
H-France Review Vol. 12 (September 2012), No. 124

Stephen Miller, *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century France: A Study of Political Power and Social Revolution in Languedoc*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2008. 322 pp. \$79.99 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 081321517X.

Reviewed by Robert A. Schneider, Indiana University.

This well-researched study into last decades of the *ancien régime* and the Revolution in the province of Languedoc attempts to reintegrate the social element into our understanding of eighteenth-century French political history, an element that has virtually dropped out of sight since the triumph of both revisionism and the so-called cultural turn. I'm not convinced that it will succeed, but no intellectually open-minded historian can come away from reading *State and Society in Eighteenth-Century France* without being chastened by how much we miss when we ignore the social conditions and social conflicts that largely governed the lives of the masses of people in pastimes. Indeed, if nothing else, Stephen Miller's book serves as a primer on several generations of social history, for one of its many virtues is its scrupulous and persistent acknowledgement, both in the notes and the texts, to a wealth of historical scholarship that once dominated graduate reading lists.

But it is much more than that. Miller has a thesis, and while it sometimes is lost amidst the qualifications, the detailed exposition, and a wealth of examples and case studies, it hinges on the relationship between the nobility and the crown. Like Perry Anderson and William Beik before him, he finds a fundamental identity of interests between the two, with the nobility profiting from the privileges, venal offices, honors and tax emoluments that essentially made it the ruling class of the *ancien régime*.^[1] (In fact, Miller is explicit in casting his book as sequel to Beik's study of Languedoc—a refreshing move in a discipline where the findings of one generation often fail to find an echo in the next.) Miller is particularly good in the first two chapters where he documents the basis of noble wealth: its source in both the labor and dues of a largely impoverished peasantry and its dependence on the favors and privileges supplied by the monarchy.

In subsequent chapters covering the decades leading up to the Revolution, however, Miller shows how this relationship between provincial elites and the states was steadily undermined. The source of the tension lay in the need for the crown to raise revenues in the face of multiple fiscal crises, which led to innovations directly challenging the privileges and political primacy of traditional elites. This a variation on an old theme, but Miller plays upon it with an emphasis on the wide range of challenges and policies that defies any simple formulation. Two are worth noting, if only to convey an appreciation of this range. The first is how the royal council, intendants, and other officials consistently took the side of peasant communities as they attempted to resist or challenge the power of local seigneurs, even when this meant angering, and ultimately alienating, local sources of elite power, such as the Parlement of Toulouse and its wealthy and influential magistrates. The reason for this move, as Hilton Root demonstrated twenty-five years ago, lies in the realization that communities led and administered by peasant notables were more likely to prove fiscally fruitful for the crown, especially if they were protected from the onerous extractions of local lords.^[2] A second innovation regards the pumped-up status of the Estates of Languedoc in the last decades of the *ancien régime*, an institution which, owing to

its new-found status as a source of revenue for the crown, found itself newly graced with authority over provincial affairs that had heretofore been in the hands of local lords and officeholders. In short, by the last days of the *ancien régime*, a chasm of misunderstanding and resentment opened up between provincial elites and the monarchy. "Instead of winning support from public opinion, the Crown's policies alienated its traditional supporters" (p. 259).

Thus, when the revolutionary crisis broke, the nobility was in the front ranks of the opposition to the crown. A threatened and alienated nobility played a necessary, if not sufficient role, in provoking the crisis; and it also even proved open to reformist demands for wider participation in the formally "archaic and aristocratic institution" of the provincial estates (p. 258). But the suppleness of traditional elites had its limits, and these were reached when the revolutionary ethos turned egalitarian. Then the union of bourgeois and nobles—often forged in the face of popular protest and threats to the propertied classes—broke down, as revolutionary politics increasingly challenged inherited privileges and traditional obstacles to political participation. As the Revolution progressed, nobles found themselves unable to abide the social and political alliances—in some places, such as Lower Languedoc, with Protestants—that stemmed from its democratizing impulse. "The nobles' refusal to accept equality before the law inflected the course of the Revolution," Miller concludes (pp. 173-174).

That course is the subject of the last two chapters of the book. Here Miller shifts his focus from provincial elites and notables to the peasantry and in particular the series of popular uprisings against new tax impositions that increasingly fragmented class relationships and alliances. In a bold interpretative move, he characterizes the Languedoc economy in terms of "growth without development," arguing that the wealth generated by the province failed to rebound to the peasantry's advantage. To the contrary, the last part of the eighteenth century witnessed a decline in the standard of living for peasants, which in part explains its explosive reaction to increased demands for revenues on the part of governments, both royal and revolutionary. It may be that his depiction of the peasantry here suffers from a rather one-dimensional understanding: while he is acutely aware of the different occupational and geographical contexts of peasant life, he tends to treat it as an undifferentiated social category, thus in all likelihood missing those elements of rural laboring class that prospered, rather than suffered, during the economic transformations of the eighteenth century. In any case, one of Miller's major claims is that, contrary to our general understanding of peasant grievances, these protests were less aimed at seigneurial privileges and powers and more at tax collectors, especially as the state began to play an increasingly intrusive role in the province during the Revolution.

In the last chapter, "Radicalism, Terror, and Repression, 1792-1799," Miller's account becomes more finely grained and more driven by episodes, personalities, ideology and even what he calls, in characterizing the outlook of the *sans-culottes*, a "temperament" (p. 249). Nevertheless, he maintains his methodological commitment to see political action and policy as rooted in social realities. Thus, while acknowledging Furet's enormously influential insight into the role of ideology in fostering revolutionary radicalism, he argues that popular resentment of the traditional privileges and exploitative powers of *ancien régime* carried over against revolutionary elites, especially as they too erected their own hierarchies and, like their royal counterparts, were forced to impose public order in the face of popular uprisings. In short, while Furet saw, with the collapse of the monarchy, a historical caesura, a breach tragically filled by a radical ideology, for Miller there was less a breach than a continuity of social resentments and suspicions—a persistence of the *ancien régime* into the Revolution. And it is his painstaking attentiveness to social history that allows him to make a claim for this persistence.

Throughout this detailed and challenging study, Miller consistently reminds readers what is at stake in his analysis; his care in acknowledging the historiographical themes in play is laudable. Occasionally the thread of the argument disappears in the welter of material and the thickness of the account. Others may

react differently, but this reader often wanted less rather than more. And sometimes, in attempting to include the fullest possible range of social, ideological, political, historiographical, and conjunctural elements into his account, his reach exceeds his grasp. But those interested in delving into the social and political realities of a large and important province from the late *ancien régime* into the Revolution will not be disappointed with the richness of evidence Miller has so deftly assembled.

NOTES

[1] Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolute State* (London: New Left Books, 1974); William Beik, *Absolutism and Society in Seventeenth-Century France: State Power and Provincial Aristocracy in Languedoc* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

[2] Hilton L. Root, *Peasants and King in Burgundy: Agrarian Foundations of French Absolutism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).

Robert Schneider
Indiana University
raschnei@indiana.edu

Copyright © 2012 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