

---

H-France Review Vol. 11 (August 2011), No. 178

Albert Mathiez, *La réaction thermidorienne*. Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2010. 410 pp. Notes and index. 25€ (pb). ISBN 9-782358-720120.

Review by Laura Mason, John Hopkins University.

The history of the French Revolution after Thermidor was long *terra incognita* to all but the most determined specialist. If the Directory has become more familiar thanks to the historians who have been charting new routes there for almost a generation, the fifteen confusingly eventful months of the Thermidoran Reaction remain poorly mapped. That might be reason enough to welcome a new edition of Albert Mathiez's *La Réaction thermidorienne*. But the book does more than simply fill a scholarly gap. Although shaped by the Jacobin orthodoxies of its age, Mathiez's narrative remains exemplary for its ability to marry a close study of this critical moment in the forging of the first French republic with a far-reaching argument about the Reaction's place in the revolutionary dynamic.

That this is only the second French edition of the book since its publication in 1929 may surprise, given the numerous editions of Mathiez' history of the Revolution before Thermidor.[1] However, as Yannick Bosc and Florence Gauthier argue in their foreword, Mathiez' particular framing of the period marginalized his work. The dominant interpretation, upon which Marxists, revisionists, and post-revisionists agreed, was that the Reaction marked a return to the Revolution's true aims, whether capitalist or liberal.[2] Mathiez, on the contrary, argued that Thermidor initiated a fundamental reversal, destroying a regime that had fulfilled the promise of the Declaration of the Rights of Man by defending democracy and the right to subsistence.[3] With painstaking detail, he set out to prove that the revolutionary government of the year II, a "dictatorship of public good" (p. 82), was brought down not by its own failings but by the greed and short-sightedness of its opponents.

Mathiez sees greed in the very origins of 9 Thermidor, when old Dantonists, "anciens proconsuls corrompus, souillés de crimes et de rapines," initiated Robespierre's fall to protect themselves from justice (p.61). They galvanized a passive Plain frightened by the Incorruptible's radical project to re-distribute counter-revolutionary property, and joined Montagnards eager to defeat the man but not his policies. In the wake of their victory, "politicians replaced policy" as the Dantonists become Thermidorans careened blindly onward in the service of private interest (p. 59). They empowered themselves by challenging the supremacy of the Committees of Public Safety and General Security, and curried public favor by endorsing the liberation of suspects. In so doing, they laid the groundwork for a full retreat from the year II by destroying the Mountain's unity and emboldening a newly restive Plain. Once they had exhausted alliances within the Convention, the Thermidorans sought new associates beyond it, rousing public opinion by rallying reactionary gilded youth from the pages of their newspapers and fortifying democracy's enemies by forging alliances with bankers, wholesalers, and nobles eager for government patronage. Becoming "prisonniers de leurs troupes," the Thermidorians would continue to oppose public good in the service of property until they brought down the whole edifice of revolutionary government (p. 179).

If Mathiez condemns the Thermidorans for being blind to the consequences of their actions, he praises

surviving Montagnards for having been quick to see what was going on. "Tout en continuant d'injurier les robespierristes, il les plagiaient," revitalizing their alliance with the people by resuscitating popular reforms (p. 117). They might have blocked the Thermidorans, Mathiez claims, had it not been for the poor timing of Jean-Baptiste Carrier's trial for atrocities committed while he was a representative-on-mission in Nantes. For once newspapers publicized courtroom testimony about that slaughter, even the people came to equate revolutionary government with excess. Robespierre too would have punished Carrier, but the latter's crimes acquired new meaning in a new context. Judged by reactionaries and defended by surviving Montagnards, his case cast a pall over the Mountain's achievements and the republic itself. "Ainsi se lève sur notre histoire le spectre rouge dont l'évocation arrêtera tant de fois la marche au progrès" (p. 144).

Having imposed this narrative order on the first chaotic months of Reaction, Mathiez describes subsequent legislation against the Terror as proceeding like the falling of dominoes. Although Bosc and Gauthier claim that the most important dimension of his history is his account of the Thermidorans' repudiation of a natural right to subsistence, the second half of his book ranges more widely than that. Mathiez describes a reaction that was legislative, diplomatic, religious, and bureaucratic, as well as economic. First, the Convention, facing a newly outspoken public, agreed to roll back the "revolution of 31 May 1793" by restoring surviving Girondin deputies. Then its bitter censure of Robespierriest repression compelled it to amnesty Chouans and Vendéens, which eroded dechristianization without ending counter-revolution. Once having retreated from anti-clericalism in the west to sustain a fragile peace there, the deputies had no choice but to permit churches to re-open elsewhere "car... pouvait-on exclure les catholiques de l'intérieur des avantages qu'on accordait aux royalistes insurgés?" (p. 254) Meanwhile, the legislature set the stage for White Terror in the south by placing former Jacobin administrators under surveillance, exposing them to disdain and then violence. If none of these measures won new friends, they lost the old. Parisian working people who bore the weight of reform--suffering directly from suppression of the *Maximum* and indirectly the cost of indemnities for "victims of the Terror"--revolted in Prairial and Germinal (Apr-May 1795) for "bread and the constitution of 1793." Now the Convention refused to bend, answering the insurgents by purging the last Robespierriests from its ranks and repealing the democratic constitution.

If the Reaction was driven by venality, short-sightedness, and bad luck, Mathiez declares, its end was equally shabby. When the destruction of revolutionary government rejuvenated royalism, just as the Mountain had warned it would, the republic was saved only by divisions among its enemies and the loyalty of its last unscathed institution, the army. And yet, although French troops frustrated an assault by émigrés and English soldiers, they could not revitalize republicanism. In the end, the deputies of the Convention admitted their uncertain position with a decree that required two-thirds of their number to be elected to the new councils of the Directory. The decree was wildly unpopular. Military force was necessary to suppress a right-wing insurrection against it and the outgoing deputies did as badly at the polls as they had feared they would. Mistrustful of left and right alike, unloved, and dependant on the army: the Convention at its end, Mathiez warned, foretold the Directory's failure.

This is a vital, albeit flawed history. Above all, Mathiez' Robespierriism blinded him to the genuine antagonism to revolutionary government that emerged in the wake of 9 Thermidor. Rather than acknowledging the authenticity of a democratic movement for free speech and prompt elections that dismayed Thermidorans and hardline Robespierriests alike, Mathiez dismissed it as subversive agitation, the work of naive Hébertists who did not appreciate France's need for revolutionary dictatorship. It is for this reason that he failed to see the deep continuities between Terror and Reaction. For, as Sergio Luzzatto so astutely observed, Thermidor did not moderate, but completed the drive to centralize power that the Convention had pursued since the fall of 1793.[4] Clubs shuttered, the Paris municipal administration dispersed, sectional assemblies disabled, Germinal and Prairial merely completed a

---

process of demobilization begun at the very height of the popular movement. Moreover, by accepting uncritically the Montagnard claim that the republic could only be preserved by violating the rule of law and assailing civil society, Mathiez missed an opportunity to consider what dimensions of revolutionary government the Thermidorans might have suppressed without discarding the democratic republic organized by the constitution of 1793.

Still, there is much to learn here. If the Thermidorans were not so monolithically corrupt as Mathiez charges, the Reaction remains a low point in the Revolution that he captures with dazzlingly evocative contempt. Admittedly some deputies truly believed they were acting in the republic's best interests, but contemporary readers may feel a chill of recognition upon encountering the majority's cool indifference to popular suffering and its willingness to let the people pay the price for the government's failings. Most important is Mathiez' success at marrying monographic detail with synthetic overview, an achievement noticeably absent from contemporary monographs which, however rich, remain so tightly focused on particular details of the Reaction that they eclipse its broad contours.[5] This work, by linking Thermidor to what came before and what came afterward, situates that troubled year in a decade that moderns too often cut short at 1794. At the same time, it offers up sharply-etched portraits of particular deputies and unsparing accounts of their differences within an astonishingly detailed legislative history. One need not accept all of Mathiez' conclusions to admire the skill with which he made his case.

#### NOTES

[1] Albert Mathiez, *La Révolution française*, was first published in Paris by Armand Colin (1922-27).

[2] For the Marxist position, see Georges Lefebvre, *Les thermidoriens* (Paris: A. Colin, 1969), translated as *The Thermidorians and the Directory: Two Phases of the French Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1964). The revisionist case is made by François Furet and Denis Richet in *The French Revolution* (New York: Macmillan, 1970). Post-revisionists include François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and Bronislaw Baczko, *Ending the Terror: the French Revolution after Thermidor* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

[3] Bosc and Gauthier define the "right to subsistence" as a central feature of a Jacobin ideology that insisted on reciprocity between citizens and a natural "right to life" which took precedence over the right to property. It is a concept Gauthier elaborates in *Triomphe et mort du droit naturel en Révolution, 1789-1795-1802*, (Paris: Presse universitaire de France, 1992).

[4] Sergio Luzzatto, *L'automne de la révolution: luttes et cultures politiques dans la France thermidorienne* (Paris: Champion, 2001).

[5] See, for example, the essays in Roger Dupuy and Marcel Morabito, eds., *1795: Pour une République sans Révolution* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1996), and Michel Vovelle, ed., *Le tournant de l'an III: Réaction et Terreur blanche dans la France révolutionnaire* (Paris: Editions du CTHS, 1997). Even purportedly broad studies, like Bronislaw Baczko's *Ending the Terror* or Sergio Luzzatto's *L'automne de la révolution* read more as a series of linked essays than as synthetic narratives.

Laura Mason  
Johns Hopkins University  
lmason@jhu.edu

Copyright © 2011 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 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