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Francesco Benigno and Daniele Di Bartolomeo, *La magie du passé: l'idée de la répétition historique dans la Révolution française*. Translated by Christian J. Floquet. Rennes: Editions Les Perséides, 2022. 198 pp. €19.90. (pb). ISBN 9782371250345.

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Anyone flipping through the *Archives Parlementaires* will be struck by the historical consciousness of lawmakers and other revolutionaries. References to Greeks and Romans, admirable and reprehensible, jump off the pages. The ARTFL database of the first 82 volumes, which covers the period from 1787 to the first days of 1794, makes it possible to count the references to Lycurgus (79 hits), Solon (105), Sulla (52), the Gracchi brothers (25), Catiline (95), and the Tarquin kings (56). The name Brutus occurs 588 times, though it refers not only to the Brutus who founded the Roman republic and the one who assassinated Julius Caesar, but also to a militant Parisian *section*, communes in France, and patriotic individuals. The revolutionaries were also well-versed in more recent history, especially that of seventeenth-century England, and often abused their enemies as Cromwells (86 hits).^[1]

Despite this, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the widely held idea among the revolutionaries that history was repeating itself. Harold T. Parker's *Cult of Antiquity and the French Revolutionaries: A Study in the Development of the Revolutionary Spirit* and Claude Mossé's *L'antiquité dans la Révolution française* examined the role of antiquity in the Revolution, but without considering the possibility that the revolutionaries really believed they were experiencing a recurrence of a previous age.^[2] Francesco Benigno and Daniele Di Bartolomeo claim in the book under review that most historians of the Revolution have taken their cue from Marx, who dismissed revolutionaries' invocations of ancient history as mere attempts at acquiring legitimacy by casting themselves as heroic Romans. As for "revisionists," beginning with Furet, Benigno and Di Bartolomeo believe that they have neglected the subject due to a conviction that the revolutionaries repudiated the past. *La magie du passé* offers an account of how and why actors in the French Revolution conceived of the period through which they were living as a repetition of the past, their use of the idea in their political conflicts, and the consequences of this.

In chapter one, the authors show that following the October Days in 1789, several of the king's advisers urged him to follow the example of Charles V, who in the fourteenth century left Paris, where he was threatened by a revolt, and then returned triumphantly. This comparison, Benigno and Di Bartolomeo suggest, may have made the king receptive to the idea of a flight from Paris, which he indeed made on June 20-21, 1791, though, unlike Charles V, he was apprehended and

returned in disgrace. Following this event, frightened and indignant revolutionaries similarly turned to history to explain what was happening. Louis was Tarquin the Proud, the tyrannical king of Rome overthrown by Brutus. Or he was Porsenna, the Etruscan King who threatened the newly instituted republic, or Charles I of England, who had made war on his people and paid for his crime on the scaffold.

In chapter two, Benigno and Di Bartolomeo discuss the repeatedly expressed fear of dictatorship. Revolutionaries warned of a Sulla (the Roman general who marched on Rome in the first century B.C.E. and made himself dictator), a Catiline (a military leader who unsuccessfully attempted to imitate Sulla), a Julius Caesar, a Cromwell, and a General Monck (who facilitated the Stuart Restoration in England). They invoked these precedents when denouncing the marquis de Lafayette, who fulfilled the “prophecy” by attempting to restore Louis XVI to power shortly following the fall of the monarchy. Like Catiline, he was unsuccessful, but his attempt contributed to the belief that history was repeating itself.

Chapter three focuses on the fear expressed from the earliest days of the Republic that Robespierre would make himself dictator. Above all, the Girondins used what by then had become recognizable names—Catiline, Sulla, Caesar, and Cromwell—to alert the French to the danger that he would crush democracy. They added the name of Masaniello, the leader of the 1647 Neapolitan rebellion against Spain and the nobility, who became mad with power when it succeeded, tried to slaughter the nobles, and was assassinated by them. Benigno and Di Bartolomeo believe that the Girondins made a tactical error by attacking Robespierre in this way and that this mistake was decisive in their downfall. Attacks from the left similarly compared Robespierre to ancient tyrants. Among the ultra-revolutionaries, the *enragés* likened him to Appius Claudius, the head of the Decemvirs who terrorized the Roman Republic in much the same way that the Committee of Public Safety ruled by fear. (The *enragés* shared the fate of the Girondins.)

Chapter four concentrates on the belief that military leaders were plotting to imitate generals in the past by using their armed forces to establish a dictatorship. The Jacobins identified General Dumouriez as a prime candidate, and by this point in the book, it is not surprising that they denounced him as a Cromwell and a Caesar. One journalist, writing in the *Révolutions de Paris*, added Alcibiades to the list. This comparison was particularly prophetic because, just as the Greek general defected to the Spartan enemy during the Peloponnesian War, Dumouriez defected to the Austrians after an unsuccessful attempt to do what Lafayette had been unable to do: turn his troops on Paris. If the Jacobins were suspicious of military leaders before Dumouriez, after his treason they were even more frightened. Among the victims of this fear were General Custine of the armée du Nord and his successor Houchard, who were executed primarily for having lost battles, but who were accused of plotting to overthrow the government. Under the post-Terror Directory government, the fear of a toppling of the Republic became all the more realistic, as the Directors nullified elections and generals gained power and popularity through their victories abroad. By the time Napoleon seized power in the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire, many observers were unsurprised.

La magie du passé brings into sharp relief the degree to which participants in and observers of political events from 1789 and 1799 conceived of their world as populated by figures from Greek and Roman antiquity and English and French history. In addition to the historical figures already mentioned, the book features a host of others: Agathocles, the tyrant of Syracuse; Aretaphila of

Cyrene, the woman who deposed the tyrant Nicocrates; the Athenian politician Aristides the Just; the Roman dictator Camillus; the Roman emperor Caligula; the Roman orator and senator Cato the Younger; Charlemagne; Charles II of England; Charles the Bad of Navarre, who alternately fought for England and France during the Hundred Years' War; Charles the Simple of Lotharingia; Charles IX, the French king who permitted Catholics to slaughter Protestants in the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre; Cicero, the statesman who opposed Mark Antony and paid for his defiance with his life; the Roman tribune Clodius; Damien, the would-be assassin of Louis XV; the Roman consul Decius; the Athenian orator Demosthenes; the Theban general Epaminondas; Epicharsis, a woman who conspired against Nero; the consul and general Fabius; the emperor Galba; the Carthaginian general Hannibal; the French kings Henri III and Henri IV; the tribune Lucius Icilius; the tribune Labienus; King Leonidas of Sparta; the Roman triumvir Lepidus; Lucretia, whose rape and suicide sparked the overthrow of the Roman monarchy; the Spartan leader Lysander; the Roman general Marcellus; the Roman general Marius; the Athenian leader Pericles; the Roman general Pompey; Piso, conspirator against Nero; Empress Poppaea; Volusius Proculus, assassin of Empress Agrippina; the Roman consul Valerius; Pisistratus, the tyrant of Athens; the Roman general Fabius; Ravallac, who assassinated Henri IV; the Roman general Scipio; the Thracian gladiator Spartacus; the Corinthian general Timoleon; Verres, the Roman governor of Sicily; and Xerxes I, King of Persia. Texts containing these references were not directed solely at the learned.

Because these rulers, generals, conspirators, orators, and assassins were familiar, they were rhetorically useful. Speakers and writers could expect their audiences to know their names and significance. Moreover, they prompted emotional reactions. The names "Cromwell," "Caesar," and "Catiline" did not just activate the intellect. They triggered feelings. Above all, the idea of repetition and the invocation of familiar historical figures served as a "compass" or *boussole* by which the participants in the Revolution could orient themselves in the present and make predictions about the future. The choice of prophecies Benigno and Di Bartolomeo describe and analyze—ones that turned out to come true—might suggest that they are talking about self-fulfilling prophecies. But they explicitly reject this idea, arguing rather that it is "approprié d'interpréter ces discours comme étant des raisonnements sur la probabilité que quelque chose que l'on craint ou que l'on souhaite se produise et comme des outils performatifs pour conditionner cet événement, et, pour ainsi dire, le 'construire'" (p. 180). They borrow this orientation from Reinhart Koselleck, who argued that perceptions of the past and predictions about the future informed a "horizon of expectation" which in turn constructed the present.[3]

The authors' argument is the product of a theory of human nature that not everyone will share. Benigno and Di Bartolomeo write, "L'hypothèse qui a inspiré cette étude est que la sélection d'événements du passé passibles de se répéter est un instrument important pour s'orienter dans le présent et pour modeler le futur. Servant, comme nous essaierons de le démontrer, à réduire l'incertitude de la situation présente, en la ramenant à des schémas connus et, pour ainsi dire, familiers; ces derniers étant considérés comme plus probables que d'autres" (p. 29). Here they seem not to be talking about the French between 1789 and 1799, but all people at all times, and they interpret statements about historical repetition in the French Revolution accordingly.

This is a bold assertion, to say the least. It is based on the assumption that all people experience time in the same way. But what the authors seem to be describing in their account of the Revolution is a specifically cyclical view of time, which corresponds to the Old Regime conception, or at least one conception, of "revolution" as movement in a circle, which in politics

meant a return to an earlier form of government. It does not fit well with a linear view of time, which the revolutionaries also had insofar as they envisaged progress. One thinks of Condorcet's idea of continuous improvement through Enlightenment.

None of this means the authors' intriguing argument is not true. It is plausible, given the level of fear and confusion people faced during the Revolution. And this is enough, as it gets us to rethink assumptions about the primacy of the "new man" idea in the period. Still, if the idea of historical repetition was real, so was the idea of a break from the past, as seen, for example, in the repudiation of the Gregorian calendar and creation of a republican one. It seems to me more likely that there was a competition, or perhaps a dialectic, between the two approaches to time during the Revolution. Right or wrong, however, this book is well worth reading. It is an original take on an important topic that has been hiding in plain sight.

NOTES

[1] <https://sul-philologic.stanford.edu/philologic/archparl/>

[2] Harold T. Parker, *French Revolutionaries: A Study in the Development of the Revolutionary Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1937); Claude Mossé, *L'antiquité dans la Révolution française* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989).

[3] Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 267-288.

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