progress in manufacturing and the build-up of a certain amount of fixed capital in agriculture as well, a reflection of advances in recent historical research. On the other hand, the author's brevity is probably the main reason why most of these topics are dealt with only in passing. The result is that the complexity of the period is over-simplified and even leads to some confusion.

A good example is the author's treatment of the Church and religion. In his initial discussion of the matter, Coquard stresses the eclipse of matters of faith by the advance of rationalism and worldly concerns. Later in the text, however, as he tries to explain the counter-revolution, the author is forced to come to terms with the ongoing institutional and economic power of the Church, its importance to rural community life, and its ongoing grip on the rural population in the Vendée and elsewhere. It turns out that religious scepticism or indifference was confined to the middle class and certain regions like Provence. His earlier stress on the waning influence of religion is not reconciled with these later more substantial analyses. Likewise, the author treats science in a cursory and less than satisfying way. His all too brief discussion of this immense and important subject centers on Mesmerism, which was a focus of controversy in the last decade before the Revolution. Noting the confusion between real science and charlatanism and the rational and irrational during this quarrel, Coquard contents himself with the conclusion that science became mixed up with politics and questions of identity. The author loses the opportunity to point out, following Robert Darnton, that the quarrel over Mesmerism which crested in the 1780s became the focus of a fundamental social and ideological split that anticipated the Revolution. The controversy between the privileged scientists of the *Académie des Sciences* and more radical and

democratic intellectuals anticipated the political and ideological divide that came to the surface in 1789. Indeed, an analogous battle can be seen in the divide between aspiring artists like David and the privileged arbiters of the *Académie des Beaux Arts*.

Brevity of the narrative largely but not entirely accounts for most of the volume's shortcomings. But mistaking the date of the Eden Treaty (1786) cannot so easily be forgiven. More serious is the author's failure to deal with the contradictory tendencies in the social and economic history of the period that are critical to understanding the Revolution. As everyone knows, the interpretation of the Revolution from the beginning gave rise to bitter political and scholarly disagreements that were entangled with one another. In the face of these controversies and likely reflecting his own temperament and perhaps those of his editors, Coquard attempts to deal with them by playing them down and seeking the *juste milieu* between left and right. Readers are informed that five schools of interpretation developed in the wake of the Revolution that have carried up to the present. These are the reactionary, socialist, positivist and liberal and revisionist schools and the consensus-based and scholarly historiography of the present with which the author mainly identifies. Rather dismissive of the reactionary school which, for example, has tried to turn the repression of the *Vendée* into the equivalent of the Nazi Genocide, the author at the same time minimizes the socialist view, the beginnings of which he locates in the work of Philippe Buchez and Prosper-Charles Roux. Unmentioned and unacknowledged is the great line of Marxist historians beginning with Jaurès and continuing with Mathiez, Lefebvre, Soboul and beyond. Their political prejudices, focused on the dream of building of a socialist and democratic republic, constitute an ideal not shared by the author. But their in-depth investigation of the rural and urban economy and social structure produced a rich and complex analysis which is still foundational to understanding the social and economic history of the period.

This legacy is largely ignored by Coquard, leading him to simplified generalizations that prevent him from capturing the nature of the revolutionary crisis. He rightly stresses rural economic growth and the prosperity of the better-off in his discussion of the first decades of the century, but the prosperous agriculturists were not merely bourgeois because some of them lived in the *bourgs* and towns as he claims. Rather, they were capitalist farmers. Furthermore, the prosperity of the first two-thirds of the century was not shared by everyone as Coquard would have it. In order to explain the eventual crisis, it is essential to make it clear that the good fortune of the enterprising well-to-do came at the expense of the misfortune of many others reflected in stagnant wages among other hardships. Furthermore, the countryside was not peopled merely by rich farmers and agricultural workers who sold their labor for wages as Coquard suggests. The complex structure of the *seigneurie* and peasant communal life in which much of the rural population was still enmeshed was being undermined by both capitalism and feudal reaction. The grain shortages of the late eighteenth century did not come from out of the blue as his narrative suggests but were rooted in the contradictions of an increasingly fragile rural society. The political role of the *sans-culottes* and their tenuous connection to the middle class elite during the heyday of the Revolution are not really explained. Toward the close of the work, while sketching the Napoleonic era, the author acknowledges that the Revolution was a bourgeois revolution, but the role of the bourgeoisie in the economic growth of the eighteenth century and during the political events of the Revolution is not made clear.

The Haitian Revolution is mentioned, but the crucial role of the colonial trade in the pre-revolutionary economy is not explained, and its crisis is reduced to a conflict between political personalities. The loss of Haiti was a catastrophe for Western France and for the rest of the French economy, a loss that was compensated for by conquest of highly developed Belgium as well as Italy. The economic restructuring that went on between 1791 and 1799 and the spur it gave to the military conquests of the Republic is not seriously discussed. Indeed, the economic undergirding of the Napoleonic period, its surge of industrialization, expansion of markets on the Continent, and pillaging of other countries to the enrichment of a new French elite is largely ignored as the author dwells on the organization of the army and Empire. Coquard is right to stress the revolutionary convictions of the young Napoleon. But to see

elements of democracy and Jacobinism as a fundamental part of his reign as Coquard does is too stretch things too far.

Henry Heller
University of Manitoba
Henry.Heller@umanitoba.ca

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