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**Leonore Loft**, *Passion, Politics, and Philosophie: Rediscovering J.-P. Brissot*. Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 2002. xxii + 304 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-313-31779-8.

Review by Gregory S. Brown, University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

Jacques-Pierre Brissot's leading role in the early years of the French Revolution was the high point of his abbreviated life. His editorship of the Revolutionary newspaper *Le Patriote Français* brought him to prominence and helped him win election to the Legislative Assembly in the fall of 1791. In the legislature he became the leader of the Girondin faction that pushed France to war. During the first months of the Republic, he and his fellow Girondins in the Convention defended the king against Jacobin demands for execution, then further opposed Jacobin efforts to centralize the new, republican government. Expelled from the Convention, then charged with supporting the federalist revolts, and finally executed in October 1793, Brissot had for a long time been a symbol of Enlightened moderation and Anglophile constitutionalism amidst increasing Jacobin radicalism and *sans culotte* civic activism.

Yet it has not been Brissot's revolutionary career but his pre-revolutionary writings that have drawn the greatest scholarly attention over the past two decades. That interest began with Robert Darnton's 1968 essay, "A Spy in Grub Street," which presented Brissot's literary career not as a virtuous fight for Enlightened moderation but as a difficult struggle for sustenance that forced the young man into an embittering experience as an informant for the police. Brissot thus became, for Darnton, exemplary of a generation of would-be *philosophes* whose frustration with, rather than inspiration from, the Enlightenment propelled them into and influenced their affinities during the Revolution.

In response to Darnton, Frederick de Luna offered an alternative view of Brissot's pre-revolutionary career that emphasized his commitment to advanced liberal ideas, such as a constitutional monarchy, individual liberties, and the abolition of slavery. De Luna argued that Darnton had been unsympathetic to Brissot and failed to account fully for either his ideological liberalism and modernity or for his struggles against, rather than his collaboration with, the Old Regime. De Luna's 1991 exchange with Darnton in *French Historical Studies* presented two very different approaches to eighteenth-century intellectual history, which raised many questions that became central to the invigorated study of late Old Regime political culture in the decade after the bicentennial.[1]

Significantly, it is the case made briefly by De Luna in the early 1990s, rather than the methodological, conceptual, and substantive innovations of work published since, that inspires Leonore Loft's biography of Brissot. The subtitle, "Rediscovering J.-P. Brissot," and even more so the "Introduction" (pp. xvii - xxi) make clear the author's goal of contesting what she considers Darnton's interpretation of Brissot and the Enlightenment. Loft states clearly in her opening paragraphs that Brissot precociously envisioned a "just, democratic society [based on] universal suffrage and a renewed humanity living in moral and political freedom" and, moreover, that these "radical .. reformist, egalitarian and democratic ideals" are so deeply challenging to the eighteenth-century as well as twentieth-century social order

that not only the Old Regime monarchy but the revolutionary leaders and even contemporary historians have sought to discredit Brissot. Against this resistance, she seeks to uphold a heroic figure, “one of the few people who...lived in his ideals...as a reformist...[and who] should be viewed as comparable to...Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela.” Moreover, she seeks to uphold the power of the historian to identify, understand, even advance those ideals, based on the methodological assertion that “people behave in a manner consistent with their beliefs” (p. xviii). It is thus a consciously heroic view of Brissot, through a deliberately straight-forward reading of Brissot’s “ideals,” that Loft sets out to present in this book.

While this endeavor itself must be considered salutary in its intent, and she executes her task with considerable merit (on which more shortly), it must be noted from the outset that Loft adopts this approach by sidestepping rather than engaging with the full extent of historiography, methodological thinking, or conceptual problems that have been posed about Brissot and more broadly about the role of *gens de lettres* in later eighteenth-century French political culture. As a result, her attempt to “grant [Brissot] an importance long overdue” presents him anachronistically, as a liberal hero for today (and admittedly we are in dire need of heroes), but offers little historically informed thinking about what “ideals” are, how we understand them, what role they play in political action, or, most strikingly for a historical monograph, about the definition of such terms as “Enlightenment” and “*philosophe*” and of their relationship to the course of the French Revolution.

Loft’s attempt to reveal Brissot’s “inner conviction” (p. 3) as a modern progressive succumbs to two curious tendencies in recent intellectual historiography of the Enlightenment. The first is an assertion of methodological idealism as a sufficient approach to the study of ideas and language. By idealism, I mean the presentation of a given individual’s discourse as expressing a systematic and coherent set of “ideas” that are unproblematically comprehensible for both the “author” of those ideas and the historian studying them. Loft, of course, is perfectly entitled to adopt such an approach, and she quite explicitly does so.

At the same time, she never engages with the methods of cultural historiography, meaning the study of how social experience is represented in language and how the use of highly figurative language to represent social experience both mediated and constructed contemporary social and political relationships.[2] Consequently, she proceeds to read such sources as Brissot’s correspondence and *Mémoires*, as well as his treatises on legal reform and the slave trade, as transparent representations of his thinking and experience. While these summaries are in and of themselves admirable, Loft becomes hamstrung in her effort to ascribe all of Brissot’s writings to an intellectual outlook of “liberty.” To present his writings as ideological liberalism pure and simple, she must rely on such vague categories as a “*philosophe*,” who received “Enlightenment training”(pp. 89, 102), and whose political activism she categorizes, anachronistically, as that of a “reformist” and “abolitionist,” using these as fixed and self-evident categories. To situate him in society, she describes his search for patrons and protectors only in the vague term of “les grands” (p. 103), and she draws repeatedly on the anachronistic term “intellectual.” None of these flaws are fatal on their own, but collectively, they add up to a book with too narrow a focus on the man and not enough on the society and culture of his times.

A second, and more nefarious, tendency is the gratuitous deformation of Darnton’s arguments to serve a polemical purpose. Darnton’s original discussion of Brissot in no way implied, as Loft argues, that Brissot was a hypocrite for having provided information to the police or that Brissot was uninterested in Enlightenment *philosophie*. Indeed, his more recent articles on Brissot, including the most recent on Brissot’s relations with the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel (though published too late for Loft to have consulted it), explicitly argue for Brissot’s “genuine faith” in Rousseau’s doctrines of virtue and depict Brissot as a hapless victim of the competitive world of eighteenth-century publishing, abused by counterfeiters, commercial printers, and the Lieutenant-General of Police.[4]

Loft never considers Darnton's explanation of his argument that precisely because radicals such as Brissot did have such personal interests in the success of even their most polemical works, their views should be considered all the more sincere. After all, they were willing to compromise themselves to get their point across. Darnton, in short, suggests that an individual's "ideology" need not be consistent with his or her "interest," which is precisely the point Loft rejects. She is of course justified in disagreeing, but she ought to have responded more fully to his more recent writings on the topic.[5]

These shortcomings are more errors of omission than of commission. Loft does provide a lucid description of Brissot's major pre-revolutionary writings and weaves them into a plausible narrative of his intellectual trajectory. Her work is not a biography of Brissot as a journalist or politician and least of all as a revolutionary.[6] Loft studies primarily his published writings from the 1770s and 1780s, supplemented by some use of his correspondence and memoirs. There is also a brief discussion of his calls for abolition during the Revolution. Above all, she makes the case for a consistent and clear progressivism on Brissot's part, suggesting he had radical political commitments long before the Revolution. Particularly interesting is her discussion of Brissot's best-known work, on reform of criminal law and on his anti-slavery writings, in chapters five and eight, respectively.

However, her limited scope prevents her from addressing several very important topics about which eighteenth-century historians would like to know much more from a biography of Brissot. Recent debates about patriotism would seem to have much to gain from an analysis of Brissot's rhetorical use of the term *patriote* in his pre-revolutionary writings and in his revolutionary journalism. Specifically, Brissot made extensive use of the language of patriotism and virtue in the polemics he penned in the late 1780s with Mirabeau on behalf of the Swiss financier Etienne Clavière. These pamphlets and articles denounced "speculation" and successfully drove down the value of shares in joint-stock corporations, including the Compagnie des Eaux de Paris. Loft glosses over these writings as well as his involvement with the demagogic Parisian lawyer Nicolas Bergasse, who played a central role in the infamous Kornmann affair of 1786-1789 (pp. 11-13).

Instead, she follows the tendency of many intellectual historians to dismiss these polemics as superficial. She claims Brissot's deeper concerns were with nobler causes, such as abolition and Jewish emancipation. But as much recent cultural historiography has made clear, the use of precisely the sort of narratives of virtue and corruption so dear to Brissot filled pamphlets and the press in these years. Loft sees in Brissot's writings an admirable commitment to "the defense of the less fortunate" (pp. 243-244) and therefore dismisses any material motive for his involvement in rampant manipulation of stock values on the Parisian stock market in the late 1780s. However, it is precisely the process by which such narratives informed how French people came to view social relationships in melodramatic terms of sincerity, virtue, justice and morality against duplicity, self-interest, oppression, and luxury that needs to be analyzed, rather than reproduced.

Loft has provided a serious, earnest, and thorough reading of Brissot's writings from the 1780s. Unfortunately, she has missed an opportunity to shed new light on a key figure in linking late Enlightenment literary culture to the outbreak of and early course of the Revolution.

## NOTES

[1] Robert Darnton, "The Grub Street Style of Revolution: J.-P. Brissot, Police Spy," *Journal of Modern History* 40 (1968): 301-327, of which a slightly revised version appears as "A Spy in Grub Street," in *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982): 41-70; Frederick A. de Luna, "The Dean Street Style of Revolution: J.-P. Brissot, *Jeune philosophe*," *French*

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*Historical Studies* 17 (1991): 159-199; and Darnton, "The Brissot Dossier," *French Historical Studies* 17 (1991): 200-218.

[2] Sara Maza, "Stories in History: Cultural Narratives in Recent Works in European History," *American Historical Review* 101 (1996): 1499-1503.

[3] See especially Daniel Gordon, "The Great Enlightenment Massacre," in *The Darnton Debate: Books and Revolution in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Haydn T. Mason (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1998): 129-156.

[4] Darnton, "J.-P. Brissot and the Société Typographique de Neuchâtel (1779-1787)," *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 2001:10: 26-50. Note that here, Darnton once again does provide the evidence of Brissot's collaboration with the police, Le Noir's mention of Brissot's service in his memoirs (see note 22), *pace* Loft's claim that there is "no credible evidence" on this point (p. xvii). Accompanying this article, Darnton has published an online database of 160 newly published letters from the 1780s between Brissot and the STN : [http://163.1.91.60/www\\_vfetc/SVEC01\\_10\\_BRS/home\\_db.htm](http://163.1.91.60/www_vfetc/SVEC01_10_BRS/home_db.htm).

[5] Darnton, "Ideology on the Bourse" in *L'Image de la Révolution française*, ed. Michel Vovelle (Paris and Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1989): 124-39; and Darnton, "Two Paths Through the Social History of Ideas," in *The Darnton Debate*: 251-193.

[6] Brissot's role as a revolutionary political leader is discussed, most recently, in Leigh Whaley, *Radicals: Politics and Republicanism in the French Revolution* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2000).

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