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David A. Bell and Yair Mintzker, eds., *Rethinking the Age of Revolutions: France and the Birth of the Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. xxix + 287pp. \$99.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780190674793.

Review by Henry Heller, University of Manitoba.

This collection of essays on the French Revolution grew out of a conference sponsored by the Eighteenth-Century Seminar of the Princeton University History Department in April 2015. Most of the eight contributions are by American scholars, and the emphasis is on cultural and intellectual history, reflecting the political culture approach pioneered by François Furet and Keith Michael Baker. The essays are introduced by an essay by David Bell and Yair Mintzker, who attempt to place the essays within the mould of French Revolutionary revisionism.

The essays run the gamut from a discussion of human rights to revolution in the Caribbean, historical writing during the height of the Revolution, the Thermidorian reaction and its connection to the Terror, and the relationship between consumer and political choice during the Revolution. But the heart of the volume are three essays on the history of celebrity, the role of charismatic personality, and the great man theory of history, all focused on explaining the rise of Napoleon.

Dan Edelstein starts things off with a solid piece on the conflict between human rights and the rights of the nation. He traces the former back to natural law theory as elaborated by Spanish scholastics and Huguenot legists and theologians in the sixteenth century. It was the physiocrats who then laid the basis for the Declaration of the Rights of Man with their emphasis on the right to property. But in the eighteenth century the idea of so-called national rights adhering in the Estates General and the Parlements also gained ground. Indeed, in the first year of the Revolution it was already being said that individuals could be deprived of their rights if they endangered the rights of the nation. In the same year, Robespierre was asserting that only the national assembly could defend the rights of the nation. Moreover, the National Convention subsequently annulled the rights of Louis XVI in order to affirm the rights of the nation.

Paul Friedland's essay deals with the Revolution in the Windward Islands that include Grenada, Saint-Vincent, Saint Lucia, Martinique, and Guadeloupe. It is his contention that the uprisings against slavery in these islands were not inspired by the Revolution in Haiti, which was far away from the Windward islands, but instead were sparked by the revolutionary events in France itself. But since news of the slave revolution in Haiti was a focal point of discussion in Paris from 1791 onwards, it seems highly likely that the Haitian Revolution sparked the risings in the rest of the Caribbean. Where Friedland has it right is in insisting that the rebels in the Caribbean were inspired by the universalizing ideas of the French Revolution. Friedland bravely opposes the currently fashionable historiography based on identity politics, which argues that the rebellions were exclusively indigenous or African. On the other hand, for him to say that the slaves were inspired by French ideas rather than the prospect of their personal emancipation demonstrates a lack of understanding of the lives and aspirations of the insurgents. Indeed, informative as Friedland's essay is on the politics of the revolts its skimpy research into Caribbean slavery is evident.

Zizek's essay on historical writing during the peak of the Revolution (1789-94) underscores the degree to which the Revolution was seen as a new beginning. The historically-minded condemned the wrongdoings of the pre-revolutionary leaders of France or pointed to the radiant future which had opened for citizens in the aftermath of the Revolution. Historical writing in future had to be free of the sycophancy that had characterized it in the past. In the meantime, the actual amount of serious history written during the period amounted to very little confirming Lynn Hunt's observation "that French revolutionaries were too busy making history to write very much about it." [1]

Howard Brown's essay on the Thermidorian reaction is an outstanding account of the way the excesses of the Year II crystallized into the counter-revolutionary conception of the Terror. According to Brown, during the Year II most of France was barely touched by the Terror and most citizens knew little about it. It was only after Thermidor that a flood of pamphlets, engravings and newspaper accounts implanted the idea that Robespierre's government had constituted a reign of terror. Brown argues that the Thermidorians deliberately used emotional rhetoric, exaggerations, and outright lies to establish the notion of a Robespierrian system of terror in the minds of the public. In an interesting way he contrasts the fervent language of the Thermidorians to the stoic reserve of the radical Jacobins. The former's all-too successful campaign of propaganda implanted the idea of a Jacobin terror and had the effect of making it impossible to establish a stable revolutionary government in subsequent years. On the other hand, Brown does not clarify why the Thermidorians who were members of the Convention and had approved of the emergency measures of Robespierre's government turned against them so decisively. Was it because they wished to exculpate themselves of any guilt or was it simply a reaction against too much democracy?

But the core of this collection is the three essays on the birth of celebrity by Antoine Lilti, the cult of the charismatic leader by Bell, and the great man theory of history by Darrin McMahan all three of which prepared the way for the ascendancy of Napoleon. The rationale of this new interest in personal and commanding leadership are set forth in the introduction by Bell and Mintzker. It allows us to take the measure of French Revolutionary revisionism or that wing of it inspired by Furet. According to Bell and Mintzker, Brexit and the election of Donald Trump have unleashed a wave of populism that has swept the world. Behind this populism is anger against a privileged and out of touch elite and a new surge of support for authoritarian government from strong leaders who command popular support: "These new developments call for the formulation of new research agendas that will investigate the histories of celebrity, power and politics, charismatic leadership, gender, violence, and populist propaganda, and much more. As will become clear in several essays in this volume, a scholarly reorientation of the field of the French Revolution in this direction is already taking place" (p. xxiii).

Bell and Mintzker conclude that this reorientation will involve shifting the emphasis from 1789 and its background to the rise of Napoleon. In other words, in response to the trend of the times Bell sees the necessity for moving away from popular revolution toward study of authoritarian and magnetic leadership.

Bell and Mintzker are highly conscious of the ongoing and changing connection between historiography and the political zeitgeist. In this light they assure us that the old Marxist paradigm of the Revolution that led to a stress on the popular foundation of the Revolution has long been discredited (pp. xiv, xxii). Indeed, they point out that the fall of communism did much to discredit it. The complement of this turn toward the study of authoritarian and charismatic leadership in the eyes of these two revisionist scholars is the rejection of popular revolution and Marxism.

But speaking of the zeitgeist and scholarship, it is difficult to comprehend how the Marxism of Jaurès, Matthiez, Soboul, Vovelle, Guy Lemarchand and Peter Mcphee could become irrelevant to the study of the French Revolution while it has become central to the study of the history of capitalism in the United

States of America. Moreover, that Marxism can be extraneous to the study of the French Revolution while it has taken over the field of geography in the wake of the work of David Harvey is hard to grasp. It is furthermore difficult to understand how it can be central to the study of literature in the Anglophone world after the achievements of Frederic Jameson and yet have no bearing on the culture of the French Revolution. Do we not all live in the same world of scholarship?

How Marxism furthermore would have nothing to offer to the study of the French Revolution when there has been overall revival of interest in Marx in the United States and worldwide is hard to fathom. It is puzzling that it has nothing to offer to the analysis of the French Revolution and yet still has a widely acknowledged importance to the analysis of the ongoing global economic crisis worldwide and current revival of socialist and the revolutionary politics in the United States and Europe or an understanding of the growing ascendancy of China whose official ideology is Marxism. Furthermore, given recent upheavals in France, Bell and Mintzker's view of the irrelevance of Marxism increasingly seems like whistling in the dark.

Bell and Mintzker comfort themselves by asserting that the recent revolutions in Eastern Europe dislike calling themselves revolutions and point out that the revolutions in the Middle East ended in failure. In any event, they conclude that the aims of these recent upheavals were limited unlike the boundless aspirations of the French Revolution. Incredibly, they claim that revolutions have come to seem alien to us because we live in a post-revolutionary age.

It is not as though the field of French Revolutionary studies has found an alternative paradigm as Bell and Mintzker acknowledge. Indeed, the weakness of revisionism all along was that it had no alternative paradigm. But they welcome this because for them the absence of a paradigm opens the possibility of multiple approaches to the study of the Revolution. It also raises the spectre of historical incoherence. So they seek new trends in the scholarship of the Revolution. They might have noted the growing interest in institutional economics. But perhaps a stress on economics makes them uncomfortable. They stress the growing importance of looking at revolutionary events in France from a globalized perspective and the importance being placed on human rights in judging revolutions. But then they caution that the globalizing lens might cause a loss of focus.

They place their hopes in human rights in assessing revolutionary events citing the recent influential history of human rights by Samuel Moyn.^[2] But Moyn has recently concluded in an important essay entitled "Human Rights Are Not Enough": "Human-rights activists do need to think twice, however, about the circumstances of their success in defining good and evil so powerfully around the globe. As for the rest of us, we must recognize the limits of human rights, and admit our own failure to contribute bold visions and projects outside of the rights framework. Human-rights movements were latecomers to the era of distributional concerns. Even when they did take an interest, they set a low bar, focusing only on saving the worst off from destitution. Human rights are not to blame for inequality, but we need to face our responsibility for treating them as a panacea. Inequality is a problem that human-rights movements are unlikely to solve on their own.... A larger community within which egalitarian agitation can emerge may not be part of the history of the human rights movement, but it must become its future."^[3]

The doctrine of human rights as presently constituted cannot bear the weight put on it by contemporary events or the historical past. It must reconnect with a socially egalitarian vision. Indeed, based on Bell and Mintzker's essay, revisionism too cannot bear the weight of the present or the past. Perhaps, too, it must return to reconsider the Revolution's preoccupation with equality.

LIST OF ESSAYS

David A. Bell and Yair Mintzker, "Introduction"

Dan Edelstein, "Nature or Nation? Rights Conflicts in the Age of the French Revolution"

Paul Friedland, "Every Island Is Not Haiti: The French Revolution in the Windward Islands"

Antoine Lilti, "The Politics of Popularity: Celebrity Culture and the French Revolution"

David A. Bell, "Charismatic Authority in Revolutionary and Napoleonic France"

Darrin M. McMahon, "The Fate of Nations is the Work of Genius: The French Revolution and the Great Man Theory of History"

Joseph Zizek, "New History: The Radical Pasts of the French Revolution, 1789-1794"

Howard G. Brown, "The Thermidorians' Terror: Atrocities, Tragedies, Trauma"

Sophia Rosenfeld, "Of Revolutions and the Problem of Choice"

NOTES

[1] Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2007), p. 65.

[2] Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2010).

[3] Samuel Moyn, "Human Rights Are Not Enough," *The Nation* 306, no. 10 (April 9, 2018). <https://www.thenation.com/article/human-rights-are-not-enough/>

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