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Sophie Wahnich, *La Révolution française n'est pas un mythe*. Paris: Klincksieck, 2017. 247 pp. Notes. 25.00€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-252-04052-2.

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To many historians of France, and in particular historians of the French Revolution, a study focused on readings of Jean-Paul Sartre, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault might seem of improbable relevance. However, Sophie Wahnich's *La Révolution française n'est pas un mythe* makes a compelling case that engaging with these three thinkers' views of history has significant historiographical and methodological value. Out of these three thinkers, Sartre is the only one who could be seen as engaging directly with the history of the Revolution, both in published and unpublished works. Yet it is Wahnich's contention that the debates between these figures over the practice and epistemological status of history that began in the 1960s have influenced the historiography of the Revolution from the 1970s onward.

At the center of this wide-ranging study is the claim that what began as an argument between Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, and Foucault about the status and practice of history eventually affected scholarly debates and practices within French Revolutionary studies and the attitude with which the French Revolution is approached today. Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique*, published in 1960, attempted to reconcile his existentialist philosophy focused on the process of human freedom asserting itself with a Marxist vision of history. Throughout, he leaned heavily on recent work in sociology and anthropology, and drew from the history of the French Revolution to illustrate his arguments. In his 1962 work, *La pensée sauvage*, Claude Lévi-Strauss objected that Sartre had not only misappropriated his structuralist anthropology for a decidedly ethnocentric and unscientific endeavor, but also that he had recapitulated "le mythe de la Révolution française," the idea that this one event held the key to understanding the dynamics of historical progress. Foucault later piled on, claiming Sartre's view of historical change was not much more than a relic of the nineteenth century. These positions should matter to historians of the Revolution, according to Wahnich, because they informed the rise of Furet's revisionist approach to the Revolution and the ensuing debates around the bicentennial, debates that had "déterminé les études sur la Révolution française et leur diffusion universitaire, scolaire, et finalement sociale non seulement en France mais dans le monde"; "l'évolution occupée dans l'imaginaire social par la Révolution française doit moins aux historiens qu'aux discours philosophiques, scientifiques ou idéologiques des époques traversées, dont les historiens sont eux-mêmes tributaires" (pp. 10, 221). Rather than accept the history of the Revolution with either ambivalence or presumed scientific distance, Wahnich holds that we should follow Sartre by reclaiming the French Revolution, along with its historical truth (rather than its mythical appeal), as historical knowledge useful for our political present.

Wahnich divides her study into two parts with separate focuses. Part one is dedicated to reconstructing Sartre's readings and interpretations of the French Revolution in the 1950s and 1960s. In this first part Wahnich presents Sartre's major positions on the practice and understanding of historical change. In the early 1950s Sartre began a series of studies on the French Revolutionary period dealing with the

genesis of bourgeois ideology, the meeting of the Estates General and the Tennis Court Oath, and the demise of the Jacobin politician Joseph le Bon during the Terror. The latter was an abandoned screen treatment; elements of all of these studies would eventually appear in Sartre's *Question de méthode* (1957) and *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960). By examining these manuscripts alongside the eventual published works, Wahnich demonstrates the seriousness with which Sartre approached the French Revolution and grounded elements of his philosophy in serious attention to the work of historians. Sartre was disillusioned with the ways Marxist intellectuals and historians had reduced the French Revolution to ready-made analytical categories and he was interested in examining how those categories were themselves the products of individual choices and actions unfolding in real time. One of the book's greatest strengths is the insight Wahnich provides into Sartre as historian. Her familiarity with many of the primary and secondary materials Sartre uses has enabled her the insight to note where Sartre has anticipated later historiographical interventions and the ways in which his readings of sources (of Sieyès, in particular) do not stand up to close scrutiny.

The second part of the book mainly deals with the specific criticisms Lévi-Strauss and Foucault raised about Sartre's theory of historical change in the *Critique*, the concurrent rise of the so-called revisionist school, led by François Furet, changing views of the Marquis de Sade's relationship to the Revolution, and Wahnich's reflections of her own training and formation in the wake of the debates surrounding the bicentennial celebrations of the Revolution. Wahnich reads Furet's critiques of the "Jacobin" interpretation of the Revolution as one way of applying Lévi-Strauss's and Foucault's criticisms of Sartre to Marxist historians of the Revolution more generally (adherents to the so-called Vulgate). Aside from all three thinkers' shared criticisms of historical myths, she shows how Furet consciously made these connections. In a 1967 essay, "Les intellectuels français et le structuralisme," Furet depicted Lévi-Strauss as "l'image inversée de l'homme sartrien" (quoted on p. 182). The result was a general turn toward discourse analysis that, when coupled with the anti-totalitarian turn of the 1970s, discredited the history of the Revolution. Wahnich observes that her own early training as a historian of the Revolution reflected the shift away from the event-centered history Sartre championed and toward a focus on discourse analysis. For instance, she was heavily influenced by Régine Robin's histories and the semantic analyses developed by the Saint Cloud group. The result was "une réflexion historique, méthodologique et théorique solide, mais avec des trous que nous ne soupçonnions pas" (p. 229). It was only after engaging with Jacques Rancière's *Les Noms de l'histoire* and Nicole Lorau's theory of the productive anachronism--where the political demands of the present should animate historical inquiry--that a Sartrian sense of doing history with a political edge filled in those *trous*.<sup>[1]</sup>

While Wahnich presents a fairly accurate and straightforward account of Sartre's thought in the manuscripts (*Questions de méthode* and *Critique*), aside from some recent interpretations of the manuscripts, she does not engage with the secondary literature dealing with Sartre's philosophy. This is unfortunate for a number of reasons. For one, a reader who has not followed Sartre studies might think Wahnich is wading into largely uncharted territory. Though discussion of Sartre's manuscripts on the Revolution is still new, there is a rich literature dealing with his view of history, including studies that explore debates with Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, the same figures treated by Wahnich.<sup>[2]</sup> In addition, engaging with this literature would assist readers looking to situate Sartre's reflections on the Revolution in the larger context of his views on history and temporality. Wahnich does not treat Sartre's later reflections on history, most prominent in his multi-volume study of Flaubert, *L'idiot de la famille*.<sup>[3]</sup> While Wahnich may have considered these later works outside of her study's ambit, they build on Sartre's reflections on psychoanalysis, human temporality, and freedom in historical context begun in his manuscripts on the Revolution. These are precisely the concerns of Wahnich's book.

Similarly, greater attention to previous work on Sartre's politics would have helped Wahnich connect Sartre's studies in the book's first half to the political questions in the second. Much has been written, good and bad, on the relationship between Sartre's thought and his political engagements; this can be a minefield that is often best left untouched. However, given the emphasis Wahnich places in the second

half of her work on the way political concerns related to theoretical and historiographical positions, she says perhaps too little about the ways 1950s politics informed Sartre's analyses of the French Revolution. This is a real missed opportunity, since previous commentators have shown the extent to which Sartre's arguments with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Daniel Guérin, and Georg Lukács, as well as his discussions of the French Revolution in the *Critique*, were concerned with the historical processes that led to the Russian Revolution and Stalinism.[4] These are the same sorts of concerns driving the debates treated in the second part of Wahnich's study when she discusses François Furet's revisionism.

One of the most exciting parts of Wahnich's approach to her topic is the way in which she places a heterogeneous group of philosophers, anthropologists, social theorists, psychoanalysts, and historians in conversation with one another. At times these constellations of interlocutors are grouped according to textually traceable influence—as is the case with Lévi-Strauss and Furet. In other instances, they are grouped according to elective affinities and missed encounters, similar ideas separately developed—such as with Sartre's sense of a situational temporality and François Hartog's notion of *régimes de temporalité*. It is not always clear which type of constellation—*influence or affinity*—is at work, and this ambiguity means it is sometimes hard to discern the chain of influences from one context to the other. To take one minor example, Wahnich contextualizes Sartre's early engagement with Marxist histories of the French Revolution against Alfred Cobban's early exchanges with Georges Lefebvre (pp. 24–25, 32). While Sartre's studies clearly showed knowledge of Lefebvre's work, it is not likely he paid any attention to Cobban's.[5] Rather, the focus of his interest involved disputes among interpreters of the Revolution who were distinctly Marxist, of one variant or another.

Those historians (even those of the Revolution) who are convinced by Lévi-Strauss' critique that the French Revolution's claim to universal truth is no longer convincing will likely not be persuaded by Wahnich's claims that the Revolution can and should be given pride of place again. Others might find the connection between later historiographical developments and disputes with Sartre only suggestive. Yet, as Wahnich claims, “ces débats si vifs et conflictuels peuvent être aujourd'hui appréhendés comme des laboratoires ayant livré des outils forgés justement dans ce moment de crise” (p. 243). There is much here that is rich and worth thinking through for historians of the Revolution, intellectual historians of modern France, and others interested in the theory and practice of history.

#### NOTES

[1] Jacques Rancière, *Les Noms de l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992); Nicole Loraux, “Éloge de l'anachronisme en histoire,” *Le Genre humain* 27 (1993), 23–39.

[2] For example, James Miller, *History and Human Existence: From Marx to Merleau-Ponty* (Berkeley: University California Press, 1979); Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990); Thomas Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason*. 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997–2005); André Guigot, *Sartre. Liberté et histoire* (Paris: Vrin, 2007); Philippe Cabestan and Jean-Pierre Zarader, eds., *Lectures de Sartre* (Paris: Ellipses, 2011).

[3] Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'idiot de la famille. Gustave Flaubert de 1821–1857*, 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1971–1972).

[4] Ronald Aronson, “Sartre on Stalin: A Discussion of *Critique de la raison dialectique, II*,” *Studies in Soviet Thought* 33, no. 2 (February 1987): 131–143; Ian Birchall, *Sartre against Stalinism* (New York: Berghahn, 2004).

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[5] The only reference to Cobban in Sartre's writings on the French Revolution comes in the manuscript "Liberté-Égalité," where he quotes a passage of Eric Weil's 1951 review of Cobban's 1950 document reader *The Debate on the French Revolution*. The passage contains Weil's musings on the general frameworks of revolutionary processes, not Cobban's criticisms of the Revolution's historiography. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Liberté-Égalité," *Études sartriennes. Sartre inédit* 12 (2007-2008), 197.

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