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David Andress, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. xvii + 683 pp. Notes, bibliographies and index. £95 U.K (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-963974-8.

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Scholars editing or contributing to volumes that attempt to survey world-historic events and processes face particular challenges, especially when their subject occurred sufficiently far in the past to have accumulated a massive literature. These do not necessarily arise from an ever-increasing body of research, since new facts may be incorporated into existing interpretations. It is rather that adjudicating between *new* interpretations, which invariably seek to challenge both older interpretations and each other, can threaten to overwhelm a clear presentation of the current state of knowledge. Nor is this all: aspects that may have been completely undiscussed for decades or even centuries—such as gender and sexuality, to take the most obvious general examples—emerge as subjects in their own right and have to be treated accordingly. All of this tends to lead to the production of many lengthy and usually quite expensive volumes.

The French Revolution is obviously one of these world-historic events, and its historiography has indeed been subject to all the challenges outlined in the previous paragraph. *The Oxford Handbook of the French Revolution* is a necessarily substantial work that attempts to meet them over nearly 700 pages, divided into six more-or-less chronological parts and thirty-seven chapters. It is one of several recent collections on the subject. As editor David Andress notes in his “Foreword,” this book appears in print between two equally massive edited volumes, Peter McPhee’s *Companion to the French Revolution* and Alan Forrest and Matthias Middell’s *Routledge Companion to the French Revolution in World History*, books that share several contributors, including Andress himself (p. 5).^[1] Inevitably, there is also a degree of repetition across these volumes, such as Donald Sutherland’s work on urban violence that features both here (chapter sixteen) and in McPhee’s *Companion*.

How does the *Oxford Handbook* approach the Revolution? As is generally the case in contemporary historiography, the book takes the entire period from the Assembly of Notables in 1787 to the Restoration of 1815 as the era of the French Revolution, rather than closing with 9 *Thermidor*, or even 18 *Brumaire*. Jennifer Ngaire Heuer refers to Clemenceau’s demand that the Revolution be treated as a “bloc” and effectively endorses this approach: “Focusing on contingency and unintended consequences...rather than a coherent ‘bloc’ or inexorable development of events, makes it trickier to address the repercussions and consequences of the Revolution” (p. 630). In particular, Laura Mason makes a strong case for rejecting the notion of Thermidor as decisive break: “For although Republican political life changed significantly in the wake of Robespierre’s death, the *idée fixe* that this was a decisive moment of rupture has hidden as much as it has revealed, obscuring continuities that bound the Revolution’s second half to its first” (p. 533).

Within its broadly chronological framework the *Oxford Handbook* offers an interesting index of those aspects of the Revolution that had previously been ignored. Manuel Covo’s chapter on race and slavery in the French colonies notes that from being “marginal” or “disregarded,” “the colonies slipped

progressively from the periphery to the very center of the revolutionary story. Few fields in the historiography of the French Revolution ever experienced such a swing” (p. 290). Contrariwise, authors note that some themes have vanished altogether. In a discussion of Jacobinism outside of France, Marc Rapport is probably right to argue that the “Atlantic Revolution” thesis has deservedly been abandoned after relentless and mostly justified criticism (p. 505), although in a way it has merged into the aforementioned field of slavery and the colonies, particularly in relation to the revolution in San Domingue, perhaps the only genuine “Atlantic” revolution of the era. Other fields of study, such as that of diplomacy, discussed here by Marc Belissa, have moved in and out of fashion, in this case falling out of favor altogether between the 1920s and 1950s, during the hey-day of the “Jacobin-Marxist” interpretation of the Revolution (p. 428).

And it is, of course, the Jacobin-Marxist interpretation that has experienced the greatest reversal of fortune. As Silvia Marzagalli writes in the opening chapter, the “acrimonious intellectual fights” both among Marxists and especially between them and the revisionists “have slowly and steadily calmed down after the peak reached during the Bicentenary in 1989” (p. 4). So little influence does this conflict now hold that it is even acceptable to cite Lefebvre in a broadly favorable context, as Sutherland does in relation to the popular hopes aroused by the calling of the Estates General, without giving the impression of taking sides in the revisionist wars (p. 276). Unfortunately, several authors present rather caricatured versions of the Marxist position. Broadly, it is supposed to be that capitalism had already developed in France prior to 1789, and the bourgeoisie associated with it was able to overthrow the absolutist state, the last barrier to its ascendancy, by placing itself at the head of mass movements of peasants and small producers who were, alas, unable to take power on their own behalf (see, for example, p. 4 or p. 630).

Now, let us accept that even in its relatively sophisticated and nuanced versions—in the work of Soboul say, or more recently, that of Heller—that these accounts tend to exaggerate the size and, especially, the political and ideological coherence of the capitalist class before the Revolution, as critics like Maza have taken delight in pointing out.^[2] But exaggeration is not the same as outright invention, as is indicated by several authors here. Lauren Clay, for example, refers to the “resounding defeat of the Marxist ‘rise-of-the-bourgeoisie’ paradigm” before going on to wonder: “Given France’s prominence as a global commercial power in the late eighteenth century, could capitalism—and perhaps even capitalists themselves—have had a role to play in the collapse of the old regime and in ‘the unexpected invention of revolutionary politics,’ after all?” (p. 23) In her chapter Clay demonstrates that, contrary to what is often simply assumed, the commercial business class was involved in arguing for its own right to political representation, and she claims that “more nuanced approaches to causation and agency” will further illuminate their role (p. 35).

Simply pointing out that capitalists played a role is, of course, scarcely enough in itself to rescue the “traditional” Marxist interpretation, but is it possible to construct a more defensible version that does not depend on unsustainable claims about the bourgeoisie? It is certainly the case that not all Marxists subscribed to the “traditional” position. Daniel Guerin paid far more attention to the role of the sans-culottes than that of the Jacobins in *La lutte de classes sous la première République* (1946), and Covo (p. 290) points out that the writer who established the “once-isolated foundation” for the study of the anti-colonial revolution was C. L. R. James in *The Black Jacobins*.^[3] Both Guerin and James were Trotskyists when they wrote these books, which should remind us that Marxism is not a monolith, but neither of them was centrally concerned with the question of how far the Revolution assisted capitalist development.

Peter McPhee, drawing on the scholarship of Markoff, Ado and Alpaugh in particular, argues that the French Revolution was “a social revolution” (p. 176) on the grounds that it involved mass popular participation, at least down to 1794.^[4] Revolutions, however, are surely not defined solely by their form, but also—and even more so—by what they actually achieved. The smallholders republic desired by the sans-culottes was not achieved and, while the peasants did achieve their goal of secure possession, this is generally seen as an obstacle to capitalist consolidation in the countryside. If we shift focus from the goals

of the popular classes, however, then a different picture emerges. Marzagalli actually suggests what this might be at the conclusion of her chapter: “The French Revolution produced, indeed, a turn towards a capitalistic world in the sense that it freed property from collective rights and complex jurisdictional webs, and put the working class under stricter control. The Revolution ultimately gave political rights to a new social category of landed proprietors, in which non-nobles were numerous. Assuming that the Revolution occurred because a capitalistic class-conscious bourgeoisie aimed to achieve these goals is simply contrary to the historical evidence” (p. 17). Precisely. What marks the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution is not the intentions of the bourgeoisie, or even their actual role within it, but its *outcome*: a society in which obstacles to emerging capitalist development have been removed. This is perfectly compatible with what is usually referred to as the “consequentialist” Marxist view of the nature of bourgeois revolutions, which does not require that the bourgeoisie play no conscious role in establishing capitalism, only that they do not necessarily need to do so. In fact, several leading figures were perfectly aware of the development of what tended to be called “commercial society” in England and wished to emulate it. In 1787 Roederer even criticized Adam Smith for being *insufficiently* committed to the market, incredible though that seems now.[5]

Part of the problem here is the way in which the terms “bourgeois” and “capitalist” tend to be treated interchangeably. They are certainly connected, but not interchangeable. In particular, being a member of the bourgeoisie does not necessarily mean that one is a capitalist in the sense of being an actual landowner, financier, manufacturer, or merchant. One way of thinking about the bourgeoisie is therefore to divide the notion of a socioeconomic class into its constituent parts: the bourgeoisie in general comprise the class in its “social” aspect; the section of the bourgeoisie who specifically own or control capital comprise the class in its “economic” aspect. The connection between non-capitalist and capitalist sections of the bourgeoisie is that both derive their income, directly or indirectly, from the extraction of surplus value from the working class. The bourgeoisie was originally as necessary, as intrinsic to feudalism as the peasantry, not in the sense that it was similarly exploited, but in the sense that the system required bankers and merchants as well as lawyers and bureaucrats to function. Once capitalism, as distinct from merchant’s or usurer’s capital, came into existence, it changed the nature of the bourgeoisie: the center of gravity of the class shifted. One might say that the decisive moment in the transformation of the bourgeoisie into a potential ruling class was when the non-capitalist sections began either to derive, or at least to see the possibility of deriving, their income from the exploitation of workers rather than of peasants.

It was not inevitable, however, that these possibilities would result in revolutionary consciousness. The most decisive bourgeois leaderships therefore tended to emerge from those sections of the class *without* direct material interests in the process of production. The non-capitalist bourgeoisie were therefore central for three reasons. First, precisely because they were not subject to competitive economic divisions within their class, these groups were often better able to express the common interests of the bourgeoisie as a whole than capitalists: they were tactful cousins smoothing over the tensions between the hostile band of warring brothers. Second, and conversely, they were also prepared temporarily to transgress capitalist property rights in order better to enshrine them permanently. Third, because these revolutionaries still belonged to a minority exploiting class, albeit one broader than their feudal predecessor, they needed to involve other social forces to overthrow the French absolutist state. The bourgeoisie should not be confused with the petty bourgeoisie, but the former did have a close *relationship* with the latter, which, from 1789 through 1830 and down until 1848 at least, invariably provided the foot soldiers for the struggle against attempts to restore monarchical power.[6]

A number of chapters examine the influence of the French Revolution on subsequent revolutions. David Bell’s chapter on “Global Conceptual Legacies,” for example, treats it as the foundation of the modern conception of revolution (pp. 653–655). Other authors draw more specific connections that are more difficult to sustain. Whatever Lenin thought he was doing in October 1917, he was not, as Jeff Horn claims, “following Babeuf’s strategy” (p. 616). Indeed, he specifically argued against it during 1917, in his critique of Babeuf’s follower, Blanqui. Leaving aside individual misconceptions, however, the emphasis on

the French Revolution as the point of origin, while perfectly valid, tends to obscure relevant parallels with prior revolutions, above all the English revolutions of the seventeenth century. In his chapter (thirty-three) on Napoleon, for example, Phillip Dwyer does not draw the obvious parallel with Cromwell, whose historical role was far closer to that of Bonaparte than the figures whom he does discuss. Given that Barnave compared 1789 with 1640, and De Staël, Mignet, Saint-Simon, and Thierry all drew parallels with the English Revolution of 1688 or even the entire process from 1640 to 1688, this is one area where a return to the views of the participants might usefully have been undertaken.

There are a handful of chapters that do not quite work. Isser Woloch's chapter on "Lasting Political Structures" (thirty-four), for example, begins boldly, if defensibly, with the French Resistance after 1940, then works backwards in time, although interpreting "political structures" so widely as to include the organization of the army, but it seems to represent a missed opportunity to discuss what fundamentally distinguishes France (if anything) from other European states that emerged in the wake of the Republic. Overall though, this is an excellent volume with a consistently high level of contribution. If one can only afford one edited collection on the French Revolution, this is probably the one to choose.

NOTE

[1] Peter McPhee, ed., *Companion to the French Revolution* (Maiden, MA: John Wiley and Sons, 2012), reviewed in *H-France*, vol. 14, no. 2, and Alan Forrest and Matthias Middell, eds., *Routledge Companion to the French Revolution in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

[2] Albert Soboul [1962], *The French Revolution, 1789-1799: From the Storming of the Bastille to Napoleon* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989); Henry Heller, *The Bourgeois Revolution in France, 1789-1815* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006); Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie: An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 2003).

[3] Daniel Guerin, *La lutte de classes sous la première République, bourgeois et 'bras nus'* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946) and C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* [1938] (New York: Vintage, 1963).

[4] Anatoli Ado, *Paysans en Révolution: Terre, Pouvoir, et Jacquerie, 1789-1794* (Paris: Société des études Robespierriennes, 1996); Micah Alpaugh, "The Politics of Escalation in French Revolutionary Protest: Political Demonstrations, Non-violence and Violence in the *Grande Journées* of 1789," *French History* 23 (2009): 336-59; John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

[5] Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), chapter 19, pp. 64-5.

[6] Davidson, *How Revolutionary Were the Bourgeois Revolutions?*, pp. 551-565.

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