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**Henry Heller**, *The Bourgeois Revolution in France 1789-1815*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006. ix + 172 pp. Maps, illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-845545-169-4.

Review by William Doyle, University of Bristol.

Henry Heller hates me. I say this at the outset so that readers of what follows may judge if I am simply responding in kind. He castigates me five times (four in the text, one on the cover) as a leading opponent of the Marxist interpretation of the French Revolution. Yet the only work of mine which Heller admits to having read is a five-page conference contribution of 1990, which at the time was described by Lynn Hunt as Marxist.

That said, there are certainly things to admire in his book. It is extremely well written—furious, feisty and confident. It brings together a formidable amount of material on the economic history and structure of France both before and during the revolutionary and Napoleonic period. It also reminds us that Marxism and the interpretations of the Revolution which it has engendered constitute a challenging and dazzling body of thought which deserves to be taken more seriously than students in a post-Communist world can all too often be persuaded to do. And Heller's book offers a good example of the scholastic gymnastics which latter-day Marxists have trained themselves to perform in order to sustain the coherence of their beliefs—not to mention their habitual distortion of the motivations of those who disagree with them.

The aim is quite simple, and readers are reminded of it throughout. The author wishes “to reclaim the idea that the French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution” (p.1). He believes that “after a generation of scholarly dominance, revisionism has exhausted itself and is now at a dead end” and that an avowedly Marxist-inspired interpretation is “the only one that can make sense of the existing historical research” (p. 2). Revisionism, he concludes after 150 pages, is “a form of historical irrationality that is rooted in political and social conservatism,” in Hippolyte Taine, in Augustin Cochin, in Joseph de Maistre, and Edmund Burke. It is a dogma (p. 21), liberal consensus passing itself off as historical objectivity (p. 20), a rejection of social history itself (p. 16). Its hegemony is explained in terms of “politically influential” historians like Alfred Cobban and François Furet peopling the universities with their acolytes, and the spirit of an age in which Soviet and Chinese Communism have collapsed (p. 12).<sup>[1]</sup>

Absent here is any distinction between revisionism and what some of us call post-revisionism. For Heller there seems no difference between what Cobban and George Taylor were saying in the mid-1950s and what Roger Chartier or Sara Maza are saying half a century later. Even poor George Comninel, who almost two decades ago tried to reconcile new empirical findings with Marxist theory, receives no mercy.<sup>[2]</sup> But revisionism was not a denial of social history: it was merely airing empirical doubts about the version of social history offered in the classic interpretation. It is post-revisionism which has gone beyond it into the realms of culture and language where some of the surviving revisionists feel distinctly unhappy. Give or take a few nuances that even he feels must be accepted, however, Heller's Revolution would have raised little dissent from Georges Lefebvre or Albert Soboul. It was the product of emergent capitalism, a bourgeois seizure of power from feudal aristocrats, and it “set the stage” for the later progress and triumph of capitalism as we know it (p. 103). And those who doubt this have no other purpose than to decry the Revolution.

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Whatever one thinks of this summons back to basics, it would command more respect if the author's factual knowledge were more reliable. Some of his mistakes are venial enough, but their effect is cumulative. Allarde is misspelt twice (p. 89), the second Assembly of Notables and the Haitian revolt are misdated (pp. 71 and 70), Barnave is accorded an office which as a Protestant he could not have held (p. 75), we hear of *hundreds* of provincial academies (p. 28), while Mirabeau is called the future leader of the Feuillants, who were only founded three months after his death (p. 77). More seriously, we are told that the Directory began with deflation, when at that moment *inflation* was at its most rampant (p. 84). Monetary stabilisation had certainly not been achieved by 1796. The numbers of the pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie are consistently overestimated, while those of the nobility are understated (p. 84). Most glaringly, it is accepted (like so much in the book) on the authority of Guy Lemarchand that ennoblement through office ended in 1728, when in fact it flourished throughout the century, with ample evidence of rising demand from the bourgeoisie (p. 55).[3]

Some of these errors make little enough difference to the overall argument, and Heller is intellectually agile enough to accommodate those that do. What he incorporates into the classic account is a vast amount of data on financiers, manufacturers and entrepreneurs throughout the period. A lot of it is purely descriptive, however, as if its significance were self-evident. And that opens the way to glaring contradictions. Thus *maîtres des forges*, apparently burning before 1789 to take over metallurgy and infuse it with capitalist energy, are blamed by Napoleon's time for inhibiting progress through their conservatism. It is surprising that more is not made of the economic imperatives which drove France into the colonial competition whose cost ultimately brought down the old regime—one of the best demonstrable links, as Gwynne Lewis has argued, between capitalism and the Revolution.[4] But Heller never seems quite sure of the importance attributable to war. Sometimes it is a stimulus to manufacture, sometimes a distortion of what *laissez-faire* might otherwise have blessed France with. And it is not really explained why capitalists supposedly so enamoured of free trade and enterprise were content to flourish only behind a tariff wall excluding British competition.

The Society for Robespierist Studies has recently given its *imprimatur* to a book calling the sale of national lands the most important event of the Revolution.[5] Yet this great sell-off figures in Heller's account only in the most fragmentary way. Very little discussion is devoted to the massive drain of otherwise potentially productive capital into buying national lands throughout the revolutionary period, even though in passing we observe his showpiece entrepreneurs joining in this process. Present throughout is that most problematical of Georges Lefebvre's categories, the rural bourgeoisie, but it is never defined. Nor is the seigneurial reaction, invoked out of the blue at various points. And whereas the impression is given that pre-revolutionary agriculture was a hotbed of innovation overlooked by revisionists, by Napoleonic times we hear of "only modest progress" and "*some* increase in agricultural production and improvement" (p. 137, italics mine). Much of the discussion of the peasants is based on the arguments of the Soviet scholar Anatoly Ado.[6] It amounts to how capitalistic the French peasantry would have become if Directorial and Napoleonic policies had continued those of the Jacobin dictatorship. But even if this view of Jacobin agrarian policies is credible, it rests on precisely the sort of counterfactual argument which is dismissed as unprovable when used by the revisionist Aftalion to argue that revolution was unnecessary to bring about economic change (p. 15).

The most palpable hit score by Heller on revisionism is the observation that Cobban's original demonstration that the legislators of 1789 included few capitalists led to assertions "based on a crude reductionism...of which Marxists are often accused" (p. 72). Cobban's assertions, in fact, were almost always demonstrably wrong, and it is surprising not to find Heller making more of that. And yet, having issued a potentially lethal challenge to the founding argument which launched the whole controversy, he seems at other points to accept some of the key conclusions to which it led: such as that the revolution was not inevitable if capitalism was to break through (pp. 6, 65) and that it produced a "new class of so-called notables" (p. 127). Meanwhile, in a book which declares that "any coherent historical narrative necessarily must aspire to a comprehensive view of its subject" we hear almost nothing about

religion, and nothing at all about terror, which between them tore the Revolution apart (p. 17). Divisions over monarchy go unmentioned. So does the growing importance of the army, except as a customer for capitalists. Perhaps Heller sees such things as froth on the infrastructural waves, but it is hard to produce a coherent account of the Revolution without them. And I wonder what possessed him, at the proof stage, to allow his publisher to place a *fleur de lys* at the head of every chapter? Yet perhaps this monarchical badge is appropriate, in its way. For it almost seems as if Henry Heller, like the Bourbons who also hoped to restore vanished certainties after decades of marginalisation, has learnt nothing and forgotten nothing.

## NOTES

[1] Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1964); François Furet, *Penser la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

[2] George V. Taylor “Types of Capitalism in Eighteenth-century France,” *English Historical Review* 79 (1964): 478-497, derived from a doctoral dissertation of a few years earlier; Roger Chartier, *Les origines culturelles de la Révolution française* (Paris: Seuil, 1990); Sarah Maza, *The Myth of the French Bourgeoisie. An Essay on the Social Imaginary, 1750-1850* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); George C. Comninel, *Rethinking the French Revolution. Marxism and the Revisionist Challenge* (London and New York: Verso Press, 1997).

[3] Guy Lemarchand, *Féodalisme, société et Révolution française: études d'histoire moderne, XVIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Caen: Cahiers des Annales de Normandie, 2000).

[4] Gwynne Lewis, *The French Revolution. Rethinking the Debate* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[5] Bernard Bodinier and Eric Teyssier, *L'Événement le plus important de la Révolution. La vente des biens nationaux*. (Paris: Société des études robespierristes et Éditions du comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2000).

[6] Anatoli Ado, *Paysans en révolution: terre, pouvoir et jacquerie, 1789-1794* (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 1996).

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See also Henry Heller's response to this review.

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