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Régis Coursin, *Jacques-Pierre Brissot: Sociologie historique d'une entrée en révolution*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2023. 356 pp. Notes, references, and index. €28.00 (pb). ISBN 9782753587052; €13.99 (epub). ISBN 9782753592025. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pur.192223> (open access).

Review by Damien Tricoire, University of Trier.

While Jacques-Pierre Brissot was a major actor in the French Revolution, there are astonishingly few studies of his life and career. Régis Coursin's book is only the second-ever monograph based upon a thorough analysis of the *fonds* Brissot preserved in the French national archives. More than a century ago, Eloise Ellery wrote a biography of Brissot, but it largely followed his memoirs and was uncritical towards his apologetic discourse. In the 1930s, François Primo gave insights into Brissot's youth. Robert Darnton followed Ellery and never published the monograph on Brissot that he had announced. In the 1980s, Suzanne d'Huart penned a biography of Brissot based upon the *fonds* Brissot, but it proved to be of rather poor scholarly quality. In the 1990s and 2000s, a range of publications dealt with aspects of Brissot's life or œuvre. In a monograph and some articles, Simon Burrows studied Brissot as a London journalist and Leonore Loft—in a monograph published in 2001—his political thought. There was thus a real need for a new book on Brissot, and Coursin happily filled it. [1]

Coursin's monograph is not a biography, and the structure of the book does not follow chronology (which brings some chronological back and forth that makes it sometimes harder to find specific information). Its goal is most ambitious: Coursin claims to write a "sociologie totale" that explores "l'articulation du social, du culturel, du politique, de l'économique, du psychologique (etc.) à l'échelle de la société et de l'individu" (p. 18). In fact, the book endeavors to shed light on Brissot's psychology, to study the impact of Brissot's experience with society on his "affects et sentiments" and thus to better understand how Brissot turned into a revolutionary (p. 79). According to Coursin, "L'histoire de Brissot est celle d'un jeune philosophe ambitieux qui fait brusquement la rencontre du préjugé sur l'honneur" (p. 141). He takes Brissot's life as a case study to explore the "affrontement entre la noblesse atavique et la noblesse vertueuse," that is, between traditional nobility and a group of bourgeois who claimed that only virtue confers true nobility (p. 144). Thanks to an analysis of Brissot's career, the book also endeavors to tell us something about the "despotisme littéraire" that dominated in ancien régime France (pp. 226-243).

This narrative follows well-known images of pre-revolutionary France and of the origins of the French Revolution. Coursin insists on the frustration felt by young men who aspired, without

success, to become part of the establishment and on the injustice they experienced. In the genesis of the Revolution, this monograph also stresses the role of nobles like Mirabeau who had come down in the world. Coursin nuances Robert Darnton's famous literary lowlife thesis by insisting upon the fact that there was no sharp separation between the "high" and the "low" sectors of the Republic of Letters or by emphasizing the importance that aristocratic patronage had for some years in Brissot's life. However, on the whole, the story remains one that makes frustration, failure, and torments the real motors of political radicalization. In the book, this classical narrative tends to be expressed in a jargon that does not always clarify the argumentation. It is often unclear how the technical terms that are introduced—e.g. "nobilisation," "nobléité," "état psychique," "méclassé," "hyperclasses"—help to solve historiographical problems. This is especially true of the concept of "axe archétypique" (pp. 21, 169-184).

The book rightly underlines the centrality of the idea of virtue in Brissot's writings. On the other hand, there is a real danger to uncritically considering Brissot's stances as an expression of his inner feelings instead of interpreting them as a part of his self-fashioning. Despite the claim to develop a "sociologie totale," Coursin writes very little about the institutions, interdependencies, networks, sociabilities, personae, and norms that structured the milieus in which Brissot evolved. We thus do not learn much about the social context of the creation of the patriotic party. There is no thorough analysis of the "literary field" (or of other social fields), and for this reason, no real explanation of why the idea of virtue became so central to the discourse of the French elites in this period, not only to bourgeois aspiring to make a career but also to many of the most powerful high nobles of that time.

Furthermore, following Brissot's self-presentation also bears the risk of minimizing his social climbing in the 1780s and the role that the Palais-Royal court of the duc d'Orléans played in his career. As the monograph relies almost exclusively on the documents that Brissot gathered to prepare his defence when he was accused of being a Prussian-English agent and a puppet of the duc d'Orléans in 1792-1793, it may too closely follow the image that Brissot needed to give of himself when his reputation, and indeed his life, had become threatened by the revelations of his former friend Camille Desmoulins. More generally, the book neglects the leading role played by the aristocracy in the patriotic party in the 1780s. Though Elizabeth Eisenstein already pointed out this neglect in the 1960s, and while some work has since been published in English about this topic, French-speaking historiography still largely ignores these insights. [2] The leaders of the patriotic party—e.g. the dukes of La Rochefoucauld, Aiguillon and Biron, the vicomte de Noailles, or the duc d'Orléans, first prince of the blood—were far from being impoverished outcasts.

Despite these shortcomings, which are quite common in the historiography on the origins and beginnings of the French Revolution, it should be underlined that Coursin's study presents new insights into Brissot's life and career. Whereas the overall narrative is not fundamentally new, the first part of the monograph (chapters one and two) provide scholarship with new details about Brissot's relationships with men of letters in the 1780s, especially about the network of actors linked to the masonic *Loge des Neuf Soeurs*.

NOTES

[1] Eloise Ellery, *Brissot de Warville: A Study in the History of the French Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1915); Jean-François Primo, *La jeunesse de Brissot* (Paris: Grasset, 1932); Suzanne d'Huart, *Brissot. La Gironde au pouvoir* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1986); Simon Burrows, *Blackmail, Scandal, and Revolution. London's French libellistes, 1758-1792* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Simon Burrows, "The Innocence of Jacques-Pierre Brissot," *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 4 (2003): 843-871; Leonore Loft, *Passion, Politics and Philosophie: Rediscovering J.-P.- Brissot* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002).

[2] Elizabeth Eisenstein, "Who Intervened in 1788? A Commentary on the Coming of the French Revolution," *The American Historical Review* 71, no. 1 (1965): 77-103; Daniel Wick, *A Conspiracy of Well-Intentioned Men: The Society of Thirty and the French Revolution* (New York: Garland, 1987).

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