

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to David A. Bell's review of Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley, editors, *From Deficit to Deluge: The Origins of the French Revolution* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011).

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<http://www.h-france.net/vol12reviews/vol12no30Bell.pdf>

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Dale K. Van Kley, Ohio State University

Vankley.1@osu.edu

and

Thomas E. Kaiser, University of Arkansas at Little Rock

tekaiser@ualr.edu

In his review of our book, Professor David Bell does a splendid job delineating the task of historians seeking to explain the origins of the French Revolution. Any adequate explanation, he argues, must show why “older languages of politics, and the institutions they were so closely bound to, had come to seem not merely insufficient, but harmful and corrupt.” It must show why political languages generated by the crisis of the Old Regime not only allowed “groups to form and press their claims in new ways,” but also how “they fit in with those readers’ experiences, frustrations, fears and desires.” In other words, the historian must demonstrate that “the new languages appealed because of the way they spoke to a population that was experiencing enormous social, economic and cultural changes.” “It was this combination of factors,” Bell concludes, “that turned a crisis of a regime into a revolution.”

Needless to say, the task Bell describes is a daunting one, and in the end, it may not be possible for the human mind to dispel the full mystery behind the French Revolution, an event more encased in mythology than almost any other in Western history. Bell is surely right that if the French Revolution is to be explained at all, it must be grasped not merely as a dance of autonomous “factors,” but also as lived experience that made contemporaries feel they were living in both the best and the worst of times. How else to explain why a nation that had relied so heavily upon the past as a source of authority and emotional support was willing to break those ties so deliberately and systematically and gamble everything in hopes of regenerating itself and humanity at large? Clearly, getting the existential aspect right is crucial to any account of the French Revolution’s origins, but so is the part that explains the source of the hopes and fears that drove the Revolutionaries to undertake their grand mission in the first place. Sensibilities and emotions may have their own inner logic, but they do have identifiable causes, and it is these that we as editors sought to explore with our contributors.

As Bell correctly points out, the historiographical landscape of the French Revolution has been more placid since François Furet passed from the scene. But it has hardly been uncontested,

especially in the Anglo-American world, which has produced fine new works bearing on the origins of the Revolution by a large number of historians, including our contributors and other fine scholars such as Timothy Tackett, Michael Fitzsimmons, John Markoff, Peter Campbell, John Hardman, Michael Kwass, Vivian Gruder, and Jay Smith. If their debates have appeared, to use Bell's term, "unfocused," it is not because their work has been inferior to or less original than the work that came before it; rather, it is because of the welcome retreat from mono-causal explanations of the Revolution that over relied, in the Marxist case, on class, and in Furet's, on language and political culture. Under the banner of multi-causality, historians have lately gone in multiple directions, and it thus not surprising that their paths have only occasionally crossed and their arguments clashed in conspicuous fashion.

It was in response to this situation that we undertook the present volume. Bell scolds us for not "ventur[ing] out a little further into less well-plowed territory." But that may be because he does not fully appreciate our primary, self-assigned mission, especially in our introduction and conclusion: namely, to bring some kind of order to the considerable amount of work that has been done on the origins of the French Revolution during the last two decades. At the core of that mission was re-conceptualizing the relationship between the political narrative that has been enriched by recent historians of faction and other aspects of the Revolutionary crisis which have also been widely explored and we have inelegantly lumped together in the omnibus category of the "social." We do not believe that we "have eschewed innovation" by taking on this complicated task. Not only do we think our contributors have made original contributions to the sectors of the Revolutionary crisis that they have individually addressed; in addition, we think we have proposed-in ways that surely invite further testing, critique, and revision-an original model for tying up a lot of loose ends by showing how multiple origins combined to produce the revolution of 1789 via a dramatic process of politicization. Note that by "the revolution of 1789," we do not mean just any revolution that might have followed the collapse of the Old Regime. Rather, we mean the sort of sweeping, full-scale revolution that did, in fact, emerge out of the Old Regime's last and fatal fiscal crisis, which, in another politico-social context, might have generated a much more limited revolution or no revolution at all.

Although originally constructed as a one continuous piece, the argument developed by the editors underwent division into a separate introduction and conclusion in the book so as not to overwhelm the chapters by the contributors. This division apparently occurred at some cost to the flow of the whole. So at the risk of repetition, we the editors should like to restate here that general argument, which draws heavily upon what our contributors found in their individual chapters, but to which they are by no means individually committed. As we see it, the period from 1787 through 1789 was marked by a mode of politicization that not only transformed the political process itself but also radically expanded the political agenda by placing on it an ever growing list of explosive issues for the nation to resolve. To be sure, the old foci of political debate-taxes, for example, and the rights of the parlements to oppose them-acted as the precipitating issues. But the already constricted space for political procedure had to make room for others, as the Parlement of Paris insisted on the principle of genuinely national consent to new imposts while ministers enlisted the authority of the monarchy in favor of a whole host of retaliatory reforms. These eventually included the reorganization of royal justice, the abrogation of seigniorial courts, the reordering of the social order-even the rights of citizens and religious minorities.

It was the monarchy that initiated this process of politicization by taking the radical step of convening and consulting the Assembly of Notables. But the monarchy encountered spirited opposition not only to the substance of its proposed reforms, but also to the monarchical procedure for consenting to and enacting them. As a result, the issue of the political process itself was added to the ever growing list of debatable issues. Thus set, this pattern of “constitutional” resistance to a reformist ministerial offensive repeated itself every time the monarchy tried its luck with a more representative body, culminating with the Estates General. The conflict mobilized “public opinion” on one side or the other, and such was the adversarial upping of the ideological ante that by its end no major institution of the Old Regime escaped amputation on the political chopping block. By the time Chancellor Chrétien-François Lamoignon told two Parisian cathedral canons in 1788 that because the parlements, the nobility and the clergy had dared to resist the king, “before two years were over there would be neither parlements, nor nobility, nor a clergy,” it is clear that something akin to an institutional death wish had taken hold some of those actors on whom the fate of the Old Regime most depended.

Since the argument was that this process fatefully politicized structural problems beginning with monarchy’s crazy-quilt fiscal fabric that existed apart from the “political,” the editors could not escape the choice of a definition of the “political.” To define the “political” in terms of the Old Regime’s process of decision-making and the play of faction and interest—the English school’s contribution to the subject—was too narrow for the argument’s purposes. For that very process—the old rules of the game—rapidly became a matter of contestation and thus underwent politicization in a larger sense of the term. At the other extreme, a complete reduction of the political to the linguistic mediation of human experience—another product of the heroic revisionist efforts—ran the risk of eliminating the irreducible multiplicity of non-linguistic origins that this volume had set out to integrate and relate to the “political.” The result was a definition of the “political” as political culture that, while capacious enough to include intellection and public opinion, did not eliminate from the field of analysis other “origins” that got politicized.

What then became “political” and added fuel to the growing fire was the backlog of long-standing, unresolved contradictions of the Old Regime which, variously analyzed by the contributors, resulted in the general discrediting of the monarchy—from a failed foreign policy to the cheapening and abuse of privilege for fiscal reasons to the vexed civil status of religious minorities. In the hands of a king who at least appeared to be capable of mastering these difficult issues by artfully negotiating with leaders of a divided opposition, it is conceivable that the gathering storm could have been dissipated. A much better monarchically “managed” crisis that would have jettisoned the cargo of either the Old Regime’s absolutist constitution or its aristocratic social and political structure remained a contingent outcome until the storming of the Bastille—the end of absolutism—and the night of August 4—the end of the society of orders. But because of his inability to decide between his incompatible identities as an enlightened “first servant of the state” and the more traditional “first gentleman of the realm,” an increasingly isolated Louis XVI projected no sense of mastery over the situation. Behind the traditional language and ceremonies of a theoretically absolute state, there appeared to be no trustworthy manager in control—hence, the fear of collapse, disorder, violence, and cooptation of the government by badly intentioned domestic and foreign interests; the desperate call for the regeneration of a nation in peril; and the emergence of a politics in a new key and language—all of

which was experienced existentially as intense anxiety laced with euphoric hope.

In prioritizing the political as here defined in relation to other origins, this volume lends itself to Bell's caricature of the process we explicate as nothing more complicated-or interesting--than the politicization of multiple, yet closely related origins. Indeed, so stated, the thesis may seem obvious, even banal, although we hasten to add that theses may be no less true for being obvious and banal, and that, if true, this particular resolution to the dilemmas bequeathed by revisionism and post-revisionism has been a long time coming. Yet we do not believe that we have merely re-assembled the usual pieces of the puzzle in the usual way. In our model, we think we have juxtaposed the "political" and the "social," the necessary and the contingent, the ideological and the "real" in a manner that, by incorporating the results of much recent research, coherently explains how a crisis over the deficit became a full-blown revolution. Admittedly, the primary gain is conceptual. At the same time we think our explanation elastic enough to accommodate the results of new archival plowing, the results of which we, as well as Bell, eagerly await.

Toward the end of his career, François Furet raised the putative mystery of the origins of the French Revolution to the level of a thesis, defying any and all comers ever to explain to his satisfaction how the French had so suddenly set out to put their past so completely behind them. Since then this thesis, or antithesis, has become an unfortunate refrain. But if these origins are as beyond the scope of historical analysis as Furet thought they were, it is hard to see how any additional plowing of the archives or reflection upon those archival discoveries will enlighten us further about the origins of the French Revolution. If, after five or six decades of revisionist, anti-revisionist, a-revisionist, and post-revisionist efforts, Bell is right that these origins remain as "poorly understood" as ever, we might--all of us--turn in our credentials and admit that we are the time-squanderers and space clutterers that a certain public has always suspected us to be.

Dale K. Van Kley, Ohio State University
Vankley.1@osu.edu

Thomas E. Kaiser, University of Arkansas at Little Rock
tekaiser@ualr.edu