
H-France Review Vol. 6 (October 2006), No. 122

Susan Maslan, *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy and the French Revolution*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. xii + 275 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$50 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8018-8125-0.

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

Susan Maslan begins her *Revolutionary Acts: Theater, Democracy and the French Revolution* by describing the book as “about theater and democracy during the French Revolution” (p. 1). In this original and thoughtful work, she argues that the relationship between theater, understood as a body of literature defined by genre, and democracy, meaning an ethos of popular participation in government, should be analyzed as overlapping, culturally determined concepts rather than as institutions or social practices. The resulting book offers great originality, creativity, thoughtfulness and erudition by impressively bringing together a wide range of sources from parliamentary speeches to treatises to plays, and by drawing on secondary scholarship from a variety of disciplines: history, literature, philosophy, sociology and cultural studies. Not doubt this is a substantial book, well presented by Johns Hopkins University Press.

An historian of the Revolution, even one well read in cultural historiography, may not be well equipped to assess or even understand the argument, evidence or method of the book. Written by an author who has a doctorate in Humanities and teaches in a French Department, the book is published in a series on literary criticism. By taking an approach that eschews institutional analysis, Maslan departs, for better and worse, from the thrust of more recent scholarship by historians on French Revolutionary theater and democracy.[1] She addresses instead that body of work best described as Revolutionary cultural studies, which takes up quite different questions, arguments, sources and methods. This approach leads to both the creative originality and the shortcomings of this book as a work on the French Revolution.

The book consists of a lengthy introduction, followed by four chapters, of which chapters 1 and 4 have appeared in largely the same form as articles.[2] Chapter one narrates several well-known controversies arising from theatrical performances in the early years of the Revolution, notably Marie-Joseph Chénier’s *Charles IX*, before moving on to a more theoretical discussion of “the historical contradiction between political representation and direct democracy” and suggests that revolutionary-era theater audiences became a salient instance of the latter; this assertion becomes one of the recurrent themes of the book. Chapter two discusses what Maslan calls “the comic revolution,” arguing that Fabre d’Eglantine’s efforts as a playwright in the late 1780s and early 1790s amounted to an appropriation and adaptation of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s hostility to theater, so that Fabre’s comic works succeeded, she argues, in expressing an “antitheatricalism” that appealed to Revolutionary audiences. Chapter three takes up on the problem of “surveillance” as central to popular republican political culture, arguing that the theme emerges in Rousseau’s oft-cited *Lettre à M. d’Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758) and then attempts to show how this theme was taken up in Maximilien Robespierre’s speeches to the Convention, in Parisian sections, and then in popular imagery and several popular plays. Finally, Chapter four continues the discussion of surveillance in a discussion of the content and controversy surrounding several popular plays with both political and domestic themes, Jean-Baptiste Radet’s *La Chaste Suzanne* (1793) and Maurin de Pompigny’s *L’Époux républicain* (1794), concluding that these works expressed “a longing for and a vision of revolutionary totality” among otherwise “fragmented” citizens (p. 215). The chapters function as separate essays that develop common themes but the author does not seek to present either a narrative or an argument that builds to an overarching conclusion.

While seeking to address such important historical themes as the advent of representative democracy, Maslan nevertheless takes great pains throughout to distinguish her work from that of historians—and indeed from almost all work previously written on Revolutionary theater. She asserts in the Introduction that much of the previous scholarship does not study plays as literary works, which is a valid assertion and one that would imply there is still more to be learned about the meanings of different theatrical genres in the late eighteenth century. Maslan, though, does not raise that question, approaching theater and “theatricality” in a fashion that she describes as “extraordinarily complex” (p. 217); her sources are mostly texts of plays, with very little discussion of dramaturgy or theater criticism. Maslan’s analysis of these texts is thoughtful and subtle but one might have hoped that a critic of Maslan’s evident intellectual abilities and interests might have sought to develop a more straightforward explanation of how her readings shed light on political theory and practice during the Revolution.

Instead of a framing argument, Maslan offers in the introduction a thoroughgoing critique of scholarship on Revolutionary theater, which is at once all-encompassing in its desire to find fault with almost every work it cites and at the same time incomplete in its mastery of the relevant scholarly literature. An unsympathetic reader might find Maslan’s undeniably aggressive tone baffling given that the bibliography and references include no works published after 2000 and very few after 1995 (other than works previously published and then republished). One hopes that by implication those many recent works on the topic not cited have been left out because the author’s sharp eye found less to fault rather than because these more recent works merely escaped her purview.

Whatever the reason, the glaring omission of Paul Friedland’s 2002 monograph, *Political Actors*, must be attributed either to the author’s desire either to avoid a fight or to a fear of appearing redundant or reductive.[3] Friedland’s book works different terrain, comparing acting theory to political theory to study the concept of representation. Without rendering Maslan’s book any less original, interesting, or important, Friedland’s argument closely parallels Maslan’s argument that one of the more significant developments of the French Revolution was “the direct popular democracy that burst forth in 1789 was soon overwhelmed and replaced by the more practical, manageable system of political representation, which is to say the hegemonic form of government in our time” (p. 1).[4] Maslan takes up Friedland’s book in a lengthy footnote to her introduction (p. 217, n. 3) that offers several sharp distinctions in their respective understandings of theatricality and representation, but offers little to explain the evident significance of the questions that captured the preoccupations of two very brilliant scholars who have worked simultaneously—but apparently without conversation—on these topics for the past ten years. Without assigning blame, it is therefore disappointing to a reader of both books that they seem to have avoided rather than built upon each other’s arguments and findings in their respective, and quite complementary, studies.

At times, Maslan’s treatment of prior scholarship resembles a bull in a china shop, breaking everything in sight in a mad fury to clear an open path—with no effort at all to avoid trampling over, disfiguring and breaking into pieces the arguments and work of others. She is particularly harsh in her attitude towards the work of historians, which is often unsubtle and frequently unsupported. She resorts frequently to the formulation “Historians claim...” without either limiting the claim or even providing references to clarify or illustrate. For instance, the claim that “Historians...have argued that revolutionaries were obsessed with conspiracy” is supported by a footnote that renders this thought only more complex but does not specify or give any example.[5]

Equally frustrating is her tendency to group scholars, as well as eighteenth-century writers, into amorphous categories, such as “Rousseauian,” “Habermasian” or the old chestnut, “Marxist.” This tendency not only confuses more than it clarifies, but it borders at times on demagoguery, as with her statement that “Marxist historians have emphasized” wage and price controls as the essence of Jacobin

political culture--rather than her interpretation of Jacobinism as "an espousal of popular aspirations for full participatory democracy." This important distinction would be worth demonstrating, beginning with some evidence or example of the supposedly materialist-determinist Marxists. The footnote to this sentence, however, only repeats the same rhetorical ploy; it consists of the unqualified and unsupported claim that "Historians typically claim that the Jacobins were free-marketters" (p. 246, f. 14). Not only then do we never learn who "claims" this or why, but we never learn that both Jacobinism and economic theory during the eighteenth century remain topics of extensive research and vigorous debate.[6] Such details are not important to Maslan, because she is in, in short, not seeking to demonstrate her claims as historically accurate but instead seeking to make a prescriptive argument about how she believes "democratic political culture" ought to function.

To consider an example of how Maslan's evident but unexplained antipathy to historians effects her analysis, one can turn to her lengthy discussion of the literary career of Fabre d'Eglantine in chapter two. Maslan argues that Fabre (and, in passing, Olympe de Gouges) ought to be considered writers "of some consequence" whose "literary efforts [were] serious" but "remain unexplored" (p. 77). Moreover, Maslan claims that Fabre "has received little new critical attention" since Alphonse Aulard (p. 231, n. 2), and thus his "major accomplishment" as an author has not been recognized.[7] In this passage, Maslan draws heavily on Robert Darnton's reading of Fabre's work and career, notably Darnton's interpretation of Fabre's *Le Philinte de Molière* as a reversal of the moral lesson of Molière's *Le Misanthrope*. At the end of this passage, she then explicitly criticizes Darnton for his failure "to offer a literary analysis of Fabre's play nor does he attend to what is at stake" in Fabre's writing (p. 86). But, of course, Darnton devoted considerable discussion to just those topics in the full, final version of his 1989 paper.[8] Moreover, Maslan does not refer to or cite other, recent accounts of Fabre's involvement in theater and politics that draws on new, archival material and also offers an alternative reading to Darnton's.

To question her apparent lack of familiarity with the literature is not merely splitting hairs, because Maslan repeats erroneous information or leaves out crucial points. She repeats Fabre's own claim to have won the Eglantine d'or at the Toulousain Jeux Floraux, as if a writer's claims about him or herself could be read as documents of lived experience--and indeed, Fabre did not actually win the award, yet he did consistently use the claim that he had done so to fashion an identity as an accomplished poet. Moreover, she leaves out the crucial conditions under which Fabre achieves what she twice states to be the success of having his play performed by the Comédiens Français--that Fabre had to threaten the troupe with an attack by the militia of the Cordeliers district to get the play staged.[9]

Maslan's tendency to overstate her case is most noticeable in the ensuing chapter on Robespierre and what she refers to as "revolutionary surveillance." This chapter attempts to discuss what Maslan calls the "Rousseauian faith in surveillance," which she does not explain or specify, so we have no idea why it is "paradigmatic for Revolutionary culture." Surveillance, for Maslan, is central to the Revolution, which--she argues here--"constitutes a lost chapter in the...shift from a regime of spectacle to a regime of surveillance." This change, she further asserts, demonstrates an instance of "the shift from monarchic states ruled by powerful princes to liberal and industrial nations," which can also be described as a shift "sometime between the eighteenth century and the nineteenth" in the use of power through "the gaze" (p. 126).

Historians--to be specific, this reviewer--may be troubled not only by the lack of detail about revolutionary policing, a topic that has generated an ample secondary literature, but the lack of precision in defining "surveillance." [10] One has the sense that Maslan takes for granted many of the claims, including some of the most historically ungrounded, made by Foucault or in his name--especially in the hey-day of his influence on American humanities scholarship (which of course coincides with the years and institutions in which Maslan did most of the formative thinking for this book). Because her

discussion of “popular surveillance” seems to be derived more from Foucault than from source material on the French Revolution, we do not get much of a detailed sense of what it was, how it was practiced, or, above all, how it was experienced—which means fundamentally also we don’t know if it was experienced as “popular surveillance.” Thus, the claim of a transition from “popular surveillance” to a regime of “repressive surveillance, with which we are familiar” is not clearly argued, because it is not at all clear what she means by the distinction between popular and “repressive” surveillance (p. 169).

Elsewhere in the same chapter, Maslan provides another example of assertion taking the place of argument. She asserts the importance of “surveillance” to ideas of “popular sovereignty” held by “Rousseau...and large numbers of revolutionary citizens.” To explain or demonstrate this assertion, however, she draws on Albert Soboul’s discussion of *sans culottes* (p. 153). But, of course, more recent work has built upon Soboul to demonstrate that the *sans culotte* was a cultural construct that resonated powerfully in the sections. The *sans culottes* were not, as Maslan presents them, a social constituency or political pressure group. In this sense, her arguments are undermined by her lack of mastery of the scholarly literature.[11] It is thus difficult to be convinced by her assertions about the “demise of popular surveillance” as a necessary step in the advent of “mass politics” and “mass democracy” (pp. 169-170).

We return then to the central question raised by Maslan about the meaning of the French Revolution—that “direct popular democracy burst forth in 1789” only to be “replaced by the more practical, manageable system of political representation.” She does not explain, however, what is meant by “the hegemony of representation” that emerges from the Revolution or what is meant that “many citizens persisted in rejecting the representative model.” Likewise, she is never clear on what “new mass revolutionary culture” is or why theater in particular is an instance of it (p. 1). All of these terms ought to have been specified, given how powerfully Maslan is here arguing against the prevalent consensus on, for instance, the continuing evolution of representative democracy in France across the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries—and on the advent of mass culture only in the late nineteenth centuries. To posit the “hegemony” of anything and a “mass” anything as early as 1789 is indeed creative and original, but without clear definitions or evidence, it is also not convincing.

Ultimately, this book disappoints, not for lack of effort or ability on the part of the author—but for lack of guidance. One wishes that one of the many scholars she cites in the acknowledgements would have encouraged her either to engage with the historiography and consider the approaches, sources and findings of different historians to the problems she wants to study, or to have scaled back her claims and offered what would have been an equally valuable study of revolutionary plays as literary works. Instead, we have a book that puts forth an argument too complex to be sustained by decontextualized readings of texts—even of texts as rich and varied as the ones Maslan deploys. Given the stakes for the contemporary world, which is in dire need of careful and lucid discussions of the relationship between individual liberty, democracy and cultural unity, one can only hope that Maslan will inspire others to tackle these big questions but, from an historians’ standpoint at least, to do so with a bit more empirical precision and a bit more intellectual humility.

NOTES

[1] On theater studied as an institutional component of political culture, see Jeffrey Ravel, *The Contested Parterre: Public Theater and French Political Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), and more recently, Lauren Clay, “Provincial Actors, the Comédie-Française, and the Business of Performing in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 38: 4 (2005): 651-679. An institutional approach

to the study of democracy has been particularly important in the study of elections; see Malcolm Crook, *Elections in the French Revolution: An Apprenticeship in Democracy, 1789-1799* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), and articles by Melvin Edelstein including "Laying the Foundations for the Regeneration of the Empire: the First Municipal elections in the biggest Cities of France during the Revolution," *French History* 17 (2003): 251-279.

[2] Maslan, "Resisting Representation: Theater and Democracy in Revolutionary France," *Representations* 52 (1995): 27-52; "Susannah at her Bath: Surveillance and Revolutionary Drama," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 34: 3 (2001): 421-439.

[3] *Political Actors: Representative Bodies & Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002).

[4] Friedland devotes much of his conclusion to this issue, questioning in the end "whether in replacing tyranny with representative democracy...we have not replaced one form of tyranny with another. For representative democracy is *not* democracy" (emphasis in original, p. 299). Maslan seems to echo this precise thought on the first page of her book. On the relationship of her work to Friedland's, she explains not entirely convincingly that Friedland's book "was published after the completion of this book" (p. 217), although both dissertations were completed in the mid-1990s, and Maslan and Friedland have participated jointly on conference panels on at least one occasion as long ago as 1997.

[5] Instead of an example, we find Maslan supporting this point with a statement that reads as if this were a work of German philosophy:

If actorly representation, with its institutionalized disjoining of appearance and reality, was the antithesis of revolutionary representation, the broader structure of theatrical representation suggested a relationship between representatives and represented—between actor/ political and audience / people—even more deeply disturbing to revolutionary ideology. (233, f. 13).

[6] Those interested in Jacobin political economy might consult with profit the decidedly non-Marxist Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All: Jacobin Egalitarianism in Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) or the brilliantly written and explicitly anti-Marxist, Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness Beyond Virtue: Jacobins During the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1998).

[7] Alphonse Aulard, "Figures oubliées de la Révolution française: Fabre d'Englantine," *Nouvelle Revue* (1885): 59-85.

[8] Compare Maslan (pp. 80-87) with Darnton, "The Facts of Literary Life in Pre-Revolutionary France," in Keith M. Baker, ed., *The Political Culture of the Old Regime* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1989), 261-291. Maslan cites an earlier, shorter version of Darnton's article.

[9] See Gregory S. Brown, *A Field of Honor: Writers, Court Culture and Public Theater in French Literary Life from Racine to the Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) chapter 6, sec 5, para. 65-75. <http://www.gutenberg-e.org/brg01/frames/fbrg08.html>.

[10] The classic work of Richard Cobb, *The Police and the People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); among more recent work, noteworthy is G. Charles Walton's as yet unpublished doctoral

dissertation, "Policing Public Opinion in Revolutionary France" (Ph.d. dissertation, Princeton University, 2003).

[11] Richard Mowery Andrews, "Social Structures, Political Elites and Ideology in Revolutionary Paris, 1792–94: A Critical Evaluation of Albert Soboul's *Les Sans-Culottes Parisiens en l'an II*," *Journal of Social History* 19, no. 1 (1985): 71–112, and more recently, Haim Burstin, *L'Invention du sans-culotte* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005).

Gregory S. Brown
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
gbrown@unlv.nevada.edu

Copyright © 2006 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies. ISSN 1553-9172