H-France Review Vol. 25 (April 2025), No. 31

Micah Alpaugh, *The People's Revolution of 1789*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2024. ix + 391 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. $60.95 U.S. (hc.) ISBN 9-78-150176625.

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If this book were a revolutionary, it would be Camille Desmoulins (who, indeed, adorns its dust-jacket): an enthusiast of the first hour, clambering onto a chair, breathless with excitement, to rally the popular crowd in defence of their revolution, even before it became one. A fresh and original voice, Camille's eyes were open not just to the national, but international, implications of events: hence his new-minted journal's title a few months later, speaking of not one revolution, but of the *Révolutions de France et de Brabant*, and of anywhere else that crowns tottered. But if this book is the Camille of 1789, what of the Desmoulins of a few short years later, the man who expressed anguished regret for his calumnies against the Girondins, who sought to turn his venomous pen against the excesses of Hébertist aggression, and who was executed on the flimsiest of trumped-up charges as his former schoolmate Robespierre lost patience with his reckless provocations?[1] There is the rub.

Micah Alpaugh has written a genuinely engaging, stimulating narrative of the route that France took into and out of the revolutionary events of 1789, focused resolutely on initiative from below as it was expressed in protest, confrontation, and coercive direct action. His guiding frame is that all of this activity was a people's revolution, and indeed *the* people's revolution: a message he insists on from title to conclusions. On his last page, indeed, he goes boldly further still: "The political empowerment of the early French Revolution provides a model for the world of how to resist and overthrow despotic governments" (p. 288). Note the present tense. This popular revolution, he will insist, was effectively, positively anarchic--declared in the book's opening pages to be "without central direction" but nonetheless the "collective actions" of the people, who thereby formed a "collective identity" that allowed them to "achieve unprecedented political participation" (p. 4).

To note just one wrinkle in this, over the preceding two pages Alpaugh also declares that "rebels" had "formed Bourgeois Militias [the phrase is always capitalized, for reasons unclear] to replace the police," while also "abolishing the police" and simultaneously having "seized the right to police". (pp. 2-3) While the notion of an abolition would certainly be truer to an anarchic revolution, it is nonetheless the least-accurate of these suggestions. Not only was the police of Paris not abolished in 1789, but when it was formally reorganized in the following year, it carried with it the full panoply of public-order functions previously exercised by a multitude of

royal agencies, and indeed continued to employ some of the very same undercover agents to do so.[2] The essential complexity of the relationship between population and police, in all its forms, is repeatedly elided by the author's vigorous narrative drive. Thus we find the French Guards (and apparently the rest of the Parisian police) joining in "antiabsolutist revelry" (p.19) at a moment of *parlementaire* triumph in September 1787--the same French Guards who would unhesitatingly massacre dozens of plebeian protesters in April 1789, before becoming the mutinous heroes of Parisian resistance in early July, and active participants in the drama of the 14th (and in many cases thereafter, in a further demonstration of continuity, absorbed into the salaried component of the militia that became the National Guard). What we never learn is anything about the make-up of the French Guards, or how their relationship to their own superiors and to the capital's population they lived amongst might explain these rapid shifts.

The loss of this level of analytical detail is, perhaps, an inevitable consequence of the author's wish to concentrate on compelling narrative detail. He has done admirable work in searching out fresh voices to provide that detail: the bibliography lists more than two pages of archives and libraries, over 100 contemporary newspapers, and almost thirteen pages of further primary sources. Alpaugh acknowledges (p. 10) the influence of Timothy Tackett in the relentless quest for eye-witness testimony, pointing back to the latter's groundbreaking work on the Estates-General deputies of 1789-90. Yet it should perhaps also be noted that this approach brings with it limitations. The striking innovation of *Becoming a Revolutionary* (Princeton, 1996) was to take us inside the collective thought-processes of a group of men defined by their shared, deeply unsettling, exposure to looming collapse, and their growing conviction that they had to do something radical to safeguard the country, and themselves.[3] It was this dynamic between fear and action that made their individual testimony, so often intended for at least semi-public consumption itself, so compelling.

Scouring the records for eye-witness testimony of much wider social and political processes, in which the witnesses themselves may play a far more marginal role--where they are not simply reduced to horrified and uncomprehending observers--is a task that produces far more questionable benefits. Thus Tackett himself wrestles in his later work *The Coming of the Terror* to extract an eye-witness history of 1789 to 1793 that is not simply propelled forward into epochal horror by the force of fear twisted into conspiratorial accusation and exclusionary dogma.[4] And that fear is often, thanks to the nature of so much of the surviving source-base, essentially a middle-class fear of the mob. Such a fear, rooted in abiding prejudice, presents the historian with the dilemma of paying attention to thoughts and beliefs that manifest themselves as purported insights into hidden proceedings and manipulations, while knowing that, as George Rudé labored to show more than sixty years ago, most of those claims were paranoid nonsense.[5] To take one simple example, in his introduction, Alpaugh cites seven "pronounced waves of disorder" (p. 9) over the food-supply over the course of the previous 75 years, and yet later quotes without question a "correspondent" in early 1789 asserting the unprecedented nature of current troubles: "the people did not murmur" in previous times of dearth "because they attributed their misfortune to nature" (p. 44)--a profoundly nonsensical proposition, that should not be reported as fact.[6]

Fear, of course, was real. Eighteenth-century French people had a great deal to be afraid of, especially having lived through several years of unprecedented political upheaval in a country

also experiencing a slow-burn subsistence crisis, that had exploded in the winter of 1788/9 into the specter of full-fledged famine. Alpaugh suggests that the French were experiencing "a potent neurological cocktail of fear and euphoria" (p. 3) under these conditions. One might suggest it would have been odder if they were not. One of their responses was clearly to assert at a whole range of levels that "the people" should unite to defend itself, and its Revolution. Yet as Jean-Clément Martin, *doyen* of studies of internecine civil conflict in the 1790s, has recently argued, declaring the existence of a unitary *peuple* (in place of the *peuples* habitually referenced prior to this point) was one of the revolutionaries' greatest failures, an unsustainable claim about a ungraspable, *insaisissable*, object, that produced more strife and division than it countered.[7]

Much of that strife is made evident in Alpaugh's account of the terrible summer of 1789, marked from the beginning of July by reports of bloody fighting in Parisian bread-queues and simultaneous repeated assertions of wide-ranging evil famine-plot. Structurally, town and country were at odds, with aggressive efforts to prevent the movement of grain from much of northern France towards Paris, where it was so desperately, ardently, needed. The following two months take up almost 130 of Alpaugh's 288 pages and are a barnstorming compilation of vivid accounts that demonstrate how far the crisis penetrated almost every corner of France. They also demonstrate how far the fear and aggression unleashed by crisis was directed against other members of "the people". In one episode from Rouen, simultaneous with the outbreak of epochal change in Paris, rioting crowds first sacked an abbey, then extorted money from "bourgeois" households under threat of pillage, then went on to raise the workforce of local weaving-mills, who responded with cries of "destroy the machines!" (p. 93) Here, immediately, Alpaugh glosses what happened next: "The following day [14 July], young men joined with the soldiers to suppress the disturbances", and a conspiracy-theory of aristocratic provocation was put into circulation. Who those young men were, and what social attitudes they brought to suppressing a popular revolt, is the sort of question that Alpaugh passes over, asserting that while these events "clearly reflected national trends" it was nonetheless evident that "none could adequately understand" their "ramifications".

Fifty pages further on, Alpaugh vividly evokes the events that plagued southern Burgundy less than two weeks later, a massive wave of attacks on chateaux, religious institutions and "merchant houses", with "bands of outlaws" reported forcing peasants to join them at gunpoint, and a threat of the total collapse of order, met with an offensive of the propertied classes that shot down some six hundred insurgents in "the most open civil war of July 1789" (pp. 142-143). Militia reinforcements ultimately marched from as far away as Lyon to aid in a month-long suppression. This also involved an "extralegal" committee that ordered detainees to be tortured for information, and the apparent flight of everyone except "women and old men" from some villages. As he reports this, Alpaugh notes both that "Antithetical propertied and peasant interests could lead to slaughter" and, a page further on, "Bourgeois Militias often did not consider themselves on the same side as other revolutionaries". He then moves immediately to note that "new", presumably revolutionary, "authorities" in the Dauphiné, "responded with exemplary force against insurgents" (pp. 143-144).

And yet, it is only one page further on that Alpaugh states, unequivocally, that "French people… inspired by the young revolution's possibilities" had "done the unprecedented, together" and cohered into a "national movement" (p. 145). There follows an entire separate chapter that will

document further brutal, frequently terrified local responses under the rubric of the "Great Fear" (while often discussing events that visibly overlap the chronology of the previous chapter), and which asserts from its outset that "rather than destroying fragile new revolutionary alliances, the Great Fear strengthened new bonds of trust" (p. 149). It is undoubtedly unfortunate that this chapter did not have the chance to reckon with the further recent publication of Jean-Clément Martin, in which he revisits Georges Lefebvre's original research to reassert the kaleidoscopic particularity of the upheavals of these weeks, and to suggest that it was the responses of local elites, perhaps even more than the triggering rumors and mobilizations, that gave these events their lasting significance for the local and national politics that followed.[8]

Within Alpaugh's text, there is ultimately a curious sense of two different books layered upon each other. One of them vividly depicts the almost insuperable challenges of a large, complex society struggling to deal with the collapse of top-down order and fundamental disagreement about its potential bottom-up replacement. In this book, it makes perfect sense to tell the story of what happened in Troyes on 9 and 10 September 1789, when local authorities, themselves placed in office by an insurrection less than two months earlier, were overwhelmed by a crowd wild with alarms about rotten and allegedly poisoned food in the local market. The unfortunate mayor was beaten to death and paraded through the streets, his house burned, along with that of "military officers and leading merchants", some of whom were blamed for importing British spinning-machines, that were smashed. Surviving councilmen, fearing for their own lives, oversaw the burning of the supposedly poisoned rice, and banned machinery from the town, as the recently formed "Bourgeois Militia" declined to intervene, and "leading property owners" armed a second, distinct force in response (pp. 210-211).

The other book opens the chapter containing these details with the assertion that "for all the Revolution's problems, its potential remained incredible" (p. 194). It will conclude a subsequent chapter documenting the descent of France's Caribbean slave-colonies into multi-sided civil war with the claim that "Slave uprisings were the most extreme and perhaps impactful movements of the people's revolution." (p. 261) It will go on to end its final substantive chapter, on the Federation movement of 1790, with a paragraph asserting that "millions of participants little doubted that the French people, through their collective action, had achieved France's great Revolution. The power of collective action provided the common basis for their great achievements, which motivated a future of collective freedom and participation in government." (p. 283) It is somewhat unclear whether we are to take this as an expression of what the French were feeling, or Alpaugh's summary of their reality. The historical record attests that the class that formed "Bourgeois Militias" across the country would, in fact, never be reconciled with the popular classes who wanted regulated food-markets. Year in, year out, France was to be wracked with rioting as authorities tried yet again to impose the dogma of primitive free-market thinking.[9] And that division was relatively easy to manage, compared with those that erupted volcanically about the redemption of feudal dues or the nature and structure of the Catholic Church. An unending series of dogmatic blunders effectively thrust a massive popular constituency into what were otherwise the clearly "aristocratic" hands of the counter-revolution. Hundreds of thousands of people were to die in the consequent civil conflicts.

It is, in current circumstances, profoundly understandable to want certain things to be true about the potentiality, and actuality, of popular democratic mobilization against despotism. And yet

one of the great problems that we face, as custodians of historical interpretation, and as citizens, is that all the worst people have become cheerleaders for "the people", on both sides of the Atlantic. We are seeing at least as much popular democratic mobilization in favor of governments that are despotic, in spirit and increasingly in action, as we are against them. The notion that "the people" is a real thing that exists, and can manifest a united, legitimate political will forcibly, most notably against "elites", is an idea that has been weaponized with appalling success by forces for whom the wider values of liberal democracy and individual rights are a contemptible relic. I do not think we can assert our way out of this problem.

NOTES

[1] On Desmoulins' actions and attitudes, see Marisa Linton, *Choosing Terror; virtue, friendship and authenticity in the French Revolution* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), esp. pp. 168-70 on his attacks on the Girondins, and 184 on his regret.

[2] See David Andress, "Social Prejudice and Political Fears in The Policing of Paris, January-June 1791," *French History* 9, 1995, pp. 202-26; *idem*. "Neighborhood Policing in Paris from Old Regime to Revolution: The Exercise of Authority by the District de Saint-Roch, 1789–1791," *French Historical Studies* 29, 2006, pp. 231-60, and esp. p. 238, on the declaration of the continuity of police regulations and powers, issued by the Municipality of Paris on 16 August 1789, and p. 240, the transfer of such powers formally to the sixty Districts on 5 November.

[3] Timothy Tackett, *Becoming a Revolutionary: The Deputies of the French National Assembly and the Emergence of a Revolutionary Culture (1789-1790)*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[4] Timothy Tackett, *The Coming of the Terror* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[5] George Rudé, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 2-5 for his observations on the 'anti-crowd' tradition.

[6] The extent to which people did much more than "murmur", and very much did *not* attribute dearth to nature, was examined canonically by Steven L. Kaplan, *The Famine-Plot Persuasion in Eighteenth-century France* Transactions of the American Philosophical Society vol. 72, part 3, 1982.

[7] Jean-Clément Martin, *Penser les échecs de la Révolution française* (Paris: Tallandier, 2022), chapter 1, "Le peuple insaisissable", esp. pp. 17-19, 22-25.

[8] Jean-Clément Martin, *La grande peur de juillet 1789* (Paris: Taillandier, 2024); see also this interview with the author: <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2024/08/13/entrer-en-revolution-cest-comprendre-lirreversible-la-violence-de-juillet-1789-et-le-mythe-de-la-grande-peur/>.

[9] See for example David Andress, *The French Revolution and the People* (London: Hambledon & London, 2004), pp. 135, 172-5, 186-7, 203.

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ISSN 1553-9172