

H-France Review Vol. 10 (October 2010), No. 154

Augustin Cochin, *Organizing the Revolution: Selections from Augustin Cochin*, trans. Nancy Derr Polin; with a preface by Claude Polin. Rockford, Ill.: Chronicles Press, 2007. \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN-10: 0972061673.

Review by Donald Sutherland, University of Maryland.

Several years ago, Francois Furet drew attention to Augustin Cochin's reflections on the nature of the French Revolution. It is unfortunate that so few have paid attention because Cochin had many interesting things to say. At least this beautiful translation of some of Cochin's essays makes him more accessible to an Anglo-Saxon audience. Unfortunately, the husband and wife team that produced this readable volume do not consistently indicate which of Cochin's writings they excerpted—his *La crise de l'histoire révolutionnaire; Taine et m. Aulard* (1909) is obviously one of the sources though. The explanation that they chose works for their “modern, universal interest” [p. 29] requires greater elaboration. The criterion appears to have been his more polemical writings, rather than his historical scholarship. More of the latter would have been a great contribution.

Cochin takes some getting used to. He was a conservative Catholic and therefore in historiographical terms a counter revolutionary, very much out of sorts with modern sensibilities. He was also a gifted writer, clear thinker, and vigorous polemicist. More than a half century before Furet, Cochin targeted what Furet called *histoire universitaire*. For Cochin, this meant placing Aulard and the thesis of circumstances in his sights. Like Furet, Cochin problematized the Terror, challenging the assertion that the Terror and its atrocities were a logical response to foreign war and internal insurrection. Instead, Cochin argued, Aulard was not a historian of the Revolution *per se* but an apologist for the defense of the Revolution, a historian not of *facts*, but of partisan and self-justifying interpretations. Long before Furet, Cochin warned against uncritically accepting the revolutionaries' image of themselves.

The revolutionaries' justification of their actions did not always invoke self defense either, as Cochin points out. Rather, they wrote an informal collective autobiography that justified the insurrection of 1789 as throwing off the chains of despotism. Then the “people” completed the struggle on 10 August 1792 by instituting direct democracy. This invariably led to a new kind of despotism, a tyranny without a tyrant, a regime with no self control because nothing could constrain the people's will. Instead of being rooted in lived experience, the revolutionaries created fantasies in the clouds. Cochin was devastating on the imprecise language the classical historians from Mignet to Aulard used to describe agency during the Revolution. Cochin argued that the term “people” meant nothing. What lay behind it was the Popular Societies or the Clubs who fantasized a people and determined entry into the charmed circle. The Societies alone, or rather a tiny group of their leaders, used the language of direct democracy to exercise a horrible tyranny.

This concern led Cochin to examine the rationale behind atrocities in the Terror. These are largely

forgotten nowadays except in the popular histories that academics scorn. Thus, for example, Soboul (*Précis d'histoire de la Révolution française*. Paris: Éditions sociales, 1962) devoted exactly one line to the drownings at Nantes and the shootings at Lyon. By contrast, Cochin argued that atrocity was integral to the Revolution. Since the small cabal that ruled in the name of the people recognized no limits on its power, there was no such thing as excess. Enemies of the fantastical people had to be destroyed, not just defeated. Thus, member of the Committee of Public Safety, Georges Couthon wrote of the rebels at Lyon, "It is less a question of punishing them than of annihilating them." Or take Collot d'Herbois, also a member of the Committee on mission in Lyon, "None must be deported, the conspirators must be destroyed" (cited p. 111).

Cochin argued that atrocity was the logical result of the processes of direct democracy, not as Furet did, the result of ideology and language. While both agreed that Terror was not a response to circumstance, Cochin insisted the practices could be found in the "Philosophical Societies," the academies, literary salons, reading clubs, and so on, that sprang up in mid-century. These stood for nothing positive save secularism, while the whole thrust was anti-traditional and negative. Most important were their practices of anathema and the destruction of the reputation of dissenters. They lived in a fantasy world of their own making, utterly cut off from lived experience. Thus the processes of revolutionary politics originated a couple of generations before. Thermidor eventually brought them all crashing down to reality but the illusions of "free thought" continued into Cochin's day.

It is easy to fit Cochin into the historiography of counter revolution that stretched back to Burke and Barruel. It is also easy to dismiss him. Yet there is a great deal of value in Cochin's writing. The Polins decided not to excerpt the empirical parts of Cochin's best known work, *Les sociétés de pensée et la Révolution en Bretagne (1788-1789)*. Paris: H. Champion, 1925. There he tried to examine the workings of these societies in the run up to the Revolution in Brittany. This omission is a pity because Cochin's attempt to demonstrate the link between the Philosophical Societies and the early Revolution produced one of the best books on the pre-Revolution in the provinces, one that is still very much worth reading.

Cochin also challenges those who think the clubs had no antecedents, that the very crisis that the Revolution of 1789 engendered also created the response. On this reasoning, the clubs were *sui generis*. Yet Cochin's work shows that while there were significant institutional breaks between the early Jacobin Club and the Breton Club, there were continuities at the level of personnel. The Bretons and no doubt many others had pasts in the political and cultural life of the provinces. Although in social and economic terms, Brittany was an unlikely seedbed for radicalism, its institutions and vibrant intellectual life produced a dramatic clash of patriots and anti-patriots in 1788 that in turn sent an unusually patriotic delegation to the Estates General.

Cochin then was an odd historian. As a prosopographer and critic of concepts like the thesis of circumstances, he was strikingly ahead of his time. As a conspiracy theorist and anti-republican, he illustrated some of the peculiarities, some might say the sinister qualities of the French right. Either way, he deserves to be better known.

Donald Sutherland
University of Maryland
dsuther111@gmail.com

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 edistribution/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