

---

Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to David Andress's review of Jon Cowans, *To Speak for the People: Public Opinion and the Problem of Legitimacy in the French Revolution* and in response to Cowan's response essay to Andress's review.

*H-France Review* Vol. 2 (January 2002), Nos. 3 and 4

The original review and response may be found on the H-France web page at:

<http://www.h-france.net/vol2reviews/vol2no3andress.pdf> and

<http://www.h-france.net/vol2reviews/vol2no4cowans.pdf>

---

Monday, 16 January 2002

David Andress

david.andress@port.ac.uk

A reviewer must write about the book he or she receives. That is what I did. An author is aware of what it is that his or her book is trying to say; a reviewer can only know what it actually says to them. All of us who act as both authors and reviewers know the difficulties that ensue. It is horrible to find that one's text, that one thought the limpid reflecting-pool of one's insights, in fact conveys to others an entirely different impression. I found Cowans' book disappointing precisely because, while there was an interesting argument there to be pursued, it was interrupted by what struck my eye as errors of fact, and by a generally decontextualised treatment of language. If it is old-fashioned of me to find a lack of context to be a fault, je m'excuse.

I would leave the matter there (indeed I would leave it entirely without response), except that I would wish to correct the misapprehension that I am a Marxist. I am not now such a thing, nor have I ever been. Unless, of course, Marxist now means having a care for the multiple dimensions of human existence, and attempting to contextualise politics in terms of the conflicts and patterns of belief and action taking place outside the narrow political arena. Michel Foucault of course once remarked that "we are all Marxists now," but perhaps he over-generalised.

I have no desire to turn this little matter into a replaying of some Marxist/revisionist combat which I, frankly, had thought rather passé. Surely we are beyond the point of needing to discuss whether we approve of "the Revolution" as if it were the fabled "bloc." Without launching into a long string of citations, I should have thought that outstanding recent work such as Tim Tackett's on the National Assembly, or, for example, the intriguing article by William Reddy on emotions [Sentimentalism and its Erasure: The role of emotions in the era of the French Revolution, *JMH*, 72, 2001, pp. 109-152], shows that revolutionary historiography is opening up into a fruitful period of multiple perspectives, many of which are about "political culture" in a more open and inclusive sense than Furet or Baker's

works gave it and that latter, I assume, is the revisionist tradition to which Cowans wishes to be attached. As a fellow-historian, I wish him every success, but I must persist in my reservations.

---