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Jean-Clément Martin, *Penser les échecs de la Révolution française*. Paris: Tallandier, 2022. 247 pp. Notes and index. €19.90 (pb). ISBN 9791021049093; €13.99 (epub). ISBN 9791021049109.

Review by William Doyle, University of Bristol.

Not so long ago it would have seemed unthinkable that a holder of the chair in the History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne would produce a book on the Revolution's failures. It would have been equally unthinkable that a holder of that chair should be an expert on the counter-revolutionary Vendée. Jean-Clément Martin admits that his appointment came unexpectedly and without the support of the "classic" revolutionary establishment. Nevertheless, it marked the end of the grip previously held on the chair by adherents of the classic interpretation. Great scholars though most of his predecessors had been, at heart they all believed that the Revolution was something to celebrate. Martin, steeped since his youth in the cultural history of the Vendée, felt no attachment to that tradition. He sees the history of the Revolution, and its fascination, mainly as a set of ambiguous methodological and epistemological problems to be broached by a more rigorously critical interrogation of sources. The celebratory instinct lay at the heart of many of those problems.

His latest book is a sort of intellectual autobiography. In it he revisits some issues he has written on at length before—not just the Vendée, but the significance of revolutionary violence and the exclusion of women from revolutionary culture and historiographical tradition. His many lesser contributions can also be tracked through thirty-seven pages of footnoting, which he defends at the outset as fundamental to good history writing. The final chapter out of seven traces the author's professional evolution, comparing himself in an epilog to a gamekeeper who culls less sustainable specimens in order to keep the overall stock in healthy condition. In this spirit, the main body of the book is a series of pleas for clearer thinking about some key concepts that recur throughout the study of the Revolution.

Martin begins with a chapter entitled "*Le peuple insaisissable*," in which he castigates the vague and ambiguous ways in which "the people" were invoked, whether with approval or not, by all sides during the Revolution, and by almost all who have written about it since. It is such a useful catch-all term: and yet, he notes, it only sporadically seems to include women, and never those of a different race. The criterion of race excluded not only those of a different skin color, but also nobles, who first began to define themselves as a separate race during the preceding century and paid for it when the cataclysm came. If we cannot avoid using the term *peuple*, Martin concludes, the way it is used must also be explicitly qualified, rather than serving, as it served too many revolutionaries, to mask other preoccupations and obvious contradictions.

From here the argument moves on logically enough to chapter two, “*Le rêve de l’égalité*.” Despite its presence in the famous tripartite slogan, revolutionary equality always had its limits. And if the guillotine was the ultimate symbol of equality before the law, that equality meant little to women or slaves, whose minimal gains over the revolutionary decade were always conceded with extreme reluctance. And in economic terms or those of social power, the traditional claims of property always took priority over the new egalitarian dream.

Chapter three takes us back to the Vendée about which Martin made his scholarly name.[1] Here his first quarrel is with calling it a war. A peasants’ revolt was only given that name, he argues, by the Montagnards in 1793 to implicate their Girondin opponents in incompetence, or worse, as Europe armed against the infant republic. Nor does he accept the label “genocide” which became fashionable among historians a generation ago thanks to Reynald Secher.[2] Martin’s own earlier estimates of the number of victims of the Vendée campaign were even higher than Secher’s, although he now takes the opportunity to scale them down. But he emphasizes that the repression witnessed in the region was not without parallels elsewhere during the revolutionary age.

This argument also underpins a chapter on terror. The French language does not allow a writer to use the term without the definite article, but Martin’s argument is to make the distinction which the English language allows between generic “terror” and *the* Terror, something forever associated with the French Revolution. He it was, he reminds his readers, who first pointed out that the Convention never formally declared terror to be the order of the day, but merely responded piecemeal to the punitive demands of the sans-culottes. The violence unleashed in 1793-1794, he insists, was not inevitably or uniquely inherent to the Revolution, and to assume that it was is “une confusion regrettable” (p. 102). He points out that the period saw terroristic atrocities on all sides and in many countries, and he welcomes reviving interest in the truly horrific violence in France’s rebel Caribbean colonies. His view is that violence and bloodshed are never necessary and always deplorable. They should never be associated by historians with any sort of *grandeur*.

Behind these convictions lies a belief in the importance of accidents and contingency. This emerges even more clearly in a chapter on what Martin calls “le triangle maudit” (p. 120) of rebels, revolutionaries, and republicans. After tracing the evolution over the preceding century (familiar to anglophone readers of the works of Keith Baker) of the meaning of revolution from political or dynastic change at the top into root-and-branch transformation, he argues that the consummation of this process in and after 1789 was not foreseeable.[3] Much of what the revolutionaries brought about bore little relationship to the aspirations of those who rebelled in that hopeful spring, and there was no serious ambition to found a republic until 1792. Even then, the parameters of republicanism remained contested, as the debate over the right of insurrection embodied in the Declaration of Rights of 1793 showed. Under the impact of events, there finally emerged a republican nation-state whose character was antiroyalist, anti-aristocratic, anticlerical—and antidemocratic. We should not, concludes this chapter, be blinded by “l’excès des mots.” (p. 142)

What happens when we are, is discussed in a penultimate chapter on what the term “French Revolution” means. Too often it conceals a trap, for “the revolution in France” of 1789-92 and “The French Revolution” as a concept were not the same. The first was a series of events shaped

by contingencies. The second was a bundle of ideas and a program inspiring some and repelling others. It only emerged fully with the Republic, as what Martin calls “un monstre intellectuel.” (p. 169) On the way to these conclusions he takes aim at some ideas now widely accepted, at least among those of us who write in English. Thus, he has no time for the fruitful distinction, first suggested by Colin Lucas, between counter-revolution and anti-revolution. Nor does he accept Timothy Tackett’s careful account of how the men elected in 1789 became revolutionaries.[4]

Not that he spends much time refuting these foreign-born ideas. His aim is a loftier native viewpoint. He believes that current French national culture is “schizophrène” (p. 14) and concludes with the ambition (it sounds better in French) “de participer à la recomposition de notre identité historique” (p. 171). Whether this somewhat rambling book will help to achieve that aim is for his compatriots to judge.

NOTES

[1] Among his many works relating to this subject, see *La Vendée et la France* (Paris: Seuil, 1987), *Une Guerre interminable. La Vendée deux cent ans après* (Paris: Reflets du Passé, 2000), *Blancs et Bleus dans la Vendée déchirée* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), and *Révolution et Contre-Révolution en France de 1789 à 1989. Les rouages de l’histoire* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015).

[2] Reynald Secher, *Le Génocide franco-français. La Vendée-Vengé* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1986).

[3] Keith Michael Baker, *Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 203-223.

[4] 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).

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