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Robert H. Blackman, *1789: The French Revolution Begins*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. ix + 287 pp. Tables, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 978-1-108-49244-7.

Review by Peter McPhee, University of Melbourne.

Robert Blackman defines his instructive and ambitious book as being “about how the deputies elected to the Estates General of 1789 created a new political culture and constitutional order during the first seven months of the French Revolution, May–November 1789” (p. 2). He notes that his book covers roughly the same period as Georges Lefebvre’s 1939 classic, *The Coming of the French Revolution*, but there the similarity ends. Lefebvre’s famous Marxist overview was divided into six parts: four on the aristocratic, bourgeois, “popular” (in Paris and provincial cities) and peasant revolutions; then two on the Rights of Man and Citizen and the October Days.<sup>[1]</sup> Blackman’s narrative has six parts too, but these are focused closely on the convening of the Estates General, the commoner deputies’ battles with first the noble deputies, then the king himself, before the new National Constituent Assembly’s moderate majority took its first decisive—and, for Blackman, fatal—initiative, the nationalization of church property on 2 November.

This vote was the clearest demonstration that the Assembly had resolved its own protracted doubts about whether the forces of circumstance in 1789 had freed them from the imperatives of acting as the people’s mandatories for the views expressed in the *cahiers*. The Assembly was now a sovereign, constituent body rather than the former advisory Estates General grappling with the collapse of absolutism. Its decisions were foundational. For Blackman, while the lack of an overwhelming vote on the nationalization of church property—only 568 of the thousand or more eligible deputies voted in favour—prefigured the most fundamental and ultimately bloody division across the nation, far more important to him in the outcome of the Revolution after 1789 was Louis’s bad faith (pp. 266–67).

There are many merits to Blackman’s judicious and lucid narrative analysis. Chief among them is his initiative in reconstructing the momentous debates from the deputies’ personal papers and memoirs. He notes that the *Archives parlementaires* for 1789 on which historians have generally relied are a mid-nineteenth century reconstruction based on later, polished versions of speeches and from which there are key speeches and entire debates which are missing altogether (pp. 6–7, 256–57). Blackman relies instead on a dozen contemporary newspapers, the memoirs, letters, and diaries of forty-eight deputies, and material from other observers.

This freshness has as its corollary a second major merit of the book. Blackman is keen to try to capture the uncertainty, and at times anxiety, of deputies grappling with what seemed overwhelming responsibilities and challenges as they worked through how to replace the absolutism that Louis XVI effectively abandoned on 27 June 1789. The highlight of the book is his expert recapturing of the intense, weighty debates of 15–17 June on how a mooted National Assembly might both represent the will of the nation and yet not alienate nobles or the king. Louis appears as hopelessly out of his depth and yet capable of dissimulation and foot-dragging, notably in his acquiescence to Marie-Antoinette's demand that he prorogue meetings of the Estates General until 22 June. The move only accentuated the deputies' resolve.

Blackman places himself within the recent approach of Timothy Tackett, Marisa Linton, and others, who have properly insisted on contingency and choice in the volatile politics of 1789 and afterwards.<sup>[2]</sup> There was nothing inevitable about the course of events after the Estates General convened in May; instead, loose groupings of like-minded bourgeois deputies manoeuvred against recalcitrant nobles and a vacillating king as they sought to deliver workable political compromises and secure public order. Blackman captures adroitly the mix of chaos and resolve in the Assembly, and the conflicting emotions of trepidation and elation conditioning the deputies' discourse.

In the process, Blackman takes issue with a fatalist historiography from Norman Hampson to Simon Schama and Keith Michael Baker, which has seen the seeds of “the Terror” of 1793–94 in the supposed unwillingness of the Third Estate deputies to compromise, signalling the start of a spiral of repression.<sup>[3]</sup> He specifically criticizes the elision made by Hampson and Baker of the deputies' emphasis on the “people's will” in 1789 and later terror (pp. 14–15). Blackman insists instead that the majority of the deputies were moderate compromisers, forced above all by Louis's bad faith, even duplicity, into protecting their constitutional independence by approving a suspensive rather than an absolute veto, and a single rather than a double chamber. Whereas Baker and Paul Friedland have understood the deputies' departure from the supposed mandate in the *cahiers* to respect the king's powers as portentous of a fatal political intolerance, Blackman argues instead that the deputies took a considered, compromise decision that this was an individual matter for deputies to resolve with their constituents (pp. 169, 185). Indeed, Blackman's overall argument is that the political outcomes of 1789 were a victory for a moderate, even “defensive” majority of commoner deputies who were adept at balancing compromise and conviction. He thus also takes issue with Michael Fitzsimmons, whom he sees as overstating the radical will to attack the old regime in the August decree (p. 14).<sup>[4]</sup>

Blackman's intense focus on the debates in and around the National Assembly results in a rich, convincing narrative, and deserves to become a standard reference for the political history of 1789. However, his approach creates its own problems, since his close focus serves to decontextualize the hectic politics. He expands Timothy Tackett's magisterial account in *Becoming a Revolutionary* of the political narrative of 1789, but eschews Tackett's broader analysis, indeed almost entirely ignoring the clerical deputies. While there are superb passages on both the seizure of the Bastille (pp. 172–79) and the October Days (pp. 230–38), the almost constant popular unrest in Paris is mostly absent from the story. The implication of Arthur Young's comment on the king's capitulation on 27 June—“The king has been frightened by the mobs into overturning his own act of the *séance royale*”(p. 139)—could have been sustained throughout. The crucial decision made in the aftermath of the October Days to distinguish between “active” and “passive” citizens—arguably as important as the nationalization of church property—is passed

over in a brief paragraph (p. 239). Nevertheless, Blackman argues that his book is a “novel discussion of how important matters of public order were to the deputies” (p. 265). On the contrary, such a link has long been made, for example in the neglected 1952 study of the Assembly by Eric Thompson, *Popular Sovereignty and the French Constituent Assembly 1789-1791*.<sup>[5]</sup>

In other places Blackman presents a restricted overview of the Revolution. Its causes are defined as “a fiscal crisis arising out an antiquated and inefficient tax system” (p. 32). There is no reference to the new scholarship on the Atlantic crisis, or even a note to the American War of Independence and its financial and ideological consequences in France. The cultural shifts and confrontations we loosely refer to as “the Enlightenment” are present only obliquely as “public opinion” (p. 258). The 144 Third Estate *cahiers* he analyses expertly were all from the *bailliage* or district level: they represent the views of the bourgeois electors alone. Despite the political importance of the clerical deputies, he decided to ignore their *cahiers* altogether (p. 44). Most starkly, he presents the August decree on feudalism as an initiative of the Assembly to “reduce unrest” (p. 181) rather than as a panic-stricken response to probably the largest insurrection in French history. The decree itself is not discussed; nor, oddly, is the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen.

Of course, these remarks about context highlight the dilemma that we all face in making sense of a complex past: what are the wider contexts on which we should draw, or can rich textual analysis provide its own meanings? In the case of the French Revolution of 1789, we should not forget that the Third Estate deputies who found themselves at the epicentre of an unanticipated upheaval were overwhelmingly provincial bourgeois acutely aware of their distant constituencies. Their letters about events in Versailles and Paris on which Robert Blackman relies in part for this splendid book were only one side of a frenzied correspondence: the other voices were their constituents’ anxious reports of urban and rural unrest and expectations, far from the capital.

## NOTES

[1] The first English version was translated by R.R. Palmer, and published by Princeton University Press, 1947.

[2] Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror. Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[3] Norman Hampson, *Prelude to Terror. The Constituent Assembly and the Failure of Consensus, 1789-1791* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989); Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[4] Paul Friedland, *Political Actors: Representative Bodies and Theatricality in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), ch. 4; Michael P. Fitzsimmons, *The Night the Old Regime Ended: August 4, 1789 and the French Revolution* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003).

[5] Eric Thompson, *Popular Sovereignty and the French Constituent Assembly 1789-1791* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1952).

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