

Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to William Doyle's review of Henry Heller, *The Bourgeois Revolution in France 1789-1815*.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (April 2007), No. 36

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

<http://h-france.net/vol7reviews/doyle.html>

Date: Sat, 7 Apr 2007 09:06:01

David Slavin
dhslavi@emory.edu

Colleagues

If professors Heller or Doyle or others would care to comment, I'd like to hear what you have to say on the role of the Antillean pseudopod of the French ecumene during the Atlantic revolutionary era. My own view is that the debate over the nature of the revolution has thus far failed to take into consideration that Saint Domingue, Martinique and Guadeloupe constituted an industrial agriculture concentration of 750,000 proletarians (Sidney Mintz, Theodore William Allen, Eric Williams all see the Africans as slave proletarians), perhaps the largest working class concentration in the world, and certainly the largest in what might be termed greater France. The planters, who owned both the workers outright, exploited their labor power for a French national and a global market. They could hardly be considered anything other than capitalists. Factoring them and their workers into the equation clarifies the analysis of the nature of French society, does it not? Yet both revisionists and Marxists remained wedded to a Eurocentric perspective on the revolutionary era. This narrow view persists despite what we know about the Atlantic political economy of the era as knitting together Africa, North America, the Caribbean, and Britain, Holland, France into a multiplicity of triangle trades.

How one pieces together this political economy with the particular events of the unfolding revolutionary struggle is something I myself cannot do in this short comment nor do I have the time to prepare an extended essay. But I wish someone would address this problem directly. I think of Peter Linebaugh's and Marcus Rediker's work on the "many-headed hydra" of revolution among the seafaring laborers of the 18th century, serving on slave ships and fishing fleets (which fed the Antillean slaves as well as Europe). They too are part of this Age of

Democratic Revolution that ironically consolidated slavery in the US. This part of the revolutionary struggle defeated Napoleon and emancipated Haiti, only to be embargoed by Jefferson's republic. Can you isolate the peasant revolt from the sugar workers revolution? What was the impact of the shift to beet sugar production in northern France in the early 19th century? Continuing to debate what went on within the Hexagon with no reference to the Atlantic complex seems wrong to me.

Date: Sat, 7 Apr 2007 09:06:01

Norman Ravitch
ravitchn@bellsouth.net

William Doyle's discussion of Henry Heller's book on the bourgeois French Revolution and Heller's response constitute for me the return of a nightmare.

Books like this are designed for an increasingly inward-looking clique of people. History in general is out of fashion as a college major and French history decidedly even less fashionable. Why is anyone any longer writing about the French Revolution, bourgeois or otherwise? France is no longer of any consequence and as a model of historical development not very useful. The French themselves as they approach a general presidential election do not refer to their Great Revolution for inspiration or admonition. The French bourgeoisie still runs things, as always, but doesn't care to know how it got there in the first place. The French masses are more concerned with jobs than ideology and if they fear anything it is more likely to be Islamicization than capitalization.

Marxism will always remain an example of great intellectual achievement, of the ability of the well-endowed mind to create realities more meaningful than mere empirical facts. It need not fear any historian and his petty revelations about errors and exaggerations. Nor should Marxist historians think that their every utterance is awaited with impatience by a public in search of meaning and purpose.

In short, one wonders what History has come to.

I'll wait for a better dream.

Date: Sat, 7 Apr 2007 11:44:51

Kenneth G. Johnson
kgj_phd@hotmail.com

While taking the Caribbean colonies into account, one must also not forget the French colonies in the Indian Ocean - Ile de France and Reunion, and the role they and their political representatives also played in the French Revolution.

I recommend Claude Wanquet's *La France et la premiere abolition de l'esclavage, 1794-1802: Le cas des colonies orientales Ile de France (Maurice) et La Reunion* (Paris, Karthala, 1998)

Date: Sun, 8 Apr 2007 09:17:00

Jonathan Marshall
jonathan.marshall@ecu.edu.au

Reading Norman Ravitch's summary dismissal of France, the French Revolution, the bourgeoisie, class and Marxism as matters worthy of serious debate or research, one is tempted to apply the same standards to him and pass over such claims as irrelevant.

I do however feel it is worth noting that while France is not quite the great land of the public intellectual it once was, it does remain in part so and the role of the intellectual --- both in France and the US --- is derived in part from the role of intellectuals in the Revolutions of those countries. Neither country has rejected out of hand the importance of difficult and/or controversial ideas to public discourse. Moreover (unfashionable though it may be to state things quite so bluntly in the wake of postmodern relativism) I find it hard to imagine that any of us on list and/or working at major cultural institutions would be doing so if we did not believe that each of us possess to some degree specialist skills and/or knowledge which are not widely shared amongst the general public and that as such, it is our function to bring such difficult, unpopular or otherwise 'unfashionable' material out, to educate and enlighten those who are not in the possession of such skills and knowledge. How the public as whole views our contributions is not something any of us can afford to ignore, but I dare say few of us would consider public reception and/or relevance the chief criteria to determine whether to conduct and/or publish research.

In short, if --- as Ravitch rather quaintly puts it --- "the masses" really are in no way "concerned" with the Revolution and ongoing debates about its political character, its class significance, and so on, this in no way invalidates the importance of such work. In any case, I for one, do not

believe in such a large and incoherent lumpen social group as "the masses" can really be said to exist --- this is indeed an issue right at the core of texts such as "The Bourgeois Revolution": how are social groups constituted, what is their role, their economic and political character, and so on. Given the US and her allies are currently trying to create a Euro-American style civil polis from out of diverse social groups in Iraq right now, the make up of societies during the historic foundations of Western liberalism would seem like fairly pressing matters to me.

If I can take this discussion in a rather different (if not closely related) direction though, I noted our rather right-wing national newspaper in Australia recently published an equally summary dismissal of one of France's great (ex-pat?) intellectuals: Jean Baudrillard, whom I had not heard had died. This is the only reportage I have seen of this, which is odd as Baudrillard was always rather popular in the Australian academy. I suspect that list members are highly divided on their assessments of the king of simulations, a (post?)Marxist who turned the role of the intellectual into something more akin to popular cultural fame and whose claims regarding S11 and the Gulf War were controversial to say the least. Nevertheless, his work on the simulacra remains a corner stone of the theorisation of the postmodern condition. Would anyone be able to direct me to any interesting online coverage of his passing?

Jonathan Marshall
Research Fellow
Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts
Edith Cowan University
2 Bradford Street
Mt Lawley, WA 6050

Date: Sun, 8 Apr 2007 21:29:35

Henry Heller
heller@cc.umanitoba.ca

I would like to briefly respond to David Slavin. The West Indian sugar economy was critical to the French economic expansion of the eighteenth century. The Haitian revolt and the British blockade represented a body blow to the new revolutionary government in France. Remarkable is the speedy restructuring of the French manufacturing economy toward the north and east during the 1790s and its role in the emergence of French imperialism on the European Continent under the Directory and Napoleon. I don't accept the idea that slave are

proletarians. What is the point of confusing the two?

I have many colleagues who are interested in post-colonialism. Some chastize me for my Eurocentric interest in the French Revolution. I always respond that the Haitian slave revolt was a remarkable precursor of the anti-colonial revolts of the twentieth century. It was inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution.

Date: Sun, 8 Apr 2007 21:29:35

Paul Sonnino
sonnino@history.ucsb.edu

I would say, in response to Professor Marshall's interesting reaction, that it is not Professor Ravitch, nor even Professors Doyle and Heller, who have made the French Revolution seem irrelevant, but rather Professors Furet and his disciples who, by denying that it is possible to make a disinterested historical statement, have turned the study of the revolution into a babble of depersonalized discourses, whimsical "representations", and consecutive lieux des mémoires, each one more distant from the original human tragedy than its predecessor.

Date: Mon, 9 Apr 2007 10:05:35

Kenneth G. Johnson, Ph.D., INFR, FINS
kgj_phd@hotmail.com

Henry Heller wrote:

"I have many colleagues who are interested in post-colonialism. Some chastize me for my Eurocentric interest in the French Revolution. I always respond that the Haitian slave revolt was a remarkable precursor of the anti-colonial revolts of the twentieth century. It was inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution."

In addition to being inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution, the events on Saint-Domingue (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Ile de France and Ile de Reunion) and the heated debates they inspired in the assemblies also played an important role in the French Revolution. Was it the tail wagging the dog? I wouldn't go that far, but their influence on the French Revolution cannot go ignored.

Date: Mon, 9 Apr 2007 10:05:35

Alan Kahan
alansarah@hotmail.com

The lovely dispute between Heller and Slavin as to whether slaves were proletarians highlights all the deficiencies of defining class based primarily on the relationship to the means of production. Consciousness, anyone? Did slaves think of themselves the same way as factory-workers did? Or as journeymen did? Did other people at the time usually consider them in the same category? I thought the profession had put all these questions down some time ago. I'm as Eurocentric as prof. Heller, but it's time to close the dustbin lid on the oversimplifications of a Marxism that can never escape vulgarity, for the simple reason that when it does, it ceases to be Marxist.

And of course, Furet hardly was interested in making the French Revolution irrelevant. Declaring it "finished" is another matter.

Date: Mon, 9 Apr 2007 10:05:35

Eric Davis
Eric.Davis@ucfv.ca

I find Norman Ravitch's comments puzzling. He suggests writing about the French revolution is a waste of time because France is no longer important. Leaving aside the debatable nature of this claim, does that mean we should stop teaching or writing about Plato, Aristotle, and Homer because Greece is no longer "of any consequence"? Or the Renaissance because as "a model of historical development" it is not very useful? Isn't the fact that the French Revolution had a profound impact on a significant chunk of the world at the time and since justification enough? Even if later thinkers and revolutionaries were, from Professor Ravitch's point of view, mistaken in taking the Revolution as a model, their thought and actions were still inspired and shaped by it. And if "the French bourgeoisie still runs things, as always, but doesn't care to know how it got there in the first place," isn't the task of the historian to tell us how it got there and why it no longer cares how? Professor Ravitch adds that "history in general is out of fashion as a college major," but, in fact, it has always been the most popular major at my institution (there are about 250 declared history students in a comprehensive institution with about 6000 FTE students). Though some might say we are not "of any consequence," this is far from being the only sign of history's popularity, and in a world which is in many respects hostile to history,

that, I think, is of some consequence.

Date: Mon, 9 Apr 2007 17:13:30

Paul Werner
paul.werner@nyu.edu

If I might kill a few birds with one stone (or, in RevSpeak, "decapitate at one stroke the many-headed hydra of Error"):

1) I will be giving a short "intervention" on a subject which is at once Frenchrevolutionary-ish and eternal: "Liberté, Egalité, Génitalité." This as part of a conference on the Marxist-Psychoanalyst-etc Wilhelm Reich. I'm sure most of us, whatever we think of the actuality of the first two terms of my title, are still of an age to relate to the third.

SEXE, POUVOIRS, ENERGIE

Vendredi 25 mai 2007

Maison de l'Amérique latine,

217 boulevard Saint-Germain, 75007 Paris

Organisation : Roger :Dadoun, 0145414400, 06 66 65 58 09

2) I find Alan Kahan's point about Marxism and consciousness curious, in terms for instance of Reich's (and Freud's) relationship to the Austromarxist ideology of 1920s Vienna. Then again, since Austromarxism borrowed its theory of consciousness wholesale from Kant, I can understand how someone like Freud or Reich would have had difficulties with that kind of "Marxist" understanding of consciousness as "fixed," by which I don't necessarily mean the operation recently performed on my cat, but pretty close. I would think that the consciousness of one's relationship to systems of production would be only as fixed as those systems, would change as it changed those systems, and that an insistence on the fixedness of consciousness would be as good a way as any of "fixing" the class one applied it to - as it was for my cat. Or am I being the wrong kind of Marxist?

3) Curious, that at a moment when 45% of the French electorate are positive as to what they don't want, another historic moment whose dynamic was as often based on the rejection of the past as on the imagination of the future is rejected wholesale by some of my colleagues. Was Furet whistling past the graveyard or wishfully thinking? Are the French media doing the same? On verra...

Date: Tue, 10 Apr 2007 18:55:14

Mike Rapport
m.g.rapport@stir.ac.uk

On the uprising in Saint-Domingue, my understanding from discussions with my colleagues who are African historians and who have worked on the African diaspora is that the revolutionaries of Haiti did not think in class terms, but saw their actions very much from an African religious and political perspective. There's an interesting article on this by J. K. Thornton, "'I am the subject of the King of Congo': African Political Ideology and the Haitian Revolution', *Journal of World History*, 4 (1993). See also my colleague Robin Law's work on the role of voodoo in the uprising...

Date: Wed, 11 Apr 2007 07:49:56

Alyssa Sepinwall
sepinwal@csusm.edu

Adding to what Mike Rapport has said, the idea that the slaves in Haiti were simply borrowing/aping French revolutionary ideals is a very old-fashioned one (epitomized by the widely spread engraving of an African with the caption "me want liberty too"). See the work of Carolyn Fick on slave resistance in Saint-Domingue that long predated 1789, and how the chaos of the Revolution essentially provided an opportunity to continue these efforts. More recently, Laurent Dubois has emphasized how our understanding of what French revolutionary ideals meant has been in many ways shaped by the 16 pluviöse decree abolishing slavery, but that that change was largely forced on the ground by slaves in Saint-Domingue rather than being an ideological and magnanimous grant by Jacobins in Paris.
