
H-France Review Vol. 21 (August 2021), No. 148

Stephen Miller, *Feudalism, Venality, and Revolution: Provincial assemblies in late-Old Regime France*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020. vii + 221 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-5261-4837-7; \$111.25 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-5261-4836-0.

Review by Robert H. Blackman, Hampden-Sydney College.

In this clever, provocative, and slim volume, Stephen Miller, Associate Professor of History at the University of Alabama-Birmingham (and member of the H-France Review editorial team) explains the link between the abolition of feudalism on the night of August 4, 1789 and the provincial assemblies created in 1778 in Berry and 1779 in Haute-Guyenne and then throughout the *pays d'élection* (those provinces of France that lacked provincial estates) in 1787. After a fine introduction in which he lays out the historiography, Miller explains how the idea of provincial assemblies originated in France, first with the marquis d'Argenson's circle and then through the work of the Physiocrats in the middle of the eighteenth century. Miller does not present here a comprehensive survey of the provincial assemblies (last done by Pierre Renouvin in 1921).^[1] Rather, he analyzes the provincial assemblies from three broadly different provinces, so we can see how the assemblies contributed to the origins of the French Revolution in similar ways despite the varied social, economic, and political conditions in which they sat.

Miller looked closely at three very different *pays d'élections*: Berry, Poitou, and the Lyonnais. He chose these provinces for their different economic and political conditions, and because each took a different direction during the Revolution. The Lyonnais had extensive commercial and manufacturing interests, where Berry and Poitou had subsistence farming largely isolated from the commercial cities. While Berry remained devoted to the Revolution right through the radical period of 1793-94, Poitou became embroiled in counterrevolution and the Vendée uprising. Meanwhile, the Lyonnais was initially loyal to the Revolution but later rebelled against the National Convention in the name of moderate republicanism. Most importantly, though, the three provinces had similar experiences of the assemblies. In each province, members of the three traditional orders of the kingdom initially took up the task of putting aside particular privileges to work with eagerness for the public good. As the meetings of the provincial and district assemblies went on, however, high clergy and nobles showed that their interest in reform was limited. In the end, the high clergy and nobles rallied to the insistence of court grandees that their jurisdiction and privileges be maintained, even to the point of attacking exemptions held by lower ranked venal office holders, townspeople, and rural priests to avoid paying more themselves. Moreover, the seigneurs and high clergy in the assemblies argued that assemblies in which ordinary people could participate undermined the absolute nature of the monarchy. Far from rallying with the Third Estate to support reform, they asserted that their continued

authority over the Third Estate was more important to the survival of the absolute monarchy than the reforms the king urged them to make.

In focusing on the provincial assemblies, Miller does not want us to think that the assemblies themselves achieved revolutionary tasks, or that the actions they took triggered the Revolution itself. For Miller, it was the *failure* of the assemblies that marks their importance. Only an elite that retained significant power could block reform attempts, even fairly minor ones, that had the backing of the crown. Relying on Perry Anderson's idea that the nobility and monarchy had come together in the eighteenth century to form a changed and powerful system of feudal domination, Miller claims that seigneurial elites were not simple victims of the Revolution.^[2] In order to demonstrate how the remaining power of the nobility could trigger its own Revolutionary overthrow, Miller explains how, despite the relative decline of noble power and influence in the eighteenth century, the essence of it remained, and that in fact eighteenth-century reformers had identified the remaining power of the nobles as a fundamental weakness of the state. Relying on the work of Rafe Blaufarb, Miller notes that contemporaries called France's system "feudal" precisely because of the continuing confusion of property and public power, a confusion used to the advantage of the most privileged elites in France.^[3] The ability of the seigneurs and office holders to modify the way in which the provincial, district, and municipal assemblies met, who sat in them, and the extent of their authority demonstrated to all who had eyes that those who held on to the remnants of feudal power had real power.

Miller therefore rejects claims that the nobles of France had no meaningful role in the governance of France, that they had lost their power through a very long process of royal centralization, as Alexis de Tocqueville claimed, or that the long-term decline of noble fortunes and influence had made it possible for commoners to conceptualize a society based on equality of rights, a position taken more recently by Jonathan Dewald. Miller strongly rejects François Furet's claim that the radicalism of the Revolution came out of Jacobin ideology, not out of the various inequalities and inequities of the Old Regime. In addition, he works to modify the schema of late-eighteenth century discourses proposed by Keith Michael Baker and Dale Van Kley by showing how the adoption by different groups of the discourses of justice, reason, and will was rooted in social and economic conditions, not simply a function of ideology.^[4] Miller's well-researched, thoughtful, and well-written book adds to our understanding of how the crisis of the monarchy intensified during 1787 and 1788, providing a useful addition to the work of Vivian Gruder, John Hardman, and Jean Egret on the period usually called the "pre-Revolution."^[5]

Main areas of interest in Miller's book include his emphasis on the contingent nature of the events that propelled the crisis of 1787-1788 into the Revolution of 1789, and his emphasis on how the experience of these events caused some seigneurs and venal office holders to oppose the "feudal" regime. In this he builds in particular on the work of Timothy Tackett, but also on recent work by Peter Campbell and William Doyle.^[6] Miller's discussion of the experience of the members of the provincial assemblies is a clever use of Timothy Tackett's methods from *Becoming a Revolutionary*, applied to a (somewhat) different and (definitely) larger group. Miller's conclusions also show Tackett's influence, and the evidence Miller has uncovered at the provincial level both supports and complicates Tackett's thesis. We see in Miller's work the process of a revolutionary education clearly starting before Tackett claimed, coming for perhaps one fifth of the Third Estate deputies two years before the dramatic events of 1789. We are accustomed to reading about the clash between Breton and Dauphinois deputies, who had very different experiences leading up to the Estates General. We must now consider the experiences of deputies who sat in

the provincial and district assemblies in the *pays d'élections* as well. Miller claims that the failure of the provincial assemblies to embrace reform led "tens of thousands of office holders in local courts...to defend their professional expertise.... [W]ith the creation of the assemblies, and the impending changes to the administration, they began to support the objective criteria of talent proven in years of service as the fairest means of acceding to offices. The assemblies thus instilled in hundreds of office holders in the National Assembly the vision for an administration of functionaries paid a regular salary for executing impersonal public duties" (p. 157). Miller reminds us that over forty percent of Third Estate deputies to the Estates General held venal offices, and that nearly twenty percent of the deputies had served as members of provincial or district assemblies in 1787-88. The experience of the provincial and district assemblies changed their attitudes, he writes, between 1787-88 when such venal office holders defended their offices in principle, and 1789 when such venal office holders overwhelmingly voted to suppress them (albeit with compensation) (p. 154).

Jean Egret, Peter Jones, and Jeff Horn have argued that the way in which the king organized the assemblies was meant to appeal to the Third Estate in hopes of building an alliance between the crown and that order in favor of reform. For these historians, the assemblies carried the seeds of constitutional monarchy.[7] Miller wishes to expand on their insights by arguing that the assemblies did more than appeal to Third Estate elites and draw them toward supporting royal plans for reform. He argues that "the assemblies helped change the perspective of some...lords and office holders.... [Some] members of the Second Estate, by participating in the provincial assemblies, became aware that the sacrifice of privileges could assuage the feelings of unfairness and thus allow them to enjoy a more stable form of power. They gained a foretaste of the regime of notables of the nineteenth century...when the landed elites of the imperial and monarchical regimes could count on the peasantry as a conservative constituency..." (pp. 6-7). His study of the reaction of seigneurial elites to the failure of the provincial assemblies leads to Miller's most ambitious claim, that the appearance of liberal nobles willing to take on revolutionary change did not arise out of the spread of Enlightenment ideals or a clash of discourses but rather out of the change in perspective caused by service in the provincial and district assemblies (p. 163). The change in attitude was not universal but a small number of nobles came to see that the existence of politically constituted property made it difficult, if not impossible, for provincial elites to follow the king's lead and take reasonable actions to reform France in the general interest. According to Miller, those nobles who participated in provincial assemblies and then sat in the Estates General were over three times more likely to join the National Assembly than those noble deputies who had not. He takes this to mean that participation in the assemblies had "facilitated the perception of an alternative political order in which the nobles could play a leadership role in the regeneration of the kingdom" (p. 179).

Miller has ably deployed material from the national and departmental archives related to the provincial assemblies, as well as using the printed records of the meetings of the assemblies, memoirs, and pamphlets describing service in (and criticism of) the assemblies at the provincial, district, and municipal level. This gives him an unprecedented insight into the granular evolution of thought about issues of political representation in the provincial assemblies he studied. His book shows us that service in district and provincial assemblies changed attitudes, and that the concrete experience of noble intransigence pushed large numbers of Third Estate officeholders and small numbers of seigneurs and high clergy to demand an end to the eighteenth-century system of privilege. In the future, I hope Miller will continue to pursue this task of illuminating the inner workings of the assemblies. I would have loved for the book to be fifty pages longer—a

rare thing for a reviewer to say!—so he could have pursued in more detail the links between individual deputies to the Estates General and their service in the assemblies, to put more flesh on his claims, and to reinforce his argument that social and economic factors impacted attitudes much more so than developments in late-Enlightenment discourses.

NOTES

[1] Pierre Renouvin, *Les assemblées provinciales de 1787: origines, développement, résultats* (Paris: A. Picard, 1921).

[2] Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1979) and *English Questions* (London: Verso, 1992).

[3] Rafe Blaufarb, *The Great Demarcation: The French Revolution and the Invention of Modern Property* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[4] Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans., Stuart Gilbert (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955); Jonathan Dewald, "Rethinking the 1 Percent: The Failure of the Nobility in Old Regime France," *American Historical Review* 124: 3 (2019), 911-32; François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans., Elborg Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Dale Van Kley, *The Religious Origins of the French Revolution* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996).

[5] Vivian Gruder, *The Notables and the Nation: The Political Schooling of the French, 1787-88* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); John Hardman, *Overture to Revolution: The 1787 Assembly of Notables and the Crisis of France's Old Regime* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Jean Égret, *The French Prerevolution, 1787-88*, trans. Wesley Camp (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

[6] Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); William Doyle, *France and the Age of Revolution: Regimes Old and New from Louis XIV to Napoleon Bonaparte* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013); Peter J. Campbell, "Rethinking the Origins of the French Revolution," in *A Companion to the French Revolution*, ed., Peter McPhee (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

[7] Egret, *French Prerevolution*; Peter Jones, *Liberty and Locality in Revolutionary France: Six Villages Compared, 1760-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and *Reform and Revolution in France: The Politics of Transition, 1774-1791* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Jeff Horn, *Qui parle pour la nation? les élections et les élus de la Champagne méridionale, 1765-1830* (Paris: Société des études robespierristes, 2004).

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ISSN 1553-9172