

---

H-France Review Vol. 19 (June 2019), No. 115

Marc Belissa and Yannick Bosc, *Le Directoire: La République sans la démocratie*. Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2018. 304 pp. Notes, chronology, bibliography, and index. 15€ (pb). ISBN 9782358721646.

Reviewed by Laura Mason, Johns Hopkins University.

Long derided as petty and corrupt, the Directory was redeemed by late twentieth century historians. François Furet played a particularly important role in that recuperation because his insistence that Thermidor marked the rebirth of civil society excited decades of scholarship.[1] While Marc Belissa and Yannick Bosc acknowledge the achievements of that work, they take the distance announced in their subtitle, naming the Directory not as “la république sans révolution” but “la république sans démocratie” (p. 20). As they retreat from the celebration of civil and political renewal favored by Furet’s heirs, they ask us to consider the demobilization of popular activism and repudiation of citizens’ right to subsistence effected in the same era. If the Directory foreshadowed a modern polity, they argue, it was not the democratic, social republic that early nineteenth century idealists dreamed of but “la république élitiste, parlementaire (et colonialiste) qui s’impose progressivement dans le dernier tiers du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle et au-delà au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle” (p. 20).

Belissa and Bosc make their case with a survey crafted for the (French) general public, challenging the oft-hermetic quality of directorial history by introducing specific topics with brief overviews of their revolutionary background. Accordingly, their account of the Directory begins not at its inauguration but with a survey of the post-Thermidorian Convention that brought it into being. That assembly, which bore the same name as the one that adopted the radical democratic constitution of 1793, was profoundly changed after Robespierre’s defeat, when the purge of its Montagnard left and re-integration of surviving Girondins gave new advantage to advocates of an unlimited right to property. This reconfigured Convention attacked Jacobin social policy by repealing price controls and producing a new constitution that severed democracy from the republic. That code abolished universal male suffrage, restricted rights of free speech and assembly, and was preceded by a Declaration of Rights void of all reference to natural law that might be turned against positive laws the deputies had crafted. Henceforth, men with wealth and property would be considered the sole guarantors of republican legitimacy.

Founded on an exclusion of *le peuple* from political life, the Directory devolved to a narrow oligarchy. Belissa and Bosc explain that process by alluding to the regime’s familiar see-saw between right and left. It began with the Thermidorian vilification of Jacobins, which left the

way open for the reactionary resurgence that culminated in the Vendémiaire insurrection of 1795. The insurrection, in turn, pushed the Directory leftward to embrace old Jacobins. The process continued with the exposure of the 1796 conspiracy of radical democrat Gracchus Babeuf, after which the Directory turned against the left once more, easing the way for a reactionary revival that culminated in the stunning right-wing electoral victories of 1797.

The see-saw is quite clearly a useful metaphor for the Directory's early years, but it proves less helpful for understanding what followed. Belissa and Bosc might have shifted their analytic framework midway to underscore the implications of the Directory's assaults on the left in its final years. Despite democrats' status as fellow republicans, their acceptance of the constitution of 1795, and their willingness to work legally for reform, the Directory continued to paint them as "anarchists" who posed an existential threat to the republic (p. 156). By refusing to ally with the left against the reactionary right or even accept democrats as loyal opponents, the regime doomed the republic, resorting to military coups to defend the increasingly narrow center it defined. Attending to the Directory's special animus against democrats would clarify the point Belissa and Bosc make in concluding that Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès's 1799 conspiracy to found a government on "une limitation radicale du principe représentatif et une limitation aux riches et aux notables des pouvoirs administratif et judiciaire" (p. 256) was the culmination of what preceded. Sieyès' ambitions produced the Directory's third coup in four years, sounding the republic's death knell by bringing Napoleon Bonaparte to power.

The Directory's hostility to democrats was consistent with its founding principles, because the democrats' aspirations to broaden political participation and renew social welfare threatened directorials' determination to safeguard elite wealth and power. And safeguard they did. Belissa and Bosc identify the Directory's accretion of power in its naming of functionaries to a growing bureaucracy, appointment of departmental commissioners who vitiated the authority of elected municipalities, and resort to military tribunals for the administration of justice. They describe the Directory's deference to wealthy elites, which manifested itself in the adoption of educational reforms that neglected public primary schools but established an exclusive secondary system and in the creation of a National Institute whose leading thinkers discredited natural law to promote utilitarian guarantees of social harmony. They also highlight official efforts to improve the economy that benefitted speculators, military contractors, bankers and large merchants far more often than small peasants or urban workers. As the authors observe: "Incontestablement, le tableau des années directoriales est bien noire pour les masses populaires, dépossédées non seulement de leurs droits politiques par la Constitution, mais aussi et surtout de leur 'propriété' la plus chère: leur droit à l'existence" (p. 134).

Foreign affairs were marked too by the Directory's narrow conception of who it served, as evidenced by its indifference to Belgian sovereignty and outright hostility to democrats in the sister republics. The Caribbean colonies alone seem to have retained a sliver of advantage. Despite vigorous lobbying by white planters, the Convention affirmed the abolition of slavery in the constitution of 1795 and refused to condemn Léger-Félicité Sonthonax for issuing the decree that ratified the liberty former slaves had seized for themselves. Toussaint l'Ouverture managed to resist some degree of metropolitan supervision by sheer force of arms only to create new hierarchies by tying liberated cultivators to the land and nurturing a new elite of military commanders. It is testimony to how grim circumstances had been in the Caribbean before 1793 and how much metropolitan liberties were eroded after 1794 that Saint-Domingue's situation under the Directory appears at all favorable.

Given the comprehensiveness of this survey, it is not at all clear why Belissa and Bosc ignore gender and family. For, as Suzanne Desan and Jennifer Heuer have demonstrated, the Directory's search for order was intimately linked to its desire to regulate the household.[2] Many were those who challenged the Convention's progressive policies on inheritance, divorce, nationality, and paternal authority by insisting that families organized by gendered and generational hierarchy would be sturdy building blocks of a more conservative society. Belissa and Bosc's neglect of a subject that so clearly strengthens their argument is disappointing: it not only limits the reach of an otherwise exhaustive synthesis but discourages newcomers to the field from engaging with a historiography that continues to change our conception of revolutionary citizenship.

In other respects, *Le Directoire* offers a fine overview of how the Directory wrestled—politically, socially, and institutionally—with the legacy of the French Revolution. The authors make accessible an important body of scholarship likely to be unfamiliar to readers drawn to the high hopes, outsize personalities, and sensational events of the French Revolution's early years. And it is a scholarship that ought to be better known, not only because of the painstaking labor that informs it but because of what it tells us about revolutions and republics. As the modern era makes amply clear, democracies do not die by violence alone. They are too often eroded quietly by legislative encroachment on popular sovereignty, the concerted repopulation of judicial and administrative seats, anti-egalitarian economic policies, and subtle shifts in cultural values. It is precisely because so few heed this apparently uninspiring activity that it is worth examining. Belissa and Bosc do well to remind us that the most significant demobilization of the French Revolution came not from the “tyranny” that Robespierre's opponents imputed to him, but from the many intrusions on liberty that followed his defeat (p. 39).

To explain some of the Directory's failings, the authors quite usefully distinguish between notions of property prevalent after 1795 and those that dominated the Montagnard Convention during the Terror. Directorials, they argue, gave priority to property in things, refusing to impinge on that right of ownership by imposing requisition or price controls. The Montagnard Convention, by contrast, defined property more capaciously, as each citizen's inherent possession of self. Accordingly, it was more willing to encroach on private property to insure subsistence and safeguard a more foundational property of self.[3] This ideological opposition does much to explain the very different policies of 1793-94 and 1795-99, above all the Directory's persistent unwillingness to improve the material condition of veterans, the indigent, or the laboring poor.

Belissa and Bosc's distinctions between regimes of state power is not, however, equally persuasive. Here, they challenge the notion of Jacobin centralization to insist on the novelty of the Directory's enhancement of executive power. The Montagnard Convention, they say, organized legislative centralization but delegated the execution of revolutionary law to democratic municipalities and revolutionary committees. Nor was the Committee of Public Safety an omnipotent executive power, they argue, because it was subject to monthly re-election by the Convention. Finally, they add, we cannot speak of the Committee as an exclusively Jacobin instrument because it was created by a Girondin-dominated Convention and survived well beyond Thermidor. The Directory, they insist, stood in stark contrast. Called into being by an anti-democratic constitution, the executive enhanced its power at the expense

of legislative councils and democratic municipalities by tampering with elections, multiplying administrative and bureaucratic offices, and peopling its ranks with loyal notables.

All of this is true, and it does much to diminish the Thermidorian demonization of Jacobins that persists in modern historiography and the modern imagination. And yet, regardless of whether the Montagnard Convention enjoyed legislative or executive centralization, it played an important part in extending the reach of the revolutionary state. It impinged dangerously on democratic practices and republican institutions by purging its own ranks, appointing representatives-on-mission (appointments sometimes effected by the Committee of Public Safety without oversight), suspending the constitution (which permitted the breach of civil liberties and deferred elections), and decreeing exceptional laws. In its encroachment on local power and its restriction of private citizens' political autonomy, the Convention of 1793-94 prefigured the Directory rather than offering a clear alternative. By acknowledging this affinity, Belissa and Bosc might have more comprehensively integrated the Directory into the broader arc of the French Revolution.

This disagreement about the originality of the Directory's assault on democracy does not, however, diminish the value of this book. It is an excellent survey of a poorly-known era, the first such volume in a half-century that has witnessed an outpouring of specialized studies.[4] Belissa and Bosc offer us a wide-ranging and comprehensive synthesis of that work, much of which they include in their illuminating bibliography. Theirs is an indispensable volume that belongs on the shelf of every dix-huitièmiste, and quite a few dix-neuvièmistes too.

## NOTES

[1] The iconic volume in French is Roger Dupuy and Marcel Morabito, eds., *1795: Pour une République sans Révolution* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 1996). For exemplary English-language work, see James Livesey, *Making Democracy in the French Revolution* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Andrew Jainchill, *Reimagining Politics after the Terror: The Republican Origins of French Liberalism* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

[2] Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Jennifer Ngaire Heuer, *The Family and the Nation: Gender and Citizenship in Revolutionary France, 1789-1830* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[3] The historian who has most exhaustively elaborated this opposition is Florence Gauthier, *Triomphe et mort du droit naturel en Révolution: 1789-1795-1802* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992). See also: Jean-Pierre Gross, *Fair Shares for All: Jacobin Egalitarianism in Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Yannick Bosc, *La terreur des droits de l'homme: le républicanisme de Thomas Paine et le moment thermidorien* (Paris: Editions Kimé, 2016).

[4] The most recent historical surveys of the Directory before Belissa and Bosc were: Denis Woronoff, *La République bourgeoise: de Thermidor à Brumaire, 1794-1799* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1972); Martyn Lyons, *France under the Directory* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

---

Laura Mason  
Johns Hopkins University  
[lmason@jhu.edu](mailto:lmason@jhu.edu)

Copyright © 2019 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